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## An Analysis of the Heroine of North and South: Margaret Hale as an Independent Woman

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### ABSTRACT

Mrs. Gaskell is a very important woman writer in the 19th century in Britain, and she is famous for her social novels, in which she highlights complicated social conflicts. *North and South* is usually considered as the turning point of Mrs. Gaskell's literary creation, in which she suggests for the first time that there should be a hope of reconciliation between the working class and the bourgeoisie. Also, the author vividly depicted an independent woman with a sharp mind and a deliberate manner in the book, that is, Margaret Hale. She seems to be very special when compared with the women around her and very attractive to men for her peculiar thoughts as well as her beautiful looks. This thesis mainly analyzes the attractive heroine of the novel in three aspects: her independent character, her independent action and her independent thoughts. What's more, the thesis aims to shed light on the characteristics a "New Woman" should be endowed with. The heroine, to some extent, is the author Mrs. Gaskell herself, rejecting inferiority to men and defending the rights to express themselves freely. All in all, this thesis tries to enlighten people on woman's position in today's society by deriving some inspirations from the literary work.

**Keywords:** Independent Women, Margaret, Mrs. Gaskell, *North and South*.

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### 1. Introduction

Mrs. Gaskell was one of the best-known women writers of the Victorian Age in Britain. She was born in London and was brought up by her aunt. Later she married to William Gaskell, a clergyman, and then they settled in the industrial city of Manchester. What she had experienced in her own life had a significant influence on her literary creation. As a writer, she wrote seven novels including *Mary Barton* (1848), *Cranford* (1853), *Ruth* (1853), *North and South* (1855), *Sylvia's Lovers* (1863) and *Wives and Daughters* (1865). She also wrote a biography for her friend Charlotte Bronte, some short stories and a few poems. Though Mrs. Gaskell's works were not popular in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, they attracted attention later for the reassessment of her position as a writer among the Victorian women novelists. Her novels are mainly concerned with the social problems and feminist issues.

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*North and South* is the fourth novel of Mrs. Gaskell, which is set in the fictional town of Milton in the north of England when industrialization was changing the city. The novel has frequently been favorably compared to the similarly focused *Shirley* by the better-known novelist and friend of Gaskell, Charlotte Brontë. In this book, the heroine Margaret is forced to leave her home located in a tranquil and rural village of Helstone, south of England and to settle in with her parents in the industrial town of Milton. She witnesses the harsh brutal world wrought by the industrial revolution and dislikes the way people all rush to money in Milton. Also, she gets to know something about the strikes which she never hears of in the south and pays more attention to the poor and wretched working class. Owing to that, she has to face Mr. Thornton, a cotton mill manufacturer who belongs to the nouveaux riches whose contemptuous attitude towards workers makes Margaret feel very uncomfortable. The confrontation between her and him is similar to that between Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen, but in a broad context of the harsh industrial north.

Feminism started to spread in the western world in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, which is “a rebellion of the female consciousness against the male dominance and the detriment of female identity and experience” (Fang, 2014). The development of feminism can be divided into three periods. Activists of feminism pay attention to the abolition of slavery and women’s right to vote in the 1830s. But feminism began to fade between the two world wars. In the 1960s, feminism revived with a lot of women’s liberation movements taking place, among which, Virginia Woolf wrote some articles to appeal for women’s financial and space independence. Feminism continued to develop in the 1990s when plenty of well-organized feminist movements started to draw people’s attention. In literature, women writers wrote about women’s growth and independence as in *Jane Eyre* and *Mill on the Floss*. “Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South*, an intricate declaration of female rights, is one of the foundation stones of the feminist movement” (Fang, 2014).

The studies abroad on Mrs. Gaskell’s works are fruitful, among which the studies on the feminine problems are given special attention. While the studies at home are not mature, more and more critics are trying to explore Mrs. Gaskell’s works from different perspectives. The thesis focuses on one aspect of feminism—the profile of an independent woman.

## **2. Margaret’s independent character**

Margaret’s independence is first revealed in her character. A woman with a strong will and a sharp mind certainly outshines any figure in the book, given that there are plenty of limits imposed on women in the Victorian Age. Margaret’s independent character can be categorized into two main categories: strong will and sharp mind, which will be dealt with in details in this part.

