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**An exploration of the nature of Illness in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton*
and Washington Irving's short story *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*,
answering the question:**

In what ways and to what ends is nature incorporated into the two texts?

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'I swear, gentlemen, that to be too conscious is an illness.' (Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, 8)

In her book *On Being Ill*, Virginia Woolf equates the spoken word with sickness. She claims that 'the poverty of language [hinders] the description of illness in literature' (Woolf 10) where 'English, which can express the thoughts of Hamlet and the tragedy of Lear, has no words for the shiver and the headache' (Woolf 10). Despite being published around a century later than the two authors this essay approaches, Woolf's statement highlights the importance of examining the mysterious nature of sickness in literature. Instead of invoking a descriptive image of illness, the spoken word enables an intangible image of feeling and emotion. Rather than referring to a definition of nature as 'the phenomena of the physical world collectively, including plants, animals, the landscape and other features or products of the earth' (Knowles), this essay will examine the 'nature' of sickness as a 'state' following the Cambridge definition of 'state' as a 'condition of being that exists at a particular time' (Cambridge Dictionary). This essay will approach Washington Irving's 1819 Gothic short story *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* and Elizabeth Gaskell's 1848 Victorian realist novel *Mary Barton* through the theoretical frame of the medical humanities. *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, set in North America, centres around the teacher Ichabod Crane who is immediately entranced by the narcoleptic veil of Sleepy Hollow upon his arrival to the village. The hollow is cursed by supernatural events and contrasting legendary narratives that ensue fear and confusion within the community's individual perceptions. Conversely, set in the slums of mid-nineteenth century Manchester, Gaskell's Victorian novel *Mary Barton* considers Chartist working class values and inequalities through the mental perceptions and state of John Barton and his daughter Mary. The novel puts forth the theme of poverty as a manifestation of myriad sanitary and miasmatic disadvantages of the time. Thus, through an examination of setting, spatiality and sensuality within the texts, this essay will examine how these texts incorporate the nature of sickness as a means of unpacking the abstract emotions of fear and social anxiety within differing social disparities.

Irving and Gaskell employ setting and its space as drivers for citizen perceptions of paranoia and anxiety. In Irving's short story, illness manifests itself through setting as narcolepsy and its hallucinogenic nature. The village's space induces hallucinations and sets the inhabitants into a state of psychological madness as a result of their social insecurities. In their publication's abstract, C. Schiappa defines narcolepsy as 'a chronic sleep disorder characterised by excessive daytime sleepiness, cataplexy, hypnagogic hallucinations and sleep paralysis' (Schiappa). Sleepy Hollow's locality drives illusioned perceptions through depictions of spatially enclosing imagery. The town is described as residing in a 'lap of land' 'among high hills, which is one of the quietest places in the whole world' (Irving 291). The use of hyperbolic language of grandeur such as 'lap', 'high hills' and the superlative adverb 'quietest', encapsulate the extent of isolation and entrapment provided by the setting. The land within the hollow is enchanted where 'every sound of nature, at that witching hour, fluttered [Crane's] excited imagination: the moan of the whip-poor-will from the hill-side; the boding cry of the tree road; [...] the sudden rustling in the thicket of birds frightened from their roost' (Irving 296). The surrounding natural beings are personified through emotional reactions such as 'moan', 'cry' and 'frightened'. These cathartic and sonorous terms could be interpreted to project Crane's dazed and anxious state of mind onto the village's environment. However, through further analysis of space, this could further illustrate that it is the hollow's ambiguous supernatural events that manifest Crane's anxious perception. For instance, the natural beings from the 'hill-side', 'tree road' and birds in 'their roost' appear from very specific and concealed locations. This movement and intricacy in location further enhances the atmosphere of isolation. The sounds' multiple precise and crevassed localities incite confusion in Crane's sense of perception. Andreea Popescu suggests that 'the forest is a place of challenges and initiation' (Popescu 87), thus inferring that Sleepy Hollow's wild and forested environment is one that affects changes in perception of the self and identity as a

space of initiation. Looking at ambiguity in Irving's tale, Benjamin Crawford suggests that Irving does not explicitly affirm whether Crane's supernatural encounters 'are in fact from Crane's mind, or the result of Satan' (Crawford 1512). For instance, this ambiguity is present in the haunting and ambiguous nature of Crane's visions, where in moments of anxiety Crane is stuck between 'drown[ing] thought or driv[ing] away evil spirits' (Irving 297). Crawford seems to suggest that these visions are either imaginary or from a spiritual origin. However, one can also argue that Irving affirms that these encounters are real. For instance, Irving affirms that Crane gets hit by the headless horseman's head as it 'encountered his cranium with a tremendous crash' (Irving 316). Confirmation of the occurrence of this hit lies within the visible traces of hoofprints, a hat and pumpkin (Irving 317). The details of this narrative are indeed ambiguous due to the narcoleptic veil from the Hollow on its inhabitants, but the crash is not purely imagined; rather, it is possibly interpreted in a distorted manner. Thus, through spatial literary devices, Irving highlights the alienating and isolating powers of the hollow through Crane's illusionary nature and anxious state.

