

*Literature Insights*  
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# Elizabeth Gaskell: *Mary Barton*

Richard Gravil

*our labour's  
our capital,  
and we ought  
to draw interest  
on that'*


# PUBLICATION DATA

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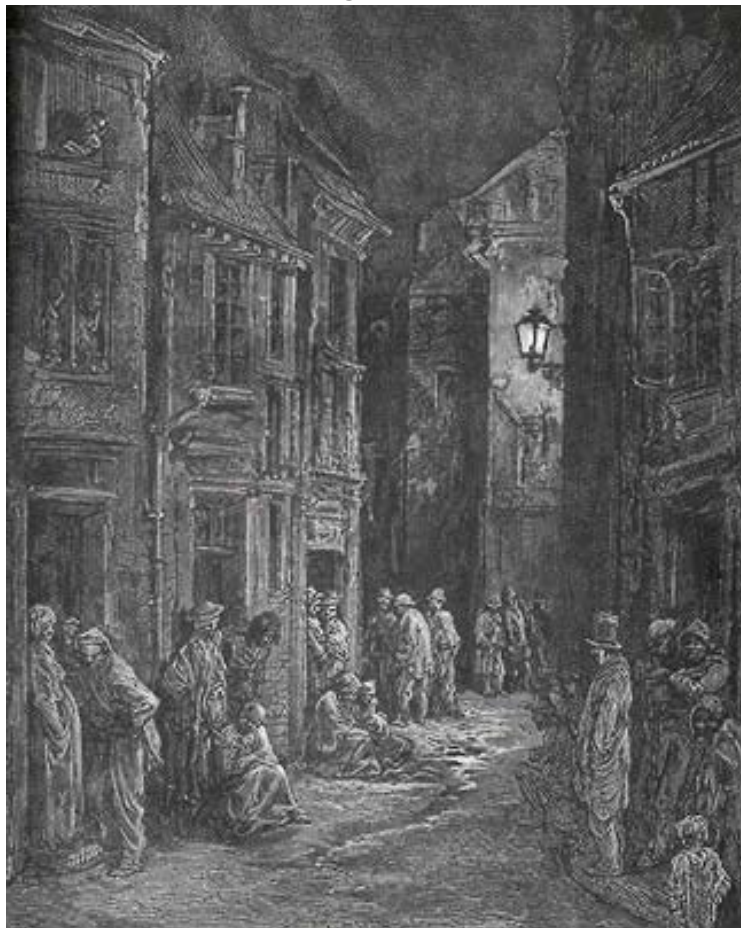
# Part 1. Life and Times

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## 1.1 General Introduction

It is said in *The Gentleman's Magazine* in 1895 that when Mrs Gaskell tried to persuade a working man that he should not feel hatred towards the rich, he replied, 'Ay, ma'am, but have ye ever seen a child clemmed [starved] to death?' She puts the same question—repeatedly—to her readers in this novel.

The gulf between rich and poor was never wider than when Elizabeth Gaskell set out to depict the abyss of working class misery in her novel *Mary Barton*, and since she was writing for the rich, with a desire to engage their active sympathy for



Gustave Doré, *London: A Pilgrimage* (1872)  
More elegant streets, but the same poverty

the poor, she constantly faces a diplomatic problem. How can she tell the truth—that extreme poverty is a result of an unjust and exploitative social system—without causing offence?

In chapter 3 Gaskell gives a vivid and persuasive sketch of the process of capital accumulation, showing how the poor weaver sees 'his employer removing from house to house, each one grander than the last' while the weaver and his fellows struggle to feed their children. She immediately enters a caveat: 'I know that this is not really the case ... I know what is the truth in such matters'. But she does not tell us what that truth may be. One may well ask whether the 'I' that knows 'what is the truth' in this chapter, is the same as the 'I' in the preface to the novel who says she has 'tried to speak truth-