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I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Eileen D. Abel entitled "'Blessings Left Behind': Self and Social Obligation in the Novels of Elizabeth Gaskell." I have examined the final copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in English.



Don R. Cox, Major Professor

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Associate Vice Chancellor and
Dean of the Graduate School

"BLESSINGS LEFT BEHIND":
SELF AND SOCIAL OBLIGATION
IN THE NOVELS OF ELIZABETH GASKELL

A Dissertation
Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy
Degree
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Eileen D. Abel
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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents

John H. Abel, Jr.

and

Carolyn W. Abel

and

to my husband

Paul N. Allen

who have given me the most important lessons in life.

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Abstract

Far from supporting the domestic ideology of the Nineteenth Century as many writers contend, Elizabeth Gaskell's five major novels--Mary Barton, Ruth, North and South, Sylvia's Lovers and Wives and Daughters--reflect her overriding idea that the individual could effect social change only through the achievement of moral integrity. Gaskell believes that the primary responsibility of an adult participant of community life is moral awareness, and in these five novels Gaskell creates a sort of moral mythology, or stories by which women could guide their lives. Gaskell's heroines influence their specific communities by learning the supposed "feminine" virtues of love, mercy and generosity, the "best of the human spirit." At the same time that Gaskell's novels stress these powerful and transformative female values, they also create her new mythology and generate social change, through these particular virtues embodied in and taught by her heroines. There is a progression of moral reasoning in her novels where the heroine's moral integrity involves a coherent conception of who she is and what her commitments are. Gaskell's mythology thus creates a rejuvenated, better community through these virtues, through the achievement of moral integrity and social obligation.

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INTRODUCTION

"Blessings Left Behind":
The New Mythology of Self and Social Obligation
in the Novels of Elizabeth Gaskell

The last two decades have seen a burgeoning of critical analysis of the works of Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell, an author occasionally still compared to Dickens, Brontë or Eliot, but more frequently--and quite appropriately--valued for her important position in the ranks of both Victorian fiction and women's writing. Gaskell's critical reevaluation has occurred for good reason: she was an insightful, witty, socially engaged and passionately concerned author whose works spanned the middle centuries of the decade, frequently voicing the concerns of the age as well as pointing them out with gentle irony.

Gaskell was a prolific writer, producing poems co-written with her husband, numerous short stories, five major novels, and the biography of her friend Charlotte Brontë. Cranford is witty; "Lois the Witch" startling; "Cousin Phillis" sweet (and deemed by John Lucas the most perfect short story in English); The Life of Charlotte Brontë is lush, and, its occasional evasions and inaccuracies aside, in-depth and honest; Sylvia's Lovers is poignant; Wives and Daughters intelligent and delightfully engaging. Reflected primarily in her five major novels, however, is her one

overriding idea that the individual could effect social change; she herself lived the ideal; her heroines in the novels do so as well.

Gaskell's concern is not strictly with the development of the individual; as a Unitarian, she considered that focus on egotism as essentially wicked. What she does believe, however, is that a sense of self is vital in any kind of moral approach to life. Moral awareness becomes, then, the primary responsibility of an adult as she participates in the life of the community. For community is the most essential element of a moral life, according to Gaskell, and far from being a hackneyed idea, this theme of connection provides the excitement in Gaskell's novels, the driving idea behind her heroines, and, ultimately, the track of her own progression as a novelist. What Gaskell does in these novels is raise the events of these women's lives to symbolic significance; these are stories about human truths from which others--ideally--could learn important values, for self and social obligation. If we accept the definition of myth as universal truth embodied in a story to impart meaning, then Gaskell in her novels is creating a new social mythology for an age she considered devoid of meaning.

Gaskell's heroines come to a sense of self in her novels only through crisis and resolution, but their growth is intimately involved in each heroine's awareness of her place in, her involvement with, her obligation to the

community of which she is a part. These novels are not merely "Bildungsromans" in the sense of Goethe's Wilhelm Meister or of Carlyle's Sartor Resartus; Gaskell's novels reflect neither the solitude of character nor the philosophical musings about man's meaning on earth which imbue such novels as Eliot's Daniel Deronda. Rather, Gaskell's heroines define what Susan Morgan calls "the best of the human spirit" (51), and their progress as individuals and their influences on their specific communities can be measured by the learning of supposedly "feminine" virtues of love, mercy and generosity.

These "feminine" values infuse her novels: Mary Barton (1848), Ruth (1853), North and South (1855), Sylvia's Lovers (1863), and Wives and Daughters (1865) all stress the importance of connection. What also infuses these novels is the increased strength with which Gaskell states her philosophy of self and social obligation. Social change is not something that can be merely legislated; rather, social transformation can only extend from personal involvement, and this comes through an individual recognition of a certain morality that extends beyond either the social or the personal. The pivotal action in Gaskell's novels, then, comes in recognizing that through personal growth and an individual relationship in and connection with a specifically defined community, the ability to change that community will come from a distinctly "female" way of moral

reasoning, what Carol Gilligan calls "the ethic of care" (74).

Writing at a time when England was becoming depersonalized through increasing commerce and industrialization, Gaskell sought to expose the hollow core of modern life, not by bitter diatribe nor by highly critical social indictment (though her first two novels are a bit anomalous), but by creating a new kind of mythology by which her characters could live. Finding meaning in the ordinary, (which the late philosopher and mythologist Joseph Campbell considered a mythical conception), could be achieved, Gaskell believed, in everyday existence, but it came only from, to use Gilligan's phrase again, an "ethic of care." Campbell tried to encourage people to "live mythically," or to find patterns in our own lives which reflect universal truths. Dr. Jean Houston, in her book The Hero and the Goddess: The Odyssey as Mystery and Initiation, believes that living "mythically" means to become "spiritually charged and awakened to a larger and a nobler life"; this involves, she goes on, shifting our awareness away from "the personal-particular concerns and frustrations of our everyday lives to the personal-universal, with its capacity to broaden the context of our lives." Becoming fully cognizant of one's self while at the same time becoming selfless is at the core of Gaskell's mythology;

this is the journey from self to other which all of Gaskell's heroines experience.

By paying attention to the plots, characters and leitmotifs in the life narratives of Gaskell's heroines, we can become aware of their movement toward this "larger, nobler life." As the themes found in all great art and literature--love and loss, joy and suffering, triumph and failure--begin to emerge from the ordinary events of their lives, we can see each young heroine become the central character of her own tale, a tale constructed out of the social fabric, the community of which she is a part. The losses and sorrows which are endured and the obstacles that are encountered can be seen as catalysts, agents of growth that compel these young women to develop neglected or unrecognized talents and strengths to become fully human.

Much of the mythic journey undergone by Mary, Ruth, Margaret, Sylvia and Molly is their attempt to free themselves from the worn-out plotlines of the past; they must sort through the scripts written for them by parents, friends, society. They grow to feel uneasy that the breadth and depth of their experience is no longer compatible with their former understanding of themselves. Each must decide, then, what "story line" to keep, which to throw away. And in the transformative power of voicing each personal story, Gaskell creates a unique journey for each character, melding into one great mythology: a community bound by the female

ethic of care. Mary's story is about definitions of innocence. Ruth's is one of personal strength in crisis. Margaret's is balancing the public and the private, while that of Sylvia questions moral law--personal, Victorian or human. Molly's story is perhaps the apex of Gaskell's mythology for a new age: in it is highlighted social and personal change and the longstanding commitment to connection in spite of these changes.

Because Gaskell's sense of moral responsibility pervades these novels and because this relates specifically to her heroines' experiences as women in closely defined sets of relationships, a closer examination of Carol Gilligan's "ethic of care" is in order. She outlines in her seminal book, In a Different Voice, what she perceives as the differences between male and female moral development. The former she describes as possessing an "ethic of justice" and the latter an "ethic of care." Justice is defined by separation and individuality, while care is defined by connection, which, she explains, "reflects a cumulative knowledge of human relationships, [and] evolves around a central insight, that self and other are interdependent" (74). She is careful to stress two points, however, which are vital also to our understanding Gaskell's portrayal of her heroines' growing sense of morality: first, that this interconnection cannot truly exist without a proper sense of one's own individuality; and second, that "the fact of

interconnection informs the central, recurring recognition that just as the incidence of violence is in the end destructive to all, so the activity of care enhances both others and self"--in other words, that a concern with relationship "becomes universal in its condemnation of exploitation and hurt" (74).

Gilligan explains that because women are--culturally and historically--particularly concerned with the care of others, because they "attend to voices other than their own" (16), they are often seen as lacking the capacity "for autonomous thinking, clear decision-making, and responsible action" (17) which are traditionally associated with masculine maturation. She maintains that women attain selfhood through a different process than that of men, and to clarify her point, she traces three particular stages of women's moral development:

The sequence of women's moral judgment proceeds from an initial concern with survival to a focus on goodness and finally to a reflective understanding of care as the most adequate guide to the resolution of conflicts in human relationships. (105)

What results from this final stage of development, Gilligan points out, is what she defines as a particularly female voice, a voice which recent feminist critics have looked for in women's writing.

Like the stories that delineate women's fantasies of power, women's descriptions of adulthood convey a different sense of its social reality [than that of men's]. In their portrayal of relationships, women replace the bias of men toward separation with a representation of the interdependence of self and other, both in love and work. By changing the lens of developmental observation from individual achievement to relationships of care, women depict ongoing attachment as the path that leads to maturity. Thus the parameters of development shift toward marking the progress of affiliative relationship. (170)

Gaskell emphasizes this "interdependence" in her novels: it is the heroines' "ongoing attachment[s]," or rather the foundation of their very selves in these attachments, which provides the core of the novels and provides the new mythology which would help overcome the false glitter of an increasingly materialistic society. This "ethic of care" is really an ethic of responsibility which becomes the heroines' personal hallmark of "integrity and strength" (Gilligan 171); in achieving this "ethic of care" the heroines undergo a kind of mythic journey.

In the nineteenth century, a woman's capacity to care, her self-abnegation in light of domestic duty, was called her "proper sphere"; the real gift of modern feminist

criticism, like Gilligan's, is to explain how that "sphere" could actually involve a definition of one's individuality and one's power over certain aspects of one's (female) life, and how this can be a positive force in reexamining female lives and literature. This idea is reflected in much recent criticism about Gaskell, but we must be careful to avoid a common pitfall: Gaskell is by no means a feminist writer, though she would certainly be called a "feminine" one if we use the criterion of a specific set of "female values" consisting of mercy, love, kindness, forgiveness, patience and acceptance (not to be confused with passivity). Gaskell does create her new mythology, she does generate social transformation, through these particular values, embodied in and taught by her heroines.

Gaskell's five major novels, then, stress these female values and mark the progress of female moral development on each heroine's journey to "personal-universal concerns." There is a sort of progression of moral reasoning in the novels where the heroine's moral integrity involves a coherent conception of who she is and what her commitments are. The first of Gaskell's novels is Mary Barton; written in 1848 when Gaskell was thirty-eight years old, it reflects much of the crisis suffered by the working class which Gaskell witnessed in Manchester. Its theme is England's "Two Nations," to borrow Disraeli's appropriate phrase, and the dominance of one culture (the upper class factory

owners) over another (the impoverished and beleaguered factory workers), a situation, to use Marilyn French's apt terminology, which "makes impossible the most essential and felicitous element in life: trusting mutual affection" ("Power" 85). Both John Barton and his daughter Mary are trapped by their lives, and while John Barton is a magnificent character, he never goes beyond an obsession with the misery he sees around him; Mary, on the other hand, whose story dominates the second half of the novel, learns that perhaps her notions have been misguided and tries to correct them accordingly. The novel ends in a reconciliation between the two battling classes, and though somewhat idealistic, it reflects the first of the five stages of Gaskell's idea of moral progression-- a kind of youthful, naive and somewhat innocent selfishness must make way for a more mature responsibility for others.

Yet another stage is reflected in Ruth, published in 1853, and while this novel's moral overtones may sometimes seem unpalatable to modern readers, it clearly offers us a "lesson of forgiveness" and a recognition of "the power of change" in a public realm which, as Gaskell critic Susan Morgan points out, "must [learn to] take up the values we have relegated to the home" (50). It is Ruth Helton, seduced and abandoned, who is saved, loved and nurtured by the Benson siblings, odd, seemingly genderless individuals who teach her the power of redemption. The novel is about

suffering, about "loss of innocence," a crisis above and beyond the reevaluation of innocence which Mary undergoes; Ruth's crisis forms the beginning of her own mythological journey.

Published just two years after Ruth and in response both to criticism that Mary Barton was too critical of factory owners and to the publication of Dickens' industrial novel Hard Times, North and South becomes a narrative of the struggle of a private life in a public sphere. Dickens' novel reflects the mass dehumanization of an industrial society, while Gaskell's focuses more on specific individuals' reactions to it. What Margaret Hale must confront in the factory owner Thornton (eventually her accepted lover) is not only his completely authoritarian management--what he terms "enlightened despotism"--but the entire progressive and industrial mindset of the North as well. Margaret reaches her own maturity when she can become an actor in a male-dominated world of commerce, one which initially defies her understanding, but which she grows not only to appreciate, but to participate fully in as well. She chooses the narrative of her story; she allows for the possibility of a new industrial myth. She humanizes Thornton and by the end of the novel makes provisions for the reevaluation of industry for the workers with whom she has become intimately involved.

The Life of Charlotte Brontë kept Gaskell busy over the next several years, and most critics agree that Gaskell matured dramatically through the writing of this biography. Published in 1857, it was followed six years later by Sylvia's Lovers, the fourth of Gaskell's major novels, generally the least known and certainly the saddest. This story reinforces the idea that it is vital to establish a strong sense of self, in light of both social and human moralities, in order first to avoid unnecessary unhappiness, but also to be able to participate fully as a human being. Sylvia Robson is a dreamer like her father and yet envisions no life for herself beyond that which her mother lives, until, of course, she begins to live a similar life and finds herself miserable, frustrated and trapped. What she does do, however, is gain insight into herself and the truth; she learns at once to be herself and to be selfless; she passes on a new ethic of mercy and kindness to an alienated husband, to her circle of friends, and most importantly to the next generation through her daughter, Bella.

The last of Gaskell's novels, left unfinished by her death in November of 1865, is Wives and Daughters, usually considered her best novel and often compared to Eliot's Middlemarch in its scope and its combination of sympathetic and ironic social insight. More than in any of her four previous novels, this last novel has a pervasive vision of

the individual's sense of belonging to a greater whole. A sense of one's own individuality--who one is and how one creates a sense of self in the world--is molded by one's connections, inevitably and irrevocably. An individual, and particularly a woman, according to Gaskell, must acknowledge that her "right to her own story, depends upon her ability to act in the public domain," as Carolyn Heilbrun notes (Writing 18). And while Mary and Margaret do so in a large public event, and Sylvia and Ruth in smaller ways, Molly acts in the public sphere continually, making it part of her private one. The story is simply the story of her interaction with those individuals who make up the community of which she is a vital part. We constantly see Molly working out her private dilemmas, yet she acts in relation to those moral responsibilities of and to people around her. Molly is faced with several different sets of values--from the monied upper class in the Cumnors; the landed gentry in the Hamleys; the professional working class in her father, and the "unclassable" pair in Hyacinth and Cynthia Kirkpatrick--from which she must sort out the "real" values and make them her own to reach full maturity. Because morality and education are inseparable, the natural result of this ideal combination is the understanding of self and one's place in community. Molly is an individual first; but she is also a daughter, a helpmate, a nurse, a confidante, a friend, and eventually a beloved. These social, these

public relationships are what define and focus her gifts as a woman. The last of Gaskell's novels, then, reflects the final stage of moral development and the culmination of Gaskell's mythology: a strong sense of self leads to connection to community which can effect social change.

All of Gaskell's novels, then, have conclusions in which certain difficulties faced by the heroine are overcome, though of course none is so simplistic as to merely relate a story of a woman achieving adulthood solely to give something back to the community. As important as the heroines' own movement toward moral integrity is what these individuals offer to their communities. They inculcate those feminine virtues of love and kindness and understanding, ideally to change that community. There is for Elizabeth Gaskell no greater good than for an individual to be involved in the community, to change it for the better; but this change is effected only through active involvement (choosing one's story), through moral development, through, again, the "ethic of care" and through concerns not "personal-particular" but "personal-universal."

Though each of the main characters goes through various stages of growth, the novels themselves reflect Gaskell's growing commitment to the idea of the mature individual being an integral part of a community. Her novels go through a period of innocence, through a crisis which brings on suffering, through a debate on public and private action,

through the conflict of one's personal demands versus Victorian social custom, and finally to a strong sense of self in connective relationships to effect change in the community. Whereas Gilligan finds three stages in moral development, from a "concern with survival" through a "focus on goodness" and finally to a recognition that "care" is "the most adequate guide to the resolution of conflicts in human relationships," I argue that while Gaskell's characters certainly reflect these stages, the novels themselves inherently forward a more specific moral mythology: one must, to survive as a sympathetic and intelligent human in this world, find out who one is in order to discover what one can do. For doing is the key. What Susan Morgan holds for Ruth can be said for the other novels as well, that the "real measure of progress" occurs when "our public realms [have taken] up the values we have relegated to the home" (50). This is certainly true of all of Gaskell's novels:

As long as history, as the record of human progress, is measured in traditional public terms, in the terms of political or economic moves, there will be no progress because the values behind that kind of measuring deny and even attack the best of the human spirit. Moreover, the ascendance of these false measures can be marked by a society's treatment of its women and is characterized by a

rejection of what are classed as feminine values, a belief that to be loving and merciful and generous is to be weak. But those supposedly feminine values are the real measure of progress, the true story of a community's growth or lack of it, and only when they are recognized as such can a community, a society, improve. (51)

Gaskell's mythology, then, is to create a rejuvenated, a better community through those virtues possessed by the heroines and through their social obligations.

We should turn to some criticism of Gaskell's works to examine what scholarship has been done and what has been omitted. There has been a renewed interest in Elizabeth Gaskell over the last decade and a half, and in feminist criticism over the last two decades; the combination of the two has provided some exciting new scholarship on Gaskell's work. Patsy Stoneman, in her 1987 Elizabeth Gaskell, reevaluates Gaskell as an author who has too long been ignored or relegated to the ranks of "minor" Victorian writer, particularly by feminists who found that her work contained too few stories "about" women (2), and by others who merely deem her "quaint." In discussing class and gender in Gaskell's works, Stoneman's primary strength lies in three particular points: 1) her discussion of women "speaking out" in Gaskell's works; 2) her elucidation of

Gaskell's efforts toward "social reconstruction" which, Stoneman maintains, "were directed precisely towards inducing caring attitudes in men"; and 3) her point that much of Gaskell's fictional resolutions are a breakdown in ideology (19). I am convinced, however, that Gaskell's "fictions of resolution" are more a creation of her mythology--that in living in the world of industry and commerce and hollow materialism, the best and indeed the only way to live fully human is to live through mercy and forgiveness, through the truths of the "feminine" virtues. Stoneman does emphasize, however, that in Gaskell's novels "'caring for others' requires not subservience and conformity but courage and independence." She clearly points out that Gaskell felt "women [should] share in the creation of values," because her heroines "have achieved that sense of self-worth which is the prerequisite for political action" (206). While she uses the idea of female morality as a springboard for discussion of gender and class in Gaskell's novels, she ignores any creative attempts on Gaskell's part to create a mythology for those very women who were creating these new values.

Rosemarie Bodenheimer, in The Politics of Victorian Social Fiction (1988), finds "politics" in the "shape and movement of narrative" rather than the stated social ideologies of Victorian "social" literature, in which she includes Gaskell's first three novels. The narratives, she

maintains, reflect "the patterns of contradiction and paradox which characterize the formal fantasies of people living through a period of unprecedented social change" and become a way for the middle class to "reimagine the roles that it should play in the maintenance of the social order" (5). The stories of the heroines, she states, "are about processes of education and action" (8). I argue that this process of "education and action" and involvement is precisely the new narrative mythology in each of Gaskell's five novels. The heroines are subject to a plurality of values from which they must choose those which provide a critical coherence to their experiences; this becomes a personal mythology which can then enhance the community.

Other more recent book-length scholarship on and criticism of Gaskell include those by Hilary Schor (1992), Jenny Uglow (1993) and Felicia Bonaparte (1992). The last book attempts to "explore Elizabeth Gaskell's inner existence," i.e., Bonaparte finds "moments of rebellion" throughout Gaskell's works which she defines as Gaskell's "subtext in her thought; one that runs under her work as its unified antithesis, one that challenges and subverts everything the text asserts" (8). The strength of Bonaparte's work is the discussion of the double, an idea that may find some justification in Gaskell's major characters and their relations to others. What Bonaparte contends throughout, however, to the point of redundancy, is

that in all her fictional relationships, Gaskell is merely trying to express her own need for love. In her discussion of Wives and Daughters, she claims that Gaskell "learned [in this book] that to gain the love she needed she had to kill herself" (76); in other words, the "autobiographical" Molly must learn, in Roger's words, "to think more of others than [her]self," as only in this way could Gaskell earn the love she needed. The title of this particular chapter is "An Autobiography of a Suicide" and Bonaparte contends that the whole point of Gaskell's last novel is for Molly to become like her step-sister, Cynthia, who is literally "self-less" (69). This misreading of Roger's edict Bonaparte makes into Molly's figurative "suicide." Roger should be understood instead as knowing that helping others, thinking of others, is ultimately more fulfilling than wallowing in either self-pity or myopia; he, like the Bensons teaching Ruth, helps Molly understand this. Bonaparte concludes her study by stating that "in [Gaskell's] fiction, to keep her demon, to be really and fully herself, a woman must remain alone. She may have family and friends, although these must not be too close, but she must remain unmarried" (211). This reading is particularly distressing because, while Ruth and Sylvia do remain single, the endings of both these novels indicate that the heroines are in close and intimate relationships with the communities, not in solitude--and surely a close reading of all of the novels reveals that a woman most

herself is one who has a strong sense of self in conjunction with the responsibility of commitments to others.

Hilary Schor's book, Scheherazade in the Market Place: Elizabeth Gaskell and the Victorian Novel (1992), discusses Gaskell as author in a male-dominated literary marketplace. In the most simplistic sense, Schor examines what Gaskell faced as author, writer and woman (6), but more significantly, she places Gaskell in an important position in the development of the novel. At the time Gaskell was writing, Schor posits, the Victorian novel was still in a state of flux, and she should be seen, not "as a practitioner of a kind of transparent realism" but as being "both complex and self-conscious" and concerned with "form" and the "relationship to one's audience" (7). In discussing each novel, Schor examines the double story of Gaskell as writer and of the characters' development (5). Her discussion of North and South, generally considered a dissatisfying novel, is particularly excellent, where she examines various oppositions, most notably where "the heroine's progress toward marriage suggests the difficulties of reconciliation and the continuing tensions of those alienated from dominant structures" (121). Schor fails to delineate, however, in what way Gaskell deals with these "continuing tensions," which, I believe, she does by creating a new mythology by which Margaret--and others--can live.

Jenni Calder (1976) feels too that Gaskell has developed female strategies for survival in a patriarchal system, while Barbara Weiss (1984) argues that tales women tell each other in Gaskell's literature are a means by which "the female characters may name and give shape to the reality of their lives in a patriarchal society," and the way by which women can "inspire," "warn," or provide "some sort of clue," so that the female hearer "may find her path in the midst of the perplexities and trials with which feminine lives are fraught" (280). Calder develops the idea that Gaskell was concerned about how people worked and lived together--though not necessarily in marriage (68). This is an important idea in that Gaskell's new mythology encouraged work as an alternative to a middle-class lifestyle, and all of Gaskell's heroines oppose a leisurely life. Weiss argues also, similar to Schor's thesis, that these stories, far from being discursive, "may have been the means through which the author was able to work out the anxieties and ambiguities inherent in the role of the female artist" (274).

The idea of a female artist, or more specifically, the production of a female artist or writer, has captured the imaginations of many feminist critics, and discussions have ranged from female aesthetic, to female as reader, to female values, to female experience and language. Susan Morgan (1983) defines "female" values as essential history, where

politics and economics as traditional definitions of progress are "rejected as a mode of reform" (49). Rather, she argues, this traditional definition of progress "not only ignore[s] but actually violate[s] another mode of measuring progress, a mode whose values are traditionally characterized as feminine, a mode which measures by the principles of mercy and love" (50). Understanding this dichotomy of values is essential to understanding Gaskell's mythology of self and social obligation.

That kindness is an essential aspect of the female experience is echoed in Josephine Donovan's feminist-marxist critique of women's relationship to the novel (1991). She points out that with increased industrialization in the nineteenth century, women became increasingly responsible for the "inner world of personal feeling" which labor alienated (447); while women were displaced in the world of economics and politics they tended to seek power "in the imaginary" (449). She goes on:

The women novelists resisted the commodification of relationship that resulted both from exchange-value consciousness extending into all areas of life and from the marriage-market exchange system's reification of women. Instead, the women novelists envisage (sometimes implicitly) an oppositional ethic that does not entail the commodification of women, one that is rooted in

spiritual love, in a thou-experience of
relationship. (451, emphasis added)

This is, of course, an interesting point in any study of Victorian women writers, especially of one like Gaskell who indeed stressed the idea of the "thou-experience," or, in Gaskell's mythology of a new social order, the "personal-universal."