### **2.1 A woman with a strong will**

When Margaret just comes back from London after her cousin Edith’s wedding, she knows some terrible news from her father. Mr. Hale, a clergyman, who is on the point of giving up his career and in the mid of belief crisis, tells her daughter that they has to leave Helstone, Margaret’s lovely hometown. She is startled to hear the news and feels sorry to what had happened to her poor old papa. Moreover, her father dare not tell Mrs. Hale the bad news, and instead asks his daughter to do so. Unwilling as Margaret is, she promises to try her best to finish the task no matter how painful it was --- someone had to do it. Faced with such an unexpected change, Margaret doesn’t cry as other girls will do because of her strong will. Instead, she eagerly asks why this happens and finds practical solutions once she knows things are settled. Margaret consoles her mother for her disappointment towards her father and the bleak future they are going to face.

Misfortunes never come singly. When Margaret’s family are finally settled in the industrial town Milton, Mrs. Hale’s body becomes weaker and weaker because of the polluted air in Milton and her missing of her beloved son Frederick, who is unfairly accused of betraying his own country so that he has to leave England. Margaret forces the doctor to tell her the truth about her mother’s condition because she knew she could take it. And the truth is that her mother was dying. Again, Margaret accepts the fact bravely with great grief biting her heart. A girl with such a strong will, Margaret, deserves everyone’s admiration.

## 2.2 A woman with a sharp mind

Women in their families are usually considered as listeners other than decision-makers. It seems that women are not smart enough to make a decision because they are not well-educated or they are used to obeying their fathers and husbands. In the Victorian Age, many young girls in fact have no domestic power and have no right to speak in the family. What they could do is to follow their parents' instructions and look for an ideal husband with title and money. Then they spend the whole life taking care of their children and holding some stereotyped parties. Mrs. Gaskell, however, cannot bear it so she creates a clever woman who can manage domestic things quite well.

Though born in an ordinary family, Margaret receives a good education from her father, a well-educated clergyman who devotes himself to classical works such as Plato's and Homer's, which lays a solid foundation for Margaret's growth later. She is brought to London to stay with her aunt, Mrs. Shaw and her cousin, Edith when she is just a little girl. In London, she is taught how to be a real lady and has the opportunity to meet people from the upper class. Her experiences in London broaden her horizon and Margaret herself also enjoys thinking about her own life and others' opinions.

When her father has no idea about when and how to carry out their moving plan, Margaret gets a great atlas from her father's study and begins to pore over the map of England. Finally, she makes a suitable plan which her father agrees to. It is also Margaret who decides how to decorate the new house in Milton and makes a proper arrangement. Somehow Margaret is more like a master of the house instead of her father or her mother in that her sharp mind enables her to think and act reasonably and sensibly. Therefore, she can always rely on herself, a message Mrs. Gaskell wants to deliver in the hope that more and more women can count on themselves against the injustice they are experiencing.

## 3. Margaret's independent action

Margaret's independence can also be seen in her action which usually goes against the convention of the Victorian Age. Margaret dares to walk alone on the streets or in the wild, enjoying freedom. She actively extends her life circles to the public world. And she bravely faces the furious workers on strike. What's mentioned above will be expanded on in this part.

### 3.1 A woman who enjoys walking freely

It is said that women, especially unmarried young ladies, cannot walk alone unless they are accompanied by an adult man in the Victorian Age. The heroine of the story, however, would like to take a walk alone. When Margaret is in London, her aunt, owing to her own helpless dependence on others, always asks a footman to accompany her and Edith, Margaret's cousin, if they go around the neighborhood. It is, in fact, against Margaret's nature and she even tries to rebel against it. She really enjoys the beautiful view in the wild and sometimes even cannot help bouncing. When she moves to Milton, she still keeps the habit of taking a walk alone on the bustling streets where many workers go past her after work and some of them even make fun of her about her beautiful face. Margaret is not afraid of going out alone, though. She still talks with the local people in order to find a suitable housemaid. In her heart, she yearns for a free walk, a free air and a free world.

