MARY BARTON: A REVALUATION

By JACK L. CULROSS, B.S., M.A., Ph.D.
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH AT EASTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY

ALTHOUGH some few critics have defended Mrs. Gaskell for yoking together a public, social plot with a private, romantic one in her first novel, Mary Barton (1848), the majority of scholars feel that the combination is not a happy one. According to Margaret Ganz, "Critics have rightly judged that sufficient material for two novels is to be found in this work. For besides the psychological study of the harrowing effects of social alienation, there is the more conventional romantic story of the pretty and flighty daughter of John Barton who eventually overcomes her frivolity." This largely unchallenged opinion is particularly strange in a formalist age. In recent years we have seen everything from Beowulf to Beckett subjected to numerous structural analyses, and even the most obtrusive elements—for example, the final section of Huckleberry Finn or the third part of Gulliver’s Travels—have been loudly defended as relevant, necessary, and contributory to the unity of their respective works. That similar justifications do not exist for Mary Barton suggests, of course, the obvious, that the two plots are unlike in many ways. But it suggests more as well. It suggests that critics have not really tried, have not really brought to the book the full spectrum of ingenious arguments for unity because they have never really believed that it is unified. It is as though they knew the fight was lost before the bell ever rang and so they threw in the towel rather than take a senseless beating.

And, in fact, the critical tradition of Mary Barton has fostered an a priori conviction that the book is irredeemably disunified, for it has passed along several widely held beliefs about both the appropriate critical approach to the novel and its genesis. These beliefs have, as it were, led critics to the conclusion that the two plots are not integrally related and that given the way in which

Mrs. Gaskell wrote the novel it could not be anything other than disunified. However, when one does take time to re-examine this critical tradition, he finds a series of claims which he should be wary of too readily accepting. Once he begins to distrust them, he can analyse the novel unhampered by predispositions. He can approach the book with an open mind, willing to accept whatever Mrs. Gaskell wrote as potentially important. Only then will he find that *Mary Barton* is unified by the theme that the author developed contrapunctually in the public and private plots.

I

One misleading item of the book's critical tradition is the assumption that it is a social novel and, therefore, that the public plot must be pre-eminent. Certainly the book contains social material. The public plot does represent Mrs. Gaskell's view of the industrial workers' plight during the late 1830s and early 1840s, and it does argue against the callous laissez-faire philosophy by which masters ignored widespread starvation and death among the workers and their families. However, the public plot is not the entire novel. It constitutes only about one-half of Mrs. Gaskell's creative endeavour, but it is this one-half alone which has provided critics with the book's generic label and many of the claims they make regarding its realized intention. Myron F. Brightfield, for example, apparently never even acknowledges the private plot when he states that the purpose of books like *Mary Barton* is "to explore ... some problem or evil affecting the interests and the well-being of ... the manual laborers or working classes".¹ This belief in the public plot's primacy helps, too, to explain the narrowness of Edgar Wright's claim that "The whole emphasis of the novel is in its account of the way of life of one class, and its feeling of insecurity and isolation."²

For much the same reason, critics emphasize the role of John Barton, protagonist of the public plot. Arthur Pollard, for

example, states that Barton is "always well to the forefront of the story";\(^1\) even though in fact he disappears entirely for some seventeen consecutive chapters, over forty per cent of the total number in the book. Kathleen Tillotson makes a similar claim in her distinguished *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties*. There she says that Barton "is central both to the mere narrative, and to the theme of class antagonism".\(^2\) This conviction leads her in turn to discover "the book's true theme: not this or that feature of industrial society is being criticized, but its whole principle, excluding any human contact between masters and men; and the hope of betterment lies not in this or that reform, but in the persistence, against all odds, of humanheartedness".\(^3\) These comments suggest critics who have not really noticed that half the book is not at all social and does not focus on John Barton.

