The personal is the political
Nicola Onyett

Building on my article on pp. 28–31 of the magazine, these teaching notes offer ways to enrich your reading of *North and South* by getting you to think about both the Romance genre and attitudes to female Victorian writers.

The battle of the sexes

In *North and South*, Gaskell’s representation of the relationship between Margaret Hale and John Thornton reworks the classic romance trope of the ‘battling lovers’. This plot device is so familiar that the writer and comedian Meera Syal described it as ‘the DNA of romantic comedy’ in which ‘banter’ is effectively ‘foreplay’. My article suggests that the traditional ‘happy ending’ of *North and South* can be seen to illustrate Gaskell’s desire to tackle a broad range of Victorian social and cultural concerns, but it is well worth considering the extent to which the literature of love has always chosen to represent relationships between men and women as an ongoing ‘battle of the sexes’: an attraction of opposites that sometimes — but not always — ends ‘happily ever after’.

We can trace the trope of the ‘battling lovers’ at least as far back as Chaucer’s tale of the Wife of Bath, while Shakespeare’s early comedies *Much Ado About Nothing* and *The Taming of the Shrew* contain the famous love-hate relationships of Beatrice and Benedick and Kate and Petruchio. Victorian literature is full of examples of fighting couples, while more recently, Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* saga has brought the idea right up to date.

**Task**

In groups:

- Compare and contrast some of the ways in which the social, historical and cultural contexts in which texts were originally written might influence their representations of the battle of the sexes.
- How many other texts can your class think of in which apparently mismatched lovers eventually reconcile their differences?

Text and genre

My article draws attention to the contrasting genres traceable within *North and South*, the romance and ‘coming-of-age’ of the heroine and the social-problem novel. Each of these text types makes symbolic use of the characters of Margaret and Thornton.

**Task**

Research other famous Victorian love stories that deal with wider social concerns. You might consider novels such as:

- Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*. 
• Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*.
• Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.

A group of students might be allocated one novel (or section of a novel) and could produce a PowerPoint or poster that presents the key features of the novel to the rest of the class.

**Eagles and doves**

In 1934 the Oxford academic Lord David Cecil claimed that as a genteel and ladylike sort of novelist, Gaskell should never have tried to tackle such unsuitably political subjects as industrialisation and class conflict. Unlike other Victorian women writers, characterised by Cecil as ‘ugly, dynamic, childless, independent…eagles’, he described Gaskell as completely happy within the ‘placid dovecotes of Victorian womanhood’.

**Task**

How do you respond to Lord David Cecil’s way of comparing great women writers by referring to aspects of their private lives? Can you think of any male writers who have been subjected to this sort of critical approach?

**What’s in a name?**

My article points out how the polemical title *North and South*, which draws attention to the Victorian class divide, was not Elizabeth Gaskell’s own choice, but was in fact imposed by her editor, Charles Dickens. In rejecting the author’s preferred title, ‘Margaret Hale’, Dickens was only the first in a long line of male critics (such as Lord David Cecil) who have attempted to reclassify and redefine both the writer and her texts.

**Task**

Patsy Stoneman’s article ‘Will the real Mrs Gaskell please stand up’ in THE ENGLISH REVIEW, Vol. 1, No. 3 discusses a variety of responses to *North and South*. Stoneman looks at how the popularity of the gentle comic novel *Cranford*, which tells the unthreatening stories of the inhabitants of a small country village, may have overshadowed Gaskell’s more difficult and challenging works. Read Stoneman’s article and discuss the ways in which the contexts of production and reception can alter the ways in which Gaskell’s novels have been read and received.

**Further reading**

Online portal The Victorian Web offers insights into an enormous treasure trove of articles, links, ideas and information about the nineteenth-century world. The link below leads to an excellent section devoted to the life and work of Elizabeth Gaskell:

[http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/gaskell/index.html](http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/gaskell/index.html)

The Gaskell Society has been involved with the restoration of 84 Plymouth Grove in Manchester, where the Gaskell family lived for many years and where Elizabeth wrote most of her novels. The newly restored house is due to open to visitors in late 2014: [http://www.gaskellsociety.co.uk/](http://www.gaskellsociety.co.uk/)

The British Library site includes an entry for *North and South* and some useful links to contextual material, including articles on the ‘condition of England’ novel and on the rise of technology and industry: [http://www.bl.uk/works/north-and-south](http://www.bl.uk/works/north-and-south)