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I am Elizabeth Gaskell: The Literary Evolution of Elizabeth Gaskell throughout Mary Barton, North and South, and Wives and Daughters

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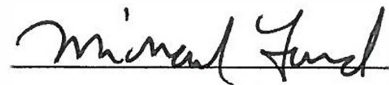
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Jessica Leigh Watkins



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2 May 2006

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INTRODUCTION

From the time Elizabeth Gaskell published her first novel, *Mary Barton*, in 1848, her writing has inspired countless mixed reviews. Critics, attempting to position Gaskell into a specific group, or style, of writing, both praise her for her realistic portrayals of lower class suffering, and condemn her for her use of sentimentality. Some applaud her earlier Industrial novels, such as *Mary Barton* and *North and South*, as being her greatest achievements, while others disapprove of their political intentions, favoring instead her later observations of country life, as found in novels like *Cranford* and *Wives and Daughters*. Many accuse her of being “second-rate” in comparison to other Victorian authors of her time, especially Charles Dickens and George Eliot (Easson 46). Margaret Ganz is of such an opinion, as she explains in the preface to her book, *Elizabeth Gaskell: The Artist in Conflict*, writing:

This study has attempted to suggest some of the less apparent but fascinating elements in Mrs. Gaskell's failure to reach a level of achievement on a par with that of such contemporaries. It has thus often focused on those flaws in her work the result not of deficient craftsmanship, not of imperfect intellect, not of excessive sentimentality, but of a basic temperamental ambivalence whose repercussions often prevented her from achieving the universality of the great artist. The conflict between her instinctive impulses and the demands of both social conventions and spiritual commitments was the central personal dilemma which on both a conscious and unconscious level contributed to the imperfect development or marring of many of her works . . . Her failure to resolve that

conflict so characteristic of her age essentially spelled her failure to achieve artistic wholeness. (Ganz 9)

According to Ganz and other critics, Gaskell's work did not measure up to that of the "most successful" authors of her time, because of the conflict between her self and her desire to please the public. As the wife of a Unitarian minister, both tolerance and the promotion of Christian love and ideals were important to Gaskell and some critics use this part of her identity to undermine her writing. Ganz believes that Gaskell failed "to achieve artistic wholeness" because her definition of wholeness is based upon an artist's willingness to abandon any, if not all, parts of the self to the realization of the art.

Gaskell, rather than completely abandon her notions of self, has used them throughout the progression of her writing to create and develop her own female consciousness and this consciousness is brought to life by the very experiences that Ganz implies found Gaskell's "temperamental ambivalence" (9).

Perhaps it is the variety of styles Gaskell has used throughout her work that move critics like Ganz to accuse her of ambivalence. It is true that her novels contain a plethora of themes and concerns, ranging from the plight of the Industrial working class, to the developing romance of young lovers, and even to the social implications of the developments of rural life. Some critics might suggest that such diversity is demonstrative of Gaskell's lack of commitment to her art. As Mary Lenard claims in her book, *Preaching Pity: Dickens, Gaskell, and Sentimentalism in Victorian Culture*, Gaskell's "shift in subject matter is due to her realization that she would never be recognized as an artist until she broke away from the confining gender binaries that constrained her audience's understanding of social reform fiction by women writers"

(112). Lenard would make it seem that Gaskell gave up on one form of writing, her Industrial novels, in order to embrace a genre in which she might find more success. This idea seems imprudent, however, when viewed in the light of Gaskell's complete literary process. To maintain that the motivation behind Gaskell's style shifts exists in the failure of her initial novels not only depreciates the success *Mary Barton* attained, but also denies the technique with which Gaskell weaves multiple concerns into the progression of her writing, to create a more holistic picture of social consciousness. The variation of themes throughout her novels is indicative of her life experiences and identity as a woman author. As her writing evolves, so does her developing self and the female consciousness she has been struggling to identify within her work. Gaskell's novels, then, becomes groundbreaking as she writes to redefine the very gender roles that seem to be keeping her success from being acknowledged.

Through an analysis of three of Gaskell's more popular novels, *Mary Barton*, *North and South*, and *Wives and Daughters*, Gaskell's personal evolution, as well as her struggle to develop a complete female consciousness within her writing, can be tracked. In all three novels, Gaskell begins by establishing a female main character with an inaccurate view of self. Next, through her interactions with the man she will eventually marry, the girl will begin to realize her identity as a woman. Because of the nature of Gaskell's writing, the girls' transition into sexuality and womanhood is closely linked with social concerns as well, so that as she comes into an understanding of herself as a woman she is also realizing her responsibility to the world around her. Mary, of *Mary Barton*, Margaret of *North and South*, and Molly of *Wives and Daughters*, all deal with their new found responsibilities in different ways, but all three girls end their novels with

a new understanding of the power that comes with their female identities. As Gaskell's writing develops within the span of the novels, the consciousness of each character more closely evolves into the independent female consciousness Gaskell is seeking. In this sense, then, her final novel, *Wives and Daughters*, becomes the evidence of the "artistic wholeness" that Margaret Ganz and other critics have been denying within Gaskell's literary development. When viewing her work as a process, instead of simply isolating and defining each of her novels as a separate entity, it becomes impossible to deny the genius of Elizabeth Gaskell's technique. Her novels, as individual stories, chart the development of the identities of her female characters as they exist within the social concerns of her time. As a literary process, or movement, each novel becomes a step towards the realization of a complete female consciousness that exists both within Gaskell herself and the realities her novels represent.

CHAPTER I: The Awakening

As a Victorian author, Elizabeth Gaskell often incorporates ideas and issues into her novels that are appropriate to their time period. Throughout much of her work Gaskell uses the characters and plots of her stories to comment on Victorian England, relating a variety of issues from the poverty of the lower class to the consequences of rapid industrial progress. As her novels unfold, Gaskell's readers are guided into a new world where, through the experiences of her characters, they can be taught to see their society from different perspectives. Most often, readers are led through this lesson by the main female character of the novel, as can be seen in three of Gaskell's works: *Mary Barton*, *North and South*, and *Wives and Daughters*.

In all three novels the main character is a young girl just beginning her transition into womanhood. After experiencing some sort of awakening, the girl begins to see both herself and the world in a new light, thus commencing the journey of both character and reader into the newly lit world of the novel. The relationships each girl has with other characters then become an important part of Gaskell's social commentaries and illustrations, as she often uses them to shape the experiences of her main characters. In *Mary Barton*, *North and South*, and *Wives and Daughters* in particular, Gaskell seems to place a heavy emphasis on the male and female relationships throughout each novel and uses them to advance the worldly understanding of her female protagonists. In each novel, the girls have early interactions with the men they will eventually marry and these interactions help to shape their growth and maturity throughout the rest of their stories. In a sense, Gaskell uses the men in her novels to instigate or ignite the social consciousness of the women they love. In all three novels these men enter into the lives

of the main characters by introducing them to the new and different worlds in which they will soon play a part.

Mary of *Mary Barton*, Margaret of *North and South*, and Molly of *Wives and Daughters* all begin their novels as fairly naïve young girls, generally content and relatively unaware of the happenings in the real world. As *Mary Barton* begins, Mary is a teenage girl with an inaccurate view of herself, which Gaskell displays through her early interactions with Jem Wilson. As Gaskell writes in Chapter One:

. . . Mary loitered behind to gather some buds of the coming hawthorn, when an overgrown lad came past her, and snatched a kiss, exclaiming, “For old acquaintance sake, Mary.”

“Take that for old acquaintance sake, then,” said the girl, blushing rosy red, more with anger than shame as she slapped his face. (10)

Mary has not yet recognized herself as a possible sexual being and therefore reacts with anger to Jem’s playful attempts to sexualize her. Gaskell gives another example of Mary’s refusal to acknowledge herself in the next chapter, writing:

Two rude lads, standing at a disorderly looking house-door, exclaimed, as Mary Barton (the daughter) passed, “Eh, look! Polly Barton’s gotten a sweet-heart.”

Of course this referred to young Wilson, who stole a look to see how Mary took the idea. He saw her assume the air of a young fury, and to his next speech she answered not a word. (12)

Once again Mary reacts to the teasing with anger because she is not able to recognize herself as a possible sexual partner for Jem. She cannot yet see, or understand, the woman she is becoming.

Mary's view of self is made even more inaccurate because, although she is unable to recognize her sexuality, she is quite aware of her physical beauty. As Gaskell writes:

She knew she was very pretty; the factory people as they poured from the mills, and in their freedom told the truth (whatever it might be) to every passer-by, had early let Mary into the secret of her beauty. If their remarks had fallen on an unheeding ear, there were always young men willing to compliment the pretty weaver's daughter as they met her in the streets. Besides, trust a girl of sixteen for knowing it well if she is pretty; concerning her plainness she may be ignorant.

(27)

The knowledge of her own beauty becomes dangerous for Mary because in her inability to view herself as a woman she is also unable to understand the implications and power of the beauty she possesses. The result produces within her not only an inaccurate view of herself, but also an inaccurate view of the world. Gaskell continues about Mary's knowledge of her looks, writing, "... with this consciousness she had early determined that her beauty should make her a lady; the rank she coveted more for her father's abuse; the rank to which she firmly believed her lost Aunt Esther had arrived" (27). Mary does not yet understand the ways that beauty can function and believes that Esther, who has actually become a prostitute, became "a lady" because of her beauty. Furthermore, she has a misconception about what a lady is. She does not understand the class system, or

how it functions, and in essence has no understanding of the real world in which she lives.

In the same way *North and South* also begins with Margaret Hale's inadequate self-view. In the first chapter of the novel Margaret is found trying on the wedding shawls of her cousin Edith. Gaskell describes the scene, writing:

So Margaret went down laden with shawls . . . No one thought about it; but Margaret's tall, finely made figure . . . set off the long beautiful folds of the gorgeous shawls that would have half-smothered Edith. Margaret stood right under the chandelier, quite silent and passive, while her aunt adjusted the draperies. Occasionally, as she was turned round, she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror over the chimney-piece, and smiled at her own appearance there – the familiar features in the usual garb of a princess. She touched the shawls gently as they hung around her, and took a pleasure in their soft feel and their brilliant colours, and rather liked to be dressed in such splendour – enjoying it much as a child would do, with a quiet pleased smile on her lips. (11)

Margaret sees her reflection in the mirror, but does not realize the power she has to wear the shawls that “would have half-smothered Edith.” Instead of recognizing herself as beautiful and womanly, Margaret feels like a child playing dress-up. As a result, she does not take herself, or her power, seriously. Kimberley Reynolds and Nicola Humble elaborate on the significance of the shawls to Margaret's identity in their book *Victorian Heroines: Representations of femininity in nineteenth-century literature and art*. Describing her feelings as she models the clothes, they write:

Her pleasure in their scent, their glowing colours, and their sumptuous texture is clearly evoked; she is even allowed an innocent vanity in her appearance, ‘the familiar features in the unusual garb of a princess’. The vanity is innocent partly because the shawls are not her own – she is not puffing herself up with worldly pride – and partly because of their alien, exotic nature. The Indian shawl is too important a garment to be merely frivolous, it echoes the strength and passion of the woman who wears it . . . the wearing of the garment speaks power – it is significant that it is Margaret whom we see dressed in this way, and not the actual owner of the shawls, the kittenish Edith, who would be swamped by the expectations the garment creates. (Reynolds and Humble 60)

Although Margaret’s ability to bear the shawls is an obvious sign of the responsibilities she will eventually face, she remains, as of yet, naïve of the power she possesses.