In *Mary Barton*, Gaskell presents the unsanitary nature of the working class' domestic spaces and slum setting in order to highlight issues concerning social perceptions conditioned by the fear surrounding the nature of illness. The unsanitary quality of urban and domestic spaces are displayed through illness' miasmatic qualities to highlight the working class' depressed and anxious states as a result of this environment. The Victorian theory of 'sanitationism' is touched upon by Elizabeth Sheckler where 'illness was generated from environmental causes' (Sheckler XI) such as 'foul air or water, predominant from 1800 to 1880' (Sheckler 1). This theory ties in closely to the theory of 'miasma', a Greek word for 'pollution' ('Merriam-Webster'), where the Victorians believed that diseases emanated from 'mist filled with particles from decomposed matter' (Kennedy 510). The setting of the urban slums of Manchester highlights the gap between the working and middle classes through

sanitation. For instance, Gaskell relates the 'filthy neighbourhood [with] great depression of mind and body' (Gaskell 75). Through this direct paralleled comparison, she attempts to highlight that the urban's space of filth projects itself onto the state and nature of the working-class citizen's perceptions. This critique of space as a factor for misery is more subtly suggested by her emphasis of a separation between inner and outer spaces and their atmospheric differences. For instance, Mary Barton reaches the Wilson household where 'the outside of the well-known house struck her differently; for the door was closed instead of open, as it once had always stood. The window-plants [...] looked withering and drooping' (Gaskell 146). This description hints at the miasmatic nature of the atmosphere where the air trapped behind the household's closed door is a possible factor for the plants' deaths. Moreover, Gaskell relates crowding in domestic dwellings and urban spaces to sickness due to a lack of personal space 'for in their crowded dwellings no invalid can be isolated' (Gaskell 75). This space reflects factory working chaos' presence in the home and minds of the working class. Nataalka Freeland claims that 'sanitary awareness among the poor was above all a fear of the authorities' (Freeland 805), confirming that it is the space of filth, a view condescendingly imposed by upper classes, that acts as an inevitable signifier for the working class' standing in society. Hence, the nature of illness represented through space and setting allows Gaskell to critique the perception of sanitation attributed to the working class.

Furthermore, Irving and Gaskell touch upon ambiguity in narratives through sensory descriptions rather than tangible visuality to explore the nature of illness surrounding their experiences. In *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, the nature of the inhabitants' madness and delusion is manifested texturally through sound to reflect their states of drowsiness. For instance, the circulating legends of the hollow, particularly the tales surrounding the Headless Horseman, rely heavily on onomatopoeic language. Brom Bones' 'crew would be heard dashing along past the farmhouses at midnight, passed the hoops and halloo, like a troop of

Don Cossacks; and the old dames; startled out of their sleep, would listen for a moment until the hurry-scurry had clattered by' (Irving 301). The terms 'hoops and halloo', 'hurry-scurry' and 'clattered' all encapsulate the sensuality of sound, inciting interest in the mind by creating a chaotic sensory atmosphere. However, the soft 'h' alliteration against 'oo' and 'u' sounds reflect the possible state of drowsiness of the citizens. The inexact reflection of 'oo' against 'u' sounds through the contrast of 'hoops and halloo' and 'hurry-scurry' subtly echo each other, a reflection of the malleability of interpretive narratives by the citizens in the hollow under their drowsy nature. Thereby, through a representation of the drowsy citizens' senses of perceptions through sound, Irving manages to criticise their appeal to accepting heroic narratives of oppressive characters like Brom Bones. These heroic perceptions are moreover infected by the atmosphere where 'there was a contagion in the very air that blew from that haunted region' (Irving 289). The hollow's personification as 'haunted', further consolidated as it 'breathed forth an atmosphere of dreams and fancies infecting all the land' (Irving 289), exposes the hollow's class hierarchy as a socially constructed narrative. Therefore, the mind's portrayal as prone to the infection of 'dreams and fancies', provides a possible explanation for the citizen's appeal to Brom Bones' heroic image conditioned by this dazed hierarchy. Crawford suggests that this infectious environment acts 'as a source for the supernatural' (Crawford 1525), but one could further argue that it is a source for paranoia and anxious collective perceptions influenced by a hierarchy manifested as supernatural.

Mary Barton depicts the senses of smell and touch to critique the circulating narrative of the nature of sickness as grotesque and infectious which is perceived as normal within working class communities. Gaskell employs diction of moisture, as reflected by the perception of miasmatic infections at the time. For instance, she describes the air as 'thick' and 'clammy' (Gaskell 75) and 'children rolling on the damp, nay wet brick floor through which the stagnant, filthy moisture of the street oozed up' (Gaskell 74). The grotesque images

of moisture as 'stagnant', 'filthy' and 'oozing' evoke a contagious feel through stickiness. This heavy moisture, put into contrast with the human body where a woman is seen 'suckling the child from her dry, withered breasts' (Gaskell 79) creates a juxtaposed binary of extremes in texture between the damp and the dry to expose the nature of the surrounding illnesses. Smell is further personified as 'foetid as almost to knock the two men' (Gaskell, 74), a brute force in the urban space. This little amount of agency attributed to smell highlights the oppressive nature of the nature of the working class' conditions as a result of class hierarchy. Through textured descriptions of feeling, Gaskell manages to present the sickness' nature as an intimidating power larger than the working-class inciting fear.

Conclusively, the mental and physical diseases that permeate both texts are framed through atmospheric theories, with spatial features and sensual imagery emphasising the powerful forces of sickness. Depictions of extreme conditions in *Mary Barton* and extreme anxiety in *Sleepy Hollow* are employed to the ends of critiquing social expectations, constructions, and perceptions held by privileged societal positions.

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