Good Verses Bad: Class Conflict in *Persuasion* and *Mary Barton*

The nineteenth century marked a period of social reform in England. One of the major social issues at the time was the social, financial, and legal differences between the classes. Both Jane Austen's *Persuasion* and Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* address the problem of social class. *Persuasion,* published in 1818, focuses on the middle class and the lower aristocracy in Regency England, while *Mary Barton*, published in 1848, focuses on the working class in the late 1830s to early 1840s in Manchester. *Persuasion*, therefore, is further away from the social reforms that took place in the Victorian Era. Austen and Gaskell's characters have diverse opinions on the issue of class, which provides a guide for the reader to judge whether a character is 'good' or 'bad' in terms of the traits that they possess.

The thirty years that separates the two novels accounts for much of the difference between how the novels comment on class. Gaskell is able to write a story like *Mary Barton* because writers like Austen raised questions about class thirty years earlier. *Persuasion* questions the societal status quo, starting a conversation that allowed Gaskell to make her point by writing a book full of starving, dying children. The morality of each character is related to their opinions on the class issue and the issue of class can be read through which characters are 'good' and which ones are 'bad'.

Gaskell's characters are arguably more realistic, with bad characters on both sides of the class conflict, but she is dealing with a more extreme situation than Austen's critique of middle-class society, and the morality of 'good' and 'bad'-as in, are they a good or bad person- is often blurred. A product of its time, Gaskell was trying to elicit a certain response from her readers, she wanted them to act, to call for change. Austen was far more subtle in her commentary and so her characters fall into stereotypes more easily. *Persuasion* is thirty years earlier in the process of

the demand for social reform that *Mary Barton* is screaming for with each death of a starving child.

Persuasion is advocating for the meritocracy of the navy over the hereditary leadership of the aristocracy, as will be explored through an examination of the 'goodness' or 'badness' of the characters. Austen began writing the novel the year Napoleon was defeated at the Battle of Waterloo (Austen xlv). The importance of the navy within the novel, it can be assumed, was influenced by the war and the success of the English. The navy, in its meritocracy, worked. One can imagine that Austen, being disenchanted with the social order of the day, saw the navy as an example of the future, despite, as David Monaghan argues, the lack of formality shown by the navel men (155). It may be this informal-ness, this movement away from the stiff hierarchies, that appeals to Austen.

Conversely, *Mary Barton* is advocating for better treatment and general awareness of the conditions of the working class. The Reform Act of 1832 had given more of a voice to people in the industrial cities in the north of England, however, in the novel this platform for the workers to express their concerns is ignored, adding to their frustration. Glenn Everett suggests that this Act and the redistribution of votes among landholding men "made many people consider fundamental issues of society and politics." It is a serious issue that Gaskell asks to be solved, the novel could not have been written in 1818 and can be read as an accurate portrayal of the social climate of industrial towns of the time.

Persuasion is told in free indirect discourse and as such the narrator is most of the time in agreement with the main character, Anne Elliot, who is portrayed as a good, reasonable person. As the protagonist, she is meant to be likeable and since the novel is commenting on the issue of class, Anne's opinions or reactions are the correct ones to have. In fact, it is how the other

characters treat Anne that often decides their level of class morality, and whether they are 'good' or 'bad' characters, and if their opinions on the class issue are the right or wrong ones to have.

Mary Barton is the titular character - although not the main character in Gaskell's mind (Deveraux) - and does not have an opinion so much as a naïve view of the class conflict in the novel. She wants to move up in the world and aspires to be better than she is through marriage to Harry Carson. Deidre d'Albertis argues that the function of Esther in the novel is that of watcher (49). While that may be true, the warning Esther provides the reader and Jem Wilson is her most important role. Esther's transgressions are offered as the cause of Mrs Barton's death, "it was she who had brought on all this sorrow" (Gaskell 22). Similarly, Mary's naivety causes strife without meaning to, causing much of problems for the 'hero' of Jem Wilson. D'Albertis believes that Gaskell's message in the novel is the "essential belief in the moral and political responsibility of women to take an active part in the struggle for social progress in the streets and slums of industrial England" (70), and indeed, Gaskell writing the novel can be seen as her attempt to do what she can where she can. Another way to read the character of Mary is that Gaskell is advocating for education over ignorance; for women, and for the lower classes in social issues.