Gaskell illustrates this naïveté when she writes:

Her aunt was so much absorbed in asking Mr. Henry Lennox- who had not been able to come to dinner- all sorts of questions . . . that Margaret saw she was no more wanted as shawl-bearer, and devoted herself to the amusement of the other visitors, whom her aunt had for the moment forgotten. (12)

Margaret feels that her purpose is simply to display the shawls temporarily and once her aunt is finished with her, she returns to the simple “amusement” of others. She does not view herself as a mature, sexual woman and as a result, she, like Mary Barton, is in danger of ignoring her true self.

Continuing in her demonstration of Margaret’s naïveté, Gaskell writes:

As Margaret sank rather more into the background on her aunt's joining the conversation, she saw Henry Lennox directing his look towards a vacant seat near her, and she knew perfectly well that as soon as Edith released him from her questioning, he would take possession of that chair . . . Margaret's face was lightened up into an honest, open brightness. By-and-by he came. She received him with a smile, which had not a tinge of shyness or self-consciousness in it.

(12)

Because Margaret has not yet started to take her sexuality seriously, she is unable to understand that Henry's feelings towards her could be romantic. Her inadequate self-view is keeping her from seeing the world adequately as well. Gaskell writes that Margaret "was at an age when any apprehension, not absolutely based on a knowledge of facts, is easily banished for a time by a bright sunny day, or some happy outward circumstance. And when the brilliant fourteen fine days of October came on, her cares were all blown away as lightly as thistledown, and she thought of nothing but the glories of the forest" (23). She is living as if still a child and must start to see herself and the world differently to be a part of reality. Speaking of Margaret's undefined identity in her book, *Scheherezade in the Marketplace*, Hilary M. Schor writes, "it is not that readers do not know what will *happen* to the heroine, for one rarely knows that, but we do not know, any more than she does, what sort of heroine she is to *be*" (126). Margaret, as seen in her reaction to the wedding shawls and her treatment of Lennox, must be awakened to her developing self, before she can determine "what sort of" woman she is becoming.

Wives and Daughters' Molly Gibson is in much the same way as Mary and Margaret in that her self-view at the beginning of the novel does not match up to the actual-self she is becoming. As Gaskell writes in Chapter Six:

She looked at herself in the glass with some anxiety, for the first time in her life. She saw a slight, lean figure, promising to be tall; a complexion browner than cream-coloured, although in a year or two it might have that tint; plentiful curly black hair, tied up in a bunch behind with a rose-coloured ribbon; long, almond-shaped, soft grey eyes, shaded both above and below by curling black eye-lashes.

‘I don’t think I am pretty,’ thought Molly, as she turned away from the glass; ‘and yet I am not sure.’ She would have been sure, if, instead of inspecting herself with such solemnity, she had smiled her own sweet merry smile, and called out the gleam of her teeth, and the charm of her dimples. (66)

Molly, at her young age, is unable to recognize the beauty within herself because she still views herself as a child. It is, in part, her inability to imagine her potential that keeps her from maturing because she will remain a little girl until she is able to see herself as a woman. In their book, *Victorian Publishing and Mrs. Gaskell's Work*, Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund discuss Gaskell's use of the mirror throughout the novel, writing:

One of the devices she uses for showing Molly's growing sexual maturity, for example, is to have her discover her new semblance in a mirror at intervals throughout the novel . . . Molly is generally surprised by what she sees in the mirror, as if the knowledge it reveals came from without rather than within.

Meanwhile, the mirror registers for readers the subtle gradations of maturation in the course of passing months. (31)

The “surprise” Molly experiences as she finds her own reflection comes from her inability to see herself as anything other than “Mr. Gibson’s daughter.” As Hughes and Lund continue, “readers can recognize the code of erotic promise in the description, but Molly is too young to understand and turns away from the mirror remarking, ‘I don’t think I am pretty’ – though she isn’t sure” (32). She sees, in the mirror, the makings of a beautiful woman, but because she is unable to understand her future self, she is discouraged.

Just as in the stories of Mary and Margaret, Molly’s naïve self-view also becomes a hindrance to the accuracy of her world-view and Gaskell illustrates this through Molly’s reaction to the news that her father is getting re-married. After their small argument and Mr. Gibson’s departure she writes, “Molly stood there, shading her eyes, and looking at the empty space of air in which his form had last appeared. . . She turned away at last, but could not go into the house, could not tell Mrs. Hamley, could not forget how her father had looked and spoken – and left her” (Gaskell 113). Later, Molly escapes to the bourne and Gaskell continues, writing:

When she had once got to the seat she broke out with a suppressed passion of grief; she did not care to analyse the sources of her tears and sobs – her father was going to be married again – her father was angry with her; she had done very wrong – he had gone away displeased; she had lost his love, he was going to be married – away from her – away from his child – his little daughter – forgetting her own dear, dear mother. (114)

Molly is holding on to the view of herself as her father's "child" and "his little daughter." She is unable to see that she is growing into a young woman and as a result does not understand that her father's decision to re-marry was made with her best interests at heart. Just as Molly does not think that she is pretty, she does not realize that she is beginning to develop into her own woman, ready for independence and reality, and that, as a result, her relationship with her father must, in some ways, change.

In order to make the changes that each girl needs to grow, their self-images must be altered. Gaskell uses the relationships between the girls and the men in their lives to begin to shake their self-views by introducing them to a new world. As the girls interact with the men, they, along with Gaskell's readers, begin to see themselves and their worlds in different ways.

In *Mary Barton*, the relationship between Mary and Jem began in childhood. While Jem began to show romantic interest in Mary, however, she refused the possibility of ever having a romantic relationship with him. As the two grow older Mary continues to refuse Jem as a suitor, in part because he does not fit into her definition of the type of man a lady would marry. In one description of Jem, Gaskell writes, "the cub-like lad, Jem Wilson, had shot up into the powerful, well-made young man, with a sensible face enough; nay, a face that might have been handsome, had it not been here and there marked by the smallpox" (29). In Mary's eyes Jem is not as attractive as her rich suitor, Harry Carson, but in truth, the pock marks she finds ugly are representations of his experience in the world. Jem is grounded in the powerful reality that Mary has yet to acknowledge or accept.

Her eyes are opened to this reality, however, on the night of the fire at Carson's mill. At first Mary drags Margaret to the fire in order to be entertained by the excitement of something extraordinary, but when she finds it is George Wilson stuck in the flames she begins to understand the severity of the situation. Gaskell illustrates her realization, writing:

Wilson! Then, was that the man whose figure loomed out against the ever-increasing dull hot light behind, whenever the smoke was clear, - was that George Wilson? Mary sickened with terror . . . at first she had no idea that any lives were in danger; and since she was aware of this, the heated air, the roaring flames, the dizzy light, and the agitated and murmuring crowd, had bewildered her thoughts. (57)

When Mary sees Jem's father in the fire she begins to appreciate the personal connection she shares in the tragedy and that connection is even strengthened by Jem's participation in his father's rescue. As Gaskell continues:

Then there was a pressure through the crowd, the front rows bearing back on those behind, till the girls were sick with the close ramming confinement. Then a relaxation, and a breathing freely once more.

"'Twas young Wilson and a fireman wi' a ladder," said Margaret's neighbour, a tall man who could overlook the crowd. (57)

Jem is attempting to end the tragedy of the fire, and as Mary watches from within the crowd, she is physically moved by his efforts to save his father. Watching Jem take action against a desperate situation produces within Mary a connection to him so strong that she faints in the crowd as if overwhelmed by the flames he battled. Jem has

introduced Mary to the reality of the life she is living. When Margaret exclaims, “poor Mary! Ye won’t hanker after a fire again. Hark! Listen!” she is acknowledging that Mary has finally begun to understand the seriousness of the suffering her community is facing (Gaskell 57).

When Margaret meets Mr. Thornton in *North and South*, she is struggling to adjust to life in Milton, a town radically different from her beloved home, Helstone, in the southern part of England. In describing the differences between Milton and Helstone Gaskell writes:

It had a character of its own, as different from the little bathing-places in the south of England as they again from those of the continent. To use a Scotch word, every thing looked more ‘purposelike.’ The country carts had more iron, and less wood and leather about the horse-gear; the people in the streets, although on pleasure bent, had yet a busy mind. The colours looked grayer – more enduring, not so gay and pretty... In such towns in the south of England, Margaret had seen the shopmen, when not employed in their business, lounging a little at their doors, enjoying the fresh air, and the look up and down the street. Here, if they had any leisure from customers, they made themselves business in the shop – even, Margaret fancied, to the unnecessary unrolling and re-rolling of ribbons. All these differences struck upon her mind, as she and her mother went out the next morning to look for lodgings. (59)

Milton is unlike anything Margaret has ever known, and when she meets Mr. Thornton, a true Milton man, he is no different. Describing him to her mother, Margaret claims that Thornton is “about thirty – with a face that is neither exactly plain, nor yet handsome,

nothing remarkable – not quite a gentleman, but that was hardly to be expected” (Gaskell 65).

Margaret sees in Thornton the qualities that she dislikes in Milton and expresses this while continuing her description of him to Mrs. Hale:

With such an expression of resolution and power, no face, however plain in feature, could be either vulgar or common. I should not like to have to bargain with him; he looks very inflexible. Altogether a man who seems made for his niche, mamma; sagacious, and strong, as becomes a great tradesman. (65)

As a result of the connection she makes between Thornton and Milton, Margaret is able to react to him as she initially reacts to the town. She disagrees with Thornton’s views on industry, and she is unfamiliar with his custom of shaking hands. In a sense, then, her relationship with Thornton, however unpleasant at first, introduces Margaret to the new way of life she is entering in Milton and allows her to project her reactions to the town on to him. As she grows closer to Thornton she also becomes more connected to the community in Milton.

Like Margaret and Thornton, Molly is not immediately impressed with Roger in *Wives and Daughters* either. In fact, before the two ever meet, Molly is prejudiced against Roger for bringing home bad news about his favored brother, Osborne. As Gaskell writes:

Molly thought over all that she had heard, as she was dressing and putting on the terrible, over-smart plaid gown in honour of the new arrival. Her unconscious fealty to Osborne was not in the least shaken by his having come to grief at Cambridge. Only she was indignant – with or without reason – against

Roger, who seemed to have brought the reality of bad news as an offering of first-fruits on his return home. (85)

Molly's child-like fancy had been for Osborne, the poet, and she is reacting angrily against Roger's introduction to the reality and truth of Osborne's actual situation. Roger does not fit Molly's ideal image of a man – which she seems to have modeled after Osborne – and so she refuses to give any significance to his news. In her description of him, however, Gaskell gives Roger qualities similar to those of Jem and Thornton in their expression of his experience with real life. She writes:

He was a tall powerfully-made young man, giving the impression of strength more than elegance. His face was rather square, ruddy-coloured (as his father had said), hair and eyes brown – the latter rather deep-set beneath his thick eyebrows . . . To Molly, who was not finely discriminative in her glances at the stranger this first night, he simply appeared 'heavy-looking, clumsy,' and 'a person she was sure she should never get on with.' (Gaskell 86)

Molly prefers Osborne over Roger because Roger seems plain, but like Jem and Thornton, his plainness is in actuality a demonstration of the power and strength he has to manage within the real world. Upon Molly's first actual encounter with Roger, after she learns of her father's remarriage, it is his plainness that comforts her the most.