The graphic realism of the public plot would be perhaps sufficient reason why critics insist on its pre-eminence, but in fact they have what appears to be a much more convincing reason for doing so—Mrs. Gaskell herself. In some of the comments she made in print after she had completed the novel, she implied that only the social issues had been important to her as she wrote and that accordingly her novel was "about" the industrial situation. One significant source of this impression has been the Preface she added to the book just prior to its publication late in 1848. There she described the genesis of *Mary Barton*. She had begun, she explained, to write a rural tale when she was struck by the fact that the real story to be told was that of the operatives all around her in Manchester. Thus, she turned her efforts to this new subject and attempted "to give some utterance to the agony which, from time to time, convulses this dumb people; the agony of suffering without the sympathy of the happy, or of erroneously believing that such is the case".\(^4\) If this statement does reflect Mrs. Gaskell's full intention, critics

\(^{1}\) *Mrs. Gaskell: Novelist and Biographer* (Manchester University Press, 1965), p. 41.

\(^{2}\) *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties* (Oxford University Press, 1954), p. 211.

\(^{3}\) Ibid. p. 212.

certainly seem justified in emphasizing the public plot as they do. A second source, moreover, appears to have been even more influential. This is the well-known letter Mrs. Gaskell wrote to Mrs. Samuel Greg some six months after the novel was published. Here she described the specific artistic means by which she sought to achieve her intention: "'John Barton' was the original title of the book. Round the character of John Barton all the others formed themselves; he was my hero, the person with whom all my sympathies went." A number of critics see this remark as a key to the book. Thus, when they stress the public plot and the role of John Barton, they are not just arbitrarily ignoring the second half of the book; they are attempting to bring to the novel a critical approach, the sociological, consonant with Mrs. Gaskell's own statements of her intention.

This approach, however, can hardly account for the private plot, a romantic melodrama without social content. It shifts the book's focus to the title character and away from John Barton, the character around whom, according to the author, "all the others formed themselves". Because Mary's story seems extraneous to the fulfilment of the author's stated intention, critics either ignore it altogether or accord it second-class status as a subplot. They do so not because it is any less developed than the public plot but simply because it does not help fulfil Mrs. Gaskell's intention, as they understand that intention. On the other hand, when they do acknowledge its existence, critics see this private plot as the cause of the novel's disunity; after all, this is the part of the novel that wanders away from the important social materials of the first half. Thus, for example, once Mrs. Tillotson seizes upon "the book's true theme", she quickly concludes that Mary's "relation to its theme seems too

1 Among the critics who quote at least a portion of this statement are Tillotson, p. 205; Pollard, p. 36; Wright, p. 30; and Ganz, p. 56.
weakly developed”. In much the same fashion, Miss Ganz criticizes the novelist’s “undue emphasis on suspenseful action in the latter part of the novel”. It is “undue”, she argues, because it “undermines the impact of her central theme”, the alienating effects of social destitution depicted in the first half.

Still another scholar, Raymond Williams, offers similar criticism of the disunity created by the two plots but in addition calls special attention to the conclusion, one that he finds “devastating”. In allowing Mary and her new husband, Jem, to emigrate to Canada and escape the industrial evils of Manchester, Williams contends, Mrs. Gaskell turned her back on “the situation which she had set out to examine.”

Behind all these criticisms, of course, lie the assumptions, stated or implied, that it is the public plot which is central to the novel, that only this plot really matters, and that Mrs. Gaskell destroyed the unity of her novel when she introduced the private plot that is neither relevant nor adequately subordinated to the social material.

When critics discover that the completed novel is at odds with the author’s stated intention, perhaps they should reconsider their critical approach, an approach originating with that intention. They do not do so, however, because one final tenet of the critical tradition surrounding Mary Barton seems to account for the contradiction. This widely accepted hypothesis explains why Mrs. Gaskell abandoned the public plot in the second half. In accounting for the private plot’s existence so neatly, however, this explanation effectively discourages critics from trying to find a unifying principle for the novel, for it suggests that Mrs. Gaskell was not free to write the novel she wanted to write and that the book she wound up writing could not possibly be unified.

