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FROM GREEN HELSTONE TO SMOKY MILTON: LANDSCAPE, ATMOSPHERE, AND EMBODIED ECOLOGICAL HARM IN ELIZABETH GASKELL'S NORTH AND SOUTH

Mukhammedova Khulkar Eliboyevna
Professor (DSc)
Uzbekistan state world languages university
Orcid: 0009-0003-5002-625X
Email: muxammedovaxulkar@gmail.com
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Abstract: Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1854–55) has traditionally been read as a social novel concerned with industrialization, class conflict, labour relations, and the reconciliation of conflicting social perspectives. Although recent scholarship has begun to approach the novel from an ecocritical perspective, its representation of environmental change can be examined more closely through the relationship between landscape, atmosphere, and the human body. This article argues that Gaskell does not simply construct a binary opposition between a natural and harmonious South and a polluted and destructive North. Rather, she presents a more complex ecological continuum in which environmental transformation moves from landscape to atmosphere and ultimately into the human body. Through close readings of the forests and ferns of Helstone, the smoke-filled atmosphere of Milton, Bessy Higgins's exposure to cotton fluff, and Thornton's discussion of smoke-consuming technology, the article demonstrates how Gaskell challenges both pastoral idealization and unchecked industrial mastery. Drawing on material ecocriticism and environmental justice, the study further argues that Gaskell represents pollution as a material process that disproportionately affects working-class bodies. At the same time, the novel does not advocate a return to an idealized pre-industrial countryside. Instead, its ecological imagination moves toward a model of pragmatic industrial responsibility in which economic productivity must be negotiated with human health and environmental well-being. The article therefore proposes that *North and South* can be productively reread as a nineteenth-century literary exploration of the interconnectedness of environment, industry, embodiment, and social responsibility.

Keywords: Elizabeth Gaskell; *North and South*; ecocriticism; material ecocriticism; environmental justice; industrialization; pollution; Victorian literature

Introduction. Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*, first published in serial form in 1854–55, occupies an important position in the tradition of Victorian industrial fiction. The novel follows Margaret Hale's movement from the rural southern environment of Helstone to the fictional manufacturing town of Milton-Northern, where she encounters the social, economic, and environmental consequences of industrialization. The contrast between the two locations has frequently been interpreted through the categories of rural and urban life, tradition and modernity, landed culture and industrial capitalism, and workers and manufacturers. G. Garrard similarly identifies the movement from Margaret's rural home to the industrial town of Milton as central to the novel's engagement with the Industrial Revolution[5.72]. Yet the geographical movement from South to North also constitutes an environmental movement. Gaskell carefully changes the sensory vocabulary through which her environments are perceived. Helstone is associated with forests, ferns, flowers, bees, birds, sunlight, seasonal change, and atmospheric stillness, whereas Milton is introduced through smoke, fog, machinery, coal dust, noise, and polluted air. The contrast is therefore not merely visual. It is sensory and material. Recent ecocritical scholarship has already established the relevance of environmental criticism to *North and South*. Chen's 2024 study, for

example, examines Milton from an ecocritical perspective and connects industrial deterioration with the changing relationships among machines, workers, and the wider ecosystem [3. 136]. In 2025 E. Bolat made a comparative study of Gaskell's *North and South* and Zola's *Germinal* likewise emphasizes the environmental consequences of industrialization and its effects on both human beings and nature [1. 65]. These studies establish that the novel is a productive site for ecocritical inquiry. However, the present article shifts the emphasis from the general opposition between nature and industrialization toward the material trajectory through which environmental degradation is experienced.

Materials and methods of research. The central argument of this article is that Gaskell constructs an ecological continuum that can be described as landscape → atmosphere → body → responsibility**.** The first stage is represented by the pastoral landscape of Helstone, where nature appears abundant but is nevertheless subject to anthropocentric aesthetic consumption. The second occurs in Milton, where industrialization transforms the atmosphere itself into a material sign of economic production. The third is most powerfully represented through Bessy Higgins, whose exposure to cotton fluff demonstrates that industrial pollution does not remain outside the human subject but enters and damages the body. The final stage appears in the novel's treatment of technological mitigation and Thornton's smoke-consuming apparatus, through which Gaskell imagines the possibility of a more responsible form of industrial practice.

This approach also prevents a simplistic interpretation of the novel as a binary opposition between a "good" natural South and a "bad" industrial North. Helstone itself is not presented as an ecological Eden. Margaret's pleasure in crushing ferns reveals that even pastoral beauty can be consumed from an anthropocentric and socially privileged position. Conversely, Milton is not represented as an entirely homogeneous ecological disaster. The possibility of cleaner industrial technology suggests that the problem lies not necessarily in industry itself but in forms of industrial production that externalize environmental and human costs.