After finding Molly in the bourn, Roger tells her a story to ease her sorrow. After using the story to warn her about selfishness, he says:

It is right to hope for the best about everybody, and not to expect the worst. This sounds like a truism, but it has comforted me before now, and some

day you'll find it useful. 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. (117)

Later, as the two return to Hamley Hall, he does what he can to continue to give Molly comfort. Gaskell describes his efforts, writing:

She was very weak, and stumbled over the straggling root of a tree that projected across the path. He, watchful though silent, saw this stumble, and putting out his hand held her up from falling. He still held her hand when the occasion was past; this little physical failure impressed on his heart how young and helpless she was and he yearned to her, remembering the passion of sorrow in which he had found her . . . (118)

Roger's experience allows him to tell Molly the truth she needs to hear and to give her the advice that will help her grow up. He is also able to hold her hand, assuring her that she is not alone, despite her present feelings of abandonment. Although Molly is still upset with her father and her new situation, her new friendship with Roger introduces her to a life beyond the simple world of her previous understanding and allows her to appreciate new relationships and experiences.

Jem, Thornton, and Roger have brought Mary, Margaret, and Molly into new understandings of their identities and their lives. Because their self-views have changed their world-views, their world-views must also change their actions within the world, thereby demonstrating their new levels of social-consciousness. As a result of the fire in *Mary Barton*, Mary begins to feel her role, or place, in the world of the poor more acutely. Describing the aftermath of the blaze, Gaskell writes:

There were homes over which Carsons' fire threw a deep, terrible gloom; the homes of those who would fain work, and no man gave unto them – the homes of those to whom leisure was a curse. There, the family music was angry wails, when week after week passed by, and there was no work to be had, and consequently no wages to pay for the bread the children cried aloud for in their young impatience of suffering . . . There was Faith such as the rich can never imagine on earth; there was "Love strong as death"; and self-denial, among rude, coarse men, akin to that of Sir Philip Sidney's most glorious deed. The vices of the poor sometimes astound us *here*; but when the secrets of all hearts shall be made known, their virtues will astound us in far greater degree. (64)

After being shown, through Jem, the serious consequences of such a disaster, and the serious sufferings of the people around her, Mary is able to accept her place in the suffering. As a result she takes on an increased responsibility for her suffering neighbors, as demonstrated in her response to the widow her father sends her to comfort. As Gaskell writes:

Mary did not know what to say, or how to comfort; but she knelt down by her and put her arm round her neck, and in a little while fell to crying herself so bitterly that the source of tears was opened by sympathy in the widow, and her full heart was, for a time, relieved.

And Mary forgot all purposed meeting with her gay lover, Harry Carson; forgot Miss Simmond's errands and her anger, in the anxious desire to comfort the poor lone woman. Never had her sweet face looked more angelic, never had

her gently voice seemed so musical as when she murmured her broken sentences of comfort. (81)

As she begins to identify with the widow and her suffering, Mary is able to forget about her desire to be Carson's "lady" and embraces her role as comforter to the poor.

In *North and South*, Margaret, like Mary, also starts to feel a sense of belonging to her new life as she begins to find the good in Thornton and Milton. In a later account of Thornton, Gaskell describes:

A set of teeth so faultless and beautiful as to give the effect of sudden sunlight when the rare bright smile, coming in an instant and shining out of the eyes, changed the whole look from the severe and resolved expression of a man ready to do and dare everything, to the keen honest enjoyment of the moment . . . Margaret liked this smile; it was the first thing she had admired in this new friend of her father's. . . (81)

Margaret begins to appreciate Thornton as a man and as a result also makes an effort to get involved in Milton life. Her efforts are first actualized through her interactions with Nicholas Higgins and his daughters whom she agrees to visit. As Gaskell writes:

Margaret went home, wondering at her new friends, and smiling at the man's insight into what had been passing in her mind. 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. (75)

Margaret has taken a "human interest" in Mr. Thornton and is therefore able to get involved in the lives of the Higgins as well. Critic Margaret Ganz addresses the

implications of Margaret's new feelings for Thornton in her book, *Elizabeth Gaskell: the Artist in Conflict*. As she writes, "Thornton's early infatuation with Margaret Hale promotes his gradual conversion to her social views, while Margaret's progressive recognition of Thornton's ability as a manufacturer and her increasing sympathy with some of the aims and principles of industrialism help her to acknowledge her love for him" (81). This love, whether she recognizes it or not, is one of the driving forces behind Margaret's decision to get involved with the Higgins family. In growing closer to Thornton's workers she is, in some ways, growing closer to Thornton himself and entering into a deeper understanding of the industry that is his world.

In *Wives and Daughters*, Molly too is able to adjust to the new life she faces. After being comforted by Roger's sermon-story Molly reconciles with her father and agrees to accept his new wife. As Gaskell explains, "Molly was bracing herself up in her way too. 'I will be like Harriet. I will think of others. I won't think of myself.' She kept repeating all the way to the Towers" (125). Heeding Roger's advice, Molly applies the truth that he taught her to her new life with the new Mrs. Gibson and begins to look past her "little girl" self in an attempt to get over the pain she feels at losing her father's sole attention. As she continues to do so her eyes will be opened even more to the woman she is becoming and she will allow herself more and more room to develop.

Their initial interactions with Jem, Thornton, and Roger encouraged the girls of each novel to enter into a new world outside of their old ideas of self. As a result, Mary, Margaret, and Molly, along with all of the readers who follow their stories, receive a new understanding of their responsibilities to the worlds in which they live. Mary's personal connection to the sufferings of the poor, Margaret's realization of the humanity within the

industrial Milton, and Molly's acceptance of her new role in her new family all demand that the girls, quickly becoming young women, plunge into a deeper level of social-consciousness that will expand as their relationships with their future lovers intensify.

CHAPTER II: The Commitment

Through their relationships with the men in their lives Gaskell introduces Mary, Margaret, and Molly to a new world of understanding. As the girls are led further into this world, their ideas about themselves, both as women and as active participants in society, begin to awaken. Each girl begins to develop an awareness of her sexuality and the responsibilities that come with it. Throughout each novel Gaskell parallels their “awakening” process with the development of their relationships with Jem, Thornton, and Roger. As the girls experience increased desire for the men, they are, at the same time, experiencing a deeper level of social-awareness. The girls have been changed by the images of themselves through the men’s eyes, and that change inspires within them the need to commit to their new found sexuality and social responsibilities.

In a chapter from her book titled, “The Social Conscience,” critic Margaret Ganz discusses the idea of social responsibility as it relates to Gaskell’s first novel. She writes, “inevitably led to compare Mrs. Gaskell’s work with previous studies of social conditions in fiction, critics generally agree that *Mary Barton*’s significance, aside from its great authenticity, lay in its capacity not only to stimulate the imagination but to arouse the social conscience of its readers” (Ganz 49). This “social conscience” is so aroused both through Gaskell’s detailed portrayal of the Manchester working class and Mary’s growing awareness of their struggles. In *Mary Barton*, Mary is first made aware of her identity as a woman when Jem begins to pursue a romantic relationship with her. Later, Jem also introduces Mary to the sufferings of the Manchester working class. With his actions during the mill fire Jem shows Mary that there is darkness underneath the life she has been living and opens her eyes to her role within the community. Mary is able to

comfort the poor widow in Chapter VI because her experience with Jem allows her to focus on areas other than her future with Harry Carson.

Despite her deepening connection to the community, however, Mary continues to hold on to her Harry Carson dream. Describing Mary's future plans, Gaskell writes:

So Mary dwelt upon and enjoyed the idea of some day becoming a lady, and doing all the elegant nothings appertaining to lady-hood . . . But the best of her plans, the holiest, that which in some measure redeemed the vanity of the rest, were those relating to her father; her dear father, now oppressed with care, and always a disheartened, gloomy person. How she would surround him with every comfort she could devise . . . till he should acknowledge riches to be very pleasant things, and bless his lady-daughter! Every one who had shown her kindness in her low estate should then be repaid a hundred-fold.

Such were the castles in air, the Alnaschar-visions in which Mary indulged . . . (92)

Mary still believes that the riches of Harry Carson will save her from life's hardships, but however noble her intentions of building a better life for her father, she continues to be blinded by vanity. As long as she rests her hopes on a life with Carson, Mary will remain unable to see the reality of his corruption, or the truth of Jem's power. Speaking of Mary's feelings for Carson, Gaskell writes, "her love for him was a bubble blown out of vanity; but it looked very real and very bright" (134). Because of her "love" for the rich young man Mary is removed from reality and her self.

As the novel continues, Gaskell begins to blur the ideas of Jem's love and the social action needed in Manchester. When John Barton returns from London and is

sharing his experiences with Job Legh, Job is reminded of a poem by Samuel Bamford and reads it aloud. The poem begins and ends each stanza with the phrase, “God help the poor” and touches Barton so deeply that he asks Mary to copy it down for him. After Job’s recitation Gaskell writes:

“Amen!” said Barton, solemnly and sorrowfully. “Mary! Wench, couldst thou copy me them lines, dost think? – that’s to say, if Job there has no objection.”

“Not I. More they’re heard and read the better, say I.”

So Mary took the paper. And the next day, on a blank half sheet of a valentine, all bordered with hearts and darts – a valentine she had once suspected to come from Jem Wilson – she copied Bamford’s beautiful little poem. (129)

In this sense, the relationship between Jem and Mary and the social crisis going on within England’s lower class seem to be united. In *Victorian Publishing and Mrs. Gaskell’s Work*, Hughes and Lund address the valentine as a “validation” of Mary’s identity. They write:

Mary’s effort to build a public identity and to validate it with documents takes its first significant step with the valentine from Jem, on which she copies for her father Samuel Bamford’s poem lamenting the worker’s life. This piece of paper first validates Mary in the traditional role as a marriageable object; but with Bamford’s words added (“God help the poor, who, on this wintry morn, / Come forth from alleys dim and courts obscure”), it also suggests her less conventional identification with the politically active working class. (Hughes and Lund 38)

The valentine, then, comes to represent both Mary's identity as a woman and her responsibility to the working class. She copies the song of protest and truth over top of Jem's proclamations of love, blurring the line between them and connecting the two, however unconsciously, in her mind. As a result, when Jem eventually proposes to Mary, her rejection of him begins to feel like a rejection of herself. Mary has already been made aware of her role in the lower class community and because Jem is so closely connected to that role, her rejection seems unnatural. Of the situation immediately after Mary refuses Jem's proposal, Gaskell writes:

She could not have told at first (if you had asked her, and she could have commanded voice enough to answer) why she was in such agonized grief. It was too sudden for her to analyse, or think upon it. She only felt, that by her own doing her life would be hereafter dreary and blank. (152)

She is surprised by her sorrowful feelings because she is gradually coming to the realization that Jem represents all that is real in her life.