In *Persuasion* there are no consequences for 'bad' characters beyond the ridicule of the reader through the narrator. As Mary Evans claims, Austen's point is that "the rich are not necessarily the most morally defensible, nor is their behaviour any necessary guide to the most appropriate forms of conduct" (66), which is seen in the character of Sir Walter, who the narrator treats with scorn and contempt. That Austen "opposed arbitrary aristocratic and patriarchal privilege" (65) in her writing is clearly demonstrated through the characterization of both common and not so common people in her novel, those who are higher born are worse people

than those who have worked for their position, such as the members of the navy. Each character's faults or virtues contribute to Austen questioning the class system.

"Vanity was the beginning and the end of Sir Walter Elliot's character; vanity of person and of situation" (Austen 10), his introduction in the novel centers entirely on his obsession with the Baronetage and how his name and family feature in it. He has little time for Anne;

> with an elegance of mind and sweetness of character, which must have placed her high with any people of real understanding, was nobody with either father or sister: her word had no weight; her convenience was always to give way;—she was only Anne (11).

Sir Walter does not value reasonable people, to him class is the important trait a person possesses. Sir Walter demonstrates a distinct prejudice against naval men, for their generally haggard appearance-which is the main focus of his distaste for them-and the meritocracy of the navy, which "bring[s] persons of obscure birth into undue distinction, and rais[es] men to honours which their fathers and grandfathers never dreamt of" (22).

Sir Walter condemns Mrs Smith for her name and her lack of wealth but esteems Lady Dalrymple for her name and her wealth, causing Anne to think "that Mrs Smith was not the only widow in Bath between thirty and forty, with little to live on, and no surname of dignity" (128). This is a comment about Mrs Clay's unsuitable continued presence. Mrs Clay is in a lower social position than the Elliots, she is something of a social climber as she seeks to convince Sir Walter to marry her and so elevate her to Lady Elliot. On the surface she is nice and polite to Anne but happily takes Anne's place, as Lady Russell is shocked to learn of "Mrs Clay's being of so much use, while Anne could be of none" (32). Mrs Clay is quite adept at flattering the 'Elliot pride'. Of the potential in a naval tenant she tells Sir Walter: "They would look around them, no doubt and bless their good fortune" (21).

Mary Musgrove also possesses the 'Elliot pride' that is directly a result of the belief that being a baronet makes her father, and by extension her, better than everyone who does not possess one. Louisa describes her: "she does sometimes provoke me excessively, by her nonsense and her pride; the Elliot pride. She has a great deal too much of the Elliot pride" (75). Mary also cares too much for formal social etiquette, one of the Miss Musgroves tells Anne that:

> I wish any body could give Mary a hint that it would be a great deal better if she were not so very tenacious; especially, if she would not be always putting herself forward to take place of mamma. Nobody doubts her right to have precedence of mamma, but it would be more becoming in her not to be always insisting on it. (42)

Mary's misuse of Anne as a nurse and child minder with no regard for Anne's feelings also contributes to her categorization as a 'bad' character. Like Sir Walter, her 'Elliot pride' is a bad trait; they are 'bad' characters and their views are therefore bad ones to hold.

The 'bad' characters in *Mary Barton* fall to negative consequences in the text. John Barton has strong classist opinions about the conditions of the working poor in Manchester which start to build after his wife's death:

> he had joined clubs, and become an active member of the Trades' Union… At all times it is a bewildering thing to the poor weaver to see his employer removing from house to house, each one grander than the last…while all the time the weaver, who thinks he and his fellows are the real makers of this wealth, is struggling on for bread for his children…
>
> The contrast is too great. Why should he suffer alone from bad times? (Gaskell 23)

John's opinions are not portrayed as bad, so long as he follows proper procedures. It is when his classist opinions lead him to the meeting that decides that the only way to get the masters' attention is to hurt them (185) that he crosses the line between having the right opinion and doing

the wrong thing about it. This culminates in the murder of Harry Carson at John Barton's hand. His punishment is an addiction to opium which causes him to waste away: "all energy, both physical and mental, seemed to have retreated" (341). However, he is granted forgiveness on his deathbed as he dies in Mr Carson's arms (359). It is important to note that none of the characters in either novel are truly 'bad' or truly 'good', it is their morals relating to class that place them in each category, there are many different parts that make up each character.

Harry Carson truly believes in his own superiority because of his class, despite his mother being a factory girl prior to her marriage (134). He is the one who convinces the masters to ignore the wishes of the workers, and makes it worse as, "the head and voice of the violent party among the masters" (178). His punishment is that he is the chosen victim and is killed in an attempt to even the odds.