The article therefore asks three questions: How does Gaskell transform environmental description as Margaret moves from Helstone to Milton? How does industrial pollution become embodied in the working-class body? And how does the novel negotiate between industrial productivity and environmental responsibility? Through close textual analysis, the study argues that Gaskell's environmental imagination is neither nostalgic pastoralism nor anti-industrial romanticism. Instead, it develops toward an ethically grounded understanding of the interdependence of environment, labour, technology, and human life.

Ecocriticism broadly examines the relationship between literature and the physical environment, challenging approaches that treat nature merely as a passive background to human experience. In *The Ecocriticism Reader*, Cheryll Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment [4.112]. Such an approach is particularly appropriate for *North and South*, where landscape and atmosphere actively participate in the development of the narrative rather than functioning as neutral settings.

The present study, however, moves beyond a simple nature-versus-industry framework by drawing particularly on material ecocriticism. Iovino and Oppermann's *Material Ecocriticism* emphasizes the material forces, substances, bodies, processes, and agencies through which ecological meanings emerge [8. 43]. Their approach is useful for reading Gaskell because the novel repeatedly gives environmental substances narrative significance: fern, smoke, cotton fluff, air, coal, and even the human lungs become connected within a network of material relations.

From this perspective, cotton fluff is not simply an image used to create a realistic description of a Victorian factory. It is a material substance with consequences. It moves through the carding room, enters the workers' respiratory systems, and becomes implicated in illness and mortality. Similarly, smoke is not merely a metaphor for industrial ugliness. It is presented as

something that occupies the atmosphere, alters sensory experience, and affects the physical environment of Milton.

A second theoretical concept relevant to this study is environmental justice. Environmental harm is rarely distributed equally among social groups. Industrial pollution can be produced through systems of economic activity while its physical costs are disproportionately experienced by workers and economically vulnerable populations. Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence" is particularly useful in this context because it emphasizes forms of environmental harm that develop gradually and remain less visible than spectacular environmental disasters [7. 86].

Bessy Higgins's illness can be examined through this framework. Her suffering is not an isolated medical event. It results from prolonged exposure to an industrial environment whose harmful material conditions are known but insufficiently addressed. The environmental problem is therefore simultaneously a labour problem and a social justice problem.

The theoretical framework of this article consequently combines three related perspectives: ecocriticism, to examine literary representations of human–environment relationships; material ecocriticism, to examine the agency and consequences of substances such as smoke and cotton fluff; and environmental justice, to examine the unequal distribution of environmental harm across class and labour relations.

Results and Discussion. Gaskell's description of Helstone initially establishes an environment of extraordinary sensory richness. When Margaret returns home in July, the forest is described through colour, light, vegetation, temperature, fragrance, and animal life:

> ***"****The forest trees were all one dark, full, dusky green; the fern below them caught all the slanting sunbeams; the weather was sultry and broodingly still."[6.214]*

The passage constructs nature as materially abundant. The "dusky green" of the trees, the sunlight caught by the fern, and the sultry atmosphere create an environment that appears almost untouched by industrial modernity. Margaret moves through "broad commons" where she encounters "wild, free, living creatures" surrounded by herbs and flowers.

At first sight, this description may appear to establish a conventional pastoral opposition: Helstone represents organic nature, while Milton will later represent industrial destruction. Such a reading, however, overlooks an important detail in Margaret's relationship with the landscape. She walks through the forest "crushing down the fern with a cruel glee."

The phrase "cruel glee" complicates the apparent ecological harmony of Helstone. Margaret experiences the natural environment aesthetically and sensorially, but her pleasure simultaneously involves the destruction of living vegetation. The verb "crushing" is particularly significant because it disrupts the romantic language surrounding the forest. Nature is beautiful, but it is also physically vulnerable to human action.

The scene therefore challenges the assumption that proximity to nature automatically produces ecological consciousness. Margaret's relationship with the forest is initially characterized by what may be called aesthetic consumption: nature provides beauty, fragrance, movement, and pleasure, while its material vulnerability remains largely invisible.

This observation is important because it prevents the novel from being reduced to an opposition between rural ecological virtue and industrial ecological failure. Helstone is environmentally rich, but Margaret's initial experience of it is still anthropocentric. The countryside functions as a space for aesthetic and emotional consumption.

The seasonal descriptions further undermine the idea of Helstone as a static ecological Eden. When October arrives, Margaret becomes absorbed in "the glories of the forest," while the fern harvest has ended and previously inaccessible glades become available. Nature is represented as dynamic and seasonal rather than permanent. Its beauty is inseparable from change, decay, and temporality.