Mary begins to feel herself split as she realizes the differences between her imagined life with Carson and her possible life with Jem, which Gaskell describes, writing:

It was as if two people were arguing the matter; that mournful, desponding communion between her former self, and her present self . . . Her plan had been, as we all know, to marry Mr. Carson, and the occurrence an hour ago was only a preliminary step. True; but it had unveiled her heart to her; it had convinced her she loved Jem above all persons or things. (152)

As Mary realizes and accepts her love for Jem Wilson she abandons the part of herself desperate for riches and embraces her true self, along with all the responsibilities it entails. She chooses Jem over Carson and as a result recognizes the truth about life. As Gaskell illustrates:

. . . Jem was a poor mechanic, with a mother and aunt to keep . . . while Mr. Carson was rich, and prosperous, and gay, and (she believed) would place her in all circumstances of ease and luxury, where want could never come. What were these hollow vanities to her, now she had discovered the passionate secret of her soul? . . . She now saw how vain, how nothing to her, would be all gaieties and poms, all joys and pleasures, unless she might share them with Jem . . . She had hitherto been walking in grope-light towards a precipice; but in the clear revelation of the past hour, she saw her danger, and turned away resolutely, and for ever. (152-53)

By turning away from Carson, Mary chooses to take on a difficult, but more effective lifestyle and identity. She recognizes the danger of Carson's vanity and decides to commit herself to a life with Jem.

In response to this new commitment, Mary immediately breaks off her relationship with Carson. Though he tries to persuade her by proposing marriage, his proposal only makes her more sure of the necessity of their separation. Gaskell writes:

Yes! Though all she had pictured to herself for so many months in being the wife of Mr. Carson was now within her grasp, she resisted. His speech had given her but one feeling, that of exceeding great relief. For she had dreaded,

now she knew what true love was, to think of the attachment she might have created; the deep feeling her flirting conduct might have called out. (160)

Her relationship with Carson now, at least in her mind, completely eradicated, Mary is free to admit the truth and power behind her feelings for Jem. Though upset by his avoidance of her, Mary settles down to wait for the perfect time to express to him her change of heart. While waiting for Jem, Mary begins, for the first time, to willingly participate in the life around her. She welcomes opportunities to spend time with Alice and Margaret and begins to take more of an interest in the lives of her friends. When her old friend Will returns for a visit Mary is thrilled to notice his attention to Margaret as she sings one of her songs. Gaskell writes:

Mary was amused to see how the young sailor sat entranced; mouth, eyes, all open, in order to catch every breath of sound . . . For the first time the idea crossed Mary's mind that it was possible the plain little sensible Margaret, so prim and demure, might have power over the heart of the handsome, dashing, spirited Will Wilson. (180)

Her strengthened feelings for Jem have caused Mary to look outside of herself and to become aware of the life going on around her. She has become a permanent participant in the Manchester world, instead of the temporary guest who had been biding her time before her marriage to Carson.

When Jem is arrested as a suspect of Carson's murder, Mary's participation in society is raised to an even greater level. She is forced to acknowledge a world of darkness and crime, where justice is lacking and revenge runs rampant. Describing her reaction to the news of Jem's arrest, Gaskell writes:

No more thinking with infinite delight of her anticipated meeting with Jem; she felt too much shocked for that now; but longing for peace and kindness . . . she wished to be as near death as Alice; and to have struggled through this world, whose sufferings she had early learnt, and whose crimes now seemed pressing close upon her. (258)

Her connection to Jem is leading her past a life of shallow happiness, demanding that she recognize and take action against the sufferings and crimes being pressed upon her class.

At one point, in Chapter XX, Mary is returning home, distraught over Jem's situation, when she passes a small child begging for food. Her heart goes out to him and she gives him all the food she has in her house. In a way, Mary's attempt to save the starving boy can be seen as an attempt to save Jem. Her relationship with Jem has become so closely linked to an inspiring social change that Mary's natural reaction has become to give all of herself to helping the cause of the poor and helpless. After serving the child, she returns to her home and collapses into a sorrowful sleep, but because of her bond with Jem and her new understanding of society, something within her is beginning to stir.

Soon after she falls asleep Gaskell writes, "she suddenly wakened! Clear and wide awake! Some noise had startled her from sleep . . . There was a low knock at the door! A strange feeling crept over Mary's heart, as if something spiritual were near" (272-73). The "something spiritual" turns out to be Aunt Esther, returning in a futile attempt to spare Mary from any interaction with the world of violence. Esther brings with her, however, the paper that will prove to Mary that her father murdered Carson, further arousing her feelings of responsibility and determination to save Jem. Upon Esther's departure, Mary is left to assess her situation. Gaskell writes:

But some remedy to Mary's sorrow came with thinking. If her father was guilty, Jem was innocent. If innocent, there was a possibility of saving him. He must be saved. And she must do it; for, was not she the sole depositary of the terrible secret . . . with the call upon her exertions, and her various qualities of judgement and discretion, came the answering consciousness of innate power to meet the emergency. Every step now, nay the employment of every minute, was of consequence. (289)

Mary has committed to love Jem Wilson and now she must commit to save him from being persecuted for her father's crime. She has realized her call to stand up against the afflictions of the lower class, and by fighting for Jem's freedom she will be doing just that.

In this sense, Mary's decision to free Jem from execution by the law also becomes her decision to free the lower and working classes from a social "execution" by the upper class. Throughout the novel, Gaskell's portrayal of Jem allows him to develop into the heroic representation of working class strength and dignity so that his struggle becomes fixed to the struggles of all the lower class peoples of Manchester. Gaskell illustrates Jem's societal link earlier in the novel with his first interactions with Carson. Carson, meeting Jem for the first time, thinks to himself:

Could this man be a lover of Mary's? and (strange stinging thought) could he be beloved by her, and so have caused her obstinate rejection of himself? He looked at Jem from head to foot, a black, grimy mechanic, in dirty fustian clothes, strongly built, and awkward (according to the dance master); then he glanced at himself, and recalled the reflection he had so lately quitted in his bedroom. It was

impossible. No woman with eyes could choose the one when the other wooed . . .
 And yet here was a clue, which he had often wanted, to her changed conduct
 towards him. If she loved this man. If - - he hated the fellow, and longed to strike
 him. (207)

With these thoughts, Carson proves to be made up of nothing more than arrogance and
 conceit. His high opinion of self comes only from his fortunate financial status, and he is
 so consumed by his wealth that he is unable to see the power that exists within Jem.

Carson then comes to represent the very forces that Mary is fighting against throughout
 her battle to prove Jem's innocence. Before her awakening, Mary was in some ways
 betraying her class by foolishly flirting with Harry Carson, preferring his softness to
 Jem's reality. As her desire for Jem increased and she realized her love for him, she
 realized the significance of such a betrayal. With this realization, Mary is finally ready to
 accept her responsibility to save Jem, which in turn could be one more step towards
 freeing the lower class from the influence and control of wealthy people like Carson.

Some critics denounce Gaskell's connection between Mary's feelings for Jem and
 Manchester's increasing social crisis, claiming that the two plots should remain separate.
 As Ganz explains:

The novel is . . . weakened by the prominent position eventually accorded
 to what would, from the title, have seemed to be the major character – Mary
 Barton. Critics have rightly judged that sufficient material for two novels is to be
 found in this work. For besides the psychological study of the harrowing effects
 of social alienation, there is the more conventional romantic story of the pretty
 and flighty daughter of John Barton who eventually overcomes her frivolity. (69)

Ganz is correct in her statement that two novels could be found in *Mary Barton*, but her argument neglects to address the seamlessness with which Gaskell intertwines the two stories. From the symbolic valentine scene to the tension between the two classes through the “competition” between Jem and Carson, Gaskell uses the “conventional romantic story” as a sort of metaphor for the “social alienation” being experienced in Manchester. Schor expands upon this argument in *Scherezade in the Marketplace*, writing:

At the least, we can say that one plot never quite advances, or advances only at the (again, explicit) cost of the other; more, the continuing juxtaposition of the two leads to a denser feeling of working-class life, in which organized politics and domestic details live side by side. The substitutions not only push forward the revolutionary domestic content of the novel (Gaskell’s claim to be writing a “novel of Manchester life,” . . .) but encourage us to see the politics of that domestic life. (16-7)

The two “plots” of the novel work together in such a way as to unite both the romantic and social foci. Mary’s romantic attempts to save her lover, then, become in a larger sense, the attempts of the working class to break free from the oppression of the rich.

Like Mary, Margaret of *North and South* is driven into social action as a result of her feelings for the man she will eventually marry. Unlike Mary, however, Margaret jumps into action before she realizes that her desire for Thornton is the inspiration behind her social consciousness. Upon Margaret’s arrival in the industrial town of Milton she is immediately taken aback by its differences from her previous southern home, Helstone. After meeting Thornton and developing a relationship with him, however, Margaret is

introduced to the Northern lifestyle and allowed to appreciate the humanity within the industrial community. As a result of her new found appreciation, Ganz suggests that the novel as a whole has grown into a more impartial version of *Mary Barton*. She writes that “the novel continues the work begun in *Mary Barton* but in a less one-sided manner; having dedicated herself in her first work largely to vindicating the attitudes of the workers, [Gaskell] went on to redress the balance by also doing justice to the point of view of the manufacturers” (40). This “balance” creates, within Margaret, a more accurate social consciousness and, in turn, increases the responsibility such a consciousness demands. As her friendship with Nicholas Higgins and his daughter Bessy develops, Margaret grows more and more invested in the plight of the factory workers, while her connection to Thornton allows her the master’s perspective as well. As a result, Margaret begins to exist in the middle of the two classes, a position that will drastically impact her understanding of the world around her.

Despite her intimate experiences with Milton life, however, Margaret remains unable to grasp fully the entire truth about her new world. Much as Mary initially holds on to her affection for Carson in *Mary Barton*, Margaret seems to remain locked into a certain naïveté about the ways in which the world functions. Gaskell illustrates this naïveté through Margaret’s walk to Thornton’s house in the hours preceding the factory strike. She writes:

She had got into Marlborough Street before the conviction forced itself upon her, that there was a restless, oppressive sense of irritation abroad among the people; a thunderous atmosphere, morally as well as physically around her. From every narrow lane opening out on Marlborough Street came up a low distant roar,

as of myriads of fierce indignant voices. The inhabitants of each poor squalid dwelling were gathered round the doors and windows, if indeed they were not actually standing in the middle of the narrow ways – all with looks intent towards one point. Marlborough Street itself was the focus of all those human eyes, that betrayed intensest interest of various kinds; some fierce with anger, some lowering with relentless threats, some dilated with fear, or imploring entreaty . . . all these circumstances forced themselves on Margaret's notice, but did not sink down into her pre-occupied heart. She did not know what they meant – what was their deep significance . . . (170-71)

Margaret is walking the streets during a time of heaviest unrest. The strike has begun, along with all the misery and violence a strike entails. All the happenings around her point to a fierce civil disruption, and yet Margaret is unable to recognize, or comprehend, the warning signs occurring right before her eyes. Once Margaret arrives at Thornton's her naïveté is displayed once again as she is unable to understand the magnitude of the strikers' hatred and anger. As Thornton looks out the window, the crowd bursts into an uproar, which Gaskell describes, writing, "as soon as they saw Mr. Thornton, they set up a yell- to call it not human is nothing, - it was as the demoniac desire of some terrible wild beast for the food that is withheld from his ravening. Even he drew back for a moment, dismayed at the intensity of hatred he had provoked" (175). Thornton realizes that his harsh treatment of the workers has, in a sense, dehumanized them so that their anger has become uncontrollable.