This explanation was first proposed by Annette B. Hopkins in 1948. It focuses on Mrs. Gaskell’s claim that John Barton had been her original title, a fact she mentioned to Mrs. Greg. Actually, she had given a fuller version of the story some six

1 Tillotson, p. 213.
2 Ganz, pp. 73, 55-56.
3 Williams, p. 91.
months earlier in reply to an acquaintance, a Miss Lamont, who felt that the father’s name would have made a more appropriate title than did the daughter’s. Mrs. Gaskell replied:

"John Barton" was the original name, as being the central figure to my mind; ... he was my "hero"; and it was a London thought coming through the publisher that it must be called Mary B. So many people overlook John B or see him merely to misunderstand him, that if you were a stranger and had only said that one thing (that the book shd have been called John B) I should have had pleasure in feeling that my own idea was recognized; how much more am I pleased then when the whole letter comes from one whom I so much liked and admired in our few & far between glimpses as I did you.¹

Miss Hopkins may not have known this version, but she was aware of the letter to Mrs. Greg in which the novelist had stated simply that her original title had been John Barton. Moreover, she herself located a third reference to the earlier title, a comment in Mrs. Gaskell’s handwriting inscribed in a copy of the novel in the Manchester Central Library: "‘This story was first entitled John Barton, but at the publisher’s request the name was changed to that which it at present bears.’ E. C. Gaskell, May 3rd, 1861."² In this thrice-repeated story of the title change, then, the critic saw a reason why Mrs. Gaskell shifted her focus away from John Barton, why she let a subplot come to dominate the second half of the book. "It is significant", she wrote,

that Mrs. Gaskell had originally given her book the title of John Barton.... And some years later she made the enlightening admission that the title was changed by request of her publishers. Chapman and Hall... no doubt felt that a murderer was not exactly what the public, in that day, would look for in the hero of a novel intended for family reading. Confronted with this problem, the author cleverly saw Mary as a key to the resolution. This necessitated some quick shifting of emphasis; Mary had to be pushed more into the foreground.... But the scar left by this major operation remains.³

In other words, Mrs. Gaskell had intended the father to be the focus and accordingly had used his name for her title. When some fifty per cent of the book was written, however, her

¹ Letters, p. 70.
² Annette B. Hopkins, "‘Mary Barton’: A Victorian Best Seller", The Trollopian, iii (June 1948), 11, n. 14.
publisher forced her to adopt the title of *Mary Barton*. Thus, she then moved the focus from John Barton to his daughter and completed the book; but in the process what was originally meant to be a subplot mushroomed until it became as prominent as the main plot.

Understandably, Miss Hopkins's theory has influenced later critics, those concerned with structure, who feel no need to question their socially oriented approach even though it ignores one-half the novel. These critics believe that the heart of *Mary Barton* is its social first half and that the second half was added, against her will, to give meaning to the title that was forced upon her. With such external pressure, the author could not possibly produce the unified novel she had intended. But, they largely ignore the private plot and try to describe the novel only in terms of what they feel Mrs. Gaskell wanted to write and would have written had she been allowed to do so.

II

The oft-repeated argument summarized above rests finally on a single point, the conviction that the private plot is not important to the book because it was not important to the author. However, not everything Mrs. Gaskell wrote supports the theory that the private plot was for her the functionless excrescence later critics have taken it to be. Several statements she made before the book was published, including some that were part of the serious business correspondence between publisher and novelist, imply that to Mrs. Gaskell the private plot was fully as important as the public, that it was, in other words, an integral part of her novel.

Mrs. Gaskell's letters, for example, raise serious doubts regarding Miss Hopkins's theory that the title change caused the author to shift her focus, for they indicate precisely when the change occurred. On 21 March 1848, seven months before the novel appeared as *Mary Barton: a Tale of Manchester life*, Mrs.

---

1 Ganz clearly indicates that she believes the story regarding the change (p. 266, n. 44); Williams ascribes the plot shift to the publisher's influence but confusedly asserts that the title change occurred after the direction of the story was changed (pp. 88-89); and Tillotson merely implies that she accepts Miss Hopkins's theory (p. 213, n. 2).
Gaskell wrote to Edward Chapman concerning "the MS in your hands" for she was "naturally a little anxious to know when you are going to press". She apparently received no immediate reply, for on 2 April she wrote again to inquire "as to the probable time, when my MS (a Manchester Love Story,) would be published". She explained her anxiety by reminding Chapman that he had told her in January the novel "would be published in two or three months from that time".