This becomes particularly evident in the scene immediately preceding Margaret's departure. The autumn leaves are "more gorgeous than ever," but the narrator simultaneously reminds the reader that "the first touch of frost would lay them all low." The beauty of the leaves therefore contains its own temporality. The environment cannot be frozen into a permanent pastoral image.

The robin reinforces the relational dimension of this environment. Its song is connected with Mr. Hale's memory and with the small robin-house he built near his study window. Here human and nonhuman life intersect through care, memory, and habitation. The bird is neither an entirely independent symbol nor a mere decorative detail; it participates in the emotional ecology of the household.

Gaskell therefore presents Helstone through a tension between pastoral beauty and ecological vulnerability. The forest is rich in multispecies life, but it is not outside human influence. Its seasonal transformations also reveal that the pastoral environment is neither static nor invulnerable. This complexity becomes essential when the novel later introduces Milton.

The transition from Helstone to Milton is marked by one of the novel's most significant environmental transformations. As Margaret approaches Milton, the landscape is gradually replaced by a polluted atmosphere:

> "*For several miles before they reached Milton, they saw a deep lead-coloured cloud hanging over the horizon in the direction in which it lay." [6.212]*

The environmental significance of this image lies in its scale. Pollution is no longer confined to individual factories. It has become an atmospheric condition extending over the city. The "lead-coloured cloud" occupies the horizon before Margaret even enters Milton.

Gaskell intensifies this atmospheric transformation through sensory language. The air has "*a faint taste and smell of smoke*." The environment is therefore experienced through the body before it is fully understood intellectually. Smoke becomes something that can be smelled and tasted.

This is an important shift from Helstone. In the southern landscape, environmental description is dominated by colour, fragrance, sunlight, vegetation, and birdsong. In Milton, the sensory environment becomes dominated by smoke, fog, smell, taste, noise, and mechanical movement. The movement from South to North is therefore not simply geographical; it is a transformation in the sensory experience of environment.

The comparison can be represented as follows:

Helstone	**Milton**
Fern and foliage	Smoke and soot
Flowers and herbs	Coal and cotton production
Birds and bees	Machinery
Fragrance of vegetation	Taste and smell of smoke
Seasonal rhythm	Industrial acceleration
Multispecies life	Mechanical production

Gaskell further intensifies the contrast when she describes Milton as a town in which "*every machine seemed in rapid motion, and every human being lived only to produce*." The

sentence connects mechanical and human activity within a single productive system. Machines and people become components of an accelerated industrial environment.

This does not mean, however, that Gaskell simply condemns technology. Her representation is more complex because industrial technology also becomes a potential means of environmental mitigation. The environmental problem is therefore not "technology" in the abstract but the organization of technology around economic priorities that permit pollution and human suffering.

The distinction matters for understanding the novel's ecological politics. A simplistic reading would interpret Milton as an anti-industrial dystopia. Gaskell's narrative instead asks whether industrial production can become compatible with social and environmental responsibility.

Conclusion. "*North and South"* does not simply construct a moral opposition between the green South and the smoky North. Its environmental imagination is considerably more complex. Helstone is aesthetically rich but not free from anthropocentric attitudes; Milton is environmentally damaged but not beyond technological and ethical reform.

Through its contrasting landscapes and sensory environments, the novel first establishes a movement from pastoral abundance to industrial pollution. More importantly, however, Gaskell traces the movement of environmental harm from the landscape into the atmosphere and finally into the human body. The "*lead-coloured cloud"* and the "*taste and smell of smoke*" transform Milton's atmosphere into a material expression of industrial production, while the cotton fluff in Bessy Higgins's lungs demonstrates that environmental degradation becomes embodied social suffering.

The novel's ecological significance therefore lies not merely in its descriptions of nature. It lies in its representation of material interdependence. Air, industrial substances, machines, workers, and urban space form a connected system. Pollution becomes a social issue because its effects are unequally distributed across human bodies.

At the same time, Gaskell avoids a simplistic anti-industrial position. Thornton's smoke-consuming apparatus suggests that technological systems can be modified to reduce environmental harm. The novel consequently imagines a form of industrial modernity in which economic production must be accompanied by responsibility toward workers and the environments they inhabit.

The central ecological trajectory of *North and South* may therefore be summarized as: landscape → atmosphere → body → responsibility.

This trajectory provides a way of rereading Gaskell's industrial novel beyond the conventional opposition of North and South. The novel's deepest ecological insight is that the environment is not external to society. It is materially present in the air people breathe, the substances they handle, the bodies they inhabit, and the economic systems that determine their exposure to environmental risk.

In this sense, Gaskell's novel offers a nineteenth-century literary exploration of a problem that remains central to contemporary environmental humanities: the recognition that environmental degradation is simultaneously a material, social, economic, and ethical phenomenon.

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