Margaret's free walking on the streets in Milton also brings her two friends, Nicholas Higgins and her daughter, Bessy Higgins. When she knew Bessy is going to die because of the bad conditions of the workplace, Margaret promises to see her when she is available. Therefore, Margaret has to take a walk on the streets very often which implies that she does not care about the old fashion-- unmarried women cannot walk alone. Here, the author vividly depicts an independent woman who tries to help the poor wrung by the industrial society in spite of her own reputation--a well-behaved young lady. The author suggests that what one should really care about is ordinary people's happiness rather than the pedantic conventions. An independent woman dares to challenge herself to do the good deeds.

### 3.2 A woman who stands closer to men

It is acknowledged that women are only entitled to private space, that is, to occupy themselves dealing with domestic trivial things. However, according to the scholar [Hu Jiao \(2013\)](#), there actually exists another two spaces besides the private space: the transitional space and the public space. The

space theory is to explain the extension of women's social space. It seems that Mrs. Gaskell object to the view that women are only able to look after their husband and children, and do some meaningless talking. Actually, women can also go into the public space to make social observations, talk about social affairs, and stand closer to the outside world. Margaret Hale, in the author's description, is a woman who stands closer to men.

Parties are very common in the Victorian Age where people can communicate with each other about their own concerns. Usually, men prefer talking about political and economic issues while women are always talking about the fashionable clothes and hairs. When she attends the evening party held in Mr. Thornton's house, Margaret doesn't join the conversation among those idle and vain middle-class ladies who she believes just show their belongings off by talking about the housekeepers, valuable lace and diamonds in the accidental manner. She chooses to stand close to the men, listening to their animated conversations concerning the current economic situations of Milton, the on-going strikes and the approaches to dealing with the rebellious workers. The more she listens, the more interested she becomes. She seems to join the gentlemen's conversation silently, though she cannot fully understand many of the things they are talking about. Miss Thornton, however, comes to take Margaret into the lady's room because she is sure that Margaret should feel uncomfortable at being the only lady among so many gentlemen. But in reality, Margaret is too devoted to notice it.

Here the author makes a contrast between Miss. Thornton and Margaret. Miss. Thornton symbolizes the conventional young ladies of the Victorian Age, who take other people's views for the rule of their feelings and are ashamed of any singularity of action. Therefore, the conventional ladies confine themselves to womanly fussy things. Margaret, however, stands for the capable women who care about the outside world and take an active part in social affairs, because they knew the world is changing due to the Industrial Revolution. Mrs. Gaskell encourages more and more women to immerse themselves not only in the domestic care but also in social affairs.

### 3.3 A woman who faces furious workers bravely

Women cannot express their opinions or defend what they think is right in public as men do, because women's power is limited and their voice is too low to be heard. Many people believe so, and among them, a lot of educated women argue that it is true in terms of biological structures. Women's physical strength is indeed less than men's, so they cannot fight for the things they want forcefully. Mrs. Gaskell holds different views. She believes it is not the physical strength but the strength of purpose that makes a woman stand out bravely and confront the crisis she has never gone through.

When she goes to the mill where Mr. Thornton lives to borrow a water bed for her mother, Margaret is involved in a serious strike, unexpectedly. On her way to his house, she has noticed something unusual and feels that something is going to happen. When she arrives, she notices that everyone in the house is in panic, saying the rebellious workers are coming soon. Even Mrs. Thornton, who usually looks serious and queenly, is waiting for her son in an uneasy manner. Later Mr. Thornton comes in and asks everyone including Margaret to hide in the back rooms of the house. Margaret refuses and almost forgets herself because of her great sympathy for the poor workers outside the house. She tells Mr. Thornton that she is not afraid at all and encourages him to face the furious workers like a man and bring them to reason. Mr. Thornton agrees and Margaret goes downstairs with him to help close the door. But he doesn't make the people outside calm down, and his appearance actually evokes a horrible storm of anger among the workers. And some of them even try to attack their master. Margaret, at that time, feels it is her responsibility to rescue him, so she pulls the door open and stands between the master and the workers bravely, telling them to leave here for they can get nothing but injuries from the strike. Her action stops the attack for a moment but Mr. Thornton's intransigence gives rise to another attack. And this time, Margaret throws her arms around Mr. Thornton to protect him from the attack. And the strike ends up with the accidental injury-- Margaret gets hurt. Margaret, to some extent, saves both the bourgeoisie and the working class.