That female experience is made of connections is endorsed also by Marilyn French (1990), who, in an attempt to define what constitutes a feminist aesthetic, defines "healthy literature" as "that [which] attempts to create a healthy culture, is inclusive--of everyone--implicitly or explicitly. It is directed at an entire society" (41). She argues that there is as yet no language "to describe interconnections" but that the real value of a feminist literature lies in the assertion that "things are connected as well as divided, that a person is not always at war with herself or her world, that in fact people seek to live harmoniously with themselves and their world" (38). Another value of feminist literature is an "endorsement of female experience [as] showing a pluralistic reality made up of connection, flow, interrelation, and therefore equality" (38), a reality that is legitimized by experience (feeling) and not power (40). Again, the value of this kind of feminist criticism in evaluating Gaskell's mythology is that this Victorian woman writer believed very strongly in the

ability of people to "live harmoniously," if they made the right choices, if they could transform their own personal narratives in terms of universal truths that could change lives.

Carol Gilligan's In a Different Voice (1982) of course reemphasizes the idea that women tend to think in terms of connection while men think in terms of separation. This female connection roots itself in "the ideal of care" which Gilligan defines as "an activity of relationship, of seeing and responding to need, taking care of the world by sustaining the web of connection so that no one is left alone" (62). For women, avoiding hurt becomes paramount; and while this may occasionally lead to deference, such response is actually rooted "in the substance of their moral concern." This is the paradox of moral development peculiar to women: the ability to "attend to voices other than their own and to include in their judgment other points of view" is both their moral weakness and their moral strength (16). (This is reminiscent of Hazlitt, whom Gaskell read, who commented that "truth is not one but many.")

In the nineteenth century, of course, this "ability to care" confined a woman primarily to domestic duties, and forced her to become, in Coventry Patmore's terminology, the "Angel in the House." A discussion of the nineteenth-century woman, particularly in relation to the "literary imagination" as defined and confined by the female authors

of that century, is excellently presented in Gilbert and Gubar's The Madwoman in the Attic (1979). Basch (1974) examines three types of Victorian women in fiction, the "model...even sanctified image of the wife-mother," the "single woman, debased and largely caricatured," and "the impure woman, condemned and even damned" (xix). Discussing nineteenth-century women writers in terms of how they viewed their art as public display provides the basis for Dorothy Mermin's Godiva's Ride (1993). On the opposite pole, Marianne Hirsch (1983) avers that because women were so obviously excluded from the "outside world," the "inner life" became the most remarkable characteristic of nineteenth-century female character development (26). This last argument is interesting in that it poses an alternative to the progressive, heterosexual "Bildungsroman"; in this new paradigm, there is "a different notion of self (marked by attachment rather than separation)" and this should be seen as "a renunciation in a limited sense only," for in other ways it can certainly "emerge as a different kind of affirmation" (28).

Arguing that Gaskell is a part of the "counter-panthreon" of middle-class women writers who actually "resist closure and question 'human reality'" and who call the "concept of character and its ideological assumptions" into question (62), Terry Lovell (1987) claims Gaskell "gives the feminine role and identity pivotal importance in the

construction and maintenance of social life" (86), obviously renegotiating domestic ideology. Judith Newton (1981), on the other hand, argues that Gaskell "celebrates the ideology of woman's sphere" (164), that she "located herself firmly within a proper sphere" (162); at the same time, however, she points out that Gaskell develops strong "fantasies of power" (163). Newton ignores the fact that Gaskell develops strong female characters in particular relation to a community, insisting instead on the idea that Gaskell encouraged relinquishing self-definition, that a middle-class woman "was urged to become identified by her service to others, in particular to men" (4). And certainly while Gaskell could not be termed a "revolutionary," she still creates in her fiction an ideal up to which people, particularly women, could live; this ideal is to have moral integrity and a coherent conception of who one is and what one's commitments are. Newton's "fantasies of power" should really be defined as Gaskell's myth of communal integration.

Pauline Nestor (1985) also discusses the tension between "men doing" and "women being." Gaskell sees women as victims, she contends, "sharing a fate of social and sexual passivity" (57), and while this may be only marginally true of Ruth, it is by no means applicable to the rest of Gaskell's novels. Even in her story, Ruth changes from passive victim to active participant, part of Gaskell's new mythology. Nestor does discuss, however, the importance

of a community of women in Gaskell's novels: "In the end, Gaskell's tendency, by nature and in her fiction, is to acknowledge those things that unite individuals, and the common interests of a 'sisterhood of shared pain' lead her to see womanhood as perhaps the most fundamental bond of all" (82), reminiscent of Weiss's telling of feminine tales.

As far as general studies and biographies of Gaskell go, they are numerous. Of course, for any good study of Gaskell the Portrait in Letters (1966) is invaluable; these letters show the quality and intensity of Gaskell's life, the intimacy with which she dealt with friends, and the frustrations and joys of being an author, wife, mother. W. A. Craik (1975) stresses Gaskell's originality and classes her as vital in the development of the novel. Louis Cazamian (1973) defines Gaskell's first three novels as social novels or social-problem novels as do Kathleen Tillotson (1954), Raymond Williams (1958), John Lucas (1966, 1977), and Helena Bergman (1979). All save the last consider that Gaskell failed in her novels because the personal concerns of the characters subordinate the social problems. Bergman, on the other hand, finds that the use of the female characters to bring about a type of social reconciliation "can best be defined as an exhortation to the middle and upper classes to intervene in a situation that demanded immediate action" (15). Bergman certainly has a point: but rather than anything so explicit as an

"exhortation," I believe rather that Gaskell was creating new stories, in the midst of a changing society, which were meant to show people how they could change their lives. Reflecting on the lives of the characters in these stories, society could see the experiences of their own lives reflected and ennobled.

Catherine Gallagher (1985) elucidates the common points and differences in various authors' approaches to the problems brought on by industrialization. She maintains that many of the novels of the 1840s and 1850s mix the ideologies of "social paternalism" and "domestic ideology." One important point which Gallagher makes, and this is well taken, is that Gaskell was strongly influenced by her background and her strong belief in Unitarianism, most particularly the idea forwarded by Francis Newman, an influential Unitarian thinker and close friend of the Gaskells, that "morality does not exist in a realm apart from social and economic necessity" (64).

More traditional readings of Gaskell come from Coral Lansbury (1975) who finds that Gaskell's "most remarkable achievement" is a narrative voice that Lansbury feels "reflected little of her own taste and feeling, but did correspond with her vision of the average middle-class reader of her day" (9). I would add that Lansbury reads this middle-class voice sometimes too frequently into Gaskell's narrative voice, recognizing no irony, though she

does discuss the importance of Gaskell's Unitarian background and her dwelling in Manchester, the industrial city of nineteenth-century England.

That Gaskell was concerned with moral dilemmas is one of the points of Margaret Ganz's study of Gaskell (1969). She maintains that Gaskell's "basic impulse" is to "moderation, adjustment, compromise" (81), but this is counterbalanced by a challenge to "conventional assumptions about the social order" and that this "wider and bolder vision of the inequities in human relations and destinies" is certainly Gaskell's strength and her interest for us (83). Ganz also sees a progress in Gaskell's work; where in the beginning she would punish her characters for "uncontrolled passions," she eventually becomes more adept at understanding "the complex motivations often responsible for the betrayal of those values which ought most to be cherished" (232). Similar to these lines, I argue that the mythology which Gaskell creates allows for these "complex motivations" which make us human.

The general reaction to Gaskell's novels, then, is as varied as it is broad. If the mark of an important writer is that she can generate as much criticism as Gaskell has in the last several years, then her importance is assured. There is a quality in Gaskell's writing that is captivating. The characters are fully developed, the emotions and dilemmas they suffer and enjoy are real. But more than

this, there is an element of real value in Gaskell's works. Each of her heroines is involved in some way in finding her way in this world, and what each of them discovers is that caring about others forms an essential part of her self-worth. And, really, far from being conformist, far from being an enthusiast of domestic ideology, Gaskell is giving voice to female experience, to the world of feeling and connection, saying simply that only in connection with others, through an interactive moral life, can we achieve our full human potential. Integrity is best achieved through interaction; moral integrity involves a coherent conception of who one is and what one's commitments are. Integrity comes, to invoke Gilligan again, from an "ethic of responsibility." From this moral integrity and maturity Gaskell creates a new mythology for an industrial age. So while her heroines give voice to the need for such moral integrity, they do so not in solitude away from the cares and pressures of the world as the ancient philosophers would have us believe one should, but they do so in relationship. And while she portrays her heroines both learning and imparting this lesson, her own writing reflects a developing moral mythology, from an initial stage of relative innocence, to the full maturity of self, of moral integrity, of responsibility and care.

CHAPTER I

Mary Barton and the Age of Innocence

The year 1848 witnessed numerous crises in various industrial societies--violent revolutions on the continent, particularly in Germany, and the failure of Chartism and the threat of serious unrest in England. This year also saw the publication of Elizabeth Gaskell's first novel, which dealt with the problems brought on by industrial change. Mary Barton, classified variously as a "social problem" novel (Lucas 141), an "industrial" novel (Wright 43), and a "proletarian" novel (Shrivastava 70), details passionately the impoverishment brought on by increased industrialization and urbanization, with particular focus on the bitterness and hopelessness suffered by so many. Gaskell movingly portrays working class life, though not necessarily with the middle-class gloss which pervades the works of both Kingsley and Disraeli (Lucas 162). That is not to say that no overtones of her middle-class Unitarian morality exist; but her working-class characters speak and think and act according to their own specific ethics, needs and problems.

What Gaskell saw around her in Manchester distressed her. If, indeed, as Hunt notes, the "Victorian emphasis on the sanctity of family and home as a place of refuge from

the ruthless world of business encouraged the view of woman as guardian angel of the sanctuary" (4), then, to society, women alone would provide the "alternative to the marketplace values which threatened to obliterate the aesthetic, moral and emotional dimensions of life" (5). If Gaskell encouraged the "victorian feminine ideal," to use French's phrase, which consists of "felicity" and "self sacrifice" ("Power" 204), of being "ministering angels" (205)--then she sees these as the values which could transform that industrial society which had debased all classes. The industrial revolution created a myth that women were the repositories of virtue and thus, French explains, were "extraneous to the entire business of life" (202):

"Feminine" qualities were further degraded; men who demonstrated compassion, sensitivity, or indifference to acquisitiveness were deemed unfit. These qualities, urged upon women by various kinds of literature and by religion, became an absolute requirement for women: what men might not possess, women must. But women, constricted with an image of sweetness and docility, complaisance and gentleness, chastity and even nonsexuality, could maintain such qualities only by willfully blinding themselves to what was occurring in the outer world. (202)

But this is precisely the point where Gaskell changes the myth and creates her own. The heroines in her novels become active participants in the "business of life," not peripheral charity-givers or "ministering angels."

Gaskell's myth for a new society is that these deeply-held values, which society says women possess, should and must be learned by all members of society, not just women, and that all people should be actively involved in providing maintenance of these values. What happens, then, Basch argues, is that "the feminine ideal [becomes] an essential factor in the evolutionary dynamic" of social change (xix), not just for the middle class, but for everyone. The myth becomes the necessity of establishing moral integrity, which can be defined as a clear conception of who one is and what one's commitments are.

While Gaskell uses in Mary Barton the relationships that exist between "masters and men," "rich and poor," to elucidate the problem of dominance and the lack of sympathy which she felt existed in her contemporary England, she also uses these relationships to convey the message that social change can only result from active moral integrity, from an individual taking responsibility. This ethic of responsibility to a greater whole is clearly evident in Gaskell's first novel, not just through the transformed relationship between Carson, the primary mill-owner, and his workers, embodied in John Barton's death and Job Legh's

life, and not just through the other characters that are affected by their lives, e.g., Job's granddaughter Margaret, and their close friends the Wilsons. All the relationships that surround the novel's heroine, Mary Barton, are affected by her growing sense of responsibility; and because of this, she is indeed the center of the novel, in spite of John Barton's seeming prominence in the first half. The latter does represent a great deal of the misery and squalor which Gaskell wanted to bring to the attention of her readers, but it is Mary who learns from her father's mistakes; it is Mary who, with this sad knowledge, defines herself in relationship to those closest to her; and it is Mary who makes understood the need for those values of "transformation"--for herself and for the greater whole--which consist of mercy, forgiveness, kindness and patience.

The difficulty most critics have with Mary Barton is that they see a revolutionary text replaced with a romantic one, where, Yeazell maintains, the "public history of class conflict" is changed into "the private story of an individual courtship," where "representation of dangerous aggression" is modified into "evasion and restraint" (143), where "the 'energy of life' is transferred from John Barton to his daughter" only because "that energy has been decontaminated and contained" (134). The novel has been described as a "simple fable" of a woman who must choose between two suitors, one who is essentially bad and one who

has the qualities which Gaskell imagines carries the "solution to the problems of her society" (Kennard 51). John Barton's story has been seen as "irrelevant" (Gallagher 84) if Mary's story is to take precedence; and her story is merely extraneous if Barton's is considered seriously. Other critics argue that Mary is not even central to the novel and that as a character she does not "transcend the documentary nature of the novel" as does her father (Kennard 49), or that Gaskell devolves into domestic melodrama, as her inability to sustain the character of John Barton shows a failure of imaginative vision (Lucas 162, 173-4).

Hilary Schor, however, argues that the plots of John and Mary Barton are inextricably linked. "Far from constituting a 'diversion'" from her father's "more serious, socially critical plot," Schor argues, Mary's is an echo where what both "plots share most clearly is a sense that power is linguistically motivated and enabled." The two plots are essentially a "'political' quest" to find "an effective language of representation, for words to change the world"; John Barton wants to have his grievances understood, his petition heard; Mary moves "toward speech, her ability to 'own' her story" (Scheherezade 15). In other words, they are both seeking, as Carolyn Heilbrun notes about women's literature in general, a "right to [their] own story" (Writing 18), and the interplay of the political and love plots create, in Schor's words, "a very different

novel" in "its critique of narrative and social authority" (15).

While Lucas believes that the "love story" is "detachable" and "certainly peripheral to the novel's real concerns" (162), Patsy Stoneman believes that, far from being an extraneous digression, Mary's story is vital to Gaskell's purpose. "If we approach the novel through the ethics of the family," she maintains, "we do not detract from its value as an exploration of class relation" (70), but while she goes on to argue that this prompts a discussion on class and gender (while Schor discusses "women's language"), I argue that in this novel Gaskell is laying the groundwork for her definition of moral integrity. In Gaskell this moral integrity can be defined as a strong sense of self and commitments; moral integrity is exactly that theme around which Gaskell builds her own new social mythology, based on the lives of her fictional heroines. This new mythology, of course, involves nurturance and care and involves finding, in Gaskell's own words, a "heart's piety" (Schor, Sch 18), a "healthy" language, French calls it, that is all-inclusive ("Aesthetic" 41) and that ultimately, according to Gilligan, avoids "hurt" (71).

While John Barton initially exhibits, in Gallagher's view, a kind of "heroic unselfishness" (72) in his concern for others, this takes on an excessive and obsessive morbidity which cannot be resolved--for him--except through

violence; for Mary, however, and for others around Barton's tragic life, the resolution lies in forgiveness and mercy. "The conflict between compassion and autonomy, between virtue and power," Gilligan points out, is precisely that dilemma "which the feminine voice struggles to resolve in its effort to reclaim the self and to solve the moral problem in such a way that no one is hurt" (71). Mary's story, which picks up where Barton's fails, is essentially a story of a woman coming to terms with male aggression and female care. Mary Barton's story dominates the second half of the novel for a specific reason: she offers new hope in those values which Barton's murder of young Carson tries to make recognizable to the millowners. While he is acting publicly, she is privately, and it is the virtues she learns and those learned eventually by the community--those essentially "human values" which Morgan defines as "kindness, mercy, love," those "values we have relegated to the home" (43, 50)--which Mary brings into her life and into those lives around her. Mary, in her growing moral integrity, "confronts society" as Lansbury notes, and "eventually overcomes it" (23).

So while Mary moves from self-interested or "personal-particular" concerns to a focus on caring for others, or "personal-universal" concerns, her father does not. He is a man deeply troubled by the disparity between the lives of the wealthy--the elaborate carriages, luxurious meals and

careless dress--and the mere survival of the poor around him--their squalor, hunger, misery. The purposes of John and Mary, father and daughter, then, are two-fold. For one thing, long before analysts of psychological development such as Gilligan, Gaskell points out that caring for others is much more effective in solving dilemmas, in bringing out the best in human sympathy, than the "ethic of justice," which demands that an unfair situation be made equal through any means possible, even violence. John's death and Mary's legacy can be seen as a promise to the future that forgiveness and sympathy--that "care"--will be passed to the next generation, and here is the second purpose of these two characters. This "passing of the torch," so to speak, reflects Gaskell's idealism and her hope that, indeed, these "human" and "feminine" values can be inculcated in an otherwise dehumanized society.

While Mary, then, learns that care and responsibility for others should be the defining factor in one's life, John Barton, and indeed the whole dehumanized industrial system under which he labored, signify the first element of Gaskell's myth. She believes that a growth toward moral integrity must first move beyond innocence or naivete. John is politically naive thinking that violence will change political or social consciousness; Mary is socially and personally naive, thinking that her beauty will allow her material gain. Before the murder, both focus on personal-

particular concerns, something which Gaskell feels stunts moral growth. Mary, however, expands her vision appropriately to encompass community; John does not. But because John and Mary's stories are so closely identified with this stage, certainly a closer examination of the novel, of how these lives and values interact, is essential.

The first half of the novel focuses on John Barton's rage and his grinding poverty, and on his naive daughter Mary's increasing awareness of the world around her. Their stories run perpendicularly; the intersecting point is the murder of Harry Carson, the event which sends them hurtling into unknown territory, leading eventually to Barton's death and to Mary's courageous actions and to her forging a new life of her own. She rewrites the story of her life, based on her new moral integrity, not on the scripts prepared for her by her father, her potential seducer, or society. Gaskell's "own experience of what a woman could do," one critic writes, "led her to be so sensitive, so central, in her handling of young women who wanted more than tradition suggested they should even think of" (Calder 77). And while Mary does choose marriage to Jem Wilson at the end of the novel, Mary's change from innocence to a full acceptance of adult commitments and responsibilities--her moral integrity--becomes the basis for social change in her old community, as well as the hope for an even newer text in her family's emigration to Canada. This is one of Gaskell's paradigms

for her revisioning of society and women's experience: women can become an active force in infusing those "feminine" values into a marketplace that has long abandoned them.

Mary Barton begins with a mock-pastoral description of John Barton surrounded by friends and family. "Mock" not simply because there is a contrast between Green Heys Fields occupied by his group, and Manchester, the nearby urban center; but also "mock" because this field outing is no Wordsworthian respite. Though the day is glorious, the mood is tainted by ill-health, sorrow, and the certain knowledge of an inevitable return to town, "through half-finished streets, all so like one another, that you might have easily been bewildered and lost" (11). John Barton himself is described as

a thorough specimen of a Manchester man; born of factory workers, and himself bred up in youth, and living in manhood, among the mills. He was below the middle size and slightly made; there was almost a stunted look about him; and his wan, colourless face, gave you the idea that in his childhood he had suffered from the scanty living consequent upon bad times and improvident habits.

(4)

Barton and his neighbor discuss not a pastorally revitalized view of the world, nor even the beauty that surrounds them. Rather, they discuss the disappearance of Barton's sister-

in-law (who, Barton is convinced, has become a prostitute, a factor of vital importance later on), and the problems of their class.

Barton's anger stems from his inability to reconcile the vast gulf between the rich and the poor, Disraeli's "Two Nations," and he feels the rich do nothing to alleviate the suffering of the poor. This results in the penultimate crisis for Barton, his loss of faith; as Gallagher points out, the "corrosive bitterness of his experience" (86) had undermined what possibility there may have been for him to find succor in religion.

Barton's myopic rage over social inequities becomes destructive; he sees that charity is neither universal nor classless, as it should be if England were indeed a Christian nation. "No, I tell you," he exclaims to Wilson at one point, "it's the poor, and the poor only, as does such things for the poor" (8). He joins the union, becomes a Chartist, and goes to London to petition Parliament. It is highly significant, however, that all of this political action is moot; all of his efforts fail. The feelings of hopelessness, desperation, frustration and rage combine to make John Barton an instrument of violent revenge: he murders the mill owner's son. Barton's intentions may have been well placed--he wanted to draw attention to the misery of the poor and to bring about its end--but clearly his action is meant to be seen as ineffective at best and

regressive at worst. We understand the motivation but not the reaction, and as Gallagher argues, "Barton, we are told...reached the wrong conclusions, but the circumstances of his life did not allow him to reach any other" (73).

This act changes nothing as far as the mill owners are concerned, though its consequences are dire. It is not violence, Gaskell warns us, that will effect change. The story's shift from John's rage and political action to Mary's naivete, from violence to innocence, has posed some critical dilemmas. Yeazell claims that substituting "the narrative of the conventional heroine for one of political violence is...to shift from the public history of class conflict to the private story of an individual courtship, and from the representation of dangerous aggression to that of modest evasion and restraint" (143). Lucas sees this shift and the resolution at the end of the novel as being too-easy solutions and as Gaskell's "failure of imaginative honesty" (142) and her inability to "deal really honestly with the social experiences of the novel" (141). But the social realities which Gaskell portrays are for a specific purpose: to elucidate the trauma which the values of an industrial society have created. It is vital to recognize that the murder itself does reemphasize that trauma; but the resolutions at the end--the industrial change and the human forgiveness--are delineations of how that trauma can be

transfigured. These resolutions are essential to Gaskell's imaginative vision.

Certainly Gaskell fully intended to parallel the stories of John and Mary, not because violence is something for the middle class to fear, as Bergman believes (11), and not because, as Yeazell argues, Mary's story as a "sexually unaggressive young woman" would "prove reassuringly static" after the possibility of violent outbreak (Yeazell 143). Gallagher sees the murder--the point where the stories shift--as a way for the "narrator once again to argue that domesticity is the ultimate ground of reality" (84), and while certainly the focus now falls on Mary and her supposed "domestic" virtues, this reading needs qualification. Gaskell juxtaposes the stories of these two people precisely because the plurality of values to which each is subjected becomes the focal point in a shift of their concerns. Mary moves from personal-particular to personal-universal, while her father does exactly the opposite. That Mary accepts the "domestic" virtues of forgiveness and love is not arguable; but these virtues become not a source of submission for Mary, but one of empowerment. Contrary to Newton's argument, Mary does not, in order "to have influence," need to do "without self-definition, achievement and control" and does not need to "[relinquish] power for effacement of the self in love and sacrifice" (5). This becomes for her instead, to use Lovell's point, a "negotiation of domestic

ideology," where the "feminine role and identity [are given] pivotal importance in the construction and maintenance of social life" (86).

Mary begins as a complete naif. Even when she is not daydreaming about her absent aunt Esther, whom she believes has attained the status of lady and in whose path she wishes to follow, or about young Harry Carson, who is the imagined vehicle for her social rise, Mary gives no thought to those concerns which so plague her father. She is portrayed as slightly frivolous and vain, however well-intentioned and sweet. Even her desire to find "suitable" employment are tinged with her lackadaisical attitude and her vanity.

So with this consciousness she had early determined that her beauty should make her a lady; the rank she coveted the more for her father's abuse; the rank to which she firmly believed her lost Aunt Esther had arrived. Now, while a servant must often drudge and be dirty, must be known as her servant by all who visited at her master's house, a dressmaker's apprentice must (or so Mary thought) be always dressed with a certain regard to appearance; must never soil her hands, and need never redden or dirty her face with hard labour. (27)

Lest we misjudge her in these respects, however, let it be noted that Mary is a good daughter to her increasingly

embittered father; Lansbury vehemently points out that her loyalty to him even after the murder is of vital importance (46). The juxtaposition of Mary's concerns and her father's is Gaskell's attempt to imagine Mary as a self-focused innocent upon which to build her rejuvenating myth of moral integrity.

Mary is also a kind and attentive friend to her neighbors, Job Legh and his granddaughter, Margaret, and to old Alice Wilson, the neighborhood caretaker and nurse. What these old friends do for Mary is present a cohesive circle of warmth, familiarity and support when she feels her world is falling apart; too, they teach her about interconnection, sympathy and patience as Mary grows to accept and embrace her own place in the world. Mary's increasing social involvement at this time helps build her confidence and sense of self, helps define her commitments, and creates the foundation of her social interaction. As Lansbury points out, she finds "fulfillment as an active member of society" (13) in a community of "individuals who could often create a richer cultural life for themselves than the manufacturers" (20).