These letters establish that Chapman had the manuscript in the Spring of 1848, and they suggest that he must have had the completed version for several months had he been able to predict in January a March or April publication. However, Mrs. Gaskell did not agree to change the title until two weeks later. In a letter dated "April 17, 1848", she wrote to Chapman, "Thank you for your suggestions; you will see that I have adopted the additional title of 'Mary Barton', a Manchester Love Story". Thus, these business letters suggest that the title change occurred after Mrs. Gaskell had completed her novel and had sent it to the publisher, not while she was still writing. The change could hardly have affected the way in which she developed the private plot.

At least two of her later comments support such a suggestion. In the Preface dated "October, 1848", Mrs. Gaskell wrote that her tale was "completed above a year ago", or at least six months before she agreed to Chapman's suggestion about a title change. And in the letter to Mrs. Greg referred to above, she wrote:

The tale was originally complete without the part which intervenes between John Barton's death and Esther's; about 3 pages, I fancy, including that conversation between Job Legh, and Mr Carson, and Jem Wilson. The MS. had been in the hands of the publisher above 14 months, and was nearly all printed when the publisher sent me word that it would fall short of the requisite number of pages, and that I must send up some more as soon as possible. I remonstrated over and over again—I even said I would rather relinquish some of the payment than interpolate anything. . . .

1 Letters, p. 54. 2 Ibid. p. 55. 3 Ibid. p. 56. 4 Works, I. Ixxiv. 5 Letters, p. 75. Even though Mrs. Gaskell must have added considerably more than three pages, her comment here makes it clear that she did not double the length of an already completed novel by adding the entire private plot to fit the title forced upon her.
Now, even if these "3 pages" were added as late as October, the month of publication, fourteen months earlier would have been August 1847. Thus, Chapman and Hall apparently had the completed novel at least eight months before Mrs. Gaskell's letter to Chapman gives her assent to the change of title. Furthermore, in addition to acknowledging that she was very opposed to interpolating anything into her completed novel (let alone an entire plot), this comment points out that the material she was forced to add did not fill out the private plot. In fact, the conversation she mentions represents an important discussion of the industrial situation, material of the public plot.

These remarks also call into question Mrs. Gaskell's later claim about what the original title actually was. Before it was published she never mentions her novel as John Barton, but on two separate occasions she refers to it as "a Manchester Love Story". She first uses the phrase, with capital letters, to identify for Chapman "my MS." Two weeks later she repeats the phrase. On this occasion, underlining, which Mrs. Gaskell normally used for emphasis, suggests that the author was agreeing to add "the additional title of 'Mary Barton'", to her own original title, "a Manchester Love Story". These references suggest that perhaps the fledgling author had titled her first book simply A Manchester Love Story, a title emphasizing the private plot, and not John Barton as she later claimed. If such is the case, Chapman very likely knew that her innocuous title would help bury the book in anonymity, so he proposed the more distinctive main title under which it was published, a fitting title for one plot if not the other. This explanation logically accounts for the change. Miss Hopkins's hypothesis, on the other hand, fails to explain satisfactorily Chapman's reasons for changing the title, whether potentially objectionable or not, from the name of the central character to that of one who was hardly developed in the portion supposedly written by that time, one who, according to the theory, never emerged until after she became the title figure.