Thanks to Margaret's independent action, a serious social crisis doesn't cause too much damage. Her brave action of saving Mr. Thornton is regarded as shameless courting by other female characters. In fact, Margaret, as an independent woman, cares more about the severe situation where unfortunately two classes relying on each other are mutually contradictory while saving one's life is an instinctive power inside Margaret.

#### 4. Margaret's independent thoughts

This part will deal with Margaret's independent thoughts, that is, she has her own opinions towards the things she experiences. And what she believes is usually different from the mainstream of the society. She argues that the bourgeoisie and the working class are equal in the light of human rights. She is not accustomed to pretentious occasions with extravagant decoration. And on marriage, she has formed her own criteria.

##### 4.1 Margaret's view on the master-worker relationship

In Victorian Age, a genuine lady is not supposed to talk much before a gentleman, let alone arguing with him in an eloquent way. As a matter of fact, few young women dares to challenge the great authority of men for the following reasons: first of all, they seems to have no 'position' in a man-dominated society since men are always bread-winners while women are only their belongings used to show off. In addition, women are already used to being controlled in every aspect by their male companions. Last but not the least, it seems that no one has ever questioned if women are entitled to express different opinions from men.

Margaret, the heroine of the story, more than often sees the sufferings around her when she arrives at Milton so she draws a conclusion of her own on the master-worker relationship according to her observation. When he comes to talk with Mr. Hale, Mr. Thornton expresses his pride in being a master of a cotton mill in the animated industrial town. Margaret, however, points out that Mr. Thornton doesn't take the benefits of his workers into consideration and that the master and the workers shouldn't stand against each other since they are linked so closely in the industrial society. Though he feels a little bit offended, Mr. Thornton still replies politely that Margaret doesn't know how things are going around here at all. On the other hand, Margaret also talks with her friend Nicholas Higgins who is a strong supporter of the large-scale strike. Higgins sees the masters as cruel men who wring the wages of the poor workers who risk their life to work for the masters. Margaret tells him that the masters of Milton may have their own difficulties so that they have to cut off their workers' wages for the moment and she believes that they always have an opportunity to have a peaceful talk. But Higgins still believes in the powerful union which will help them to win the battle against their masters. Margaret knows it is difficult for her to persuade him at the moment. When the strike is over and one of Higgins's friends commit suicide, Margaret points out that the union, to some extent, is also a cruel beast which forces its members to suffer what they cannot bear.

In the end, Margaret's independent thoughts have a positive influence on both sides so that the seemingly irreconcilable disputes between the two classes disappear when the masters and workers can talk equally and listen carefully just as Margaret always believes, which is also the author's best wish.

##### 4.2 Margaret's view on the grandiose lifestyle

Mrs. Gaskell was born in an ordinary family and later married a clergyman so she wasn't very wealthy all her life. She prefers a simple and peaceful country life to a busy and obstreperous city life flowing light and color yet dazzling people. In *North and South*, Margaret, in the author's description, is a middle-class young lady endowed with stately simplicity. It is the contents not the extravagant form that she really cares about.

When Margaret is in London, she is busy preparing for her cousin's wedding and sometimes feels really worn out because there are so many things to consider in order to have a decent wedding in other people's eyes. She tells Henry Lennox that she has already got tired of the trouble things she has to do, and the gentleman Henry, who is also one of Margaret's admirers, says that there are ceremonies to be gone through, "not so much to satisfy oneself as to stop the world's mouth" (Gaskell, 1855). Margaret couldn't agree more and says that all she wants in her wedding is to walk to church through the shade of trees without so many bridesmaids at a very fine summer morning, which quite accords with her character. But many women at that time would like to keep themselves attending or holding various parties either to have fun or to show off their grand houses, beautiful furniture and delicate cutlery. Even Mrs. Thornton, such a strong-minded woman, is no exception. When Margaret first comes to her house which is actually located in her son's noisy mill, she dislikes the

decoration of the room in that everything in that room reflects light yet nothing absorbs it. Though a lot effort must be made to keep the house clean, not any of the labor is used to make it look like a comfortable and tranquil home in Margaret's eyes. Also, Margaret is astonished at the sumptuous appointments of the party held by Mrs. Thornton, especially the food. She thinks half of the quantity of the food will look like more delicate and elegant while Mrs. Thornton believes it is her pride to set a grandiose feast before her guests. Compared with the grandiose furniture, Margaret appears to appreciate a piece of useful wooden objects which are actually part of her lovely life.