In Chapters IX through XVII we have an interesting phenomenon in which the community circle progressively includes Mary but excludes her father. A closer look at this is in order, and a brief synopsis will help:

Ch. IX: Barton fails in London

- Ch. X: Esther warns Barton about Mary
 Barton rejects her and casts her away
- Ch. XI: Mary rejects Jem's marriage proposal
 Mary recognizes her true feelings for
 Jem
 Mary rejects Carson
- Ch. XII: Mary reflects on her vanity and its
 consequences
- Ch. XIII: Friends gather
- Ch. XIV: Esther confronts Jem
- Ch. XV: Mary determines to be patient
 Jem confronts Carson
 Workers agitate
- Ch. XVI: Workers meet owners
 Pleas rejected
- Ch. XVII: The murder

The exact center of this cycle of chapters is XIII where friends gather in a family circle, while the world of action and politicking goes on outside around them. Even Mary puts aside her concerns and "soon forgot her disappointment in the cheerful meeting of old friends" (174). The communion and connection are vital to Mary at this point; the real world, however, does again intrude as Mary heads home:

The evening came quickly to an end. There was the humble cheerful meal, and then the bustling, merry farewell, and Mary was once more in the quietness

and solitude of her own dingy, dreary-looking home; her father still out, the fire extinguished, and her evening's task of work lying all undone upon the dresser. But it had been a pleasant little interlude to think upon. It had distracted her attention for a few hours from the pressure of many uneasy thoughts, of the dark, heavy, oppressive times, when sorrow and want seemed to surround her on every side: of her father, his changed and altered looks, telling so plainly of broken health, and an embittered heart; of the morrow, and the morrow beyond that...(183)

Mary is beginning to think beyond herself here; she grieves for her father, not because she expects love and attention from him--he is beyond his capacity for giving in return--but because she sees his grief and hopelessness are real, and because she recognizes his inability to find solace in others. His violent temperament has made him an outcast and has isolated him from the warmth of others.

The chapters preceding the "family" gathering focus on Barton's bitterness and rejection, and, leaving Barton beyond the pale, the focus shifts to the tightness and warmth of Mary's circle of friendship. Those chapters following the family gathering move gradually toward a world of politics and violence. What happens here, though, is crucial. Mary does not isolate herself from the action

which her father takes, an action which threatens the very life of her beloved and what little stability is left in the world around her. She acts in the public sphere to ensure what she knows is both right and good. This circle itself empowers her, having taught her values which could counteract those of the society at large and even of her father.

It is significant that this gathering follows on the heels of her self-discovery when she consciously faces the shame of her selfishness, thoughtlessness and vanity.

It was as if two people were arguing the matter; that mournful, desponding communion between her former self, and her present self. Herself, a day, an hour ago; and herself now. For we have every one of us felt how a very few minutes of the months and years called life will sometime suffice to place all time past and future in an entirely new light; will make us see the vanity or the criminality of this bygone, and so change the aspect of the coming time, that we look with loathing on the very thing we have most desired. A few moments may change our character for life, by giving a totally different direction to our aims and energies. (152)

The import of this moment cannot be overestimated, for Mary comes to terms with herself. She was formerly selfish and

vain. Now her energies are focused and her sensibilities whole.

She had hitherto been walking in grope-light towards a precipice; but in the clear revelation of that past hour, she saw her danger, and turned away resolutely, and for ever. (153)

The circle reinforces her place in it after this moment of truth. Her increasing concern for others than herself, then, is juxtaposed against her father's increasing alienation from the community of support. Though she does not act in reference to it prior to the revelation of "her heart's secret," she does afterward; and this support gives her the courage, incentive and determination to act in the world.

In Mary's rejection of the young Carson is revealed her rejection of those industrial values of self-interest and greed. For not only does she deny herself the possibility of rising above her social station, she rejects those values he embodies in favor of "better" ones:

It was a relief, to gather that the attachment was of that low, despicable kind which can plan to seduce the object of its affection; that the feeling she had caused was shallow enough, for it only pretended to embrace self, at the expense of the misery, the ruin, of one falsely termed beloved. (160)

Far outside of Mary's immediate circle of support lies her "lost" aunt Esther. Barton is convinced that no good has come of her, and we are allowed to hear the rumor that Barton has chased her out of his home because of "[her] artificials, and [her] fly-away veils, and stopping out when honest women are in their beds" (6). Barton eventually blames Esther for his wife's illness and subsequent death, and "his feelings towards Esther almost amounted to curses. It was she who had brought on all this sorrow. Her giddiness, her lightness of conduct, had wrought this woe" (22). When she later approaches Barton in the street out of her concern for Mary's perceived dalliance with Carson, he casts her off. His bitterness since his wife's death has increased, not only toward Esther, but toward the whole world. So consumed with the tragedy surrounding him, he cannot even listen to Esther's concern that Mary will fall into the same trap of seduction she did; instead, Barton curses her, and "flung her, trembling, sinking, fainting, from him, and strode away" (144-45). Esther's miserable life still has room for concern; she asks the same question over and over: "How shall I save her?" (145). Where John's political activity counterbalances Mary's innocence, Esther's own life marks another potential role which Mary learns not to play.

We see the increasing absence of Barton from meaningful social involvement, and the increasing presence of Mary in

such. Jem has become a more prominent figure in Mary's life than her father. Because she has begun to cultivate an "other" outlook in life, she recognizes the falsity of her desire to be wooed by Harry Carson. More than just making the right choice between "vice and virtue" which Kennard sees embodied in Jem and Harry (13), in her choice to love Jem, Mary proves that her state of innocence has led her not to destruction, like Esther, nor to myopic despair, like her father; neither has Mary's active choice of values--of moving away from personal concerns to larger familial and communal ones--and her heroic efforts to save Jem publicly in court, made her submissive nor, as Newton sees her, "located...firmly within a woman's proper sphere" (162). Instead, Mary's active choice in deciding her fate becomes an essential tenet in Gaskell's mythology. Gaskell's narrative embodiment--in Mary's story--of the truth that care and personal-universal concerns should be paramount, does not mean that Gaskell was encouraging domestic ideology or the ideology of womanhood, as Hunt sees her doing (6), but perhaps that the "ideology of domesticity" could be, as Lovell sees it, as "enabling, a channel through which desires were satisfied" (91) and by which society could be transformed. Mary chooses those virtues which Gaskell sees as having been lost in industrial society and becomes active in choosing her moral integrity.

Both Esther and John Barton prove that they have made the wrong moral choices, reflecting what Gallagher sees as Gaskell's concern with both causality and conscience (67). But the "fallen" Esther--defined as "one capable of sin and therefore responsible for her own destiny" (Mitchell x)--in her own miserable and outcast state, is determined, out of a remembered and cherished emotional tie, to help Mary. There is a double irony here that bears pointing out: Mary has admired her aunt's beauty, and at one point imagined that her aunt had achieved "ladyhood." Though the reader recognizes that the threat to Mary's honor and safety is no longer valid since she has determined to throw off young Carson's attentions, Esther does not know this; she is determined to tell her story in order that Mary can choose a different narrative. When John would not listen to Esther's concerns, she laments: "To whom shall the outcast prostitute tell her tale? Who will give her help in the day of need? Hers is the leper-sin, and all stand aloof dreading to be counted unclean" (185). However, she is "soul-compelled" and in spite of her fear, "She was not daunted from her purpose, painful as its fulfillment was sure to be" (186). When Jem recognizes Esther, "he looked again into her face, and seeing that indeed it was his boyhood's friend, he took her hand, and shook it with a cordiality that forgot the present in the past" (187).

Jem listens to her tale, even before she speaks of the harm she is certain will befall Mary. He listens for Esther's sake, and beyond that, he cares. At one point in her overwhelmingly sorrowful tale, she tells of her daughter's sickness and death and her own turn to prostitution as the only way to earn money for the care and medicine necessary to alleviate her child's suffering. Esther cries for mercy and asks, "with wild vehemence, almost amounting to insanity, 'Do you think God will punish me for that?'" Jem cannot reply for being so moved; he could not "shape his heart's sympathy into words" (189). But Jem's sympathy extends even further; he attempts to convince Esther to put aside her past and come home to the circle of his family. He does not, in wild determination to "do something," rush off to confront either Mary or Carson. Rather, he says to Esther, no less than three times: "Come home." Even when she refuses and departs, Jem is not sure he urged enough, "even in the midst of the jealous anguish" he suffers (193).

Jem has already embraced those values which Gaskell sees as important to sustaining human sympathy. He rejects the possibility of his own suicide because of his responsibility for others, particularly his mother, and then he thinks of what he could do for Mary, as she had "no other friend capable of the duty required of him" (196):

Should he sink from the duties of life, into the cowardliness of death? Who would then guard Mary, with her love and her innocence? Would it not be a goodly thing to serve her, although she loved him not; to be her preserving angel, through the perils of life; and she, unconscious all the while?

He braced up his soul, and said to himself, that with God's help he would be that earthly keeper.

(195)

Gaskell plays turn-about here: those values which have been traditionally associated with women, those "domestic" virtues, are maintained by a man. He is the "angel," the unselfish giver, the selfless one. Mary eventually learns that care is the primary benefit for society; Jem already knows.

John Barton embodies Gilligan's "ethic of justice," and commits murder in order to have his grievances taken seriously. As I stated before, we are certainly meant to understand the underlying motivation of Barton's action, but we are not meant to condone it. We recognize that John Barton's life, to Gallagher's understanding, "did not allow him to reach any other conclusion" (2) than that which he did, the conclusion that violence would at least articulate his own experience of sorrow, loss and pain. This act,

however, is overshadowed by those lessons of care which are learned by the other members in the drama's cast.

While some critics argue that Carson's murder is "absolutely necessary" if wisdom from suffering is to be learned (Bonaparte 181), surely Gaskell would not intend for us to see this murder as anything but tragic. Circumstance itself, Gaskell seems to argue, can lead to inevitabilities, but pain in this novel leads to two things: it leads to Barton's bitterness and eventually to Carson's forgiveness. Ultimately, Gaskell's point is simply that a responsible attitude to all, that caring, should seek to "avoid hurt."

But this act of murder has two crucial consequences, inseparable from Gaskell's basic thesis. Mary is forced to act--she finds an alibi to save Jem from false charges and travels alone to Liverpool to testify--but more than that, she has to decide in her heart, in the strength she has attained as her own person, how to deal with that Janus-face, her father, the murderer. Social morality would dictate that she turn her father in, not just to protect Jem, but because he is guilty. Jem himself knows Barton is culpable but will keep his silence to protect those he loves. Mary does not tell; instead, she lets her father confess when he is ready, and this leads to the second important consequence.

The elder Henry Carson, the mill-owner whose son has been killed at John Barton's hand, has since his son's death

demanded bloody vengeance. Like Barton, Carson has his own ethic of justice, no more worthy than Barton's. He believes Jem is the perpetrator, as a rival, and the rejected one at that, for Mary's affections, and he does not learn who is truly guilty until Barton calls Carson to his deathbed. Barton does not ask for pity, but he seems both surprised and saddened that Carson grieves as any father would a son. Carson laments: "[Who] shall ever imagine the love I bore him?...He is gone--killed--out of the hearing of all loving words--out of my sight for ever. He was my sunshine, and now it is night! Oh, my God! comfort me, comfort me!"

And in response,

The eyes of John Barton grew dim with tears. Rich and poor, masters and men, were then brothers in the deep suffering of the heart; for was not this the very anguish he had felt for little Tom in years so long gone by, that they seemed like another life?

The mourner before him was no longer the employer; a being of another race, eternally placed in antagonistic attitude; going through the world glittering like gold, with a stony heart within, which knew no sorrow but through the accidents of Trade; no longer the enemy, the oppressor, but a very poor and desolate old man.

The sympathy for suffering, formerly so prevalent a feeling with him, again filled John Barton's heart, and almost impelled him to speak (as best he could) some earnest tender words to the stern man, shaking in his agony.

But who was he, that he should utter sympathy or consolation? The cause of all this woe.

Oh, blasting thought! Oh, miserable remembrance! He had forfeited all right to bind up his brother's wounds. (431)

The pain of seeing Carson suffer is excruciating, and Barton falls down "broken-hearted," exclaiming, "I did not know what I was doing; God knows I didn't!" and begs of Carson to "forgive me the trespass I have done!" (432).

Carson's initial refusal to forgive Barton is tempered as he walks the lonely streets home, whereupon--still reflecting on Barton's haunting words and aware for the first time of the "pompous sumptuousness of the room in which he now sat," and how it "contrasted strangely" with the "grinding squalid misery" (436) of the home he had just left--he reads the New Testament. Thereafter and "all night long, the Archangel combated with the Demon."

It is not the political act of violence which brings Carson back to Barton's deathbed with words of forgiveness; it is not the political act of violence which touches the heart of the man so deeply he changes his attitudes toward

the management of his mill and the cooperation with his workers. He learns instead that economics is not mere legislation when human lives hang in the balance. The groundwork for social reform is made certain when Carson hears these words of Barton's lifelong friend, Job Legh:

I have lived long enough, too, to see that it is part of [God's] plan to send suffering to bring out a higher good; but surely it's also part of His plan that as much of the burden of the suffering as can be should be lightened by those whom it is His pleasure to make happy, and content in their own circumstances.... But I'm clear about this, when God gives a blessing to be enjoyed, he gives it with a duty to be done; and the duty of the happy is to help the suffering to bear their woe. (454)

Though we are not given as in-depth an analysis of Carson's character as we are of Mary or her father, certainly the elder Carson finds himself, like Mary, in a situation where he must act on behalf of those in relationship with him. Carson has learned what Mary has learned: it is only in relationship to those around us that we can find a place to call our own, and because of this we will naturally want to help those who encircle us, out of an ethic of attachment, kindness and care.

Gaskell's ideology--that there is more to human history than economics, politics, fact and figure; that humanity should measure itself by its ability to provide succor to the miserable; and that an individual should care beyond selfish or social dictate to deeper humanitarian level--can be summed up thus:

To those who have large capacity of loving and suffering, united with great power of firm endurance, there comes a time in their woe, when they are lifted out of the contemplation of their individual case into a searching inquiry into the nature of their calamity, and the remedy (if remedy there be) which may prevent its recurrence to others as well as to themselves.

Hence the beautiful, noble efforts which are from time to time brought to light, as being continuously made by those who have once hung on the cross of agony, in order that others may not suffer as they have done; one of the grandest ends which sorrow can accomplish; the sufferer wrestling with God's messenger until a blessing is left behind, not for one alone but for generations. (457)

Mary particularly, but Carson as well, ground themselves in a "culture of community" where concern for others is the guiding principle of progress. What Gaskell

does in Mary Barton is to teach the first lesson of her new myth of moral integrity, that one must go beyond a certain selfishness, a monomaniacal focus. The novel is not about Mary making the "right choice." Neither is it about simply warning the middle class of imminent revolution if the poor are not taken care of. Rather, it is about moving away from selfish motivations and learning a genuine responsibility for others. These efforts lead one to a "larger, nobler life," one step in Gaskell's new mythology for the industrial age.

CHAPTER II

Ruth and the Crisis of Identity

The same values of attachment and the same "ethic of care" which underlie Mary Barton are evident also in Ruth, though in the latter novel the forces of isolation and social proscription provide greater challenges for both individual and community to overcome. Both heroines are bereft of "real" family, but where Mary Barton learns responsibility from a concerned community of individuals and creates a "new" family, Ruth becomes morally conscious through the love and friendship of her "adopted" family, the Bensons, and not--or rather in spite of--the forces and influences of the community. The Bensons teach Ruth, and she the entire town, that "goodness" is not a social achievement (as Bradshaw maintains), nor is it a privilege of the upper classes (as Bellingham believes); rather, goodness is a divine quality which originates in and is further enhanced by a genuine ability to care for others. The bonds of affection and kindness and a true understanding of what it means to be "good" are the forces of social change and personal development made evident in Ruth.

Change and development are inextricably linked: care, when genuine, is goodness.

But unlike Mary Barton, which focuses on Gaskell's desire to encourage individuals to move beyond a state of innocence in order to achieve moral integrity in a world that offers few options, Ruth focuses on a series of crises where the individual, particularly Ruth, is forced to make decisions, the culmination of which leads to moral integrity. Crisis could lead to loss of faith (as in the case of John Barton), or to moral turpitude (like Esther); but in this novel, crisis generally leads to a new set of values, based on the "feminine" qualities of care. That crises could help establish maturity and profound faith in an individual, as well as in society at large, instead of crippling or debilitating that person or society, is one of the important tenets in Gaskell's new mythology for an industrial age. If myth is an expression of a value system, then in Ruth Gaskell subtly undermines that value system held by her own society. Ruth challenges the notion that "fallen" women could not be rehabilitated; Bradshaw undermines the belief that either social standing or outwardly moral behavior defines goodness. In fact, one critic makes this case for the timeless qualities of Ruth's didactic nature:

The only story . . . written by a woman for women
with the direct intention to do good that has

survived the restrictions of its time, audience
and immediate moral is Elizabeth Cleghorn
Gaskell's Ruth. (Mitchell 32)

Ruth has long been considered Gaskell's most difficult novel, as it is filled, in Schor's words, with "failure--its overplottedness; its jolting from one discourse to another; its inability to imagine a satisfying ending" ("Critical" 160). While most critics would agree that the book "was occasioned by an assertive need to speak out against the neglectfulness of society in failing to protect such innocents" as Ruth (Stone 150), the character of Ruth is fraught with difficulty. Stone maintains that Gaskell's own "defensive attitude toward her readers and a fear of self-will" turned Ruth into a character "entirely lacking in will at the time of her seduction," who then "must gain a sense of identity" in order to "repudiate and atone for the presumed willfulness of her youth" (151). I argue that while Ruth may be literally "self-less" when seduced, her entirely different "selflessness" at the end of the novel marks not "atonement" for apparent "willfulness," but rather the achievement of moral integrity. Indeed, as Foster argues, "Ruth has to be idealised in conventionally feminine terms because she symbolises victimisation by male exploitation and double standards of morality" (153).

Michie argues that Ruth's "atonement" is Gaskell's way of allowing a "fallen" woman to re-enter the domestic

sphere: "The idea of the prostitute crossing over the threshold of the home" was abhorrent to contemporary writers such as Dickens and Greg, she points out, and "by depicting Ruth [as] becoming a member of the family circle of a dissenting minister as well as a wealthy manufacturer," Gaskell transgresses those boundaries other Victorians "worked to maintain" (105). Using this transgression, Gaskell intentionally denies the "cultural construction" of women as either "whores" or "madonnas," and the figurative imagery Gaskell employs to describe Ruth also "refuses the split between purity and impurity" (106).

The point of this, Bick argues, is that Gaskell deliberately "undercuts the Victorian tenet that ignorance preserves innocence" (18), and that the success of the character comes when she learns that life can "become 'significant' and full of 'meaning,'" and that in facing her seducer again "she is no longer the passive, docile creature" who began the novel (24). Ruth "exposes the self-righteousness and narrow-mindedness of those who view morality as a conveniently either/or proposition" (25) and Gaskell herself "is intent on demonstrating that this once-fallen woman is not only capable of adhering to accepted rules and standards, but, more importantly, has learned to distinguish societal--and often superficial--values from real values" (25).

Schor finds that Ruth is a novel about a woman trying to find herself. Much of the difficulty in reading the novel, according to Schor, lies in Ruth's own innocence as well as Gaskell's evasions about "sexuality" (167). She goes on: "For while it attempts to move 'inside' the fallen woman's story, to move from description to feeling, it also transforms its heroine in turn into an object lesson" (167). I argue that this "object lesson" is Gaskell's attempt to make mythological the idea that crisis can lead to ennoblement, not failure, for a woman who lives against her "type." To Schor, the success of the novel lies in Gaskell's attempt to find "a new way to see as well as to narrate" a story against "what she saw as a stunningly male tradition." She agrees with other critics, though, in assessing the "harshness of Ruth's end" as Gaskell's fictional failure (172).

The importance of Ruth's death is not in its inevitability nor its harshness, Hirsch argues. Rather, Ruth's death is appropriate; because a heroine like Ruth is "excluded from active participation in culture, [she] is thrown back on herself" (23). This "exclusively spiritual development" eventually "culminates in a return to origins" (26), because the dichotomy of a heroine's "psychological needs and social imperatives" cannot be reconciled (27). The only viable literary solution, then, may be death, she states, because it may "provide the only means to reverse

the growth into limitation and subordination" (37) characteristic of heroines in nineteenth-century novels. Ruth's death should not be considered a breakdown in ideology because Ruth's development of her inner self is "nevertheless a development of a total individual, spiritual, moral, intellectual, emotional, even sexual" (37). Spencer argues that Ruth's death is in no way a "sop to the conventional notion that sexual transgression must lead to death," but rather that her death is Gaskell's attempt to allow Leonard's growth away from the "intense maternal devotion" which Ruth has substituted for sexual passion (64).

Stoneman argues that Ruth really is about the denial of sexuality, but Morgan points out that "Ruth's superiority to [her seducer] is not tied to a denial of sexuality" because "Gaskell offers us passion and then purity, consummation and then innocence of heart" (Morgan 47). Ruth teaches those values that "have been relegated to the home"; what Gaskell does so well in this novel is examine how "substantial private progress" can actually become a meditation on the "lesson of forgiveness and the power of change" (50), a possibility enhanced, not limited by, Ruth's death.

Auerbach agrees that Ruth's death is not necessarily a failure, but a vital part of Gaskell's message:

Ruth's "fall". . . touches her only as a
benediction, allowing her to transcend the animal,

and thus the human condition; her martyr's death is the fullest expression of her rarefied life rather than a denial of it. Her fall is so spiritualizing that she dies long before the end of the novel, having refined herself, like Dickens' fallen Nancy in Oliver Twist, to a pair of eyes that avenge and compel simultaneously. Like the phantom Nancy, she has left the body not to become part of the community but its overseer and scourge. Once again the transforming power of the fall lends spiritual potency to the woman it destroys. (171)

While Ruth, then, like Mary Barton and the other Gaskell heroines, is involved in the creation of community values, the novel Ruth itself focuses on how crisis, if dealt with through intelligence and moral grounding, could lead, in Gaskell's mind, to moral integrity. Ruth herself faces three crises: the abandonment after her seduction, her reencounter with Bellingham several years later, and the exposure of her past. Jemima faces two: deciding about her relationship with Farquhar and about her knowledge of Ruth's past. Two crises also face Benson in his decision to lie to protect Ruth and the subsequent exposure of that lie. And Bradshaw faces but a single important one: the discovery of his son Richard's duplicity and deceit, revealing his own lack of humility. In each of these eight dilemmas, around

which the novel revolves, the individual is faced with a choice about both self and other, choices which lead eventually to personal growth and ultimately to moral integrity. Gaskell builds in Ruth another facet of her new moral mythology. Moral crisis can have the consequence of inducing low self esteem or it can lead to further moral depravity, for example in Ruth and Esther; however, it can also lead to a new kind of self confidence, one which is grounded in moral integrity and the knowledge that caring for others defines our essential humanity and, by extension, allows us to touch that element of the divine Gaskell believed we carry within ourselves.

Ruth's uncritical and unquestioning nature is made manifestly clear in her idealization of Bellingham, whose incapacity to love is underscored by his relationship with his mother. Whereas Ruth thinks very deeply about maternal comfort and love now gone, the "regardlessness of the feelings of others" by which Bellingham lives his life and conducts his relationships is attributed to the precepts taught him by his mother (32). Mrs. Bellingham's carelessness in teaching her son basic human love--and through this love and respect, a fundamental and profound morality--is echoed later in Bradshaw's relationship with his son. Bellingham sees Ruth only as a means to "please himself," as something to be "allured and tamed" and as a way to gall his mother (33). The lack of care passed from

mother to son is counterbalanced by Gaskell's building of relationships of care between the Bensons and Ruth and Ruth and her own son, Leonard. Foster points out that Bellingham's male "superiority" is targeted; his "shabby behavior" is necessary for the plot while it also "highlights the glaring injustice of double standard sexual morality." But he is also, she goes on to argue, "both emblematic of masculine insensitivity and represents a creature of a lower order than that symbolised by Ruth's womanhood" (154).

Ruth's innocence in the early stages of the novel is often seen as problematic, though she has been described as natural (Stone), romantic (Schor), or as a heroine caught in the "the pastoral mode" who must learn to grow "into the social realm, developing her natural sensibility into domestic virtue" (Bodenheimer 155). Bodenheimer also sees Ruth at this stage as oblivious to "social implication" (156) who eventually learns "the socially constructed emotions" only after time with the Bensons (157). While certainly Ruth later feels being with Bellingham was literally "thought-less" and self-serving, she is surely meant to be an innocent, one who is not equipped to make decisions in a time of crisis, neither for herself nor others. Ruth's innocence and ignorance are socialization problems, and certainly Gaskell meant to portray her as representative of those women who, through lack of familial

or financial support, were essentially ill-equipped for the problems of day-to-day living, who, as Mitchell notes, were "unfit to live without protection" (35). One critic points out the significance of the fact that Ruth "has been seduced, 'ruined,' not by the evil propensities that were often considered the marks of her fellow sinners--vanity, laziness, ambition--but by possession of those qualities so valued in Victorian womanhood: obedience and docility" (Bick 23).

Ruth's first crisis comes, not from being seduced, but from being abandoned by Bellingham--who has begun to "associate the idea of her in his mind with annoyance and angry regret" (89). Bellingham's growing irritation with Ruth's appreciation for natural beauty is indicative, Spencer points out, of "his lack, in Romantic terms, of a heart incapable of loving Nature; and in sexual terms, his inability to deal with the passionate human nature he has aroused" (60). He leaves. Wishing the "world would be still and dark" and wondering how "such a deserted, desolate creature as she was" could ever make her way in a life which had become a "horrible dream" (94-5), Ruth believes that "her only hope was to die" (94). When Benson is hurt saving Ruth, his cry of pain "did what no remonstrance could have done; it called her out of herself. The tender nature was in her still, in that hour when all good angels seemed to have abandoned her" (97). Ruth moves here from a merely

passive existence, where she had been acted upon, to an existence where a particular relationship--where "some one looked for her kind offices, [where] she was wanted in the world" (98)--awakens her spiritual and moral being. The very moment when Ruth feels most alone, most abandoned, most desperate, is the moment she is offered a real chance of finding a path to personal growth and moral integrity. This is the first crisis out of which Ruth comes as a new kind of mythic figure in Gaskell's attempt to deal with a world of indifference.