The title, however, is not the only evidence that raises doubts concerning Mrs. Gaskell's intention. The "Original Rough Sketch" from which presumably she wrote her novel also questions that intention, for it suggests that the author never
intended John Barton to be the central figure or focal character and that from the first the private plot was an important part of her design. The sketch has recently been reproduced by Edgar Wright who makes the interesting claim that it substantiates the author's "comment that the plot was originally built round John Barton".\footnote{Wright, pp. 265-7.} In fact, it seems to do quite the opposite. The sketch contains forty-two separate entries divided up for a three volume novel. Allowing for Mrs. Gaskell's later decision to change around the names of the characters, only eight entries refer specifically to the character who became John Barton. At most ten more seem to describe incidents connected with the depiction of industrialism. No fewer than eighteen entries, however, unequivocally describe events developed in the private plot, incidents unconnected with the industrial situation. Moreover, the private plot completely dominates the proposed second and third volumes. Barton is mentioned but once in the thirteen entries for the second volume and then only with regard to the love triangle, with regard to Esther's attempt to warn him of Mary's flirtation with Harry Carson. The focus is on Mary throughout; eight of the thirteen entries develop the romantic triangle from which the girl must extricate herself. Similarly, Mrs. Gaskell planned to continue telling Mary's story in the last volume as the girl was to discover the real murderer of her rejected lover and to try to get her friends to help prove Jem Wilson innocent. As in the completed novel, John Barton completely disappears when the focus shifts to Mary, and he does not reappear until the antepenultimate entry, where he comes home to die. Thus, when Mrs. Gaskell compressed her novel into two volumes, she reduced proportionately her treatment of the private plot. If either plot became more prominent than she had intended, it was the public plot, that which came to take up half the book rather than a third, as she had originally planned.

Therefore, some evidence, particularly earlier comments, suggests a disparity between Mrs. Gaskell's actual intention as she wrote her book and what she later recalled of that intention, suggests that the private plot was originally a much more integral part of Mary Barton than she was later to indicate. Such a
possibility is not surprising when one recalls the immediacy and topicality of the industrial issue in 1848. The problems on the Continent during the Spring brought the subject back to the public's attention; in fact, it was for this very reason that Mrs. Gaskell had hoped that the book would appear in March as Chapman had led her to believe it would. Just before its October publication, Chapman requested that the author add a Preface. She agreed to do so but indicated to him that all she had left to say was that she had completed her book prior to the troubles of that year, that she was not simply writing a "catch-penny run up since the events on the Continent have directed public attention to the consideration of the state of affairs between the employers, & their workpeople". Thus, in the Preface she commented only on the genesis of the public plot, not necessarily because she felt that it was the only important part of the book but because there was no need to explain anything about a plot which in no way reflected existing social conditions. Similarly, after the book appeared, it was the public plot that stirred controversy and discussion, the public plot that brought such fame to its author, while the romantic story went virtually unnoticed. Accordingly, Mrs. Gaskell may well have followed the lead offered her by her readers and may have played up the portion of the novel that interested them. When one such reader suggested that the book should have been titled John Barton, Mrs. Gaskell perhaps agreed and praised her acquaintance's perceptivity in the bargain by stating that she too had wanted to name the book after the father but that she had been prevented from doing so by the publisher. Several months later, again when discussing the social implications of the book, she perhaps remembered her earlier story and repeated it to Mrs. Greg, for, after all, the publisher had requested that the title be changed to Mary Barton. By 1861 when she wrote the description in the flyleaf, Mrs. Gaskell very likely had come to believe that John Barton actually was the original title.

Such speculations, of course, can never be verified; but as far as the book itself is concerned, they are not really very important. What is important is the simple fact that some

1 Letters, pp. 54-55.  
2 Ibid. p. 58.
evidence calls into question the traditionally held view that the public plot alone was important to Mrs. Gaskell, was necessarily the focus of the entire novel. This evidence is particularly significant because it reminds us of what we never should have forgotten in the first place. It reminds us that the first source of information about *Mary Barton* should be the text itself. Outside sources may tell us much, but critics should not, as they have done, allow such sources to become substitutes for the novel that Mrs. Gaskell actually wrote.

III

When we turn to that novel unbiased by the author’s comments and the critical tradition, we discover a book with two separate plots, both of which legitimately command our serious consideration. Finding unifying relation between the two is certainly difficult, for they seem to have little in common. However, they do share one notable characteristic. They both portray characters whose dramas and conflicts are played out largely in their minds. The public plot is social, to be sure; but, as Miss Canz puts it, it is “concerned with the psychological rather than the economic implications of social conflict”.