Despite the obvious danger of such an intense anger, Margaret demands that Thornton go out in an attempt to soothe the workers. She cries:

Mr. Thornton . . . go down this instant, if you are not a coward. Go down and face them like a man. Save these poor strangers, whom you have decoyed here. 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 . . . If you have any courage or noble quality in you, go out and speak to them, man to man. (Gaskell 175)

Although Margaret is correct in her beliefs that the workers must be treated with civility and respect, she has little idea of the capabilities of a crowd full of frantic men. She views the men as victims, driven to violence because of their unjust working conditions, and sends Thornton out to the mob under the assumption that they will be able to reason. She does not understand the desperation that their anger has caused, or the danger in which she has put Thornton by demanding that he face them alone. Finally, after watching Thornton address the men, and witnessing their response to his words, Margaret understands that their anger is too great for reason. Gaskell writes:

She tore her bonnet off and bent forwards to hear. She could only see; for if Mr. Thornton had indeed made the attempt to speak, the momentary instinct to listen to him was past and gone, and the people were raging worse than ever . . . Margaret felt intuitively, that in an instant all would be uproar; the first touch would cause an explosion, in which, among hundreds of infuriated men and reckless boys, even Mr. Thornton's life would be unsafe, - that in another instant the stormy passions would have passed their bounds, and swept away all barriers of reason, or apprehension of consequence. (176)

At this moment Margaret has recognized her responsibility in the situation. She has sent Thornton into danger and must now do something to protect him from the mob she sympathizes with.

Margaret's position in the middle of the factory workers and their master becomes physical as she rushes outside to stop the crowd from harming both Thornton and themselves. Gaskell writes:

. . . with a cry, which no one heard, she rushed out of the room, down stairs, - she had lifted the great iron bar of the door with an imperious force - had thrown the door open wide - and was there, in face of that angry sea of men, her eyes smiting them with flaming arrows of reproach. The clogs were arrested in the hands that held them - the countenances, so fell not a moment before, now looked irresolute, and as if asking what this meant. For she stood between them and their enemy. (176)

Margaret recognizes that it is her duty to negotiate between the factory workers and Thornton. She is able to understand both the motivations of the starving workers and the objectives of the determined Thornton and is in some ways torn between the two. Regardless of which side is right or wrong, however, Margaret knows that her place is not watching from a window, but outside in the middle of the madness. Gaskell demonstrates this through Thornton's reaction to Margaret's presence:

She only thought how she could save him. She threw her arms around him; she made her body into a shield from the fierce people beyond. Still, with his arms folded, he shook her off.

"Go away," said he, in his deep voice. "This is no place for you."

“It is!” said she. “You did not see what I saw.” (Gaskell 177)

Margaret knows that Thornton is in danger of being attacked by the mob and that her place is between him and that danger. According to Ganz, Margaret’s actions have significant implications for her increasing social power and responsibility throughout the rest of the novel. As she writes:

It is her intercession in the ensuing conflict and the ultimate effect of her interference which most clearly show the growing importance of the protagonists’ personal feelings in resolving larger contentions. For Thornton mainly responds to Margaret’s appeal that he avert the soldiers’ interference and deal directly with his enraged workmen (“Speak to your workers as if they were human beings . . .) because his personal admiration for her makes him sensitive not only to his pride (“go down this instant, if you are not a coward”) but to her impassioned pity. And Margaret’s horrified realization of the vulnerable position in which her humanitarian impulse has placed Thornton is compounded by her (as yet acknowledged) personal involvement with his safety. (Ganz 99)

The attraction that Margaret and Thornton feel for each other has begun to determine how they interact with the world around them. Margaret now seems to have a sort of power over Thornton and is therefore faced with responsibility for both her own actions and those of her new “lover.” These actions are nonetheless inspired, however, by her feelings for him. While, at the window, Margaret was concerned for the welfare of the other workers, it is her desire for Thornton that drives her outside and into her proper place. As critic Enid L. Duthie writes in her book, *The Themes of Elizabeth Gaskell*, “Margaret Hale tries to shield Thornton from the mob not because she has a man’s

courage but because to do so is, in her view, the woman's prerogative" (128). Margaret, because of her attraction to him, now feels a womanly responsibility to Thornton and acts accordingly. Ganz writes that *North and South* "owes its artistic coherence to Mrs. Gaskell's decision to make the central love story also the focal point for the confrontation of social views . . ." (80). In a technique similar to that used in *Mary Barton*, Gaskell has linked the love story of Margaret and Thornton to the social issues surrounding them. Margaret is struck by the rock because of her relationship with Thornton so that as a result of her desire, however unknown at the time, she becomes a participant in the process of social change that is beginning to transform Milton.

Ironically, Margaret becomes conscious of her true feelings for Thornton while waking from the unconsciousness caused by her rock injury. While lying in Thornton's parlor, she overhears Fanny and her maid discussing her aggressive actions towards the mob. As Gaskell writes:

"Sarah, you see, was in the best place for seeing, being at the right-hand window; and says, and said at the very time too, that she saw Miss Hale with her arms about mater's neck, hugging him before all the people."

"I don't believe it," said Fanny. "I know she cares for my brother; any one can see that; and I dare say, she'd give her eyes if he'd marry her, - which he never will, I can tell her. But I don't believe she'd be so bold and forward as to put her arms around his neck." (181)

Margaret has now been awakened to the fact that her feelings for Thornton are more than those of responsibility. She understands that people view her as a sexual woman with sexual intentions and realizes those intentions within herself. She also understands that

her instinct to protect Thornton from the mob, and the actions she took in order to do so, are not consistent with traditional Victorian gender roles, but instead seen as “bold and forward” in Fanny’s eyes. As a result, Margaret remains unable to admit her true sentiments and, instead, tries to deny Fanny’s accusations. Gaskell illustrates her denial, writing:

That ugly dream of insolent words spoken of herself, could never be forgotten - but could be put aside till she was stronger – for oh! She was very weak; and her mind sought for some present fact to steady itself upon, and keep it from utterly losing consciousness in another hideous, sickly swoon. (183)

Margaret’s entire perception of herself has been shaken by her experience with the mob and the possibilities for her relationship with Thornton. She does not want to acknowledge that her desire for Thornton caused her actions, but she is ultimately unable to ignore the new identity of sexuality and social consciousness stirring within her. By rushing out to the mob, and physically putting her arms around their master, Margaret has committed to her responsibilities as a mediator for Thornton and his factory workers. She is in a unique position that could bring both sides together, and it is her love for Thornton that allows her to find her place there. Just as she combined “two plots” in *Mary Barton*, Gaskell weaves the story of Margaret’s relationship with Thornton into the story of the working class struggle. Schor explains:

In this way the political resonance of *North and South* begins to depend on its very different heroine – and its different heroine begins to seem a product of those political subtleties. What Margaret Hale gives *North and South* is both a central consciousness and a plot; what the conflicts of the industrialization give

the novel that would have been *Margaret Hale* is the richness and power that a more ordinary novel of marriage would lack; what is conjoined, in their coming together, is the erotic power (the force to drive the plot) of the romance, and the political urgency (and interpretive complexity) of the condition-of-England novel. (123)

In this sense, Margaret's consciousness throughout *North and South* is both driven by her (unconscious) attraction to Thornton and tied to the social plight of the working class, as seen in her close relationship with the Higgins family.

In *Wives and Daughters*, Molly, much like Margaret, also remains relatively unaware of the nature of her feelings for Roger throughout much of the novel. Despite her ignorance, however, her unconscious desire to be in relationship with him helps her to assume more confidence in her role as a woman. At the beginning of the novel, Molly's inaccurate view of self causes her to see herself as a helpless child, but Roger's friendship encourages her to grow up and to take on consideration for others above herself. As she grows closer to Roger, and closer to a realization of herself as a woman, Molly begins to invest less in her relationship with her father and to realize the importance of her role in the lives of those around her. Using Roger's initial interaction with the mourning Molly on the bourn, critic Felicia Bonaparte, explains Molly's self-realization. In her book, *The Gypsy-Bachelor of Manchester: the Life of Mrs. Gaskell's Demon*, she writes, "it is not by accident Gaskell chooses Roger to speak these words. He is the man Molly will marry. The moment, therefore, in which he finds her fulfills the title of the book. Molly has thrown herself to the ground in her grief as a daughter. She is raised again from the ground by the man who will make her a wife" (Bonaparte 63). While the fact that Roger

will eventually marry Molly is somewhat significant to any interpretations of their earlier interactions, their future relationship does not, as Bonaparte implies, define Molly's self-realization. Roger does not seem to have any romantic feelings for Molly throughout the majority of the novel so that, in her innocence, Molly is able to take his advice as that of a friend, and to apply it purely. Although her desire for him is subconsciously ever-present, Molly, unlike Mary and Margaret, remains relatively separated from her feelings while her social-consciousness is being formed. As she grows closer to him, her social-consciousness, and awareness of herself as a woman seem to increase, but because Roger is not actively pursuing a relationship with her, she is able to develop her identity as an individual more freely.

Molly's connection with the Hamleys also seems to grow stronger as she grows closer to Roger. The more time she spends with the family, the more they seem to depend on her and the more her responsibilities within Hamley hall increase. After Molly leaves the hall, and Mrs. Hamley becomes ill, the Squire is desperate for Molly's return and begs her to visit his wife, saying:

. . . it has thrown madam into one of her bad fits of illness; and she seems to have a fancy for you, child! Your father came to see her this morning. Poor thing, she's very poorly, I'm afraid; and she told him how she should like to have you about her, and he said I might fetch you. You'll come, won't you, my dear? She's not a poor woman, such as many people think it's the only charity to be kind to, but she's just as forlorn of woman's care as if she was poor – worse, I dare says. (Gaskell 186)

The Squire and Mrs. Hamley have, in many ways, come to depend on Molly like a daughter. She is able to bring comfort where no one else could, in part, because of the selflessness taught her by Roger. Even the servants are aware of Molly's influence on the family, which Gaskell demonstrates through one of their dinner scenes:

They could understand bursts of passion, and knew the cause of his variable moods as well as he did himself. The butler, who was accustomed to argue with his master about every fresh direction as to his work, now nudged Molly at dinner-time to make her eat some dish which she had just been declining, and explained his conduct afterwards as follows, -

“You see, miss, me and cook had planned a dinner as would tempt master to eat; but when you say, - ‘No, thank you,’ when I hand you anything, master never so much as looks at it. But if you takes a thing, and eats with a relish, why first he waits, and then he looks, and by-and-by he smells; and then he finds out as he’s hungry, and falls to eating as natural as a kitten takes to mewling.” (Gaskell 194)

Roger has awakened Molly to her responsibility as a woman, and because of this awakening, little Molly has become so much respected by the Squire that she serves as an example to him when his world seems to be destroyed. Appropriately, in one description, Duthie writes that, “Molly exemplifies unconsciously the spirit of charity which is the essence of Christianity as Elizabeth Gaskell understands it. Without it, sincerity becomes austerity and good deeds lose the greater party of their value” (158). With the respect of the Squire and others around her comes a social, and somewhat religious responsibility for Molly to remain aware of problems and to address them accordingly. Where as

before her interactions with Roger Molly was consumed by the world of her father, she is now able to focus on the world of her society and can therefore actively negotiate her role in it.