Instead of the three choices which were traditionally "allowed" to fallen women--emigration, prostitution, or death (Kennard 63)--Ruth faces a new and different life. Morgan notes that in

choosing neither prostitution nor immediate death as the fate of its heroine, the novel simply imagines a new set of circumstances, that a person, having once passed into the world of experience, simply lives on, lives more or less as other people do. In fact, Ruth's affair with Bellingham is the beginning of her life. (48)

This "new set of circumstances"--being accepted into the home of a minister's family--becomes, according to Michie, a "transgression of the boundary that separated the pure from the impure" (108-9), allowing a "tainted" woman to find refuge in the sanctified home, and points not only to

"fallenness" as a cultural construct but also to Gaskell's attempt to articulate her idea that "unthinking sympathy [which, Anderson maintains, is Ruth's primary virtue] is not simply a feminine virtue but rather a larger ideal asserted against flawed human relations and dominant modes of thinking" (Anderson 129). Spencer notes the importance here that Gaskell "deliberately avoids treating [Ruth's] seduction as a focus for easy pathos" and instead shows that the fall, "after which a woman can only sink lower or die of shame," instead leads Ruth to find she has made a "mistake that given the chance she can outgrow" (52).

The significance of Ruth's acceptance into a domestic situation after her abandonment cannot be overemphasized. This is seen by some critics as Gaskell's "attempt to write the fiction of those denied a voice within Victorian society [which would lead] to an awareness of the ways that literary and cultural plots shape our understanding of the world and limit our ability to describe it" (Schor, Sch 5). It is also no less than a reevaluation of the "unexamined [cultural] assumption" that a "fallen" woman "had to be totally cut off from society so that she would not contaminate decent people" (Mitchell 33). In emerging from her first crisis, then, Ruth chooses, or is at least allowed to choose, a non-traditional role which forms the groundwork for her maturation.

When Bellingham reappears in the shady political character of Mr. Donne, Ruth is faced with the most difficult challenge of her life and her second crisis. According to Kennard, his return brings out in Ruth, "on a symbolic level," her true nature (64). Because she has a home which has given her confidence and the grounding of real love, she now has her own "independent sense of morality to defend," Bodenheimer avers (160). The Bensons' faith allows Ruth to see Bellingham now in a "new light" as Lansbury sees it (71) and, it may be added, a truer one as well.

A "strange confusion of agony" comes as Ruth thinks: "'If I might just ask him why he left me...'" ; but she reminds herself that "'he did not care for me at all...he did me cruel harm'" (273). She recognizes that "slight speeches, telling of a selfish, worldly nature, unnoticed at the time, came back upon her ear, having a new significance. They told of a low standard, of impatient self-indulgence, of no acknowledgement of things spiritual and heavenly" (163). Yet perhaps she believes she still loves him for her son's sake; most critics note, however, that thinking of Leonard focuses her dilemma; in other words, that "maternal love saves her from temptation" (Spencer 63). The thought of her son swiftly changes her "from the woman into the mother--the stern guardian of her child" (273). This meeting forces Ruth to confront herself, to make the right

choice. Ruth deeply loved her seducer, but where the Benson's faith rescued her physically at the time of her abandonment, it rescues her now spiritually when faced with this present crisis. She is able now to "separate the present Mr. Donne very effectively, from her imagination of what Mr. Bellingham had been" (277). She thinks:

Her feeling of what people ought to be had been unconsciously raised and refined; and Mr. Donne even while she had to struggle against the force of past recollections, repelled her so much by what he was at present, that every speech of his, every minute they were together, served to make her path more and more easy to follow. (284)

Bellingham registers only surprise, not guilt, that it is indeed "his Ruth," but wonders "how the devil had she played her cards so well as to be the governess--the respected governess, in such a family as Mr. Bradshaw's?" (279)

She is conscious of an "inner strength," even when he promises that Ruth would have unlimited money and Leonard the best possible education if she would consent to be his mistress. Finding this emotional blackmail both despicable and humiliating, she tells him she has gone through her life "with a stain on my hidden soul" which has made her truly humble--but also better. She reminds him, when he offers marriage, that he has suffered neither guilt nor remorse for

what happened, whereas this time for her "has pressed down my life like brands of hot iron, and scarred me for ever" (302-3). In spite, then, of possible "legitimacy" and possible material advantages, she has the moral courage to say no, recognizing that for Leonard life with him would be the worst possibility.

Ruth's refusal to marry Bellingham is both original and thoughtful on Gaskell's part, and, as Basch points out, it "denies the presupposition which more or less underpinned the conception of sinful women and of females in general," which was, of course, the "aspiration" toward marriage: "This refusal, this challenge to the social conventions, which Jane Eyre did not dare to make, asserts Ruth's moral superiority over both the father of her child and over her judges" (248). In saying no finally to her seducer, she rejects, in Auerbach's words, "conventional salvation" (170) and proves the strength and dignity she has long struggled to gain. Her rejection represents, according to Mitchell, an "action...wholly her own, taken without advice, without consultation, and contrary to social expectation" (37). Bick goes on to point out that in Ruth's rejection of Bellingham, "Gaskell demonstrates the fallacies inherent in the Cinderella myth in which a woman is conditioned to await passively the arrival of a dashing prince who will carry her away from the drudgery of life" (Bick 18). This is truly

Ruth's second triumph over a potentially destructive crisis, as Ruth rewrites her own possibilities.

Ruth lives with the consciousness that "this mocking echo, this haunting phantom, this past" (313) is still stalking her, never leaves her. "Those wild autumnal storms had torn aside the quiet flowers and herbage that had gathered over the wrack of her early life, and shown her that all deeds, how ever [sic] hidden, and long passed by, have their eternal consequences" (313). The lie is exposed; Ruth does not so much mind for her own sake, but for Leonard she is mortified. The exposure is the third crisis which forces Ruth to confront herself.

Mr. Bradshaw hears the rumors about Ruth's past and confronts her for being "the common talk of Eccleston for [her] profligacy and wantonness," the worst and most all-inclusive of sins (337), and is determined that Leonard should not be exempt from her shame, to which Ruth pleads, "'I appeal to God against such a doom for my child,'" for he is "'innocent and good'" and the shame should be hers alone (341). She rushes home to be sure to be the first to tell him the truth, for if he heard it from the street, he would, she is convinced, "have his heart turned to hate her, by their cruel jeers" (341). The contempt of the world she could tolerate. To be despised by her beloved child--the one whom she has loved beyond all else, who has led her to

the possibility of forgiveness in her own and in God's eyes--this she could not bear.

Man has no mercy, but God does certainly, Benson argues to Ruth when she wants to leave town for Leonard's sake. "'The world is not everything, Ruth; nor is the want of men's good opinion and esteem the highest need which man has. Teach Leonard this'" (357). Her efforts hereafter are for Leonard's benefit, and he becomes, in Bick's words, "not simply his mother's badge of shame, but rather an agent of growth and reintegration" (21-22)--not because she needs to repent for the "opinion of the world," as one critic argues (Beer 132), nor because she desires, as this same critic says, "the acclaim of the world, that is the citizens of Eccleston," to "mark her triumph" (134).

Rather, Ruth develops even more strength through the hardship brought on by this crisis, and learns that working for others is its own reward, and this for Ruth becomes the road to ultimate maturity and responsibility. Ruth's maturation is noted by many critics, and Bick in particular notes that Ruth moves from a "child-like, dependent girl who only wished to 'banish thought' to the independent young woman quite able to grapple with complex moral issues and make decisions" (24). She learns that the basis of moral integrity is a coherent sense of self and her commitments.

Nestor argues that her nursing the poor after this point "can appropriately be seen a challenge to public

opinion [rather] than a reflection of it" (39); and after rejecting Bellingham and accepting her exposure, she develops personal strength and moral integrity, according to Mitchell, "by taking personal responsibility for her life" (40) as well as the lives of others. Her reputation as a humanitarian and gifted nurse becomes widely known, which, Nestor goes on to point out, marks Ruth "as a strong, cohesive force...in [her] role as minister of medicine" (69); and soon she is asked to care for even those who could well pay for her services, though her first choice is to help the poor.

When Ruth decides to help the ill Mr. Donne, she tells the doctor she feels obliged to help Leonard's father, knowing what it is to be alone and ill; and because she cares--consistent with the person she has become--she feels compelled to do what is within her power to keep him from an otherwise certain death. Indeed, not going would be self-serving at best and spiteful at worst, neither of which is consistent with Ruth's character. In her care for others and in her desire to nurse Bellingham, Ruth is not, as one critic describes her, the "cardboard repentant Magdalene" who "in the second part of the book bears no relation to the figure in the early sections" (Stone 151), but rather a woman who comes to regeneration, as another critic notes, "not in isolation, nor in the altered society of a utopian

outback, but within a conventional and recognizable contemporary world" (Mitchell 33).

Her third and final contact with Bellingham becomes for some critics "her victory over his soul" (Morgan 47) even though it is the cause of Ruth's death. This "final redemption is enacted through a pseudo-wifely devotion," Foster points out, but it is necessary to explain that this is Gaskell's "contravention of a social morality in favour of a more sympathetic and individualistic one [which] shows her independence of mind" (155).

Gaskell's novelty is also strengthened by the creation of the other characters' crises and triumphs which are inextricably linked at this point in the story. Ruth comes to the point in her maturation where she takes full responsibility for herself and her actions; this ethic of responsibility is the mark of her moral integrity, and, in Gaskell's mythology, the point which mature people should reach if they deal "morally" and in a Christian manner with the crises involved in living and making choices. Benson has always possessed this sort of moral strength, as we shall see. Bradshaw must learn it. And Jemima, bright, strong and insightful, must reach beyond her training in "social morality" to learn Benson's Christian morality: in dealing with people, care is more powerful than judgment.

Jemima Bradshaw is a wonderful realization of a strong-willed, intelligent and highly perceptive young woman who

becomes a close companion of Ruth's when the latter becomes the governess of Jemima's younger sisters. The importance of Jemima's character cannot be overstressed. She, like Ruth, must come to terms with what real affection means in one's life, what the true basis of morality is, and how one must live one's life thereby. She tries to define her own womanhood from under the obvious control of her father and the obsequiousness of her mother, in terms of her love for Farquhar and her admiration for Ruth. Her relationships with these two create Jemima's crises.

Her affianced tries to argue her into submission; she wants to be accepted as an individual in her own right, not as a carbon copy of his or her father's ideal.

For an instant she planned to become and to be all he could wish her; to change her very nature for him. And then a great rush of pride came over her, and she set her teeth tight together, and determined that he should either love her as she was, or not at all. Unless he could take her with all her faults, she would not care for his regard; "love" was too noble a word to call such a cold calculating feeling as his must be, who went about with a pattern idea in his mind, trying to find a wife to match. Besides, there was something degrading, Jemima thought, in trying to alter

herself to gain the love of any human creature.

(219)

Jemima believes that Mr. Farquhar, instead of having a "true, deep, loving, manly heart, which God might let [her] win," has only a "calm calculating head" where he has a "cold way of looking out for a wife" just as he would various household items "to add to [his] comforts" (224). She meditates: "...were those the terms upon which her rich, woman's heart was to be given, with a calm consent of acquiescent acceptance?" (221).

Jemima faces her first crisis. She is unwilling to accept a role written for her by someone other than herself; she is unwilling to accept passively another's plan for her life. She struggles, according to Bodenheimer, between "natural love and social expectation" (162). The paradox which Jemima faces, according to Foster, consists of the "pride and anger at being 'managed' or disposed of as if she were material property [and which] co-exists in her with a desire for protection, and she accepts Farquhar only when quite sure of his love"; their later acceptance of each other is Gaskell's implication that "the relationship will not crush her...individuality" (Foster 155). She withdraws from Farquhar, from her family and from her friendship with Ruth. Her crisis reaches its apex when her former lover starts paying attention to Ruth, and she gives in to the

temptations of jealousy and rage. She tells the Bensons later, after Ruth's past is exposed:

"With a father and mother, and home and careful friends, I am not likely to be tempted like Ruth; but oh! Mr. Benson...if you knew all I have been thinking and feeling this last year, you would see how I have yielded to every temptation that was able to come to me; and, seeing how I have no goodness or strength in me, and how I might just have been like Ruth, or rather, worse than she ever was, because I am more headstrong and passionate by nature, I do so thank you and love you for what you did for her!" (365)

Her second crisis--deciding what to do with her knowledge of Ruth's past--is inextricably linked with her crisis of love. This dilemma arises when she first hears the rumors about Ruth's past; in her youth and inexperience, "she had never imagined that she should ever come in contact with anyone who had committed open sin" (323). She instantly assumes Ruth's guilt "which led her to look upon those who had gone astray with shrinking, shuddering recoil, instead of with pity."

Jemima, however, decides that "whatever Ruth had been, she was good and had to be respected as such now." She makes the crucial decision in this crisis not to be the one to tell her father:

If her present goodness was real--if, after having striven back thus far on the heights, a fellow-woman was to throw her down into some terrible depth with her unkind, incontinent tongue, that would be too cruel! (327)

Jemima even defends Ruth in front of Mr. Bradshaw, and instead of finding Ruth "impure" in any respect, Jemima is now "full of pity, and the stirrings of new-awakened love, and most true respect" (339). Jemima emerges from her crises not a bitter or vindictive woman, but rather one who believes that caring about others is ennobling. This is a particularly moving passage in the novel and important, according to Bodenheimer, because

Ruth's influence on Jemima therefore inverts the fearful Victorian idea of the tainted woman: only after Jemima learns that Ruth has "fallen" does Ruth's life help her to develop womanly sympathy and successful love: she defends Ruth against her father's righteous condemnation and finds a special connection with her husband in their shared disregard of the public shame heaped on Ruth after her exposure. (163)

Like Ruth, Jemima emerges from her crises stronger, more caring, and with greater moral integrity.

Gaskell's idea that care is the ultimate guide for human life is furthered by Benson's superiority over the two

crises he faces in the novel. Not money, not worldly status, but a genuine "ethic of care" informs his every action. He speaks with his "heart's eloquence" (114) and his first crisis arises out of his decision to lie about Ruth's past for two reasons. The first is to protect the illegitimate child Leonard, who would be made "miserable" by the world's condemnation, which he doubts is "according to the will of God" (120); but the other reason is to allow Ruth a kind of redemption where love--care--will lead her to a higher morality:

"Faith! Faith! let me beg of you not to speak so of the little innocent babe who may be God's messenger to lead her back to Him. Think again of her first words--the burst of nature from her heart! Did she not turn to God, and enter into a covenant with Him--'I will be so good?' Why, it draws her out of herself! If her life has hitherto been self-seeking and wickedly thoughtless, here is the very instrument to make her forget herself, and be thoughtful for another. . . . Teach her (and God will teach her if man does not come between) to reverence her child; and this reverence will shut out sin,--will be purification." (119)

So to protect the child as much as the mother, they claim her as their poor widowed relation; and on this lie, this

decision, this pivot, "the fate of years moved" (122), saving Ruth from an otherwise uncertain though undoubtedly desperate fate.

They love her as a daughter (172), and she has no "thought of comparing what she was now with her former self," but wants only to "learn in order to teach [Leonard] to be and to do as suited her hope and her prayer," i.e., that he be a moral man with the instincts to do good, steer clear of sin and to depend on God for guidance (187). In other words, to be unlike his father.

If deciding to lie about Ruth is the first crisis Benson faces, the exposure of that lie is his second. Benson has to face the wrath of Bradshaw as well as the general disapproval of the townspeople when the truth about Ruth becomes known. Faith reminds her brother that they should not really regret the lie, because "Ruth has had some years of peace in which to grow stronger and wiser, so that she can bear her shame now in a way she never could have done at first" (361). Their love and support have given her courage and strength to make the right choices now, the moral choices. Neither one of these two is ashamed for having told the lie, though both are relieved the truth has been revealed. Nor are they fearful of the townspeople's reactions to their harboring a "sinner" in their home, though both are saddened by the cold reception or outright avoidance of many. Spencer feels that one might look at the

"whole moral force of the novel" as an "indictment of Gaskell's society for making it so dangerous to be truthful about a woman's sexual irregularity" (54); she goes on to wonder that "perhaps there has been no real untruth involved because Ruth is essentially, though not technically, the innocent woman she pretends to be" (55).

Bradshaw's discovery of Ruth's past and his minister's lie makes his contempt palpable. When Benson explains his end was "to place her in circumstances in which she might work out her self-redemption" (348), Bradshaw merely dismisses her as "depraved" (350) and decides that he can no longer in good conscience attend the chapel of a minister who engages in wilfull deceit (351). But Benson deals with this by showing Bradshaw the door, knowing that no words could make "Bradshaw's obstinate mind receive the truth" (352) and by encouraging Ruth to be the best possible mother and guide, to be "brave and faithful," and advising her that "it is to God you answer, not to men" (356). Benson proves his worth in this last crisis as well; he does not condemn Ruth in order that the world forgive him ("nothing can alter our love for you" he tells Ruth), nor does he quibble with Bradshaw's self-righteousness.

Benson's acceptance of the situation and his support of Ruth are juxtaposed at this time with a canker growing in the Bradshaw household; Gaskell uses this juxtaposition to demonstrate how a person with less moral integrity than, for

example, Benson, reacts in crisis. We see in the way Bradshaw deals with his one and only crisis Gaskell's delineation of the "comparative importance of sins," to use Thomson's apt phrasing: Gaskell felt "an inadvertent moral lapse was less culpable than ingrained, fanatical intolerance" (132). Benson's lie, and Ruth's unthinking "fall" are more easily forgiven than Bradshaw's "fanatical intolerance." Indeed, in Bradshaw's self-righteousness, Gaskell is pointing out a "deviousness sometimes to be encountered in social conduct which is far more difficult to detect and whose effects are far more insidious," according to Duthie (157).

When Richard Bradshaw is discovered to have forged several insurance premiums belonging to Benson, Bradshaw insists that Benson prosecute him, for, he says, "I have not one standard for those I love...and another for the rest of the world" (404). Benson refuses to press charges without understanding the circumstances or "ascertaining the particulars"; he refuses, in short, to do that which "would blast his character for life--would destroy every good quality he has" (405). Bradshaw never considers that his own "severe and arbitrary mode of treatment" may have contributed to Richard's "want of moral courage" (406). The Bradshaw family interests many critics, and Lansbury, for one, feels this family should be seen as "a mockery of familial love, a model for hypocrisy, neurosis and crime"

(65) and a household that "revolves around subterfuges and schemes" (67). Perfection is an impossible human achievement, a point which Benson understands, but which Bradshaw thinks absurd. Where Benson shows mercy and forgiveness for human folly, Bradshaw shows intolerance and derision and demands justice. Where Benson forgives Ruth for her misdeed and lies to give her necessary strength, Bradshaw despises her for past "profligacy," ignoring what goodness she now demonstrates. Where Benson forgives Richard for his greed in order to give him a second chance, Bradshaw condemns and disinherits his only son.

Bradshaw does not immediately deal with this crisis well. Benson has. Jemima has. Ruth, especially, has. It is only later, through Ruth's community service and his own acceptance of humility, that Bradshaw's outlook on life is changed, and he becomes convinced that an "ethic of care" is infinitely more life-satisfying than his previously held "ethic of justice." What Bradshaw learns is that forgiveness and understanding lead to healthier relations between people and a greater calm for himself. He forgives Benson for concealing Ruth's past; though unspoken, the manner of forgiveness means more to Benson anyway: Mr. Bradshaw, visibly aged, and with head bowed, returns to Benson's chapel to worship. But most remarkable is his acceptance of Ruth as she has become--a good, helpful, kind woman.

That Ruth's madness and her death--or, as one critic states, Ruth's return to her childish state of "innocence and ignorance" (Spencer 65)--are caused by a third and final contact with Bellingham is indisputable. But why Gaskell does this needs addressing. We have established that Ruth is "good," so good in fact, that she decides to nurse the man who had, for all practical purposes, ruined her life when she was merely fifteen. We have determined that Ruth's "goodness" has been nurtured by the Bensons, by their quiet ways and devout faith. Leonard has become a strong, intelligent and moral child with a bright future. Farquhar and Jemima have married and have a strong, equal bond. Bradshaw has learned humility and forgiveness.

Ruth's "power" to care for Bellingham years before in Wales was taken away by his mother's refusal to allow Ruth to attend his sickbed. Her ability, her choice to nurse him now comes from the profound change Ruth has undergone, from moving passively through life with neither self-respect nor conscious moral choice nor true connection, to actively choosing to have those things, in short, to having achieved moral integrity.

There is no reconciliation with Bellingham at his sickbed and before her feverish delirium, a vitally important point; her death should be seen, then, according to Mitchell, "clearly not [as] a punishment, but rather [as] a heroic expression of woman's most noble trait" (38). Her

death should not be seen as a concession to Victorian morality, as Kennard sees it (64), or as ritual slaughter, where a wilfull and sinful woman has to be punished; but rather her death should be seen, as Auerbach deems it, as "an allegory of the triumph of the spirit over life" (171). Her death becomes a kind of subversive activity on Gaskell's part because in linking Ruth's "moral vulnerability" (the cause of her fall) and her "moral capacity" (which leads to her death), a point which Spencer makes clear (60), Gaskell links, as Morgan notes, "the forces of seduction...with the forces of law and spiritual order," in Bellingham and Bradshaw (49), and makes Ruth's feminine qualities superior to both.

Ruth makes the ultimate sacrifice; but with her death begins the legacy of what she taught and how she loved. This legacy is left with the many people Ruth nursed. It is left with Leonard, who, we feel certain, will lead a full and productive life. It is left with Bradshaw, who learns enough about human sympathy not just to purchase for Ruth a beautiful though modest headstone, but to lay aside his "dogged determination" not to talk to Leonard and never to visit Benson, and to comfort Leonard after the burial--to actually lay a sympathetic hand on his shoulder and speak consoling words--and to walk him back to Benson's house where, "for a moment, he could not speak to his old friend

for the sympathy which choked up his voice, and filled his eyes with tears" (458).

The novel Ruth challenges many assumptions--about what defines truth and falsehood, "goodness" and depravity, Christian behavior and selfishness. One of the most significant things about the novel, though, which Thomson recognizes and states pointedly, "lay in the fact that the unmarried mother, who had lurked in the background of so many novels, was not only brought into the light of day but--what shocked the susceptibilities of the reading public even more--was attired in robes till then sacred to the virgin heroine" (132). If the moral objective of heroism is, as Joseph Campbell defines it, "that of saving people, or saving a person, or supporting an idea," or for the "hero to sacrifice himself for something" (127) Ruth is the ultimate female heroic tale. The novel, then, is about redemption on several different levels, but essentially it is about potentially debilitating crises which in Gaskell's new mythology should lead not to isolation or moral collapse, but rather to a new understanding of self and responsibility for others, in short, to moral integrity.

CHAPTER III

North and South and Integrity in the Public Realm

North and South, the third of Gaskell's industrial or "social conscience" (Ganz) novels, is less difficult reading than Ruth, though also less satisfying than Mary Barton. Part of this dissatisfaction arises from, as some critics complain, never being quite sure what the novel is "about": is it about maturing and preparing for marriage; or is it about masters and men learning to communicate? In this novel, as in Ruth, basic human goodness is pervasive; as in Mary Barton, social reconciliation is vital. But the problem remains in North and South to discover how the themes of romance and industry fit together to make a cohesive whole, at the center of which stands Margaret Hale. As the heroine of this "industrial novel," Margaret has been called a "middle-class girl with working-class sympathies" (Bergmann 36), who, while trying to articulate her experience, becomes the agent for healing and change in a world torn and distorted by the increasingly industrialized society of the North. It would be too hasty to say that Margaret "transforms" the working class or "humanizes" the middle class of her adopted industrial town of Milton-

Northern; but as the focus of the novel, Margaret, in her own personal growth and increased understanding of different classes and individual lives, mirrors the reevaluation and growing appreciation of those classes in their approach to each other.

North and South has often been criticized for devolving into romance, moving away from the world of work and industry and into the domestic agenda of a marriage plot. Indeed, Lucas claims that "the very strengths of the novel, its sober attentiveness to the real virtues of the manufacturing and working classes" are the very reasons the novel fails, because Gaskell continually intrudes, to his mind, "patterns of reconciliation" which "only serve to show how impossible the hope is (200). But while the novel does end with Thornton and the workers establishing a better working relationship and environment and with the potential marriage of Margaret and Thornton, the union of these two does not represent a failure on Gaskell's part to maintain the tensions of the marketplace. Rather, this union becomes a metaphor of hope for future normalcy, a longing glance to a time when prejudice and obstinancy can be overcome, a blueprint, as it were, for the construction of the happy union of opposition and difference. The "resolutions" of the end, according to Felber, stress "reform through changing men, the human element, not laws" (70). The final

union of Margaret and Thornton, then, is above all else about possibility.

