

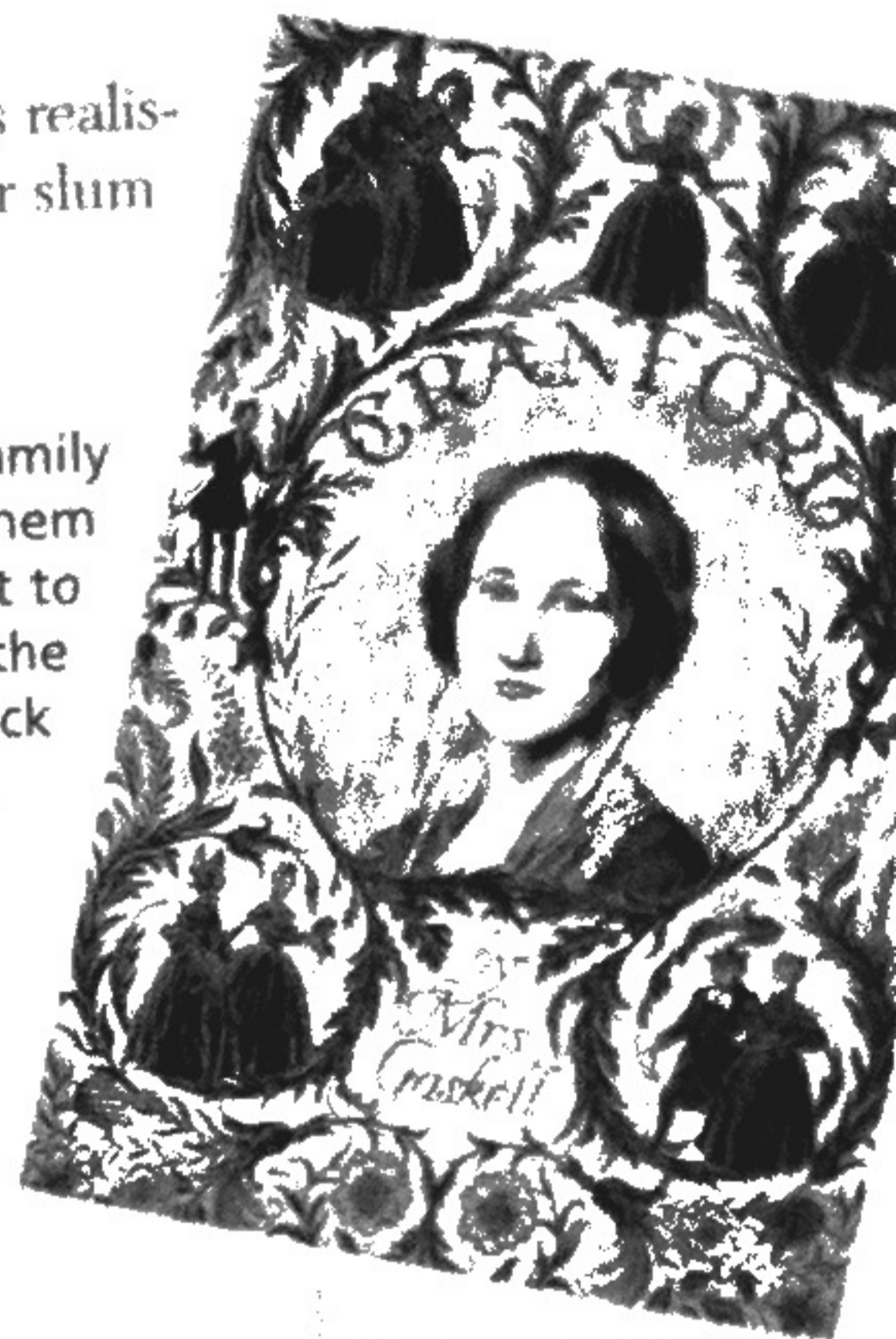
Not surprisingly, sickness was widespread. Cholera epidemics regularly swept through the slums of Great Britain's industrial cities. In 1842, a British government study showed an average life span to be 17 years for working-class people in one large city, compared with 38 years in a nearby rural area.

Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848) is a work of fiction. Nonetheless, its realistic description of the dank cellar dwelling place of one family in a Manchester slum presents a startlingly accurate portrayal of urban life at the time:

A VOICE FROM THE PAST

You went down one step even from the foul area into the cellar in which a family of human beings lived. It was very dark inside. The window-panes many of them were broken and stuffed with rags . . . the smell was so fetid [foul] as almost to knock the two men down . . . they began to penetrate the thick darkness of the place, and to see three or four little children rolling on the damp, nay wet brick floor, through which the stagnant, filthy moisture of the street oozed up. . . .

ELIZABETH GASKELL, *Mary Barton*



Elizabeth Gaskell (1810–1865) was a British writer whose novels such as *Mary Barton* (1848) and *North and South* (1855) show a sympathy for the working class. *Cranford* (1853) deals with the life of a peaceful English village.

Working Conditions Factory owners wanted to keep their machines running for as many hours a day as possible. As a result, the average worker spent 14 hours a day at the job, 6 days a week. Instead of changing with the seasons, the work was the same week after week, year after year. Workers had to keep up with the machines.

Industry also posed new dangers in work. Factories were seldom well-lit or clean. Machines injured workers in countless ways. A boiler might explode or a drive belt might catch the worker's arm. And there was no government program to provide aid in case of injury. The most dangerous conditions of all were found in the coal mines. Frequent accidents, damp conditions, and the constant breathing of coal dust made the average miner's life span ten years shorter than that of other workers.

Class Tensions Not everyone in the new cities lived miserably. Well-to-do merchants and factory owners built fancy homes in the suburbs. In addition, a new class began to emerge.

Though poverty gripped Britain's working classes, the Industrial Revolution created enormous amounts of money in the country. Most of this wealth lined the pockets of factory owners, shippers, and merchants. These wealthy people made up a growing **middle class**—a social class of skilled workers, professionals, businesspeople, and wealthy farmers.

The new middle class transformed the social structure of Great Britain. In the past, landowners and aristocrats occupied the top position in British society. With most of the wealth, they wielded the power. Now some factory owners, merchants, and investment bankers grew wealthier than the landowners and aristocrats.

Yet important social distinctions divided the two wealthy classes. Landowners looked down on those who had made their fortunes in the "vulgar" business world. Not until late in the 1800s were rich entrepreneurs considered the social equals of the lords of the countryside.

Gradually, a larger middle class—neither rich nor poor—emerged. This group included an upper middle class of government employees, doctors, lawyers, and managers of factories, mines, and shops. A lower middle class consisted of factory overseers and such skilled workers as toolmakers, mechanical drafters, and printers. These people enjoyed a comfortable standard of living.

During the years 1800 to 1850, however, poor workers saw little improvement in their own living and working conditions. Frustrated workers watched their livelihoods disappear as machines replaced them. In response, they smashed the machines they thought were putting them out of work. One group of such workers was called the Luddites. They were named after Ned Ludd, probably a mythical English