Her responsibility is increased even more as she begins to learn the secrets of the family. After walking in on Roger and Osborne, and learning of Osborne's marriage to Aimée, Molly is once again bound to the Hamleys, this time by her vow to keep the information quiet. Although she is leaving the hall once again, her commitment seems to be somewhat overwhelming, as Gaskell illustrates, writing:

She put down her book on the table very softly, and turned to leave the room, choking down her tears until she was in the solitude of her own chamber. But Roger was at the door before her, holding it open for her, and reading- she felt that he was reading – her face. He held out his hand for hers, and his firm grasp expressed both sympathy and regret for what had occurred . . . The leaving of Hamley Hall had seemed so sad before; and now she was troubled with having to bear away a secret which she ought never to have known, and the knowledge of which had brought out a very uncomfortable responsibility. (210-11)

Molly's image of the Hamleys as a perfect family, and of Osborne as the perfect son, has been destroyed, and she must deal with the knowledge of their "ruin" on her own.

Roger's sympathy, however, gives her the strength she needs to get through her own pain. Once her initial shock is over, Molly's eyes are permanently open to the reality of the world she lives in and her social consciousness is taken to another level. The strength and power Molly gains from her realization about the Hamleys also prepares her to handle Cynthia's later problems with Mr. Preston. She is developing into a wise and

experienced young woman, and her awareness of the ways of the world allow her to support Cynthia with conviction. Throughout the novel, Molly becomes a sort of unofficial caretaker for the rest of the characters. Her relationship with Roger has helped her to mature and developed within her the ability to understand and respond to the actions of others. It has brought her into a deeper knowledge of the happenings of Hollingford, and at the same time, given her a deeper understanding of the nature of rural life.

Each time Molly fulfills her “duties” as caretaker she settles further into her identity as a capable woman. When she meets Cynthia and observes her beauty, she is even closer to understanding the implications of female sexuality, a development that brings her closer to the realization of her true feelings for Roger. Describing Molly’s first interaction with Cynthia, Gaskell writes:

When they all came into the full light and repose of the drawing-room, Molly was absorbed in the contemplation of Cynthia’s beauty. Perhaps her features were not regular; but the changes in her expressive countenance gave one no time to think of that. Her smile was perfect; her pouting charming; the play of the face was in the mouth . . . Molly fell in love with her, so to speak, on the instant. (215-16)

Molly is attracted to Cynthia because she sees in her the power of female sexuality. Cynthia’s embrace of such power gives Molly her first intimate example of what it is to be a woman. As Gaskell writes:

A woman will have this charm, not only over men but over her own sex; it cannot be defined, or rather it is so delicate a mixture of many gifts and qualities

that it is impossible to decide on the proportions of each . . . At any rate, Molly might soon have been aware that Cynthia was not remarkable for unflinching morality; but the glamour thrown over her would have prevented Molly from any attempt at penetrating into and judging her companion's character, even had such process been the least in accordance with her own disposition. (217)

Molly's error is that while she is impressed with Cynthia's beauty and ability to manipulate the appreciations of others, she cannot see the "gifts and qualities" that exist within herself. She does not understand that Cynthia's excessive charm is in actuality an abuse of the power of which Molly has not yet been able to acknowledge possession.

Molly begins to recognize her desire for Cynthia's sexual identity as Cynthia and Roger develop a relationship. When Roger returns from his fellowship at Cambridge, Molly is eager to hear about his experiences, but finds that he is more interested in talking with Cynthia. Gaskell writes:

So Cynthia was hearing all about Cambridge, and the very examination about which Molly had felt such keen interest, without having ever been able to have her questions answered by a competent person; and Roger, to whom she had always looked as the final and most satisfactory answerer, was telling all she wanted to know, and she could not listen. (239)

Molly is seeking knowledge and information from Roger, but is unable to receive it because of his attraction to Cynthia. When she finally does get to speak with him, she finds the conversation unsatisfying, which Gaskell explains, writing, "the short conversation had been very pleasant, and his manner had had just the brotherly kindness of old times; but it was not quite the manner he had to Cynthia; and Molly half thought

she would have preferred the latter” (242). Although Molly attempts to deny her feelings by calling Roger her brother, she is struggling with the fact that she desires the same attention he gave to Cynthia. She has come to admire Roger as a source of worldly wisdom and so, in a sense, her desire for knowledge and experience has merged with her desire to have a sexual identity in his eyes.

When Roger proposes to Cynthia, Molly feels as if she has lost her connection to the real world, and as a result seems to lose a part of herself. As Gaskell writes:

She felt as if she could not understand it all; but as for that matter, what could she understand? Nothing. For a few minutes her brain seemed in too great a whirl to comprehend anything but that she was being carried on in earth’s diurnal course, with rocks, and stones, and trees, with as little volition on her part as if she were dead. Then the room grew stifling, and instinctively she went to the open casement window, and leant out, gasping for breath. (372)

Roger’s attraction to Cynthia, and the fact that he is leaving for Africa, exclude Molly completely from any chance of relationship with him. This in turn, leaves Molly feeling excluded from the world and any chance of experiencing life outside of Hollingford.

With Roger’s absence, both physically and emotionally, Molly feels as if she has been taken back to her girlhood days of naïveté and helplessness. Gaskell illustrates her despair, writing:

Molly turned away her head, and was silent . . . she tried not to feel it – not to feel, poor girl, that she too had a great weight on her heart, into the cause of which she shrank from examining. That whole winter long she had felt as if her sun was all shrouded over with grey mist, and could no longer shine brightly for

her. She wakened up in the morning with a dull sense of something being wrong – the world was out of joint, and, if she were born to set it right she did not know how to do it. (409-10)

Without Roger's encouragement Molly feels she has lost her purpose and her ability to make things right. She has maintained her knowledge of the world's problems, but no longer feels capable of solving them because the man who inspired all of her confidence as abandoned her. Molly needs to understand that her power, though ignited by Roger, does not depend upon his presence. Her desire for experience can be fulfilled without Roger's love, an idea Gaskell will exemplify through his letters to Cynthia from Africa.

While Cynthia's engagement to Roger progresses and she begins to receive his letters from Africa, Molly continues to long for any information about him or his travels. She also grows frustrated with Cynthia and feels that she does not deserve Roger's affection. As Gaskell explains:

She did not believe that Cynthia cared enough for him; at any rate, not with the sort of love that she herself would have bestowed . . . if she had been in Cynthia's place. She felt as if she should have gone to him both hands held out, full and brimming over with tenderness, and been grateful for every word of precious confidence bestowed on her. Yet Cynthia received his letters with a kind of carelessness, and read them with a strange indifference, while Molly sat at her feet, so to speak, looking up with eyes as wistful as a dog's waiting for crumbs, and such chance beneficences. (411-12)

Just as in the scene of Roger and Cynthia's first conversation, Molly feels excluded from Roger's letters and longs for the intimate knowledge he is wasting on his fiancée. She

desires a relationship with him, as well as the worldly understanding his experiences in Africa could bring. Gaskell allows Molly such an understanding when Cynthia gives her one of Roger's letters to read:

“Oh, lovers' letters are so silly, and I think this is sillier than usual,” said Cynthia, looking over her letter again. “Here's a piece you may read, from that line to that line,” indicating two places. “I have not read it myself for it looked dullish – all about Aristotle and Pliny . . .”

Molly took the letter, the thought crossing her mind that he had touched it, had had his hands upon it, in those far-distant desert lands . . . She saw references made to books, which, with a little trouble, would be accessible to her here in Hollingford. Perhaps the details and the references would make the letter dull and dry to some people, but not to her, thanks to his former teachings and the interest he had excited in her for his pursuits. (413)

In this instance, Molly is receiving the knowledge she desires from a relationship with Roger, without Roger's actual presence. Cynthia's directions about which lines to read have edited the “love” out of Roger's letter so that Molly is able to experience a new social consciousness completely separated from her feelings of attraction to him. Her desire for Roger remains, as is evident in her passion for him, but she is finally able to separate that desire from her need for social awareness. Because of her feelings for him, Molly is aware of herself as a sexual woman, but she is also aware of her ability to participate in the world without Roger's intervention. Perhaps this is why Schor writes that *Wives and Daughters* “is not only the age-old story of daughters turning to wives, with which every heroine's fairy tale is concerned, but a story of how a girl becomes a

heroine" (185). Molly's story is not shaped by her position as Roger's "wife," but instead is developed by her individual identity as a woman of the world.

Molly's initial attraction to Roger drove her to a desire for knowledge of him and then to an eventual desire for knowledge in general. During his absence, her memory of Roger leads her to acknowledge the realities of life in Hollingford and to accept her responsibility in dealing with these realities. In a literary evolution, which can be observed throughout the progression of *Mary Barton*, *North and South*, and *Wives and Daughters*, Gaskell gradually decreases the importance each man plays in the development of the women's sexual and social identities. Unlike Mary, who is defined by her love for Jem throughout *Mary Barton*, and Margaret, whose love for Thornton allows her a position of competence in *North and South*, Molly's love for Roger becomes less important to her development as a powerful woman in *Wives and Daughters*. With this succession Gaskell is demonstrating that, while sexual relationships are essential to the awakening of the female identity, they will ultimately lead to a social consciousness and power that can exist on its own.

CHAPTER III: The Self-Realization

The progression of Molly's independent social consciousness can be linked in large part to the progression of Gaskell's awareness of her own narrative voice as a woman. Duthie writes, "it was only through writing that [Gaskell] learned how to develop the kind of art that was her own, and to progress, in the seventeen years of her literary career, from the powerful but uneven *Mary Barton* to the finished mastery of *Wives and Daughters*" (177). As her novels advance, Gaskell's voice seems to grow and develop along with the identities of her protagonists, which are slowly transitioning into a more independent female existence. These transitions can be observed most often in Gaskell's use of the supporting female character to create a sort of bridge between the identity of her main character and the identity she herself is struggling to establish as a woman in the Nineteenth Century. As her supporting characters evolve throughout her works, they create a more definitive picture of female independence and social consciousness, while also guiding Gaskell's own voice through the awakenings of her main characters.

In *Mary Barton*, Gaskell uses the character of Margaret Legh to create a stepping stone between Mary's identity and the idea of the perfect female consciousness she is, as of yet, unable to define. Margaret's humility and gentleness, in contrast with Mary's initial naïve vanity, point towards a female consciousness heavy with traditional ideas of femininity. Margaret is nurturing, but not overly sexual, and Gaskell introduces her to the novel writing, "she was a sallow, unhealthy, sweet-looking young woman, with a careworn look; her dress was humble and very simple, consisting of some kind of dark stuff gown, her neck being covered by a drab shawl or large handkerchief, pinned down

behind and at the sides in front" (32). When Mary and Margaret meet for the first time, Gaskell makes sure to emphasize the great differences that exist between the two girls. She writes that Mary, dressed beautifully, "sallied forth to impress poor gentle Margaret," then continues, "she certainly succeeded. Alice, who never thought much about beauty, had never told Margaret how pretty Mary was; and, as she came in half-blushing at her own self-consciousness, Margaret could hardly take her eyes off her" (32). The juxtaposition of Mary and Margaret in this scene is fairly similar to the first meeting of Molly and Cynthia in *Wives and Daughters*, in that, like Molly, Margaret is both surprised by and drawn to the sexuality she finds in Mary. At this point in *Mary Barton*, however, Gaskell has yet to define the balance between femininity and sexuality that she demonstrates in *Wives and Daughters* so that Mary's aggressive attempts to be beautiful are made to seem selfish in light of Margaret's plain, but humble, form. Her humility is portrayed as an important quality that Mary lacks, but will eventually gain by the end of the novel.