Even more than in Ruth or Mary Barton, North and South presents a variety of value systems from which Margaret must choose, but the fact that she marries the northern industrialist John Thornton doesn't necessarily mean that there is a "softening social critique" or a "reconciling [of] oppositions," as Schor believes (Sch 121), or, as Newton thinks, that Gaskell is encouraging "domestic ideology" (162). Both Schor and Stoneman argue against the traditional critical view, forwarded by previous critics such as Margaret Ganz, that Gaskell has an "instinctive diffidence in challenging conventional assumptions about the social order" (Ganz 83). Schor argues that North and South "is deeply skeptical about solutions per se" (121), and that the parallel of Margaret's progress with that of industrialization is both unconventional and "unexpected" (125). The real meaning behind the novel, Schor says, is linguistic difference--male and female, owner and worker, one class and another--where the characters must learn to "speak" an unknown language. When Margaret Hale, as heroine in an "industrial novel" which should promise social reconciliation (136), tries to find her own "plot," she finds instead "the resolution of continued oppositions, sexual tension, pleasure and dispersal" (150), not really "resolutions" at all. For, Schor goes on, "not only is the

novel not afraid of conflict, or deeply attracted to it, or dependent on it, it believes in conflictual models. Not only is there no novel without a conflict but the use of the novel seems to be that it can incorporate conflict" (150).

The idea that North and South reflects gender as well as political conflict is essential in seeing the "romance plot" and the "industrial theme" as inseparable, as Stoneman argues:

While Thornton enacts the "masculine lie" that judgment must not be swayed by sentiment, Margaret acts the "feminine lie" that modesty overrides all other virtues. Their relationship, which conventional criticism reads as a "romance plot" offering a false "resolution" to the "industrial theme," thus proves to be an essential analysis of organization, dictating why, among other things, class struggle is always aggressive. Their mutual partial emancipation from gender ideology is offered not as a resolution of class conflict but as a necessary step in a political reorientation which would give higher priority to human need and ensure, minimally, that class struggle is conducted in terms of political debate rather than physical warfare. (120)

To Shrivastava, the "intertwining" of the themes of love and work provides "mutual growth and enrichment" (106). What

Stoneman calls "political reorientation" involves for Gallagher an introduction of cooperative behavior, presumably preserved in private life, into the public realm" (147), something which Margaret herself balances (168). Margaret's "peculiarly female influence over others" and her linking "the public and private realms of existence in action as well as consciousness" are based entirely on Margaret's "moral consciousness" (171), the growth of which forms the novel's action. Gallagher goes on to point out that "Margaret can achieve and maintain her influence" only if she is capable of two qualities: she must have "a consistent and realistic set of beliefs about how people should interact," and she must also be able to express "those beliefs in words and actions intelligible to others" (172).

Through Margaret's contact with various value systems and through developing a moral integrity that modifies, or really refines, the quality of her own behaviour to others, Margaret establishes a coherent sense of herself. This sense of self and this moral integrity are much like those learned by Ruth and Mary, only Margaret's journey is much different. Mary had to remove herself from an idealistic irresponsibility; Ruth had to learn to overcome debilitating crises. Margaret must learn that integrity is best achieved with her public interaction, i.e., that instead of withdrawing from the world into herself, her maturation

reflects contact with a plurality of values which provide critical coherence to her experiences. For Margaret, achieving integrity means developing a critical perspective from which to endorse or reject new social influences--which ultimately lead to a radical change in those things she chooses to value. She goes from London society, to her parental home in Helstone, to the industrial center of Milton-Northern, each place which challenges Margaret's preconceived values, forcing her to modify them in order to achieve a moral integrity that can also influence the public sphere.

Perhaps one of the reasons Gaskell is concerned with portraying Margaret as a new kind of heroine in a new kind of setting--in a busy, hectic, relatively ugly industrial world, instead of in a beautiful, isolated, bucolic, pastorally idealized setting--is to counterbalance the horrifying portrait of industrialism painted by Dickens in Hard Times, published serially just before North and South made its appearance in Household Words. In his novel, Lansbury explains, Dickens was interested in revealing through "figurative and symbolic allegory" (95) how industry, in Calder's view, "reduces living people to machines" (77); this industrial system, Lucas notes, creates a "lack of cultivation of heart and fancy" (176). Dicken's vision of Coketown, which Lansbury describes as "painted red and black like the face of a savage and twined with serpents

of smoke" (95), is in Lucas's view "nihilistic" (185), and in Calder's, void of "living relationship" (77); this vision of an industrial world allows no room for the individual, Lucas observes (190).

While certainly Gaskell felt that industrialism was depersonalizing, and often lacking in human values, she was also convinced, Calder notes, that work was an important aspect of life (68). Lucas recognizes the emphasis Gaskell placed on work as well, and feels that indeed, for Gaskell, work becomes a defining factor in culture (197). Gaskell portrays the working class, according to Calder, not as the moiling, "cruel, violent and stupid" mob of Disraeli and Kingsley (76), but as people who reflect the admirable aspects of "the toughness, the energy, the resilient integrity" of the "positive virtues that go with the belief in work," missing from Hard Times, as Lucas argues (199).

So Gaskell balances the cruel realities of industrialism with the myth of industrial progress advanced by Gaskell's contemporaries, the ideologues W. R. Greg, Carlyle and Disraeli, who, as Stone notes, affirmed "the power of individual energy" and who felt that industry, and especially a place like Manchester (Gaskell's fictional Milton-Northern), were great monuments to science and the future (156). What Gaskell does in her novel is not to portray Milton-Northern and its industry as unequivocally positive (as the ideologues do), nor as dismally bleak and

hopeless (as Dickens does), but rather she balances the two extremes. And in the middle of this balance, this transformation of two different myths or approaches to this new industrial culture, Gaskell provides the figure of Margaret who melds the private lives of the individual with the public lives of commerce. And in this balance, too, she shows how one individual, one extraordinary heroine, changes her preconceptions to embrace a new set of ideas and values. It's as though Gaskell is reflecting on Goethe's Faust, where the lesson is too late learned that technology-- machines and tools, in Gaskell's case--are not enough to save us. Instead, we need to rely on our intuitions and our true beings, as the mythologist Joseph Campbell says, to seek "neither release nor ecstasy" for ourselves, but to develop "the wisdom and power to serve others" (xv), what Margaret and Thornton eventually achieve.

At the beginning of the novel in the midst of London society, Margaret is immediately portrayed as a different kind of heroine, one neither snared by nor interested in the traditional female roles; here she must either embrace or reject her first set of values. The story opens in preparation for the wedding of Margaret's cousin, Edith, described variously as Titania, Sleeping Beauty and Cinderella (35, 40), curled into a "soft ball" of "white muslin and blue ribbons" and "silken curls," who is "too careless and idle to have a very strong will of her own"

(36). Gaskell portrays Edith and her mother as women for whom marriage is a necessary institution, yet one nevertheless to be endured. Margaret's Aunt Shaw had herself married "with no warmer feeling than respect for [her husband's] character and establishment," and who "constantly, though quietly" bemoaned "her hard lot in being united to one whom she could not love" (37). And though Edith is "thoroughly and properly in love," the narrator allows that she may have "little qualms of ill-concealed regret" that perhaps her Captain did not have "united in his person everything that was desirable," which would include "a fine house, and a fine estate, and a fine title to boot" (37).

Margaret later rejects the possibility of this kind of marriage for herself when Edith's brother-in-law, Henry Lennox, proposes in Helstone's garden. Her refusal is motivated in part because he represents an aspect of London life she has recently quitted, a life where "all the decisions she needed to make were what dress she would wear for dinner, and to help Edith to draw out the lists of who should take down whom in the dinner parties" (85). Edith's powerlessness--in Newton's terms, "as a matter of choice rather than of economic situation" (164)--and Mrs. Shaw's dissatisfaction, are echoed in Margaret's own mother's complaints about their situation at Helstone and about Mr. Hale's failure to procure a better parish and subsequent

living. The female subjection here portrayed should be seen not as Newton thinks, as a celebration of the "self-sacrificing influence" (163) of Gaskell's "ideology of the woman's sphere" (164), but instead as Gaskell's reflection of John Stuart Mill's idea of the unnatural subjugation of women in marriage, which Thomson states simply: "In short, without equality, community of interests and likeness of intellects, it was impossible to approach an ideal marriage state" (90). Too, in some ways, Margaret is rejecting the new economics of the market place, which Donovan describes as a place where "women had themselves become commodities in the marriage-market exchange" (448). Margaret's rejection of the traditional marriages--of women like her mother, aunt and cousin--her "oppression" and "indescribable weariness" about "the never-ending commotion about trifles" (41), is only the first of the value systems she opts not to embrace.

In leaving and rejecting London society and the immediate prospect of marriage--in short, in leaving the public life of her young years--Margaret returns to Helstone, to the private life of her childhood home, this time to have taken away from her the potential supports by which she has long defined her life. She calls Helstone a "village in a poem--in one of Tennyson's poems" (42) and claims she "can't put its charm into words" (43); but she soon has "the youth and bouyancy" pressed out of her heart (77), first by her mother's querulousness, then by her

father's crisis of conscience in deciding to leave the church to become a private tutor in the industrial north. Felber points out that Margaret's "security of life is shattered" when Helstone is no longer "an idyllic setting, symbolizing Margaret's naive childhood" (62), undermined by Lennox's proposal, her father's doubts, and her mother's complaints. She faces her own crisis of heart and mind; and contrary to Ganz's contention that Margaret's and Mr. Hale's questions of conscience "ultimately have no far-reaching dramatic, moral, or psychological effect on them" (83-84), Bodenheimer recognizes the great importance of this element of the novel because it "throws every facet of this pastoral myth into confusion" (55). Stone argues that this focus on "the fragility of human supports forms the countertheme" of the novel (157), and marks the point, too, where Margaret moves from the private, individual world, into a world which challenges her "private" values and forces her to participate in a new world of public action.

Margaret is no longer allowed to be just child or dutiful daughter, thus representing to some critics a "marked challenge to many accepted ideals of femininity" (Foster 149) in her movement into the public sphere, which Schor goes to some length to explain (Sch 133). She chooses not to marry; she finds no help at home or, where she found it in her past, in her father's church. As Schor says, "it is as if the novel must begin by displacing all other plots"

(124), and certainly these "plots" or refuges can be viewed as differing value systems with which Margaret must come to terms. In creating this "different" kind of heroine, Gaskell allows all sorts of other possibilities for Margaret to experience and pursue, which, of course, are not open to "traditional" heroines such as the story-book Edith. According to Newton, the novel can be "seen as Gaskell's problem novel about herself, an attempt at coming to terms with the crisis of confidence over women's work and women's power" (Newton 162). In creating a heroine like Margaret, Bodenheimer explains--"whose life is responsibly and directly entangled with the male world of industrial politics" (54)--Gaskell develops an element of surprise in the novel; this surprise, according to Newton, is that Gaskell "insists that the domestic sphere is larger than we ever dreamed" (163).

The denial of traditional roles is vital to the remainder of the book: this is the point from which Gaskell forces Margaret to experience further growth, to reexamine her life and beliefs, and to enhance her ability to care; it is also the point that allows Gaskell to include Margaret in her themes of industrial relations, social reconciliation, and cultural understanding. Margaret's life, her "plot" in Gaskell's novel, mirrors the clash of ideologies and the attempt to, the necessity itself of, understanding differing cultures and perspectives. Margaret reaches her full

maturity when she can become an actor in a male-dominated world of commerce, which initially defies her understanding and repels her sympathies, but which she grows to appreciate, even to thrive on. Margaret moves from isolation and a focus on self to a world of integration and more universal compassion. Thornton, the northern manufacturer she eventually learns to love, earns that love by becoming more understanding of his own prejudices, trying to dispel those prejudices, and reevaluating his style of management, an authoritarian rule he calls "enlightened despotism." It is Margaret, both directly and indirectly, who forces this examination; and it is Margaret, then, who influences for the better the lives of Thornton's workers.

One of the things that the move from Helstone forces Margaret to do is act--first in the move itself, when her father is incapacitated by confusion, her mother by infirmity. She acts further when she shields Thornton from the angry striking workers, and again at her mother's death when both her brother and father can do nothing. She acts again to make arrangements for her brother's re-escape abroad when a bounty is put on his head, and finally when she opts to help Thornton financially to reopen his mill. Margaret's actions take place in both the public and private domains, but the fact that she acts at all is a result of her move and subsequent renegotiation of value systems. She had previously considered the North a place which was

"discordant," and whose "manufacturers, people and wild and bleak country" she had always detested (72). Her first impression of the North is that everything looked more "purposelike," and she can't help comparing the new scenes with her familiarity of the South.

The contrast Margaret makes is important, for in it lies her prejudice and judgment: the North is not so pretty, nor so relaxed, nor so pleasant as the South. The "air had a faint taste and smell of smoke; perhaps, after all, more a loss of the fragrance of grass and herbage than any positive taste or smell." The city is busy, noisy, dirty, with "long, straight, hopeless streets of regularly-built houses."

Thornton, too, has preconceived ideas of the South and its people, and he is immediately put off by what he perceives as Margaret's disdain. He must learn to appreciate Margaret not as an object but as an individual, something he must do also with the people who work in his factory. That Margaret and Thornton each have preconceived ideas about their differing cultures and consequent value systems is more than just a gap between "inclinations" and "prejudices" (Ganz 81), though these, too, are an aspect of the novel. This does not necessarily indicate a lack of "ideological tension," as Newton avers (168) nor the lessening of social vision which Ganz contends (105). Rather, Gaskell creates and "traces," as Lansbury discusses,

"the vital linkages of social communities and the interaction as individuals move from one group to another" (98). The clash of cultures--defined less by carriage, dress, demeanor and attitude than by ideology and values--is played out over and over again throughout the course of the novel: Margaret versus Thorton, Thornton versus his workers, Margaret versus the laborer Higgins and his daughter, Bessy. Each confrontation forces a new way of thinking, of rethinking old and misconceived perceptions, of wrongly held values. These perceptions, these meanings, inherent in each individual's view of the world and the other has been seen variously as a conflict of linguistic differences (Schor), a conflict of class and gender (Stoneman), or a mixture of the two as a confusion of "private, arbitrary associations" (Gallagher 180). It should also be seen, however, as differing value systems vying for primacy to define and redefine people's lives. Gallagher goes on:

The novel creates a longing for a realm of absolute significance and unchanging values, the realm Margaret perpetually strives toward, but it repeatedly credits purely subjective, emotional, and preconscious meanings, meanings that are wholly fortuitous and involve their own kind of isolation. In fact, the meanings it most often discards are the conventional metonymic associations on which realism actually relies, the

meanings sanctioned by tradition and usage. These are the connections that Aunt Shaw and Mrs. Thornton make, the connections the book tells us we must all learn to unmake so that some deeper bond between people might be discovered. (184)

I suggest that Margaret does reevaluate her preconceived connections in becoming a better individual, and while her first reevaluation is the denial of traditional gender roles, her second is to embrace the world of work, the distinguishing factor of Manchester. She is removed from the old, comfortable habit of her life, a move marked physically by a departure from her childhood home and ideologically by the disintegration of traditional roles. Margaret's physical removals reflect her personal changes, and the changes in the novel itself. Schor explains that the novel's "geographic movement" goes "from a novel of marriage to a novel of religious doubt, from a society novel to a political novel, from family relations to industrial relations, from private to public and back" (Sch 125). Margaret is forced into contact with people and situations she would preferably not encounter, forced to examine her life for the first time as something which does not just happen, but which she can create and to a certain degree control. Indeed, Stone argues, "Margaret finds herself expanding as a human being rather than shrinking into the

self-abasing posture" (159) that some critics say mark both Ruth and Mary.

Margaret's first contact with the millworker, Higgins, and his daughter, Bessy, marks another set of values which Margaret must confront and reevaluate. Higgins foresees the change in perception that Margaret will eventually embrace when he explains that he is from just north of London; he tells her, "'Yo' see, North and South has both met and made kind o' friends in this big smoky place'" (112). Margaret, accustomed to the rites of visitation of London society, is surprised at Higgins' discomfort when she requests to visit. At Helstone, "it would have been an understood thing," but here "it seemed all at once to take the shape of an impertinence on her part; she read this meaning too in the man's eyes" (113), and she is taken aback that here she cannot extend her middle-class prerogative. The encounter nevertheless opens her eyes: she no longer sees the working class as a mass of humanity in need of philanthropy, but rather as comprised of individuals in need of recognition and action on their behalf. This is the beginning of Margaret's life of interaction, because she begins to find the industrial world interesting. Harman notes that her interaction with the factory workers becomes "a sign of [her] increasing willingness to mix with the world and to accommodate herself to the complicated class relations that, at least in Gaskell's vision, life in the public realm seems

to entail" (366). For, "from that day Milton became a brighter place to her. It was not the long, bleak sunny days of spring, nor yet was it that time was reconciling her to the town of her habitation. It was that in it she had found a human interest" (113). Duthie also recognizes the significance of this moment and argues that here Margaret develops a human sympathy which gives the novel its depths (84).

This sympathy gives her a vision of Milton-Northern as a place of much suffering, "men going about in the streets who look ground down by some pinching sorrow or care--who are not only sufferers but haters," and maintains that the southern poor do not have "that terrible expression in their countenances of a sullen sense of injustice" (122-23); but she learns too that this place offers her unheard-of opportunities. At a particular dinner at the Thorntons, Margaret chafes at having to stay behind to talk with the women while the men remove themselves to continue discussing economics and social paternalism, a discussion in which she herself had partially engaged. She thinks that she would rather "listen to something larger and grander than the petty interests which the ladies had been talking about," and she openly admires "the sense of power which these Milton men had" (217).

Thornton claims that he "'would rather be a man toiling, suffering--nay, failing and unsuccessful here, than

lead a dull prosperous life in the old worn grooves of what you call more aristocratic society down in the South with their slow days of careless ease'" (122). This is the beginning of Margaret's understanding of how work defines northern culture. Work becomes the defining factor of the middle class, its social identity as well as the "dynamis of the social reality," according to Lucas (197), and, he goes on, Margaret slowly begins to understand "the social reality, of how work must oppose leisure" (198). Beer notes that for the middle class, work is essential to one's well-being (168). Thornton, however, has no patience for what he calls the indulgences of others. He tells Margaret that the workers' countenances "'is but a natural punishment of dishonestly-enjoyed pleasure, at some former period of their lives'" (126). He says to Margaret and her father:

"It is one of the great beauties of our system, that a working-man may raise himself into the power and position of a master by his own exertions and behaviour; that, in fact, every one who rules himself to decency and sobriety of conduct, and attention to his duties, comes over to our ranks; it may not be always as a master, but as an overlooker, a cashier, a book-keeper, a clerk, one on the side of authority and order."
(125)

Martin points out that Thornton is merely espousing the Malthusian philosophy embraced by his own mother, who contends that the suffering of the poor is inevitable (95). He eventually learns, of course, to deal with the workers on an individual basis, man-to-man, in the renegotiation of his own values.

Margaret must examine closely her own religious orientation. Lansbury sees Margaret change her religious values "from an emphasis on charity and good works to active social reform" after her contact with Bessy and Nicholas Higgins (104). "'A man mun speak out for the truth," Nicholas argues,

"and when I see the world going all wrong at this time o' day, bothering itself wi' things it knows nought about, and leaving undone all the things that lie in disorder close at its hand--why, I say, leave a' this talk about religion alone, and set to work on what yo' see and know." (133)

Religion, to his mind, does not feed the starving or hire the unemployed. If all it does is reconcile and accustom the miserable to their misery, of what comfort, of what possible use, can it be?

Bessy, however, holds the fantasy that because this life has been so miserable, the next must be better:

"And I think, if this should be th' end of all, and if all I've been born for is just to work my

heart and my life away, and to sicken i' this dree place, wi' them mill-noises in my ears for ever, until I could scream out for them to stop, and let me have a little piece o' quiet--and wi' the fluff filling my lungs, until I thirst to death for one long deep breath o' the clear air yo' speak on-- and my mother gone, and I never able to tell her agin how I loved her, and o' all my troubles--I think if this life is th' end, and there's no God to wipe away all tears from all eyes--yo' wench, yo'!" said she, sitting up, and clutching violently, almost fiercely, at Margaret's hand, "I could go mad and kill yo', I could." (145)

Bessy becomes a symbol, one critic points out, not just of "industrial indifference," but of the religious authority of the past, one that needs to be renegotiated in the future (Martin 100). Mr. Hale, too, is representative of past authority; he leaves the church, Lansbury explains, because of "his inability to understand and minister to human suffering" (103), but in doing so, he loses the power to define his life.

Margaret differs from Thornton as well in their views of religion, particularly its role in the marketplace. Margaret believes religion should extend to Thornton's dealings with his factory workers, both on duty and off. She says to her father at one point that she detests

Thornton's opinions about his workers, for his despising "'people for careless, wasteful improvidence, without ever seeming to think it his duty to try to make them different'" (128). And in a discussion with Thornton, she declares that "human" laws do not prevent employers from wasting their money instead of reinvesting it in the workplace or on the employees; but certainly, she argues, religious, i.e., humanitarian and Christian laws or ethics, ought to encourage these "'two classes dependent on each other in every possible way'" from "'always running each other down'" (164-65). In Felber's words, Margaret advocates an "enlightened, Christian-humanistic industrial progress" (71), one which integrates the classes through personal contact. As Felber explains, this is Gaskell's expression of her belief "that the future belongs to those who can transfuse human values. . . into industrial society" (66).

Thornton maintains that "'despotism is the best kind of government for [the workers]; so that in the hours in which I come in contact with them I must necessarily be an autocrat'" (167). For Thornton, now, pride is the inhibitor of reasonable conference with his workers; he is the owner, the businessman, the autocrat. But in creating this kind of supremely confident character, Bergmann notes, Gaskell shows the "desperate need for a better understanding between the classes and between people in general" (93).

The imminent death of her mother, her father's ineffectuality, Bessy's distress, the misery of the working-class Bouchers, the threat of strike by the workers, the autocracy of Thornton and the other millowners, have all combined to make Margaret feel her life is oppressive and "unreal" (224).

What a vain show Life seemed! How unsubstantial, and flickering, and flittering! It was as if from some aerial belfry, high up above the stir and jar of the earth, there was a bell constantly tolling, "All are shadows!--all are passing!--all is past!" (225)

This personal crisis of mind for Margaret is exactly the moment she resists withdrawing into herself; instead, she acts nobly, even heroically. When Margaret sees the raging strikers in front of the mill, she berates Thornton for what she sees as his cowardice and lack of compassion:

"Speak to your workmen as if they were human beings. Speak to them kindly. Don't let the soldiers come in and cut down poor creatures who are driven mad. I see one there who is. If you have any courage or noble quality in you, go out and speak to them, man to man!" (232)

Seeing Thornton threatened by the angry workers, she "only thought she could save him"; where "her sex would be protection," she "threw her arms round him; she made her

body into a shield from the fierce people beyond" (234-5). She does this not for her own aggrandizement, but because she thinks her womanhood would act as protection. Lansbury also notes that neither is this action "the selfishness of individualised love, but her awareness of a duty to others that prompts her action" (111). For Bodenheimer, this marks her as a heroine who is "a fully responsible human being who is forced continually into making decisions, alone and under pressure," and who faces "a continual pressure of responsibility for actions that bear heavily on the lives of others" (63-64).

Margaret's power reaches its highest point when she throws her arms around Thornton, Newton notes (167), but this power is challenged throughout the rest of the novel, something on which most critics of North and South agree. Harman "explores the significance of female public appearance" (352) and how this manifests itself in moral tainting (368-71). The challenges to Margaret's power, which can be seen linked to her moral integrity, is challenged, not by her action, but how her action is perceived, by Thornton as well as the strikers. Thornton and his workers see the encounter as sexual, because, as Harman explains, "[Margaret's] appearance on a public stage revokes the very protection that she wishes to engage" (368). She is ashamed of the public involvement, not because she has reversed gender roles and saved a man, but

because she is viewed as "courting a man in public" (368). Although she says she would "'do it again,'" she nevertheless has nightmares which reveal a "shame that she should thus be the object of universal regard--a sense of shame so acute that it seems as if she would fain have burrowed into the earth to hide herself, and yet she could not escape out of that unwinking glare of many eyes" (249).

The conflation of the public and the private spheres here and in the later episode where she lies about being with her brother--for his protection--are essential to Gaskell's central theme, which Foster articulates:

Margaret's personal affairs are intimately related to the wider issues with which she is concerned, so that far more directly than in the earlier novel [Mary Barton] Gaskell suggests that female power, centered in the responses of the heart, is the real revolutionary force in a male-dominated environment. (148)

Her "response of the heart" comes when she realizes that Thornton knows she has lied, and like the strikers' view of her actions as something sexual, Thornton can only believe that her lie also indicates adulterous love.

The lie is frequently seen as a failure on Margaret's part to act on the moral precepts by which she judges others, but Bodenheimer notes that Margaret, in this second public notice, "becomes a human agent in her own right--a

process that means living with the doubleness of her actions, like the men who act and decide in the public sphere." For, Bodenheimer goes on,

Gaskell's revision of the myth of the rescuing heroine lies precisely in that refusal to keep her "pure" and separate from the activities generally associated with the male, the public, and the system. (67)

Harman explores the idea that Gaskell "saw neither the danger of public life as a reason to exclude women from it, nor sought to imagine her entry into that realm as an opportunity to domesticate it" (374). Margaret becomes fully active in the male-dominated world. She is, in Calder's mind, "aware of the nature of her situation" (79); and instead of feminizing "the public realm by extending domestic life outward," Harman argues, she enters "an unreconstructed and unpurifiable public realm" (372).