Thus, both plots focus on what happens inside a person rather than outside. More specifically, each portrays a character’s struggle to retain hope. Barton must continue to believe that the masters will eventually alleviate the workers’ suffering, and Mary must not lose hope that she can prove Jem Wilson innocent of murder. Barton becomes tragic precisely because he loses all hope while Mary succeeds because she does not. Thus, not only do the plots themselves “counterpoint each other”, as Arthur Pollard has pointed out; but the themes these plots develop do so as well.

The social plot explores two aspects of this theme of hope. Barton both loses hope that a solution to the workers’ problems will be found, and he rebuffs the charitable attempts of his friends to bolster his own failing hopes. The former aspect is the more obvious. From the time he is

1 Ganz, p. 55.  
2 Pollard, p. 43.
first introduced into the book, Barton is rankling at the masters and the abuses of laissez-faire capitalism: “We’re their slaves as long as we can work; we pile up their fortunes with the sweat of our brows, and yet we are to live as separate as if we were in two worlds; ay, as separate as Dives and Lazarus, with a great gulf betwixt us…” Later he joins the Chartists and is chosen to help carry the Charter which they will present to Parliament: “He hoped largely, but vaguely, of the results of his expedition. An argosy of the precious hopes of many otherwise despairing creatures, was that petition to be heard concerning their sufferings” (p. 96). When Parliament refuses even to hear the Chartist delegation, Barton’s spirit is crushed, and over him “Despair settled down like a heavy cloud” (p. 128). He resorts finally to murder, killing the son of his former employer and, unknown to him, the suitor recently rejected by Mary. But because he has a soul (p. 196), Barton’s act of murder is tantamount to the ultimate act of despair, suicide. He stays away from home for a month, and when he finally returns it is only to die a victim of “The Destroyer, Conscience” (p. 410). His face, like that of the Red Crosse Knight in Orgoglio’s dungeon, is “sunk and worn—like a skull, with yet a suffering expression that skulls have not!” (p. 411). He lives just long enough to explain why he was driven to kill: “At last I gave it up in despair”, he tells Job Legh and Mr. Carson, “trying to make folks’ actions square wi’ th’ Bible; and I thought I’d no longer labour at following th’ Bible mysel’” (p. 431).

After Barton dies, Job, the philosophical worker, uses Barton’s tragedy to explain to Mr. Carson the plight of the workers in the face of the masters’ apparent unconcern. Job’s explanation represents one of Mrs. Gaskell’s most important statements regarding the necessity of hope:

...what we all feel sharpest is the want of inclination to try and help the evils which come like blights at times over the manufacturing places, while we see the masters can stop work and not suffer. If we saw the masters try for our sakes to find a remedy,—even if they were long about it,—even if they could find no help, and at the end of all could only say, ’Poor fellows, our hearts are sore for ye;
we've done all we could, and can't find a cure',—we'd bear up like men through bad times. No one knows till they have tried, what power of bearing lies in them, if once they believe that men are caring for their sorrows and will help if they can (pp. 449-50).

Job's explanation suggests an important aspect of Mrs. Gaskell's theme that is illustrated by Barton's story. Hope is dependent on others, Mrs. Gaskell suggests; it can survive only when others nurture it and give one reason to hope. The message is directed to manufacturers, Parliamentarians, and political economists, precisely those who could and should provide the workpeople with some foundation for hope. Barton, however, has no such foundation, for he sees no help forthcoming from the class above him. To compound his difficulty, his own passionate intensity prevents those of his own class from even trying to sustain his hopes during times of trouble. After his wife dies, the gloomy portion of his nature seems to triumph over the more sociable elements, and his "gloom and his sternness became habitual instead of occasional " (p. 22). When he loses his job because of his Chartist affiliation and the economic recession, he sits alone all day in his miserable home, attempting to ward off hunger pains with the opium his daughter can afford to buy. The drug, however, merely feeds his brooding thoughts. His mind becomes "soured and morose... It was no longer elastic, as in the days of youth, or in times of comparative happiness; it ceased to hope. And it is hard to live on when one can no longer hope" (p. 194). Barton takes on a "repellent power" which keeps all but his closest and most understanding friends at their distance: "People did not care to enter the doors of one whose very depth of thoughtfulness rendered him moody and stern" (p. 414). Thus, as Edgar Wright puts it, "In growing embittered he becomes as a natural consequence more isolated in his community; both humanity and faith lose their power to guide him."1 In other words, Barton's own bitterness further weakens his hopes by turning away those who might comfort him and minister to his spiritual needs as his wife