Margaret is also used by Gaskell to guide Mary into a basic level of social consciousness. After displaying a song that Margaret sang to Mary and Alice, she writes:

To read it, it may perhaps seem humorous; but it is that humour which is near akin to pathos, and to those who have seen the distress it describes it is a powerfully pathetic song. Margaret had both witnessed the destitution, and had the heart to feel it . . . Alice had her quiet enjoyment of tears. But Margaret, with fixed eye, and earnest, dreamy look, seemed to become more and more absorbed in realizing to herself the woe she had been describing, and which she felt might

at that very moment be suffering and hopeless within a short distance of their comparative comfort. (Gaskell 39)

Margaret, from the beginning of the novel, has a deep awareness of the issues affecting her community. Her songs are so moving because, through music, she is able to capture the despair and suffering so often felt by the Manchester poor, much as Gaskell does in her writing. Although Mary will eventually come into such an understanding for herself, Margaret becomes a seemingly perfect example of the ideal woman, combining modesty with social consciousness in a way that seems to project the very voice of Gaskell herself.

Bonaparte discusses Gaskell's use of Margaret's example in *Mary Barton* by likening her to the older character of Alice Wilson. She writes:

"Mrs. Gaskell" has agents too, one in the character of Alice Wilson and another in Margaret Legh. Alice is the ideal woman. This is clear in her behavior, which is entirely self-sacrificing, and is metaphorically stressed in the fact that she is a servant, thus a perfect female self. Margaret, although a little less saintly, is essentially of the same type. Gentle, thoughtful, deeply spiritual, Margaret is often the means through which "Mrs. Gaskell" quiets Mary, speaking through her words intended to subdue her daemonic self. (Bonaparte 179)

Although correct in her assertions that Margaret and Alice are of similar character and that Gaskell uses Margaret throughout the novel to "quiet" Mary, Bonaparte's belief that Alice represents Gaskell's ideal woman seems to negate the very consciousness *Mary Barton* is working to establish. Mary's awareness is awakened through her participation in the life of the Manchester poor, a life that Margaret's songs strive to illustrate.

Throughout the novel, old Alice, despite her gentleness and self-sacrifice, longs to return

to the country life of her childhood; she longs to escape from the very life Gaskell believes must be embraced. In this sense, Margaret, more so than Alice, must be used to exemplify the social consciousness Gaskell is seeking to define.

In *Mary Barton*, and through Margaret in particular, however, Gaskell lacks the power to do anything but write about the voice she has described. Margaret represents an embrace of traditional femininity almost to a fault, which can be seen as she advises Mary about her relationship with Jem. As Gaskell writes:

“Tell me, Margaret,” said Mary, taking her apron down from her eyes, and looking at Margaret with eager anxiety, “What can I do to bring him back to me? Should I write to him?”

“No,” replied her friend, “that would not do. Men are so queer, they like to have a’ the courting to themselves.”

“But I did not mean to write him a courting letter,” said Mary, somewhat indignantly.

“If you wrote at all, it would be to give him a hint you’d taken the rue, and would be very glad to have him now. I believe now he’d rather find that out for himself.” (166-67)

Margaret tells Mary not to write to Jem because it would go against the long-established gender rules of courtship, but in reality, an honest letter to Jem expressing her true feelings could have spared him any interaction with Carson, or his murder. Despite her modesty and social consciousness, Margaret’s dependence on her role to please men prevents her from actively participating in the world around her. Her advice to Mary is

that she wait for Jem to make a move, but this advice is grounded in the idea that women must ultimately rely on the men of their lives to make decisions for them.

Margaret's powerlessness is further displayed when Will begins to fall in love with her. As Gaskell writes:

She saw as clearly as if told in words, that the merry, random, boisterous sailor had fallen in love with the quiet, prim, somewhat plain Margaret . . . she began to think some instinct made the blind girl feel whose eyes were so often fixed upon her pale face; that some inner feeling made the delicate and becoming rose-flush steal over her countenance . . . Will's love had no blushings, no downcast eyes, no weighing of words; it was as open and undisguised as his nature; yet he seemed afraid of the answer its acknowledgement might meet with. It was Margaret's angelic voice that had entranced him, and which made him think of her as a being of some other sphere, that he feared to woo. (205)

Will is drawn to Margaret's "angelic" voice because it seems to belong to a "being" from another world and, as a result, he begins to view her as more than a woman. Her gentleness and compassion have become so extreme that she seems to turn into a fairy tale creature, with no real ability to exist outside the text. Just as Mary's social awakening is too strongly tied to her relationship with Jem, Margaret's function as Gaskell's transitioning voice is, at this point, too strongly tied to traditional notions of femininity. In *Mary Barton*, then, Gaskell is still struggling to define an independent female consciousness that can exist in reality.

Her struggle continues in *North and South*, where Margaret Hale's consciousness is less reliant upon her relationship with Thornton, but still ultimately motivated by her

romantic feelings for him. Throughout the novel, Gaskell uses supporting character, Mrs. Thornton, to move out of the traditional femininity she established in *Mary Barton* and into a narrative voice and awareness with more power behind it. In one description of Mrs. Thornton, Duthie writes, “there is a . . . basic strength and fire in Mrs. Thornton, the mill-owner’s mother, the ‘firm, severe, dignified woman’ who conceals her love for her idolized son beneath an undemonstrative manner and does not hesitate to tell him ‘unpalatable truths’ when she considers they are called for” (135-36). The first demonstration of Mrs. Thornton’s control within the novel is given when Thornton describes his childhood to the Hales. As he states:

Sixteen years ago, my father died under very miserable circumstances. I was taken from school and had to become a man (as well as I could) in a few days. I had such a mother as few are blest with; a woman of strong power, and firm resolve. We went into a small country town, where living was cheaper than in Milton, and where I got employment in a draper’s shop . . . My mother managed so that I put three out of these fifteen shillings regularly. This made the beginnings; this taught me self-denial. Now that I am able to afford my mother such comforts as her age, rather than her own wish, requires, I thank her silently on each occasion for the early training she gave me. (Gaskell 85)

Upon the death of her husband, Mrs. Thornton was put into the roles of both mother and father for her son. Because of her strength, she was able to raise him to be a capable man, and, according to Thornton, her training made him the hard worker that he has become. In a sense then, Gaskell has used Mrs. Thornton’s powerful personality to move away from Margaret Legh’s powerlessness. Mrs. Thornton, as a single mother living in

Milton, is completely separated from any romantic relationship and therefore able to make decisions in ways that *Mary Barton's* Margaret could not. Gaskell's voice is, in turn, able to take on a new attitude of independence when speaking through the filter Mrs. Thornton provides.

Along with the notion of power, Mrs. Thornton also brings the idea of social awareness into Gaskell's definition of effective female independence. Living in Milton for so long, Mrs. Thornton has developed a concrete understanding of the industrial world that Margaret Hale lacks at the beginning of *North and South*. Gaskell demonstrates this understanding during Margaret and Mrs. Thornton's first meeting. She writes:

Mrs. Thornton went on after a moment's pause:

"Do you now anything of Milton, Miss Hale? Have you seen any of our factories? Our magnificent warehouses?"

"No!" said Margaret . . . "I dare say, papa would have taken me before now if I had cared. But I really do not find much pleasure in going over manufactories."

"They are very curious places," said Mrs. Hale, "but there is so much noise and dirt always. I remember once going in a lilac silk to see candles made, and my gown was utterly ruined."

"Very probably," said Mrs. Thornton, in a short displeased manner. "I merely thought, that as strangers newly come to reside in a town which has risen to eminence in the country, from the character and progress of its peculiar

business, you might have cared to visit some of the places where it is carried on; places unique in the kingdom, I am informed.” (Gaskell 98)

Mrs. Thornton, although somewhat proud about Milton’s greatness, is encouraging Margaret to take an interest in the world in which she lives. She knows that Milton’s industry has shaped her life and, as a result, has become an active participant in the town. Gaskell demonstrates this participation even further during the riot scene as Mrs. Thornton works alongside of her son. As she writes:

Mrs. Thornton came in with a look of black sternness on her face, which made Margaret feel she had arrived at a bad time to trouble her with her request . . . Mrs. Thornton’s brow contracted, and her mouth grew set, while Margaret spoke with gentle modesty of her mother’s restlessness, and Dr. Donaldson’s wish that she should have the relief of a water-bed. She ceased. Mrs. Thornton did not reply immediately. Then she started up and exclaimed-

“They’re at the gates! Call John, Fanny, - call him in from the mill!

They’re at the gates! They’ll batter them in.” (Gaskell 172)

While Margaret is speaking of her mother’s illness, completely unaware of the danger approaching the mill, Mrs. Thornton is watching and waiting for the mob to arrive. She is the first to alert Margaret of the mob, reporting their position much as Gaskell reports on such social issues through her novels. Margaret eventually realizes her role and responsibility in the situation, but Mrs. Thornton’s awareness and control during the stressful time seem to personify the aim of Gaskell’s narrative voice throughout the novel.

Her strength during the riot scene, however, is ultimately being used to keep the abused factory workers from bettering their situation. Whereas in *Mary Barton* Gaskell's voice lacked power, in *North and South* it seems to have too much. Mrs. Thornton's strength eventually comes to represent an extreme lack of femininity, so that her independence is founded less on her power as a woman and more on her ability to embrace a masculine gender role. This masculinity can be seen as the dying Mrs. Hale asks Mrs. Thornton to watch over Margaret when she has passed. Gaskell writes:

And her filmy wandering eyes fixed themselves with an intensity of wistfulness on Mrs. Thornton's face. For a minute, there was no change in its rigidity; it was stern and unmoved; - nay, but that the eyes of the sick woman were growing dim with the slow-gathering tears, she might have seen a dark cloud cross the cold features. And it was . . . a sudden remembrance . . . of a little daughter - dead in infancy - long years ago - that, like a sudden sunbeam, melted the icy crust, behind which there was a real tender woman.

"You wish me to be a friend to Miss Hale," said Mrs. Thornton, in her measured voice, that would not soften with her heart, but came out distinct and clear. . . "I will be a true friend, if circumstances require it. Not a tender friend. That I cannot be . . . it is not my nature to show affection even where I feel it. . ."

(237)

In the same way that Margaret Legh's femininity prevented her from having power, Mrs. Thornton's power has begun to prevent her from being a woman. Her harsh, "icy crust," has covered up the "real tender woman" that exists underneath her actions and, as a

result, the independent social consciousness Gaskell is searching for within *North and South* remains dependent upon a masculine gender role.