Harman explains that the lie does two things; it makes Margaret aware of her love for Thornton, and it "reduces [her] excessive sense of moral superiority...which [then] makes her able to truly connect with others" (373). Margaret's willingness to admit her vulnerability readies her for love; but it does more than this. In examining her value system and overcoming her prejudice, she paves the way for the building of a new social system, one in which she is an actor. Through a legacy left her by her father's friend,

Mr. Bell, Margaret has the financial wherewithal to reopen Thornton's factory, a factory where the workers will have better working conditions and wages.

In London, Thornton tells Margaret about his late experience with the workers, that he had gradually come to know them as individuals: "'I felt that I was on the right path, and that, starting from a kind of friendship with one, I was becoming acquainted with many. The advantages were mutual: we were both unconsciously and consciously teaching each other'" (524). And he goes on to explain his revised philosophy, not that they are his workers and he the "enlightened despot," but rather that he wishes "to have the opportunity of cultivating some intercourse with the hands beyond the mere 'cash nexus'" (525). He has learned the lesson Margaret has learned, that to think of others first, to place one's own demands and passions into relation with a greater human morality is the only way to fully realize one's human potential, to achieve moral integrity.

Because Margaret has been allowed to develop her own set of values--after facing and rejecting those of other people--because she has learned how people ought to be treated, because she values marriage, as Calder notes, "as something other than escape, a reinforcement of social status, or a utilitarian contract" (81), because of all these, the union between her and Thornton is the very basis for social change. As Gallagher clearly states: "The

private solution in North and South does not entail a retreat from social responsibility; rather, it is a solution that clears away practical barriers to social harmony" (177). This is possible because Thornton, and to a larger extent Margaret, have undergone radical reevaluations of their social habits, morality, and values. Margaret learns to act independently, to establish her own sense of self and self-worth--her own moral integrity--and what's more, to give what possible hope she can to the community.

CHAPTER IV

Sylvia's Lovers and the Growth of Mercy

Published in 1863, almost six years after The Life of Charlotte Brontë and probably now the least-known of Gaskell's major novels, Sylvia's Lovers is nevertheless an honest, important and eminently readable novel. That she was influenced by Eliot's Adam Bede and its glance to the past, and by Dickens' A Tale of Two Cities and its examination of the effects of the French Revolutionary War on a heroine loved by two vastly different men, seems indisputable (Sanders viii-x). That Gaskell was affected by her own research and writing about Brontë's life and work is also clear; indeed, as the Gaskell critic Aina Rubenius points out, The Life of Charlotte Brontë represents a division between Gaskell's novels, where those written prior to The Life are "novels with a purpose" and those after are "writing for art's sake" (60-61). But discussing any of these works in relation to Sylvia's Lovers should be limited to various similarities; for Gaskell's last fully completed novel has a depth of profundity and insight, a level of passion and sympathy, unique to itself.

Like Mary, Ruth and Margaret, the heroine of this novel, Sylvia, goes through a series of changes, first

forcing her into unhappy and dependent circumstances, then into the world as a strong and independent woman, and eventually as a mother willing both to forgive past wrongs and to prepare a way for the future for her daughter, Bella. The story is not just about independence, however; it is, too, the story of power and control, of revenge, of ignorance, of lost chances and wrong choices, of idolatrous love, of misplaced passion, in short, of life. But ultimately, too, it is the story of forgiveness and connection which make up the good in that life. It is, Gaskell felt, the "saddest story" she ever wrote; it is also the most honest.

The setting is the small northeastern harbor town of Monkshaven at the end of the eighteenth century. The details Gaskell paints and her skilled and accurate use of dialect immerse the reader into the everyday lives of Monkshaven's inhabitants, particularly of Sylvia Robson and her parents, Daniel and Bell. On one level, the characters in Monkshaven cannot communicate. Stoneman calls this a kind of "gender polarisation" where difference causes others to both admire and misunderstand "in the other the qualities from which [each] is excluded" (147). Daniel Robson finds "no great pleasure in the conversation of the other sex," because men can say things to each other which "women cannot understand" (SL 88). Philip has to watch his tone of voice with Sylvia to restrain its wonted tenderness, as "it did

not do to alarm her girlish coyness" (76). Bell has to leave the room when Daniel starts telling his tales (38). And William Coulson, one of Philip's co-workers in the store, is scolded by Alice Rose, the mother of the woman William loves, to "show up thy manly heart, and make as though thee had much else to think on, and no leisure for to dawdle after her, and she'll think a deal more on thee" (81). Sylvia is too shy at first to speak to Kinraid, whom she considers a hero (71). Hester Rose, the woman whom Coulson loves is herself in love with Philip; speak of it, though, she cannot. Kinraid is rumored to have broken the heart of Coulson's sister, resulting in her death (84). And of course the largest communication gap itself is that between Philip and Sylvia, the former adoring, the latter repulsed, a repulsion later strengthened by her discovery of his thrice-told lie about Kinraid's "death." The final scenes of the story, however, attempt to bridge that gulf in communication when Philip and Sylvia learn, through sympathy, sorrow and insight, to "speak" the other's language.

One could consider the language difficulty between individuals as a difficulty as well in understanding each other's values. Like Mary Barton who learned what her commitments were, like Ruth who learned the value of higher morality, like Margaret who learned her own brand of moral integrity through interaction with the public world, Sylvia,

too, is faced with the problem of defining her self and her commitments. She is presented with varying sets of values: from her parents, who represent a personal or individual value system; from her two lovers, Philip and Charley, both of whom represent social values, the first through financial promotion, the latter through hard work and a traditional Monkshaven lifestyle; and finally from Hester Rose and her mother Alice, who offer clearly religious values.

Sylvia's story is woven between and around these characters and value systems, each expressing a part of herself, and through these she comes to terms, eventually, with her own coherent sense of self and a responsibility to her commitments. Sylvia's Lovers is more a woman's tale than Gaskell's previous novels, yet as a woman's story, it is also less traditional than most of that era: this one tracks an ill-suited marriage between a woman who has as yet no coherent sense of self and a man with a consuming passion who betrays that same woman, whom he loves, in order to possess her. Having the benefit of a good marriage to a man who offers financial security, a home, devotion and a family was, of course, what most heroines in a Victorian novel would want, and Gaskell has been accused of devolving into just this kind of marriage plot in both Mary Barton and North and South (and later in Wives and Daughters). In Sylvia's Lovers, however, Sylvia is immediately "married off," a situation which provides the tragedy of the novel as

well as the primary theme. Instead of the marriage idyll, the story becomes one of entrapment, primarily because Sylvia has not a fully established sense of self and commitments before marrying out of economic necessity. Sylvia's Lovers blasts two myths: that all women want is family and financial security and that a married woman becomes "the angel in the house." Sylvia's marriage makes both her and Philip miserable, for unlike Mary and Margaret, Sylvia has no clearly defined moral integrity before her marriage.

In an excellent study of marriage in Victorian women's fiction, Shirley Foster exposes the myth of domesticity and elucidates how authors, particularly women authors, created characters that both undermined and supported this myth. One of the important elements in Victorian women's writing, she argues, is the way women show "how marriage, while at its best the supreme source of female happiness, may easily prove a delusory paradise" (18), and she goes on to explain that while Gaskell approved of marriage and motherhood on the whole, she was quite aware "that women have needs and desires which no one state can wholly satisfy" (139). In the ideology of the age, "so much importance was attached to the roles of wifhood and motherhood, [that] marriage was deemed the apotheosis of womanly fulfilment, alternatives to which were regarded as pitiable or unnatural" (6). In this schema, then, we are to imagine Sylvia happy and Hester

miserable. But neither one is so, and this, according to Foster, is Gaskell's recognition that "womanly individuality must be allowed to flourish" (141) as well as her expression of the tension between "female individuality and...traditional functions" (11). By the end of the novel, Sylvia and Hester could be seen the way Geraldine Jewsbury considered herself and Jane Carlyle, as

"indications of a development of womanhood which as yet is not recognized. It has, so far, no ready-made channels to run in, but still we have looked, and tried, and found that the present rules for women will not hold us; that something better and stronger is needed." (as quoted in Foster 28)

Sylvia finds herself at the beginning of the novel in a happy situation. She is doted on by both parents and has a happy and comfortable home life; she has friends, a cousin who loves her, and a hero to admire. She has little concern but whether her new cloak should be grey or red (42) or should have a hood or cape (60). She is innocent and childlike, though some critics accuse her of being "thoughtless" and "mercurial," of having "immature" fancy and "frivolous" taste (Ganz 21). She tolerates her lessons from Philip just barely (SL 92-93); she is silly and excited at the prospect of a romance with the much-admired specksioneer, or harpoonist, Charley Kinraid. She and her

mother listen "with admiration" to the stories of sailing, smuggling and like adventures exchanged between him and Sylvia's father. Robson teases the young specksioneer that he has learned "'t' way of winnin' t' women'" by telling a story; Bell herself tells Sylvia that she "never could think enough on a man" who had told of his adventures. Kinraid is like Daniel Robson, representing outdoors adventure, something unavailable to Sylvia; this is an older, traditional culture, both oral and familiar.

The kind of life represented by Bell and Daniel Robson is just this traditional culture, one where men "win" women and converse only with men, and where a woman should "go through life in the shadow of obscurity,--never named except in connexion with good housewifery, husband and children" (122). Bell defines herself so closely with her own husband's identity that after he is tried and hung for his involvement in a riot against the press-gangs, she degenerates into madness; indeed, the very evening Sylvia denounces her possible roles as either wife or whore, when she denies Philip control over her person and Kinraid control of her soul, Bell dies. Sylvia's "dual inheritance" from her parents--a "fatalistic sense of duty from her mother" and from her father a "wilful passionateness"--is for Sylvia, Foster explains, the duality "of female personality" which she must fight throughout her life (161).

For Sylvia, her father is, as one critic says, "an important link in [her] sense of a community of interest" in Monkshaven, something in which her first lover, Charley Kinraid, also shares (Calder 80). Too, their romance is encouraged by "the particular temper of the times and her own community" (Ganz 247) , and he provides a link for her with her father. Eagleton notes that Kinraid gives Sylvia a "vitalizing energy" (18); a good bit of this "energy," Lansbury notes, comes through his stories of romance and adventure, where he can "roam beyond the bonds of the commonplace into worlds of vision and high romance" (171), worlds to which Sylvia has no other access. In many ways, Charley would offer to Sylvia a life much as she had always lived. Charley is liked by Robson, for his character as well as his business (197), and, ironically, his life is taken away--when he is conscripted into service by the press gang--by the very instrument of Robson's death. Though some critics argue that Charley is the false love (Ganz) and that he is surrounded with questionable characteristics and behavior (Beer), the fact remains that to Sylvia he represents a promise of both love and life. The passion between Charley and Sylvia is apparent when Gaskell describes Sylvia's coming to life when she sees Kinraid: she is likened to "a great lump of coal...hot and slumbering on the fire; just break it up with a judicious blow from the

poker, and the room, late so dark, and dusk, and lone, is full of life, and light, and warmth" (97).

Immediately before he is taken, Charley begs Sylvia not to consider Philip "when he gets a rich man" but to rather "not forget yo'r true love" (197), perhaps an expression of the traditional notion that what women truly desire is merely material security. When Philip is the only one to see Charley taken by the press gang, Kinraid adjures him to take the message to Sylvia; but upon his return several years later, he blames Sylvia, flinging her from him and exclaiming, "'Oh! thou false heart!'" It seems, however, that while Philip is not to be trusted, neither is Charley: shortly thereafter, he marries an heiress.

Where Kinraid is adventurous, gregarious, representative of an older lifestyle, Philip is literate, staid, prosaic, a shop-keeper. Where Charley represents an ancient laboring and oral culture, Philip represents a new and literate culture, one that could represent, in one critic's words, "emergent capitalism," whereas Kinraid and Robson "seem to represent a primitive kind of populism" (Stoneman 146). Another critic sees Charley linked to "an heroic and legendary past," while Philip is clearly the man of the future with "the social forces and values that are to shape the nineteenth century" (Rignall 23). Charley's "passionate simplicity" is contrasted, according to Lansbury, with Philip's "prim comformities" (171), and

Philip is described as a "socially superior character...who is respectably staid" while Kinraid "the working man...offers a wider, liberating horizon" (Eagleton 21). One critic even sees Philip and Charley as two sides of the same individual (Bonaparte 205).

They do present, as Stoneman says, "opposed ethics," but in their relation with Sylvia they share similarities. According to Stoneman this similarity is their self-interested motivation, where Philip is ruled by "the law of the market" and Charley by "the law of the jungle" (156); according to Schor this similarity is in their mutual loss of self in the loved one--they desire in Sylvia what they themselves lack, both "sexual identity and self-definition" (Sch 158), and they measure their worth in their "ability to win--to possess--Sylvia" (160).

Indeed, Philip sees Sylvia in terms of a possession to be won, isolated and protected. Though Bell recognizes that perhaps Philip and Sylvia "would na' suit," as Philip is most probably "too old-fashioned like for her," she asks him nevertheless to "look after her a bit" by keeping "an eye upon her" (125). Philip denies Sylvia the right to socialize with the rustic townfolk, lest "one [such] as our Sylvie...be cheapened wi' t' rest" (123). He promises Bell:

"I'd just keep her a bit aloof from Monkshaven folks; a lass is always the more thought on for being chary of herself; and as for t' rest, I'll

have an eye to the folks she goes among, and if I see that they don't befit her, I'll just give her a warning, ...; she can see what's becoming in a man to say to a lass and what's not." (127)

Philip wants to extend his control over all aspects of Sylvia's life, her knowledge, her social life, her affections, her future.

As representative of the new capitalism--or, as Eagleton deems, the "petty bourgeois respectability" (18)--Philip dreams of taking over the Foster's store, of having the "dignified position of joint master of the principal shop in Monkshaven," a position which would allow him to have "Sylvia installed as his wife, with certainly a silk gown, and possibly a gig" (129). He literally worships her to the exclusion of all else:

To Philip she was the only woman in the world; it was the one subject on which he dared not consider, for fear that both conscience and judgment should decide against him, and that he should be convinced against his will that she was an unfit mate for him, that she never would be his, and that it was waste of time and life to keep her shrined in the dearest sanctuary of his being, to the exclusion of all the serious and religious aims which, in any other case, he would have been the first to acknowledge as the object

he ought to pursue. For he had been brought up among the Quakers, and shared in their austere distrust of a self-seeking spirit; yet what else but self-seeking was his passionate prayer, "Give me Sylvia, or else, I die?" No other vision had ever crossed his masculine fancy for a moment....

(128-29)

But Sylvia's "ideal husband was different from Philip in every point, the two images never for an instant merged into one" (128), and the fact that they do become husband and wife lays the groundwork for the ensuing tragedy. This tragedy is caused in no small way by his absolute idolatrous and possessive passion; this, coupled with his dishonesty and Sylvia's own rash and passionate nature, results in unhappiness and destruction for them both.

For Philip does think in terms of possession: when he plans to give her a ribbon as a gift, he congratulates himself that "she would in a way belong to him: her cousin, her mentor, her chaperone, her lover! While others only admired, he might hope to appropriate" (134). He resolves to be more to Sylvia's "liking," to "remodel his behaviour to her": he determines to "start off on a new tack"; he would make her "see how tender and forgiving he could be"; he plans to "lure her to him rather than find fault with her" (161). This is representative of the Puritan ethic, according to Lansbury, who sees, like Schor, the repression

of individual personality in Philip's desire for Sylvia; Philip finds value in his financial success, equated with personal virtue, Lansbury goes on to explain (169), and in his love for Sylvia, whom he deems his prize for working. He plans to "be patient and enduring; all the time watching over her, and labouring to win her reluctant love" (SL 231) even though "his progress was slow towards his object" (247). Philip, according to Stoneman, "gets a self, as women customarily do in novels, by being in love" (159). His "devouring" and "obsessive" love for Sylvia "makes him both pitiful and repugnant," Lansbury writes, and his "continual self-consciousness, his watchful guard upon his actions...makes his passion for Sylvia the more violent in consequence" (177).

Philip, too, expresses his love through what he can offer Sylvia materially. When Daniel is tried in York, it is Philip who pays for his defence, equating his love for her with what he can do for her financially. Sylvia thanks him for spending his entire savings; he replies: "'I have loved yo' for years and years, in a way it's terrible to think on, if my love can do nought now to comfort yo' in your sore distress'" (302-303). His help is a monetary expression of his love.

Even though Alice Rose warns Philip that he is keeping company with the ungodly, that "'the flesh and the devil are gettin' hold on yo', and yo' need more nor iver to seek t'

ways o' grace'" (162), he is adamant that Sylvia is "the desire of his eyes and the lust of his heart" (176). In this kind of idolatrous love, Philip loses his own sense of identity; he loses himself in his loved one. Ganz links Philip's obsession with John Barton's: "Both are destroyed because an obsessive commitment to a particular objective leads them to deny the claims of a higher morality" (232), and Philip in particular can be seen as the more tragic because he is "essentially responsible for his choices" (233). This is most apparent when Philip lies, something incompatible with his basic nature; this is where, again, he loses himself. He gains his own identity, his own name, his own story, only when he leaves Sylvia and Monkshaven and becomes, appropriately, Stephen Freeman.

When Philip is asked to carry a message from the captured Charley to Sylvia, he feels cursed. That he was to have "been chosen out from among all men to convey such a message as Kinraid's to Sylvia" is to him abhorrent, intolerable. And, ultimately, impossible. Philip considers the last moments of speech with Kinraid, and wonders if the specksioneer, bound and being hauled away, heard any spoken promise. But he deems not for his "dread Inner Creature, who lurks in each of our hearts, arose and said, 'It is as well: a promise give is a fetter to the giver. But a promise is not given when it has not been received'" (221).

Philip decides Sylvia's fate in his lie of omission; feeling the "great obstacle [to his winning Sylvia's love] was removed in Kinraid's impressment, Philip took upon himself to decide that, with such a man as the specksioneer, absence was equivalent to faithless forgetfulness" (230). He tells no one what he has seen; he never overcomes his guilt, though, and he dreads the inevitable:

If Kinraid should send word to Sylvia; if he should say he was living, and loving, and faithful; if it should come to pass that the fact of the undelivered message sent by her lover through Philip should reach Sylvia's ears: what would be the position of the latter, not merely in her love--that, of course, would be hopeless--but in her esteem? All sophistry vanished; the fear of detection awakened Philip to a sense of guilt; and besides, he found out, that, in spite of all idle talk and careless slander, he could not help believing that Kinraid was in terrible earnest when he uttered those passionate words, and entreated that they might be borne to Sylvia. Some instinct told Philip that if the specksioneer had only flirted with too many, yet that for Sylvia Robson his love was true and vehement. (250-51)

Philip's lie is unlike the other lies in Gaskell's previous novels, because while Margaret's and Benson's were told by one individual to help another, Philip's lie is strictly self-serving; it helps no one, not even, in the long run, the person who tells it. Lansbury describes this lie as irrational and the exact point where Philip loses his morality. It is, she says, "a lie told for the most selfish of reasons" (177). The lie, according to Bonaparte, "becomes a part of the novel's moral drama" (203), and for Foster, the inclusion of the lie in the story is one of Gaskell's triumphs: "She reveals how easily the sophisticated thinking engendered by desire can convert dishonesty into self-justifying necessity" (160). For Eagleton, Philip's constancy--so much admired by Ganz, who argues that his "unusual fidelity" (Ganz 244) is a noble attribute, the more tragic because unreciprocated (241)--does not excuse Philip, for "the point is not just that he acquiesces in a lie, but that he destroys the truth of a human relationship in doing so" (Eagleton 24). Philip is as one possessed, and even though smitten by his conscience, he hides the truth. "Self-interest is usually not enlightened," John Maynard Keynes once wrote, and certainly Philip is blind to the potential consequences of his lie.

Shortly before their marriage when Sylvia asks Philip if "'there's mebbe but one chance'" that Charley could be alive, his "heart stopped beating; literally, as if he had

come to a sudden precipice, while he had thought himself securely walking on sunny greensward" (327). He is "beside himself with guilt, anxiety, and rage"; but when she says, "'I thought yo' knowed that I cared a deal for him,'" he is convinced that "to have her for his own he must, at any cost" (328). There is for Philip no "honest certainty" that Kinraid is dead, only his own passionate desire to possess her.

Sylvia marries in black, out of respect for her father's death, she claims, but certainly it is fitting for one who sees her marriage "more as a change of home, as the leaving of Haytersbank, as it would affect her mother, than in any more directly personal way." Not only does she wed in mourning raiment, but when she and her new husband return to the house behind the shop, the sound of Bell's "weeping and wailing" is their only greeting (341). Philip notices an indifferent submission in Sylvia and desires to have back "the old Sylvia" who had been "captious, capricious, wilful, haughty, merry, charming." But he recognizes "that Sylvia was gone for ever" (330) and though he does not acknowledge it yet, he "was beginning to feel...that the fruit he had so inordinately longed for was but of the nature of an apple of Sodom" (334). She is docile, even passive, and Philip "would have given not a little for some of the old bursts of impatience, her old pettishness, which, naughty as they were, had gone to form his idea of the former Sylvia. Once

or twice he was almost vexed with her for her docility; he wanted her so much to have a will of her own" (343). His passion has destroyed the very things that had made him so desire her.

Philip's third lie about Charley's "death" is after their marriage and the birth of their daughter, when Sylvia, dreaming one night of Charley, is convinced that he is still alive. Distressed, she asks, "'Oh! what shall I do? what shall I do?'" And though Philip hid the truth before, he tells a lie now: "'Kinraid's dead, I tell yo' Sylvie!'" (354). This marks Sylvia's movement, rather quickly and sadly, from a period of innocence; her lover's disappearance, her father's death and her mother's infirmity have initiated the wild Sylvia into a new realm of experience. In spite of becoming close friends with Hester Rose and of being well thought of by the Foster brothers, Sylvia, "with all her apparent frankness, kept her deep sorrows to herself," and finds her new home a "comfortable imprisonment" (349-50). She would rather wander the countryside by herself, and later with her daughter Bella, than attend Philip's church or go to his social functions.

For Sylvia, the child represents a new possibility, and she finds "for the first time since her irrevocable marriage" that she is not completely dissatisfied:

For [the marriage's] irrevocableness had weighed much upon her with a sense of dull

hopelessness.... She did not know what else she could have done but marry so true a friend, and she and her mother so friendless; but, at the same time, it was like lead on her morning spirits when she awoke and remembered that the decision was made, the dead [sic] was done, the choice taken which comes to most people but once in their lives. Now the little baby came in upon this state of mind like a ray of sunlight into a gloomy room. (351)

The baby, though, too, adds a poignancy to Sylvia's life, for she dreams constantly now of Charley.

Contrasting the lives shared by Philip and Sylvia and Sylvia's previous passion for Charley is one of Gaskell's great subtleties. With Charley, Sylvia had been like a fire waiting to be stoked; now, with Philip, her life is confined and dark, and Philip himself pays no attention to a candle at his supper table when "the wick of the candle grew long and black, and fell, and sputtered, and puttered; he sate on, unheeding either it or the pale gray fire that was dying out--dead at last" (373). While Philip is indoors, Sylvia longs to be outside to "cry my fill out under yon quiet sky"; she feels confined and thinks she "cannot stay in t' house to be choked up wi' my tears" (368), nor does she wish to be reconciled to Philip's "respectability and comfort" which she finds "dull and restraining" (350).

Sylvia's first vision of Charley upon his return is to her like a sudden death, for "her heart leaped up and fell again dead within her, as if she had been shot"; hearing his voice "tremulous with joy and passionate love" creates in her an "inarticulate moan of agony"; looking at him again there is "a terrible story in her eyes, if he could but have read it" (377). Sylvia has not been able to create or tell her own "story" much less have people "read it" or even understand it. Her life has been created for her by circumstances and by people who would control her. She wants to run to the "wide full river, and end the hopeless misery she felt enshrouding her"; she longs to have the "sure hiding-place from all human reproach and heavy mortal woe beneath the rushing waters" (378). But, like Ruth whose attempt at suicide was stayed by Benson's cry for help, Sylvia is stayed by the thought of her child, someone who needs her in spite of her own misery, her own destroyed hopes.

In front of both Charley and Philip, in the most passionate and heartbreaking passage in the novel, Sylvia denies both any more power over her life:

"Hark!" said she, starting away from Kinraid,
"baby's crying for me. His child--yes, it is his
child--I'd forgotten that--forgotten all. I'll
make my vow now, lest I lose mysel' again. I'll
never forgive yon man, nor live with him as his

wife again. All that's done and ended. He's spoilt my life,--he's spoilt it for as long as iver I live on this earth; but neither yo' nor him shall spoil my soul. It goes hard wi' me, Charley, it does indeed. I'll just give yo' one kiss--one little kiss--and then, so help me God, I'll niver see nor hear till--no, not that, not that is indeed--I'll niver see--sure that's enough--I'll niver see yo' again on this side heaven, so help me God! I'm bound and tied, but I've sworn my oath to him as well as yo': there's things I will do, and there's things I won't.

Kiss me once more. God help me! He's gone!" (383)

The syntax is garbled, incoherent, like Sylvia's life itself. The kiss is essentially a kiss of death, spiritually for her and literally for Philip. She denounces her husband for having planned her life and made her miserble to suit himself; yet, too, she denies Charley her "soul." Whatever sins had been committed, whatever pain inflicted, she vows not to add to them.