1 Wright, p. 31. Wright's term "faith" stands for much the same quality I have called hope; however, he does not discuss this virtue with regard to the structure of the novel.
THE JOHN RYLANDS UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

did before her death. Ironically, he acquiesces in the policies of non-interventionism, the same inhumane ideals that make him such a malcontent in the first place. He cuts himself off from those around him and becomes a prisoner of his own diseased and morbid mind. This self-imposed isolation demonstrates Mrs. Gaskell’s belief in man’s need for the charity of those around him, if for no other reason than because this charity can give one a reason to hope. But like Esther, Barton’s outcast sister-in-law who tells Jem Wilson in “accents of deep despair” (p. 188) that she is beyond help, John Barton unconsciously refuses the help of those around him, and like Esther’s his refusal dooms him.

Thus, the public plot demonstrates what can happen when all hope is lost and how one can come to lose hope. It develops negatively the author’s theme of hope. The positive aspects of this same theme are depicted, in a non-social context, in the private plot, for Mary Barton retains her hope and refuses to despair.

Mary’s is a maturation story, and her growth is dramatized to a large extent in terms of her developing awareness of the nature of hope. Mrs. Gaskell initially characterizes the girl as shallow by describing her selfish and materialistic hopes. Mary eagerly anticipates marrying the rich Harry Carson not for love but because she looks forward to the day “when she should ride from church in her carriage, with wedding-bells ringing . . . and drive away from the old dim work-a-day court for ever, to live in a grand house” (p. 89). She is vaguely aware that she prefers Jem Wilson to Carson, but she suppresses this feeling so incompatible with her “castles in air” and “Alnaschar-visions” (p. 91). When Carson is murdered and Jem charged with the crime, and when Mary learns that her own father is the murderer, she is plunged into a “sickening despair” (p. 283) similar to his after Parliament ignored the Charter. Unlike her father, however, Mary retains some of the elasticity of mind necessary to produce positive action rather than merely nihilistic despair: “But in the desert of misery with which these thoughts [of her father’s crime] surrounded her, the arid depths of whose gloom she dared not venture to contemplate, a little spring of
comfort was gushing up at her feet, unnoticed at first, but soon to give her strength and hope” (p. 284). Mary’s comfort is her knowledge that Jem must be innocent and that she alone can save him. Thus, while Barton loses hope and does nothing, Mary retains hope and the capacity for action. Accordingly, the narrator interrupts the story at this point to offer an important statement of the novel’s theme: “Something to be done implies that there is yet hope of some good thing to be accomplished, or some additional evil that may be avoided; and by degrees the hope absorbs much of the sorrow. . . . Do you not believe that as long as hope remained I would be up and doing?” (p. 284). With her resolve to free Jem, Mary substitutes for her original shallow hopes a “high, resolved purpose of right-doing” (p. 285).

To demonstrate that hope can be passed on to others and help sustain them, Mrs. Gaskell sends Mary in search of help. Enlisting aid is no easy task, however, because of the overwhelming amount of circumstantial evidence which convinces everyone of Jem’s guilt. Job Legh, for example, is embarrassed by the girl’s earnestness in an obviously futile cause. But Mary’s hopes are so firm that soon he too is enthusiastically planning a means to save Jem: “Oh! surest way of conversion to our faith”, says the narrator, “whatever it may be . . . is when it is beheld as the actuating principle, from which we never swerve!” (p. 301). Mary’s hopefulness has a similar effect on Jem’s mother. Convinced that her son will be convicted and taking an actual “pleasure in despair” (p. 291), she too begins to hope that Jem will be acquitted after she talks with the girl.