Margaret feels quite comfortable when people on the party talk about art in a merely sensuous way instead of learning what art really tries to teach. And she cannot bear people's mere flow of beautiful words said to each other. Margaret thinks the grandiose lifestyle is the flower in a mirror, beautiful yet not real. So, does Mrs. Gaskell. She believes that simplicity is a virtue a woman should keep in mind and put into practice.

### 4.3 Margaret's view on marriage

British capitalist society enters a period of rapid expansion when the business is booming and the society is stable under the reign of the great Queen Victoria. Young people at that time, therefore, take the material conditions into consideration first when they choose a suitable husband or wife. They cherish the convention that the couple should be perfectly matched in terms of their families' position and wealth. As for love, they hold the view that love is not the core of a happy marriage, or rather, it is a little ornament added to the beautiful bride dress. Besides, it is very popular in the Victorian Age that a young girl marries a gentleman much older than her. A 27-year-old woman, for example, should marry a man of 40 years old according to some related books at that time.

In *North and South*, Mrs. Gaskell presents several different marriage patterns. Mrs. Shaw, Margaret's aunt, marries a general, to whom she has no warmer feeling than respect for his character. And she always regrets that there is no true love between her and her husband and decides to make her daughter marry for love. But her daughter Edith actually has no difference in that aspect. She wouldn't enjoy her life change because of the marriage once the temptation to her husband is gone. Mrs. Hale, however, marries a handsome young man, Mr. Hale. Though she complains about the plain and simple life from time to time, she still makes a long journey to the north with her husband regardless of the pain she is suffering, which has a significant influence on their daughter Margaret's independent view of marriage. She believes that marriage is based on the fact that husband and wife share the same interests, get to know each other and marry for love. She turns down Henry's proposal for she knows that what they pursue is not exactly the same. And Mr. Thornton also proposes to her when he is still a rich man, Margaret says no in an indirect manner because at that time she still doesn't appreciate the way he interacts with his workers and thinks that the proposal is out of his gratitude but not his genuine love for her. But later, Margaret gets to know that Mr. Thornton protects her from a trial for his belief in her upright character. And she also sees how he buys her mother fresh fruits to make her comfortable and how he frequently talks with her father to cheer him up. Finally, Margaret agrees to be Mr. Thornton's wife although the man she falls in love with gets no penny in his pocket. Unlike her aunt Mrs. Shaw and her cousin Edith, Margaret chooses a well-matched man she loves, whether rich or poor.

Margaret, as a New Woman, holds the view that the most important component of marriage is couples' unconditional love, and the others such as title, money, position shouldn't be put in the first place when you choose someone to accompany you for the rest of your life. Here the author encourages young girls to go after a harmonious marriage where a man and a woman love equally, adore deeply and live happily.

## 5. Conclusion

The thesis mainly talks about an independent woman's growth by analyzing her character, action and thoughts. To some extent, domestic calamities shape Margaret's independent character. And the social background at that time provides a stage for her independent action. Margaret is inclined to think and judge by herself so that she forms independent thoughts which sometimes even go against the main stream of society. In conclusion, Margaret Hale is a typical example of feminism.

At the end of the thesis, the author would like to give some advice on the growth of independent women today, referring to Mrs. Gaskell's *North and South*. To begin with, an independent woman should develop a good habit of thinking so that she can be sensitive to the things constantly coming to her life. Besides, an independent woman should learn something of everything by reading in order to broaden horizons. Last but not the least, an independent woman should have a strong will to face unexpected difficulties and a sharp mind to deal with things properly. The profile of an independent woman in the world today is that she does well not only in domestic trivial things but also in social affairs with her sharp mind, strong will and independent character.

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