Confronted with his lie, Philip "knew not what to say, whither to turn, under what refuge of words or acts to shelter" (380). He finally tries, however, to explain his life's motivations in words that would make Sylvia understand:

"Sylvie! Listen to me. He didn't love yo' as I did. He had loved other women. I, yo'--yo' alone. He loved other girls before yo', and had left off loving 'em. I--I wish God would free my heart from the pang; but it will go on till I die, whether yo' love me or not. And the--where was I? Oh! that very night that he was taken, I was a-thinking of his false fickle ways. How was I to know he would keep true to thee? It might be a sin in me, I cannot say; my heart and my sense are gone dead within me. I know this, I've loved yo' as no man but me ever loved before. Have some pity and forgiveness on me, if it's only because I've been so tormented with my love." (382)

Charley's return is, for Philip, the death his dreams had imagined. Charley returns a hero; Philip becomes the villain; he fears "the burst of popular indignation" that will follow. "His doom of disgrace lay plain before him" (386), and fully aware of the "misery that he had caused," he determines to go away. He joins the navy under the ironic name Stephen Freeman, fully "resigned, with utterly despondent passiveness, to the fate to which he had pledged himself"; he longs to forget his life, "if that were possible"; but really he welcomes "anything which increased the chances of death without the sinfulness of his own participation in the act." He retains, however, "in the

dark recess of his mind," the image of himself returning "home, handsome and glorious, to win the love that had never been his" (392). He wants, essentially, to be a hero whom Sylvia could admire; he wants to become Kinraid.

While Sylvia severs all connection with Philip and Charley--"I'm sick o' men and their cruel, deceitful ways," she tells Jeremiah Foster (412)--she manages to establish a sense of herself as an individual in spite of social moralities: in order to live henceforward, she must have no ties to the men who want her. Her mother dies the same night she sends both men away, effectively releasing her from any connections with her old life. Interestingly, Gaskell has Sylvia establish an identity strictly her own: she neither marries again nor wishes to; and, in becoming close friends with Hester and her mother, she overcomes the baser part of her own nature, her inability to forgive. Sylvia clings to her child--"with it in her arms she was protected, and the whole current of her thoughts was changed" (406-7)--as the one thing now to give her reason to live. The importance of this moment cannot be overemphasised, and Shirley Foster notes rightly that this is perhaps the most crucial scene in the book:

Ultimately, it is through relinquishing the support of matrimony that Sylvia attains real individuality. Trained by suffering, she develops self-respect and courage; she stands on her own,

acting as father and mother to her child, and with her moral sympathies broadened. (162)

Throughout her life she has battled her anger. When Kester, the farmhand, accuses her of forgetting Charley, Sylvia says to him: "'If thou wasn't Kester, I'd niver forgive thee. Niver.... It's in me to hate thee now, for saying what thou did'" (307). She says she has "'turned savage late days,'" after her father's execution, and, she says, as for those "'as helped for t' hang him...I'll niver forgive--niver!'" (319). She tells Philip that she will never forgive those who testified against her father, even if doing so would be "right" and "christian-like":

"I tell thee my flesh and blood wasn't made for forgiving and forgetting. Once for all, thou must take my word. When I love I love, and when I hate I hate; and him as has done hard to me, or to mine, I may keep fra' striking or murdering, but I'll niver forgive. I should be just a monster, fit to be shown at a fair, if I could forgive him as got feyther hanged." (333)

She later tells Philip that "thee and me was niver meant to go together," and that she would never forgive him (332), and when she goes to Jeremiah Foster for help after Philip leaves, she tells him that it is only Philip's care for her mother that stands between her and "'hating Philip'" (412). Ganz lays the entire tragedy at Sylvia's feet, arguing that

Sylvia's "failure to subvert her emotions to higher spiritual aims" causes her "sacreligious vindictiveness which lays waste her husband's life and which eventually causes him to starve in a wretched hovel while she lives in comparative peace and comfort" (249). And while Ganz is right to link Sylvia's wrath to Philip's going to war, Sylvia should not bear full responsibility. Philip and Sylvia, by their very natures, have spoiled each other's lives, one by jealous possessiveness, the other by righteous wrath. It's as though Ganz is ignoring the essence of the story and listening only to the legend of these lives presented at the end of the novel where Sylvia lives in "hard-hearted plenty" while her husband starves a few feet away.

Where Sylvia has not yet been able to relinquish her anger, she eventually, through communion with Hester and her mother, does learn Hester's ways. The contrast between these two women is one of the essential elements in the novel. Where Philip and Charley are in many ways opposites, so too are Sylvia and Hester. Sylvia had always been tempestuous and wilfull; Hester, always grave and thoughtful. When the Roses move in with Sylvia after Philip's departure in the house behind the store, Hester is at first suffering "her own private rebellion," being forced into daily communion with the agent of Philip's unhappiness. "Hester fought against herself" but eventually submits in

"her gentle piety" to try "for Philip's sake...to love [Sylvia] as well as to take care of her" (417).

While Sylvia, the wife and mother, has none of the "traditional" qualities of Coventry Patmore's "Angel in the House"--sacrifice and gentleness--Hester does. But Hester has no hope of expressing these virtues in the traditional roles for women, which the ideology of the age maintained were best expressed in wifhood and motherhood. Foster maintains that Hester's refusal to marry someone whom she does not love "both indicates her moral strength and contrasts favourably with Sylvia's eventual capitulation to Philip" (159). She does not recognize the irony that Sylvia made it perfectly clear that in marrying Philip she had no options and wished only to care for her ailing mother. Hester, however, has always had the means of supporting herself--working in the store. But Foster is quite right in recognizing that Hester's unrequited love for Philip causes her to "subdue her jealousy of Sylvia and channel her unreciprocated emotion into sacrificial martyrdom and self-denying service" (Foster 159)--she is remembered at the end of the story for founding almshouses in Philip's name.

Hester overcomes her jealousy of Sylvia and slowly begins to both love and accept her. According to Nestor, "female jealousy is finally much less disruptive and divisive than male jealousy" (66), as expressed by Philip's desperate and possessive lie. Sylvia and Hester eventually

develop a close bond which Gaskell uses to demonstrate, Nestor argues, "a degree of imaginative projection and fellow-feeling in which divisiveness is not the necessary consequence of a shared object of affection" (67). So while Hester grows to love Sylvia, first for Philip's sake, then for Sylvia's, Sylvia learns to put aside her angry and unforgiving nature. At the same time, we see that Philip also lays off his worst self: he saves the former object of his hatred and jealousy on the battlefield. Schor points out the distinction here:

To "lose oneself" as Philip does, in lies and self-betrayal, is the deepest sin; to "lose oneself" in Christian goodness or, perhaps, in true love of another, may be to get free of the obsessive need to forge identity through destruction of the other. As Sylvia can recognize in Hester's pain her own--and Philip's as well--so she gains from her "bewilderment." In that awful imposition of self--setting up oneself as an idol through one's love of some exterior object who will reflect oneself back--is the worst kind of certainty, a certainty that exists at the expense of others, as Jeremiah Foster describes Philip's lie to Sylvia: "'a self-seeking lie; putting thee to pain to get his own ends.'" (173)

Sylvia learns self-sacrifice, not merely through the care of her daughter Bella, but also through the daily communion with Hester who has taught the wilfull and boisterous Sylvia "to appreciate soft slow speech, and grave thoughtful ways" (435). She is astonished to learn that her former lover Charley marries an heiress (437-38), and becomes more than ever aware that marriage should really be a union of like natures, a sentiment articulated by Alice Rose who comments that Philip suffers as an outcast because "he were led away by a pretty face" instead of choosing a woman--namely Hester--who "was fitter for him, and who loved him as the apple of her eye" (441). But Sylvia's heart begins to soften "day by day" for the absent Philip (481), and she begins to "unconsciously miss his protecting love" (489). For, after all this time, she "began to learn the value of such enduring love as Philip's had been," even though she does not want things as they were: she shrinks from the possibility of his return to "once more call her 'wife'" (490). This duality, Lansbury notes, is her recognition of Philip's kindness, while still remembering what he did to her, and it is in her "nature that she must always remain faithful to her emotions" (176). However, while Sylvia forgives Philip at the end, she still does not love him; I think this clearly indicates that she has gotten over the worst aspect of her unforgiving nature.

The end of this novel has long been considered a descent into melodrama, but really it is the only fitting and effective ending for a theme such as Gaskell's, one where the values of mercy and kindness had to take precedence in a world that seemed to have very little of either. Philip learns to put aside his obsession, first by saving Charley Kinraid on the battlefield when the latter had given up all hope of being rescued and "lay there to die" (431), and second by returning to Monkshaven, not as Philip Hepburn, master shopkeeper and battle hero, but as the impoverished, disfigured and half-mad Stephen Freeman, unknown by colleague, wife or daughter.

Living in the shadow of his former life, Philip finally makes his identity known one day by saving Bella from drowning; in doing so, he is mortally injured. When Sylvia discovers he is her former husband, she goes to him immediately in order to pay her final respects. On his deathbed they beg mutual forgiveness. He admits to having done her "a cruel wrong," not just by his lie, but by making her his "idol" (495). Sylvia, however, despairs of ever finding peace: "'I think,'" she sobs, "'I shall go about among them as gnash their teeth for iver, while yo' are wheere all tears are wiped away'" (496). Schor notes that here Sylvia "seems to see her crime in hurting him that loved her; she never claims to love him but rather to value his love for her" (Sch 175), and this is vitally important.

It is as though Sylvia, through time and her connection with Hester, has recongized the value of true affection and connection; she has come a long and painful journey to the point where she has both a coherent sense of self and a recognition of her responsibilities.

At the close of the novel, the sea has the same "ceaseless, ever-recurrent sound as that which Philip listened to in the pauses between life and death," a reminder that humanity, its passions and mistakes and lost chances, will continue, just as the sea. The "memory of man fades away" and little is remembered of tragic tales of love faded and time gone by. The story of Philip and Sylvia is turned into legend: Sylvia is remembered as "a pale, sad woman, allays dressed in black," who dies before her daughter is full grown; Hester is remembered for founding alms-houses in Philip's name; Bella is said to have inherited the money from the Fosters' store and to have emigrated to America; Philip is remembered as "the man who died in a cottage somewhere about this spot,--died of starvation while his wife lived in hard-hearted plenty not two good stone-throws away" (502). Schor points out that this legend is more about Sylvia's guilt than Philip's lie and wonders how women's stories are so easily misplaced or transplanted (178).

It seems as though Gaskell, after the happier endings of Mary Barton and North and South and after the death of

the heroine in Ruth, decided to turn all the stories upside down. In Sylvia's Lovers her heroine is first married; then after she does learn the lesson of a higher morality, she lives on, but sadly, though not alone. Unless we come to terms with who we are and what our commitments are or at least to be willing to change our baser natures to become our better selves, there will always be separation, heartache and sorrow. The need for connection becomes paramount: the love and mercy that come from belonging make us better than we are--or ever could be--in solitude.

Duthie points out that in some ways Sylvia's Lovers looks forward to Wives and Daughters in its pointed human drama:

Operating in the novel are basic human feelings uncorrupted by materialism and artificial social values. It is what that triumphant union in Wives and Daughters is meant to be too, but while in Sylvia's Lovers these human feelings are enmeshed in drama and tragedy on a very intimate level, in the later novel they appear to be leading confidently towards quiet happiness and unthreatened fulfillment. (80)

I might add that Molly in Wives and Daughters, like all the heroines before her, is faced with a variety of values from which she must choose in order to come to a coherent sense of self. But what Gaskell teaches at the end of

Sylvia's Lovers she makes abundantly clear in her last novel. She tells us that wisdom may take a long time for all of its components to be in place, but the timing of its emergence means that in maturity we get a new start--a new way of understanding life that is more apt to benefit others. It may turn out that caring about others is the capstone of living.

CHAPTER V

Change, Continuity and Care,
or the Lives of Wives and Daughters

One of the things most noted about Elizabeth Gaskell's last novel, Wives and Daughters, is its difference. Its heroine is unlike the other novels' heroines; the geographical and temporal locations differ; the humor is more obvious; social concerns seem less pressing. But this novel, left incomplete by Gaskell's death in November of 1865, still forwards her most basic mythology, inherent in the previous four novels and made manifest in this one: moral integrity can only be achieved through social involvement. Molly Gibson, like Mary, Ruth, Margaret and Sylvia before her, grows into a complete individual, not in isolation from society, not from an inward focus and away from the world's influences, but rather in constant contact with individuals from a myriad of backgrounds. Molly learns her own level of integrity through a confluence of these social influences; she is exposed to a wide plurality of values--which help in her formation of a critical self--and she comes through them with a new value orientation. The very title of the novel, reminiscent of Turgenyev's Fathers and Sons, reflects women in relationship, the essential theme of the novel. In many ways, Wives and Daughters

is less dramatic than the previous novels, as nothing "happens" beyond the daily experiences of a woman's life; but in its subtitle, "An Everyday Story," Gaskell delineates the fragments of a deeper story: the inner drama continually unfolding behind the scenes of outer life. Like a double helix, these two forces--outer life and inner drama--spiral in and out of each other, weaving a myth by which others, particularly women, could shape their lives into meaningful patterns.

The groups of individuals with which Molly has contact represent differing value systems, which in turn help her achieve her sense of self and from which she must choose the most essential elements in that growth process. Her father, of course, is the patriarchal word, a man who does not want Molly too educated, who wants to keep her innocent and protected, who, in effect, wants to keep her as daughter. He is, however, a good man, and has taught Molly basic human sympathy as well as nurtured her instincts to love. The Miss Brownings represent Hollingford society, essentially Victorian in manner, expectation and ideology. They are overly conscious of the way things ought properly to be, and deviation from this propriety raises more than just an eyebrow. The Cumnors and Hamleys--the aristocracy and landed gentry respectively--demand respect for their wealth, obeisance to their rank, and homage to their name. The Hamleys in particular, though, are portrayed sympathetically

and deeply, and they inculcate in Molly intelligence, curiosity and grace. Roger Hamley, in fact, becomes for Molly a teacher, moral guide, friend and eventual lover. Two of the greatest of Gaskell's fictional creations are Cynthia Kirkpatrick and her mother Hyacinth Clare, the latter eventually becoming the second Mrs. Gibson and Molly's stepmother. These two in their own ways represent different value orientations, Cynthia in the coquetry and secrecy thought necessary, desirable, even essential for "successful" women searching for husbands at the time, and Mrs. Gibson in her foolish and selfish manners, representing the lack of concern for education and moral substance for which Mary Wollstonecraft, more than half a century earlier, had condemned not just women, but men, too, for making them so.

Molly defines herself both against these people and in relationship to them, eventually achieving a moral integrity by developing a critical perspective which defines who she is and what her commitments are. But the character of Molly is fraught with difficulty in the minds of most critics. In a study about the female ideal in the novels of Austen, Eliot and Charlotte Brontë, Linda Hunt accuses Gaskell of creating in the "inevitably naive and childlike" Molly "the most realistic of later nineteenth-century 'angels,' [a character who] seems to be unaware of something she should be conscious of if we are to regard her with respect: the

possibility of an independent inner life" (40). And Shirley Foster notes that while Molly may be considered "Gaskell's most psychologically credible and engaging heroine," she also "embodies many of the conventional womanly virtues" (181). Foster argues that Molly's confinement to the "domestic sphere" is "a diminution of female potential" and while she does "learn to act and make decisions, her inner dilemmas do not express themselves in her outward behavior" (176). The novel's "happy ending" Foster sees as Gaskell's "culminating vindication of nearly thirty years of married happiness" (178); and as the author's "maturest artistic achievement," the book itself becomes "her most unequivocal statement of orthodoxy" (181).

For Felicia Bonaparte, the novel is autobiographical (though in his introduction to the Oxford edition of Wives and Daughters, Angus Easson states vehemently that it is not), as Molly "mirrors Gaskell in personality and character" (56). Molly's growing awareness of the importance of thinking of others, Bonaparte sees merely as the lesson Gaskell herself "learns" while writing the novel: "She learned that to gain the love she needed she had to kill herself" (76), reflecting Gaskell's confused relationship with her father after her mother's death. Molly must learn to be like Cynthia, Bonaparte contends, who has no self; she must, "to earn the love of others...give up her individuality, she must quench her own desires. For a

desire may, after all, put us in conflict with another, which may lead to angry words that may alienate affection. But without individuality one can never anger anyone" (69). At best this is absurd; at worst, it is a deliberate misreading of Elizabeth Gaskell. For Molly openly disagrees with her father in dealing with Cynthia's secret in relation to Mr. Preston. She defies Preston as well. She tells the aristocratic Lady Harriet that she ought not to mock or belittle Molly's acquaintances. Molly does acquiesce when it comes to her stepmother, but in this situation Molly learns that the less said the less grief suffered from Mrs. Gibson's verbal assaults and absurdities. Molly recognizes full well Mrs. Gibson's vain selfishness, but in order not to pain her father and to avoid fractiousness, Molly does not quarrel. This is a far different thing than learning not to have a self, as Bonaparte contends.

Other critics see Molly differently and, I think, rightly. To Duthie, she "exemplifies unconsciously the spirit of charity which is the essence of Christianity" which Gaskell considered part of the divine (158). Stone feels that while Molly does subordinate herself to a degree, as do Gaskell's previous heroines, nevertheless her "refusal to numb her feelings, her clinging to a sense of identity through it all, and her development of strength lacking in the others permits her a measure of independence" (171). And even Ganz, never an unqualified fan of Gaskell's works,

argues that "it is Molly who sees clearly and speaks plainly, her goodness is not passive, a denial of action, but the positive force in the novel." Molly, she goes on, becomes an "individual in her own right" and not just a conventional woman (204). Molly certainly has a lively inner life, and she learns in her maturation that caring for others involves not always acting in anger or on impulse. Caring for others, to invoke Carol Gilligan, is all-inclusive in the attempt to "avoid hurt," the culmination of Gaskell's moral mythology.

Molly's awareness of her place amongst the community and her responsibility to it give rise to two things: the values she learns to embrace and her own coherent sense of self. Both of these mark her moral integrity, and both, as Stone noted, mark her independence and certainly her interest for us. Molly has learned her "sterling sense of values," as Duthie calls them, from her social contacts, so certainly a closer examination of them is in order. The primary theme of the novel is connection, and, as Elaine Showalter suggests about women's literature from the mid-1800s in general, "the central preoccupation...is with the woman as an influence on others within her domestic and social circle" (20). Molly influences those about her; but at the same time, they help her distinguish "truth" from "untruth"--about conceptions of femininity, family, status

and wealth, romance and marriage, and conceptions of language and the world in general.

From the Miss Brownings, the unmarried sisters who had been friends of Molly's deceased mother, Molly is presented with a set of values that is strictly social: polite, proper, gossipy. While Foster feels these women in their singleness represent not "female self-reliance" but rather the "stereotypical," even the "absurd or the pathetic" (177), their place in the novel, in Molly's development, is important. They are present in the very opening scenes when Molly, at twelve, is to go to The Towers, the home of the local aristocracy, accompanied by Phoebe and Sally Browning. They are too absorbed in the pleasures of Lady Agnes' hothouse lecture on orchids to notice that Molly has fallen asleep outside, and they are too absorbed discussing Lady Agnes' and Lady Harriet's condescension to notice that they return home without Molly. While the ladies seem somewhat frivolous and scatter-brained, they are well-intentioned; and certainly they are representative of that class of women who have no real place in society. They have no occupation, no husbands or children, and only enough money left them by their parson father just to manage. They spend their time discussing local affairs, potential romances, the condescension of those higher in rank, and the price of tea.

They represent a society which does not want to change: they had been unwilling years before to accept the new doctor Gibson (27) and were unwilling now, like the rest of the town, to shift their political allegiances from the Whig Cumnors (who did not really represent their interests) to more like-thinking representatives (3-4). The Miss Brownings still entertain the possibilities of romance, first for themselves when they hear that Dr. Gibson is to remarry, then for whatever potential romance they hear and gossip about next. The elder Miss Browning would rather "retract anything sooner than be reasoned with" (150), and both speak in coarse and loud tones, have an "absence of interest in things, and [have a] greediness [for] details about persons" (153). Indeed, when Molly is seen having private conversations with Preston (trying to convince him to relinquish his secret engagement with Cynthia), the Brownings gossip about her as if they had not known her or her goodness her entire life. She is reinstated in their good opinion only after she is seen walking the streets of the town with Lady Harriet (554-61). These women, of course, provide for Molly love and affection, but they provide also a role of womanhood against which Molly can judge herself and her own growth.

But while Molly understands their foibles, she is also fiercely loyal to them. When Lady Harriet calls them "Pecksy and Flapsy" after two pigeons from a favorite

children's book, Molly rebukes her for mocking her friends and for "speaking of the sort of--the class of people to which I belong as if it was a kind of strange animal you were talking about" (167). Lady Harriet explains that "it is only a way of speaking" and goes on to say that the Hollingford people

"are so unnatural in their exaggerated respect and admiration when they come up to the Towers, and put on so much pretence by way of fine manners, that they only make themselves objects of ridicule." (168)

Phoebe, sitting capless and barefoot in front of the fire and working some old lace, is almost overwhelmed when Lady Harriet stops to visit Molly. Their easy and informal conversation is interrupted by the elder Miss Browning who forces her younger sister to go upstairs and better dress herself for the visit of an earl's daughter (177).

Lady Harriet herself reflects only some of the aristocratic attitudes which her mother Lady Cumnor thinks proper for people of their station. She tells her mother that she cannot "make provincial small-talk" with people (91), and unlike her older sister and brother, she has remained unmarried. Lord Cumnor is an affable man, involved in the workings of his land, though he has, to his wife's mind, too free a manner with his subordinates. He believes in a woman's proper sphere and feels that their success

should be measured by their connections and their beauty: his children's former governess, Mrs. Kirkpatrick (or "Clare" to the family) should be a successful schoolmistress, he tells his wife, "for she's an uncommonly pretty woman for her age, and her having lived in our family, and your having had her so often with you, ought to go a good way" (97). He believes, too, that his wife is full of wisdom, benevolence, power and dignity, of which he boasts in her absence, "as if by this means he could buttress up his own more feeble nature" (96). Lady Cumnor is imperious and demands respect for her title and wealth; her decisions are not to be questioned, and she frequently longs to retreat from London to the Towers, in search of "leisure to be an invalid" (91).

Molly, however, as Duthie points out, does not have an "exaggerated deference to her social superiors" (53), one of the things that sets her apart not just from Hollingford society, but eventually from her stepmother as well. Where the second Mrs. Gibson is always reminded of her social inferiority in her intercourse with the Cumnors, Molly is respected and liked by Lady Harriet for her "simple and truthful" ways (WD 168), and is actually taken into the family of the local landed gentry, the Hamleys.

Where Lansbury feels the novel examines "the nature and source" of aristocratic power and authority "to maintain the traditions of the past" (183), the purpose of the Cumnors

(and the Hamleys) is to contrast further Mrs. Gibson's lack of moral integrity on the one hand with Molly's possession of it on the other. Clare defines herself as Lord Cumnor has: her success depends on her connections with them and on her beauty. Molly defines the Cumnors and Hamleys, not as connections to set herself up as something she is not, but as people from whom she can learn how to treat others (as well as how not to). Both her father and Roger do the same: they frequent the Towers to converse with the eldest son, Lord Hollingford, who is himself a noted and respected scientist, and who gathers about him eminent researchers of the time.

Molly's contact with the landed gentry, the Hamleys, is on a much more intimate level than her infrequent moments with Lady Harriet. Initially sent to their home as protection from Mr. Coxe's "calf-love" which her father had discovered and from which he wanted to protect Molly, she finds there a life of interest and intimacy. The Hamleys are an ancient family, "if not aborigines" and had been in possession of their estate "long before the Earls of Cumnor had been heard of" (39). Lansbury suggests that here Gaskell equates land, especially ancestral land, with social prestige, even though Squire Hamley is virtually penniless (184). Like Mrs. Gibson, Calder points out, the squire also is "motivated by a faith in status, blood, tradition and convention" (79), but I would argue that in Hamley the

motivation is familial and traditional, while in Mrs. Gibson it is entirely self-serving. Duthie remarks that "this insistence on the importance of the family is in tune with [Gaskell's] natural liking for tradition and continuity, and with her acceptance of a social hierarchy" (90), but this reading needs qualification. Certainly Gaskell believed in the strength of family, but if social hierarchy were of such importance to her, Osborne Hamley would not have married a penniless French nurse whom the squire eventually accepts, both as daughter and as mother of his grandchild. Indeed, his notions of the "proper" marriage he feels Osborne should make are painted as both outdated and supercilious. Indeed, if Gaskell felt so, Molly would not be "well-born" enough to stay as guest at the Towers, let alone marry one such as Roger Hamley.

However, Molly does learn from the Hamleys the importance of family. To Duthie, family represents "stability and peace," a place for the "transmission of moral principles and of high standards of conduct," as well as being "the most natural medium for giving and receiving affection and consequently for satisfying the deepest need of the human heart" (90). When the coherence of the Hamley family is disrupted first by Osborne's huge debts (incurred by his secret marriage) then by Mrs. Hamley's death, the individuals become "unlike" themselves. The squire turns into a "domestic tyrant" (WD 258) who has become "more

capricious and exacting, more passionate and authoritative by his wife's death" (257). Without the "ruling spirit of the house" neither husband nor sons have a sympathetic ear or heart in which to confide; and the rift between Osborne, sullen and secretive, and his father, disappointed in and resentful of his eldest, becomes too great to bridge.