To emphasize further that hope can be passed to others and strengthened precisely by its transmission, Mrs. Gaskell performs an interesting turnabout. Mary enthuses others with the hope that she can prove Jem innocent, but when she must actually travel to Liverpool, secure an alibi, and get the court to listen to it, her own hopes begin to falter. However, Mary is not moody and aloof like her father; consequently, others step in to sustain her. Job, whose own hope for Jem came originally from Mary, checks the girl’s growing despair and tells her, “Pooh! pooh! wench; don’t lose heart, just as I am beginning to get it” (p. 307).
In Liverpool, Mary’s hopes are again sustained by others, by strangers who aid the increasingly despondent girl. She learns that the *John Cropper* has already sailed and that on it has gone Will Wilson, whose testimony was to have proven Jem innocent. At first Mary is crushed at the news, but she is partially re-animated by Charley Jones, the young son of Will’s landlady, who tells her, “Don’t give it up yet . . . ; let’s have a try for him. We are but where we were, if we fail” (p. 333). Charley’s remark, it should be noted, is thematically significant, for, as the narrator suggests, “The sympathetic ‘we’ gave her heart and hope” (p. 333). The boy takes Mary to the Liverpool docks and sends her after Will’s ship in a rented boat and with the slim chance that the *John Cropper* will have to wait for the tide in order to clear the harbour. Because there is no wind, the boatsmen have to row, and their slow progress further weakens the girl’s rapidly failing hopes. The rowers, however, who are complete strangers and initially cynical of the bewildered girl, soon soften in the face of her obvious sincerity and become “Full of the spirit of the chase” (p. 341). Thus, in both Manchester and Liverpool, among friends and strangers alike, Mary’s own original hopes spread out from her and nourish others, and when her hopes begin to fail, she in turn is sustained by others. And precisely because she is never allowed to lose hope, she does succeed in proving Jem innocent.

Once the reader recognizes that both plots are important because their themes counterpoint each other, he can appreciate the thematic implications of the novel’s conclusion. Mary and Jem migrate to Canada, what Williams refers to as the “uncompromised New World”.1 But the very fact that it is “New” and “uncompromised” offers the couple hopes for their future. Thus, it provides a fitting ending to a novel not about industrialism, but about hope. Nor is Canada Mary and Jem’s only hope at the end of the book. Johnnie, their infant child, is yet another hope that the present generation has for the future. Throughout the novel parents’ fondest hopes are lodged in their children—Mr. Carson’s in Harry, Mrs. Wilson’s in Jem, and Alice Wilson’s in Will, her “bairn”. This investment of hope in one’s children, 

1 Williams, p. 91.
however, is best seen in Job Legh’s struggle to bring his granddaughter Margaret back from London. The long story Job tells of his attempts to retrieve and care for the baby, criticized by J. McVeagh as an irrelevant digression, is anything but that. As Mrs. Tillotson herself points out, the story “stands for hope”.¹ And at the end of Mary Barton, a novel about hope, Johnnie also “stands for hope”.

Critics have no doubt been correct in seeing the private plot of Mary Barton as conventional and excessively melodramatic, and to that extent they are justified in preferring the realism of the public plot. But mimetic judgements are not the same thing as, nor should they be the basis for, judgements of artistic structure and form. The latter can be based only upon a complete and honest attempt to see the relations existing among the parts of a work, and so long as critics blindly accept the tenets of a tradition that virtually ignores the private plot, they are in no position to judge either the scope of Mrs. Gaskell’s design or the unity of her novel. When they do accept the legitimate claim made upon them by the private plot, a claim based not on that plot’s realism but simply on the extent to which the author developed it, they can begin to see the theme of hope growing out of the two juxtaposed plots and can begin to appreciate the formal unity of this fine first novel.

¹ Tillotson, p. 217; McVeagh considers Job’s narrative as but one example of “the author’s incomplete grasp of the importance of structural unity” (“Notes on Mrs. Gaskell’s Narrative Technique”, EIC, xviii (October 1968), 464-6).