The in-between characters, or characters that do not as easily fit into the 'good', 'bad' categories are fewer in number. In *Persuasion* there is Lady Russell who perceived the first understanding between Anne and Captain Wentworth "with more tempered and pardonable pride [than Sir Walter, but], received it as a most unfortunate one" (Austen 27). She cares for the appearance of class distinction but wants Anne to be happy. Yet, her original advice was in favour of the former and so prevented the latter. The narrator is much more understanding of Lady Russell's objections, because she is presented as a reasonable person who can be taught the correct opinion to have of class.

*Mary Barton'*s Mr Carson is mainly oblivious to the workers issues, when told about a sick worker he says: "I don't pretend to know the names of the men I employ; that I leave to the overlooker. So he's ill, eh?" (Gaskell 68). Mr Carson is punished for his ignorance (like Mary is punished or hers with the wrongful arrest of the man she loves) with the death of his son. He

redeems his character at John Barton's deathbed with his forgiveness, quoting from the Common Prayer: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us" (359). His forgiveness can be seen as a step toward understanding. However, he never fully reaches the epiphany that would have solved the issue, this, it can be assumed, is a reflection of the actual problem that Gaskell was witnessing.

In *Persuasion* the good characters receive no rewards other than the continuation of their good character, in *Mary Barton* the good characters are given happy endings. It can be argued that Anne and Captain Wentworth get their happy ending, but, Anne is neutral as the protagonist and must therefore take part in the marriage plot that is so common in Austen, she has to be 'good' and get her happy ending.

In the novel, the Crofts judge people based on merit and personality, Admiral Croft says of the Miss Musgroves: "And very nice young ladies they both are" to which his wife replies: "Very good humoured, unaffected girls indeed…and a very respectable family. One could not be connected with better people" (Austen 78). Edward Neill points out that while Admiral Croft might be plain-spoken, he is not insensitive to others as Sir Walter is (117). The Crofts are held up as the example of marital happiness, and as such, people of good reason; they must have the right opinions, they already have their happy marriage and cannot be rewarded with one as characters are in *Mary Barton*.

Charles Musgrove only seems to make classist comments when he is defending people from Mary's scorn and judgement, most often his cousin Charles Hayter who Mary believes to be far beneath them and not a good enough match for Henrietta: "Now you are talking nonsense, Mary…It would be a great match for Henrietta…and will you please remember, that he is the eldest son; whenever my uncle dies, he steps into very pretty property" (Austen 65). In regards to

his treatment of Anne he "[i]s civil and agreeable" (39) and always kind, despite the fact that she rejected him before he married Mary.

In *Mary Barton* Jem Wilson is surrounded by classist opinions from the other working men but he is never truly influenced by them. Unlike Mary Barton, he is not ignorant or naïve to the issue. He tries his best to help Esther, where John Barton does not: "his conscience smote him. He had not done enough to save her" (Gaskell 160). Similarly, he will not reveal the evidence that would free him because it would incriminate the father of the woman he loves, he is aware of the issues but he does not cross the line that John Barton does. Jem's refusal to engage in the class conflict in the novel is rewarded with a happy ending: his marriage to Mary.

Will Wilson deserves to be mentioned. He is not part of the community, and as such does not have many opinions that are explored, since he is only passing through and any of the issues specific to Manchester do not affect him. However, he is the connecting character between the two novels. Whilst he is not employed by the Royal navy, he is a sailor and therefore part of a meritocratic world. He is described upon first appearance as "a dashing, bronzed-looking, ringleted sailor, frank, and hearty, and affectionate" (143), in keeping with positive attributes of the naval personnel in *Persuasion.* He is rewarded with marriage and a happy ending.

In both novels the merit of character is used to discuss the social issue of class. The characters support each author's social agenda, the 'good' characters are members of a new order (meritocracy) or do not cross the line into violence, and the 'bad' characters see nothing wrong with the current system, or use violence to solve the issue. Austen's characters are often more subtle, since conversations about class was not as yet much of a social issue in 1818. Gaskell is more extreme in her characterization, even rewarding or punishing her characters for their views, the social climate of the time allowed for her to be far more obvious in her pattern. Austen

politely asks for the need for change to be considered, Gaskell demands it. Both novels can be considered as important literary records of the social class changes of the nineteenth century.

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