Another of the lessons Molly learns from the Hamleys is the distinction between romance and love. Before even meeting Osborne, through Mrs. Hamley's complimentary and proud words about her oldest son, Molly makes of him a bit of an idol. He writes poetry, is "full of tastes," is "sweet-tempered and affectionate, almost as demonstrative as a girl," and is "the pride and delight of both father and mother" (42). Great things are expected of him at school, as opposed to his younger brother Roger, who, while steady, is not as clever or brilliant as Osborne. But Molly comes to prefer friendship with Roger; he tries to console her after the disturbing news of her father's imminent remarriage by telling stories of another girl who, in these circumstances, "thought of her father's happiness before she thought of her own" (120), and he tries as well to develop her curiosity about the natural world and books to distract her from her depressed thoughts.

Molly learns that Osborne is ill-equipped for the world: he has neither profession nor money, and he has married secretly. To Mrs. Gibson he is graceful, and when

in good health is the preferred suitor for her daughter Cynthia. When Osborne falls into ill-health, however, Mrs. Gibson forwards Roger's suit to Cynthia; Cynthia enjoys the attention and devotion, but is hardly in love, as, she tells Molly, she has "not the gift of loving" (396). Molly understands the attachment, for Cynthia is beautiful and graceful (362), but she is disturbed that Cynthia does not love him, and "Molly grew angry with her many and many a time as the conviction of this fact was forced upon her" (371). Roger's attractions to Cynthia, however, turn out to be misplaced, as the title of the chapter in which he proposes to her suggests: "A Lover's Mistake." He thinks of her in terms of poetic devices, as Osborne would have done, instead of in terms of her real character, or whether she would suit him in a long-term marriage. He thinks of her as

a polar star, high up in the heavens, and so on, and so on; for with all a lover's quickness of imagination and triteness of fancy, he called her a star, a flower, a nymph, a witch, an angel, or a mermaid, a nightingale, a siren, as one or another of her attributes rose up before him. (388)

Everything but the woman she is.

He later apologizes to Mr. Gibson for not sooner having recognized Molly's worth, in hopes that the father would not think him fickle or changeable, and he discovers in Molly a beauty that comes from character: "She had grown into

delicate fragrant beauty just as [Osborne] said she would: or is it the character which has formed the face?" (625). He tells his father that he recognizes he and Cynthia "were not suited to each other" (665), and calls it a "first foolish love" (669). To her father he declares himself: "'Do you think that Molly, after seeing and knowing that I had loved a person so inferior to herself, could ever be brought to listen to me?'" (677-78). He loves Molly, not for a poetic and idealized vision of beauty or womanhood, but for the loving, warm, insightful heart he had always kept close to his own. Molly, too, learns to distinguish romance from love. As Foster suggests, the projected marriage between Molly and Roger is, "in some respects" an indication of a "'modern' marriage":

Molly's new self-reliance will make her a respected companion, not a down-trodden slave, and her husband, moving in a progressive world of exploration and changing values will, we feel, be less blinkered than his father or brother by restricting notions about female behavior. (181)

In spite of calling this a "'modern' marriage," where both partners recognize in each other compatibility of interest and sympathy, and not a means of gaining either wealth or status, Foster claims this is still "Gaskell's final commitment to conventional womanhood" (181), though certainly this is an unfair assessment. While Molly may be

no Lucy Snowe, she is also no Dorothea Brooke. Molly marries for the right reasons; she has retained her self-worth and has learned moral integrity, and though this is attained through relative happiness and security, that achievement should not be devalued.

One of the essential themes of the novel is Molly's distinguishing meaning, both in language and in people's relationships to each other. Much of this lesson comes from her observations of and dealings with her stepmother and stepsister. Hyacinth Clare Kirkpatrick Gibson, former governess of the Cumnors, is shallow and self-serving, and has given up the essential duties of good mothering for her daughter Cynthia. Cynthia, while deeper than her mother, from lack of maternal attention, care and love, has become duplicitous and, in her own words, a "moral kangaroo" (229). From the outset, Mrs. Gibson is portrayed as a woman who deserves to be both pitied and ridiculed. On the one hand, since her first husband's death left her in financial hardship, she had to work for her living; she was governess to the Cumnor girls and schoolmistress at Ashcombe. To her, however, "toiling and moiling for money...[is] not natural"; marriage, in her mind, is the "natural thing; then the husband has all that kind of dirty work to do" (100), while she could sit "at her elegant ease in a prettily-furnished drawing room" (107). When Mr. Gibson--more out of concern for protecting Molly than for his own well-being--proposes

marriage to her, "she burst into hysterical tears: it was such a wonderful relief to feel that she need not struggle any more for a livelihood" (109).

Feeling "saved" from labor, however, does not keep her from constant complaint, about the small size of her new home, about Mr. Gibson's eating cheese (which she considers coarse and vulgar), about his wanting a large and hearty luncheon between rounds (instead of the new fashionable delicacies which she insists upon), about slights from the townspeople and the county people (who do not promptly visit the Doctor's new wife), about not having a gig or a man with a livery jacket, about how insufficient her husband's income is, about her "poor, dear motherless girl," about Molly's untamed curls and habit of speaking out. The list is interminable; the daily complaints become troublesome to Molly who has been accustomed to daily intercourse and ease with her father. While Bonaparte contends that Mrs. Gibson's deceit, hypocrisy and manipulation are, "for a woman, dependent and powerless,...merely the skills of the trade" (66), this should certainly be seen as more than just Gaskell's portrayal of the powerlessness of women. Gaskell certainly believed that there were women like this, but she also recognized there was no absolute necessity for them to be so. Mrs. Hamley is not like Mrs. Gibson. And certainly neither is Molly. Cynthia may eventually be more like her mother than she would like to admit. The difference between

the women is that Mrs. Hamley and Molly have developed the ability to love unselfishly. They care about others, about their happiness and sense of self worth. This forms the basis for the great distinction between Mrs. Gibson and her own stepdaughter.

Mrs. Gibson subtly refuses to have Cynthia home for her mother's wedding. She will not go to meet her carriage when she does return from France, for, she explains, "I don't like to expose my feelings to every passer-by in High Street (223), but she is neither affectionate nor emotional when Cynthia comes into the Gibson home (224). She desires to treat her daughter and her stepdaughter equally, and prides herself on that fact, to the point, even, of disregarding Molly's wishes in the redecoration of her room. Molly's bedroom held the furniture of her deceased mother, and in redoing Cynthia's before her return from France, Mrs. Gibson consigns Molly's furniture to the lumber room, so that people would not accuse her of treating the girls differently. Molly, of course, becomes aware of her stepmother's shallow nature, and as Martin maintains,

Despite Mrs. Gibson's protest that Molly is, to her like her own child, Molly knows that Mrs. Gibson cares only about herself. In fact, there is an ironic aptness in Mrs. Gibson's avowals that Molly is just as important to her as her own daughter: Mrs. Gibson cares about neither girl,

but is interested solely in cutting the figure of a dutiful mother to a watchful Victorian world.

(303)

She forbids Molly to see the dying Mrs. Hamley when the squire requests that she do so; for one, because Molly does not ask permission, but also because she wishes to be accompanied that evening to a party. She is jealous of Lady Harriet's interest in young Molly, and demands that Molly be out of the room, if not the house, when the earl's daughter comes to call. She disallows Molly to sit with her father when he returns late from his rounds. She becomes querulous with her husband, who, upon returning from their wedding trip, visits a dying man, as though, in her words, he were to receive a legacy or something. She says that "if there is one thing I hate more than another, it is the trying to make out an intimacy with great people" (308), though this is of course her greatest pleasure. She tells Lady Harriet that she "should have died of self-reproach" if she had ever told a falsehood (377), though her daughter, husband and stepdaughter find falsehood in her daily life.

Her stepmother's lapses from the truth Molly equates with the loss of intimacy with her father, and I include here an entire passage for its insight into Molly's perception:

Something or other had happened just before she left home that made her begin wondering how far it

was right for the sake of domestic peace to pass over without comment the little deviations from right that people perceive in those whom they live with. Or, whether, as they are placed in families for distinct purposes, not by chance merely, there are not duties involved in this aspect of their lot in life,--whether by continually passing over failings, their own standard is not lowered,--the practical application of these thoughts being a dismal sort of perplexity on Molly's part as to whether her father was quite aware of her stepmother's perpetual lapses from truth; and whether his blindness was wilful or not. Then she felt bitterly enough that although she was sure as could be that there was no real estrangement between her and her father, yet that there were perpetual obstacles thrown in the way of their intercourse; and she thought with a sigh that if he would but come in with authority, he might cut his way clear to the old intimacy with his daughter, and that they might have all the former walks and talks, and quips and cranks, and glimpses of real confidence once again; things that her stepmother did not value, yet which she, like the dog in the manger, prevented Molly from enjoying. (390)

The distinct differences of Molly's growing up under her father's care and Cynthia's under her mother's points again to Gaskell's notion of the importance of parental love. Those parents who have a firm moral grounding and who inculcate those virtues in their children will have children who are honest and forthright. Martin suggests the importance of the character of Mrs. Gibson, not just in Gaskell's fiction, but in Victorian novels as well:

Mrs. Gibson observes the superficial proprieties of the Victorian woman very well, but she fails as mother and stepmother because of her moral defects. Gaskell's moral earnestness here about the necessity of a strong and selfless mother, and the consequences to girls of a weak and thoughtless one, is similar to the seriousness of George Eliot in treating the mother-daughter relationship. (303)

Unlike Bradshaw in Ruth, whose authority was arbitrary, Mr. Gibson has been a teacher and moral guide for Molly. It is true he warns Molly's governess not to teach her too much, but the lessons in honesty and modesty he has inculcated in his daughter encourage her to grow into a good, strong moral individual, liked and respected by others.

Cynthia, on the other hand, has grown up essentially distanced from her mother, acknowledging that her mother lacks a capacity for moral guidance as well as love.

Cynthia has found herself involved in numerous affairs of the heart; she has looked all her life for the love her mother withheld. She tries to explain to Molly how her secret engagement to Preston came about: he was sympathetic to her mother's seeming lack of care. "'She never seemed to care to have me with her,'" she says, and goes on:

"As soon as the holidays came round, she was off to some great house or another, and I dare say I was at a very awkward age to have me lounging about in her drawing-room when callers came. Girls at the age I was then are so terribly keen at scenting out motives, and putting in their awkward questions as to the little twistings and twirlings and vanishings of conversation; they've no distinct notion of what are truths and falsehoods of polite life. At any rate I was very much in mamma's way, and I felt it." (493)

Cynthia feels power in her beauty (494), and when the secret of her engagement with Preston is exposed, she tells Mr. Gibson not to judge her too harshly, for "'I should always have wanted admiration and worship, and men's good opinion'" (578). She calls herself "'heartless baggage'" (345), and is perfectly aware that at times she does not know how "to act rightly," having been left to her own devices "'just at a time when I wanted friends most.'" She explains to Molly that she may have been different "'if I had only fallen into

wise, good hands. But I know it; and what's more...I try not to care, which I daresay is really the worst of all; but I could worry myself to death if I once took to serious thinking'" (460).

In her desire to find love and admiration to fill the void, Cynthia has learned to be "all things to all men" (226); she adjusts her poise and her mood, because "instinctively she knew her men" (347); and she possesses also by instinct "all the unconscious ways...of tickling the vanity of men" (422). She treats Roger no differently than she does Mr. Coxe, or later Mr. Henderson, though she recognizes in the first man his goodness and strength of character, and agrees to marry him for those reasons. She dissolves the engagement for the same reasons; she cannot bear that Roger might think ill of her if she could not live up to his standard (which, she admits, she could not). For this reason, too, she distances herself from Molly once her stepsister has taken steps to help dissuade Preston from pressing his suit for Cynthia, even though Molly insists she does not judge Cynthia for having made foolish choices. As Ganz suggests about Cynthia:

Cynthia cannot tolerate being
observed...[closely], or to be held accountable
for her actions. She demands admiration without
judgment because Cynthia, unlike her mother, knows
what she is and can find refuge from herself only

in the reflected approval of others. Cynthia uses people like mirrors, warmly flattering and commending mirrors that allow her to see an image that conceals the sordid loneliness of and poverty of her youth. (202)

Cynthia is an understandable character, and Gaskell has gone to some pains to portray her sympathetically, as Cosslett notes. Her faults and her inability to love are explained by Gaskell as her "deprivation of maternal love" and we accept her more readily because Molly loves her dearly. In these two characters, Cosslett goes on, Gaskell is deliberately and "explicitly breaking up and confusing stereotypes" (78). Bonaparte points out that "[Cynthia's] view...of herself has nothing, of course, to do with her merit. It is the product of her past. Since no one, abandoned as she was, seemed to have any faith in her, she finally ceased to have faith in herself" (68). Molly sees her worth, however, and indeed Cynthia is a far better and insightful person than her own mother. Cynthia does blame her mother for what she sees as her inability to love; but even so, Cynthia wishes to spare her mother the pain of her daughter's unkind words, expressed in those girlish letters to Mr. Preston which Molly desperately tries to retrieve before they are exposed.

Molly is a much different sort of woman than Cynthia, though a true and constant friend. According to Foster,

Molly is "shyer and less self-assertive," but also "morally far stronger, and her developing womanhood is marked by spiritual as well as social growth" (180). What she learns to do is to distinguish truth in people's words, and to form a language of her own that expresses honestly the connection and affection she has developed for those around her, a result of her "spiritual" and "social growth." When the squire suggests to her that her father may remarry, she clings to the idea and pesters him to tell her of the possibilities. He thinks to himself that "one had need be on one's guard as to what one says before her" (75). Lady Harriet apologizes to Molly for mocking the Miss Brownings, but says that "'after all, it is only a way of speaking'" (167); her speech to Molly is different from her speech to others below her in rank (168). Cynthia accuses Molly of being "'pedantically truthful'" and tells her: "'Besides, your manner shows when you speak truth and when you speak falsehood, without troubling yourself to use words.'" Cynthia, however, "might well say she did not consider herself bound to be truthful; she literally said what came uppermost, without caring very much whether it was accurate or not" (230). Molly takes her seriously and berates her for talking so. Cynthia retorts that Molly should not always take her "'at the foot of the letter'" (345). When Cynthia, in her mysterious way, thinks aloud that she and Roger will never be married, Molly is shocked, and even more

distressed when Cynthia says, "'Oh!...you must not go and take me au grand serieux. I daresay I don't mean what I say'" (397).

When Mr. Gibson expressly forbids his wife to do a bit of "matchmaking" for Molly, she does not take him seriously, for she believes finding a successful "match" will "reinstate" herself in his eyes after one of her foibles is discovered.

She knew that her husband had forbidden her to try for this end, as distinctly as words could express a meaning; but her own words so seldom did express her meaning, or if they did, she held to her opinions so loosely, that she had no idea but that it was the same with other people. (420-21)

She thinks that Lady Harriet "does not mean half she says" (458), and she quarrels with Molly about calling Cynthia's relationship with Roger an "engagement," accusing her of not being succinct. "'You should always try to express yourself intelligibly,'" she tells Molly. "'It really is one of the first principles of the English language. In fact, philosophers might ask what is language given us for at all, if it is not that we may make our meaning understood?'" (516).

The root of the problem between the squire and Osborne is a communications barrier: the latter cannot explain to his father his fullness of heart--about his marriage, the

birth of his child, his hopes to publish poetry. The squire cannot speak to his son except to be angry about his debts and his langor (256). Molly chooses not to speak to the squire when she tries to comfort him after Osborne's death, recognizing that "uttering of words was as a vain thing" (582), and the squire wishes bitterly that he had spoken to his son and listened as well.

Mr. Gibson feels that "one gets a great deal of meaning out of Roger's words" (622), and when Cynthia thanks him for helping to pay for her trousseau (when she finally settles to marry Mr. Henderson), she tells him she cannot thank him in words (636). It is the town's gossip that destroys Molly's reputation. It is Cynthia's saying to Preston that she is sick of hearing his aggressive words of love that finally convinces him to leave her alone (486). So much of the novel's actions revolves around people "figuring things out"--their loves, their motivations, their understanding, their relationships with one another.

Coming to terms with meaning for Molly is really coming to terms with herself. She has distanced herself from the ties and mysteries which have surrounded Cynthia and Osborne, and one critic who notes this indicates that Molly and Roger have thus remained "untainted" by falseness, and that both of them, in recognizing "the results of uncritical love, of love enmeshed in pride, and of mere passive love" find out that true love must be learned (Calder 79). For

Schor, Molly's growing sense awareness about others and herself is concomitant:

When she comes into her sister's plot, and begins to act for her, Molly begins to understand what deception and concealment Cynthia has been acting out and acting under, but that is merely the darker side of her own deception, which has involved hiding her love for Roger, protecting Osborne's secret, shielding her father from her awareness of her stepmother's foolishness. (199)

To Stoneman, Molly's actions on behalf not just of Cynthia, but of others, take on the essence of the heroic:

Rather than playing the role of the fairy-tale daughter, who enters womanhood in a state of sleep, Molly usurps the part of the younger son, who passes tests, fights duels, rescues damsels. Armed with the courageous truth-telling habits of her youth, she is, in Elizabeth Gaskell's approving phrase, a "law unto herself." (186)

For another critic, the sincerity inherent not just in Molly, but in Roger as well, is the true measure of their worth (Duthie 154), and one of the clear indications of the latter's worth is his interest and involvement in science, an interest he tries also to encourage in Molly. As Schor notes about Roger:

Throughout the novel, science has functioned as the realm of serious thought. Roger's superiority to his brother Osborne, both as moral arbiter and as romantic choice, has been signaled by his interest in science, and one could read in his devotion to his work both Gaskell's own interest in nature and in the naming of natural phenomena, and her familial relationship to and interest in Darwin. (Sch 195)

Roger's interest in science is indicative, not just of his being a "new man" but of his care for the world and for others as well. Stoneman remarks on the difference between Roger and the previous "heroes" in Gaskell's novels, not just a matter of linguistics, but of essential nature:

. . . Roger Hamley is introduced as a significantly different sort of man. In all Elizabeth Gaskell's earlier novels, the nurturing impulses felt by men have been shown as repressed or distorted by the public language of masculinity--impersonal, analytical, aggressive. But Roger's chosen discipline of natural history is presented as one in which there is no disjuncture between "science" and personal relations. (177)

Roger's care for the natural world extends to his care for people, and in this respect he and Molly are ideally suited.

Molly learns to help others, as Stoneman notes, "without using the 'arts of pleasing'" (188), which Cynthia does not, and which Roger, only after his own full maturity, learns to appreciate completely.

One of the more interesting exchanges between Roger and Molly occurs early in their acquaintance, immediately after Molly has learned that her father is to marry again. Roger tries to encourage her "to hope for the best about everybody, and not to expect the worst," and then goes on to give this injunction: "One has always to try to think more of others than of oneself, and it is best not to prejudge people on the bad side" (121). While many critics have seized upon this as Gaskell's expression of the way women ought to behave, as a concession to "domestic ideology" or the "ideology of femininity," this is patently unfair. It is Roger who teaches Molly this lesson. Roger himself lives the idea of care, not just in his profession of natural science, but in his providing extra money (which he can ill-afford) to his brother Osborne for his secret marriage, in his financing, from the funds of his own research, to help his father continue the expensive drainage of the family property, in his desire to instate his nephew as the rightful heir of the Hamley estate and to bring his father and sister-in-law to a greater understanding of each other. All of these things Roger does to take care of others. But, he too, has a lesson to learn from his own injunction. In

engaging himself to Cynthia he has not thought clearly, but is swayed by youthful passion and Cynthia's beauty. When he finally acknowledges his love for Molly, to himself and to her father, he recognizes that, since he is leaving for another six months to continue his research, he cannot speak to Molly about his love until after his return. He thinks to himself that "he was no longer a boy to rush at the coveted object; he was a man capable of judging and abiding" (671).

Thus, because of Roger's difference and Molly's integrity, the match between them should be recognized as the fulfilment, not just of romantic love, but of genuine affection and the promise of the future. We know from Frederick Greenwood's postscript, written after Gaskell's death, that Roger and Molly marry; that Roger becomes a world-reknowned professor; that Mrs. Gibson still complains; that Cynthia comes occasionally to visit Molly; and that Mr. Gibson escapes when he can to visit with his daughter and son-in-law. It is a happy book. It is an eloquent book. It is a book about how people need to achieve a level of integrity in their lives and in their commitments to others, not just to achieve happiness, but to achieve meaning in daily existence.

Unlike the previous heroines who learn to act in the public sphere as a mark of their moral integrity, Molly acts continually in relation to those around her, and far from

encouraging the "feminine ideal" of women's existing solely to nurture others, Molly's nurturance is the essential hallmark of her moral integrity. She learns from her father and from her surrogate mother Mrs. Hamley how to love. She learns from her stepmother and stepsister the necessity of clearly and sincerely expressing the regard she has for others, as they cannot. And she learns from Roger the ability to hope.

CONCLUSION

Gaskell's New Mythology

Thus Wives and Daughters creates a dilemma in critics' minds. Is this novel to be considered a strong statement of Gaskell's orthodoxy? Foster, for one, notes that "Wives and Daughters portrays many different types of womanhood, but none who offers notable resistance to conventional ideologies, either with regard to female occupation or romantic relationships" (177). And Martin suggests that there is no suffering in Gaskell's last novel, unlike the suffering in Eliot's; Eliot, she maintains, feels an understanding of and sympathy with human suffering which is central "to the development of a strong ethical stance" (306). Both Gwedolen Harleth and Maggie Tulliver, Martin goes on to explain, learn

understanding without selfishness...only after suffering makes them fully aware of the conflict between their passionate personal demands and the broader demands of human morality, which, they come to see, is quite different from the superficial morality of Victorian social custom. (309)

I argue that through the character of Molly, Gaskell also achieves "understanding without selfishness," and while this may be achieved more through humor than suffering in Wives and Daughters, the achievement itself, as already indicated, should not be devalued or debunked. That Molly should be happy in her circle of friends, that she should be happy in the love of a good man, that she should value her own integrity and look askance at her stepmother's lack of it--these things do not point to Gaskell's acceptance of a woman's sphere. Clearly, though, if a woman is a wife, a daughter, a mother, a friend, defining herself first is essential, but she cannot do this outside of her social relationships. Moral integrity comes only through contact with a variety of value systems, and in Wives and Daughters Gaskell surely creates a wonderful standard by which women of her time could define themselves, their commitments, their moral integrity.

What Elaine Showalter says about women's literature of the nineteenth century is doubly true of Gaskell's novels, particularly her last:

It can, however, be argued that women themselves have constituted a subculture within the framework of a larger society, and have been unified by values, conventions, experiences, and behaviors impinging on each individual. It is important to see the female literary tradition in these broad

terms, in relation to the wider evolution of women's self-awareness and to the ways in which any minority group finds its direction of self-expression relative to a dominant society, because we cannot show a pattern of deliberate progress and accumulation. (11)

It is not just that Gaskell was writing for her time, but that she was writing for women, to offer them a blueprint by which they could make the everyday experiences of their lives meaningful. To Gaskell, developing a sense of self grounded in sincere moral integrity and true spiritual belief, was the ultimate achievement, not just for women, but for men as well. But certainly Wives and Daughters can be seen as a warning to those men and women--who lack sympathy and understanding and integrity--that the Mrs. Gibsons out there are both ubiquitous and threatening. Creating an "unselfish understanding," an "ethic of care" and responsibility, a "thou-experience" of relationship is the only way a woman could achieve any sense of place and self in a world that seemed to offer few options. And far from being negative, this perspective should be considered affirming, even powerful.

One of my arguments throughout has been that Gaskell was trying in her work to create hope in human possibility for a world that must have seemed to her awry. In Mary Barton and North and South she delineated the horrors of

industrialism, yet created room for the possibility of change based on human interaction. In Ruth, Gaskell created a woman who lived beyond the expectations of her "type" to prove that goodness is not a social achievement. In Sylvia's Lovers, we see not just the possibility of, but the actual growth and accumulation of wisdom, leading to care as the ultimate human achievement. In Wives and Daughters, we see interaction, attachment, growth, happiness and sorrow-- in short, we see the delineation of everyday life in this "Everyday Story." As Thomas Greenwood, Gaskell's publisher, articulates in his postscript to the novel, in reading Wives and Daughters we feel ourselves

caught out of an abominable wicked world, crawling with selfishness and reeking with base passions, into one where there is much weakness, many mistakes, sufferings long and bitter, but where it is possible for people to live calm and wholesome lives; and, what is more, you feel that this is at least as real a world as the other. (WD 685)

It is a great disservice of some feminist critics to devalue Gaskell's work for being what they consider part of the ideological problem. For what Gaskell does in her novels, in her heroines' lives, is to say: if this is your life, make it have meaning. If you are a working-class girl, an heiress, a "fallen" woman, an unforgiving wife, a middle-class girl both innocent and unprepared, the best way to

provide meaning in your life is to find your set of values, live by them, and be involved in the community of which you are a part. This involvement is the apex of a woman's integrity, the essential aspect of Gaskell's new mythology, and the essential element of her novels, particularly her last.

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VITA

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