Only until her voice can combine the two extremes with which she has been experimenting will Gaskell's search for an independent female identity be complete, and it is in Molly Gibson that this combination is realized. Throughout *Wives and Daughters*, which Duthie calls Gaskell's "final masterpiece," Molly progresses through a variety of roles that incorporate both Margaret Legh's gentle femininity and Mrs. Thornton's readiness for action so that Molly herself becomes the transition point for Gaskell's voice (188). As a result, Gaskell no longer needs a bridge or a stepping stone to move from her own narrative voice into that of her main character. Molly has become a complete woman with a complete, independent, female identity and is therefore capable of realizing Gaskell's voice in both *Wives and Daughters* and the reality outside the text. She is nurturing, as demonstrated through her increasing responsibility to all the other characters in the novel, and at one point Cynthia even exclaims, "I wish I could love people as you do, Molly" (Gaskell 219). She is also increasingly aware of the world around her, and her social consciousness develops as she becomes more involved with the secrets of the other characters. Schor expands upon her involvement in these secrets, writing:

There are two specific sexual secrets in the novel, both part of the marriage plot. The first, that Osborne Hamley is already married, is a secret Molly stumbles upon early and one that she protects until after his death. The second, and more interesting, is Cynthia's secret engagement to Mr. Preston, which she does not tell in the hopes she can escape it; to protect that secret Molly

herself is caught up, almost fatally, in the plotting, secret meetings, and clandestine payments of the blackmail plot. (192)

Her responsibility to her friends and her ability to understand serious situations often place Molly in the position of secret keeper because she is the only character in the novel who can bear such a burden. As a result, her participation in the “sexual secrets” Schor describes opens her eyes to a sexuality she has not yet experienced and increases, once again, the breadth of her social awareness.

Perhaps one of the greatest examples of Molly’s growing consciousness can be found towards the end of the novel as she reads Aimée’s letters to the now deceased Osborne Hamley. As Gaskell writes:

“There are some letters,” said she: “may I read any of them?” At another time she would not have asked; but she was driven to it now by her impatience of the speechless grief of the old man.

“Ay, read ‘em, read ‘em,” said he. “Maybe you can. I can only pick out a word here and there. I put ‘em there for you to look at; and tell me what is in ‘em.”

Molly’s knowledge of written French of the present day was not so great as her knowledge of the French of the *Memoires de Sully*, and neither the spelling nor the writing of the letters was of the best; but she managed to translate into good enough colloquial English some innocent sentences of love, and submission to Osborne’s will . . . little sentences in ‘little language’ that went home to the squire’s heart. (567)

Molly has been able to independently enter the foreign world of Aimée's letters - and as a result, her relationship with Osborne - because she has an understanding of life outside of Hollingford. Aimée's letters are written in French and shaped by a foreign culture so that only Molly's total world consciousness could truly understand them. The squire lacks such an understanding and is therefore unable to translate the letters. Although Molly's French is not impeccable, her realizations of life and love have produced within her a social consciousness that allows her to transcend even a language barrier.

Along with her nurturing nature and growing social knowledge, Molly is also equipped with the power to put both notions into action. Throughout *Wives and Daughters* Molly learns to balance her sexuality, coming into an understanding of the appropriate ways in which to use the influence it allocates. Gaskell demonstrates this balance through her juxtaposition of Molly and Cynthia throughout the latter half of the novel, where Cynthia's abuse of her sexuality creates problems such as only the balanced Molly can fix. In Chapter 44, appropriately titled "Molly Gibson to the Rescue," Cynthia confesses to Molly her relationship with Mr. Preston, and Molly offers to help. In response, Cynthia asks, "Molly . . . will you do it? Will you do what you said last night? I have been thinking of it all day, and sometimes I believe he would give you back the letters if you asked him; he might fancy – at any rate it's worth trying, if you don't very much like it" (Gaskell 477). Cynthia is aware of Molly's power as a woman and believes that only Molly could persuade Mr. Preston to relinquish his hold of her. Molly's willingness to confront such a man as Mr. Preston on her own proves that she possesses a power that Cynthia lacks and that power stems from her independent consciousness. Molly loves Roger, but as shown through her interactions with his letters from Africa, she

is not defined by him. Because of this, Gaskell is able to use Molly, as a complete and independent female, to fulfill her own narrative voice throughout the text.

Gaskell's development and the progression of her narrative voice can be seen through her other characters as well. Within each of her novels, Gaskell often includes several minor characters which seem to represent her awareness of her own voice within the text itself. Often, the characters through which she chooses to express herself are indicative of the vision she had of herself, or at least her narrative identity, at the time. These minor characters come to be physical metaphors for the evolution of both Gaskell's characters and her voice.

In *Mary Barton*, Gaskell appears once in the form of the Carson family nursemaid. When Harry Carson is found murdered, the nurse is given the responsibility of informing his sisters, a scene Gaskell describes writing:

The girls began to put away their music and books, in preparation for tea. The door slowly opened again, and this time it was the nurse who entered. I call her nurse, for such had been her office in bygone days, though now she held rather an anomalous situation in the family . . . only "Nurse" was still her name... They went on arranging their various articles of employment. She wanted them to look up. She wanted them to read something in her face – her face so full of woe, of horror. But they went on without taking any notice. She coughed; not a natural cough; but one of those coughs which asks so plainly for remark . . .

"Speak, speak, nurse!" said they all, as they saw her efforts to articulate choked by the convulsive rising in her throat. They clustered round her with eager faces, catching a glimpse of some terrible truth to be revealed. (240)

The Carsons' maid is a servant in no position of authority and is therefore unable to express herself completely. Just like "Nurse", Gaskell wants her readers to "look up" and to witness the truth about the life they are living. As demonstrated through Margaret Legh, however, she lacks the power to truly express such a consciousness.

North and South presents Gaskell in the form of a neighbor who relieves Margaret during a stressful time. After John Boucher is found dead, Margaret takes it upon herself to comfort his mourning wife and children, despite her increasing exhaustion. As Gaskell writes:

The mother quivered as she lay in Margaret's arms. Margaret hear a noise at the door.

"Open it. Open it quick," said she to the eldest child. "It's bolted; make no noise – be very still . . . she has fainted – that's all."

"It's as well for her, poor creature, " said a woman, following in the wake of the bearers of the dead. "But yo're not fit to hold her. Stay, I'll run fetch a pillow, and we'll let her down easy on the floor."

This helpful neighbour was a great relief to Margaret; she was evidently a stranger to the house, a new comer in the district, indeed; but she was so kind and thoughtful that Margaret felt she was no longer needed; and that it would be better, perhaps, to set an example of clearing the house, which was filled with idle, if sympathizing gazers. (291)

Like the new neighbor, Gaskell is not indigenous to the working class lifestyle, but her willingness to participate in the community helps to complete the identity she is working to establish. Unlike the nurse in *Mary Barton*, the neighbor woman is able to take action

instead of simply informing others of the problem. Gaskell's narrative voice has evolved into a more active force; however, just as Mrs. Thornton lacks the necessary femininity that comes with an independent consciousness, the neighbor ultimately remains a "stranger" within the novel's development.

Molly's maturity throughout *Wives and Daughters* allows Gaskell to make the shift from minor character voices into the realization of her own narrative voice as a female writer. In her final novel, Gaskell is able to reveal herself in a stronger, more prominent form because her female main character has finally grown powerful enough to handle such a revelation. Just as the evolution of Molly's identity as a woman frees *Wives and Daughters* from the need for a supporting bridge character, it also allows Gaskell's voice to experience the ultimate connection and completion through Molly's consciousness. Bonaparte also discusses the similarities between Molly and Gaskell, writing:

The novel's heroine, Molly Gibson, is without question Gaskell herself, not only because she relives her history, but because she mirrors Gaskell in personality and character. Playful, cheerful, forthright, sweet, simple, serious, the soul of integrity, shrewd but innocent as a dove, no other character in her fiction seems as much the very image of how Gaskell must have appeared to those who knew her as a girl. (56)

From the beginning of the novel Gaskell reveals herself in the form of Molly and her experiences, and one early example can be found within the novel as she describes Mr. Gibson's desire to keep Molly uneducated. Gaskell writes:

“Now Miss Eyre,” said he, summing up his instructions the day before she entered upon her office . . . “Don’t teach Molly too much: she must sew, and read, and write, and do her sums; but I want to keep her a child . . . after all, I am not sure that reading or writing is necessary. Many a good woman gets married with only a cross instead of her name; it’s rather a diluting of mother-wit, to my fancy; but, however we must yield to the prejudices of society . . .”

Miss Eyre listened in silence, perplexed but determined to be obedient to the directions of the doctor . . . She taught Molly to read and write, but tried honestly to keep her back in every other branch of education. It was only by fighting and struggling hard, that bit by bit Molly persuaded her father to let her have French and drawing lessons. (34)

Molly’s struggle to get an education can, in this case, be likened to Gaskell’s own struggle, throughout her novels, to discover her own narrative voice. Throughout *Mary Barton* and *North and South* she attempts to define a self that is both a participant in the world and yet independent of it as well. Just as Molly’s fight eventually leads to her education, and as a result her later ability to understand life outside of Hollingford, Gaskell’s advancement through her novels leads to the eventual definition of the self she sought.

She shows up again as Molly during the girl’s confrontation of Mr. Preston. After Molly informs Preston of her intent to involve Lady Harriet in the affair, Gaskell writes:

. . . he wondered how she, the girl standing before him, had been clever enough to find it out. He forgot himself for an instant in admiration of her. There she stood, frightened, yet brave, not letting go her hold on what she meant to do,

even when things seemed most against her; and besides, there was something that struck him most of all perhaps, and which shows the kind of man he was – he perceived that Molly was as unconscious that he was a young man, and she a young woman, as if she had been a pure angel of heaven. (482-83)

In this scene, Gaskell is demonstrating, through Molly, her desire for social action.

Molly has seen the injustice of Preston's behavior and has taken it upon herself to right the situation. Her ability to do so comes, in part, because of her ability to find the balance between her sexuality and the power it provides. Preston feels that Molly is unconscious of their sex differences because she is not defined by either of them. Molly has realized her own sexuality, but uses it only in appropriate situations and not to manipulate or abuse the men in her lives. In her book, *Elizabeth Gaskell: The Novel of Social Crisis*, Coral Lansbury addresses the confrontation with Mr. Preston, writing that "the most penetrating observations," about the girl's "character" are illustrated within "the sudden apprehension of Preston that his discussion with Molly Gibson cannot be conducted by the socially defined rituals of implicit sexuality" (205). Molly's development has allowed her to remain independent from society's sexuality "rituals" and as a result she is able to overcome Preston's threats and manipulation. His description of Molly as a "pure angel of heaven", then, is reminiscent of Margaret Legh's "angelic voice" in *Mary Barton*, except in that Molly's angel remains independent of male influence, whereas Margaret's is defined by it.

Schor makes an important point about the process of developing consciousness within Gaskell's characters when she writes about Mary's dependence on Jem in *Mary Barton*, stating:

Mary Barton, the six-months wonder, is not the pale, retiring heroine readers are used to; she has to be tamed, quieted a little, before the novel ends. Gaskell turns her into a woman who “worships” Jem and “hangs” about her father, into the personification of innocence tending the guilty, who droops appropriately and does little to move the rest of the book. (39)

Despite Mary’s transformation into a socially conscious woman throughout the book, her identity remains fixed to her relationship with Jem and his approval of her. She has developed her identity, both as a woman and as an active participant in the struggles of the working class, but the steps she has taken to complete her development have been filtered entirely through Jem’s influence and example. Mary Lenard expresses a similar concern in her book, *Preaching Pity: Dickens, Gaskell, and Sentimentalism in Victorian Culture*, when she discusses the negative implications of Margaret’s relationship with Thornton. As Lenard states:

Although Margaret is able to use this “feminine” power in the novel in order to influence Thornton towards a better, more sympathetic relationship with his workers, the end of the novel presents a disturbing picture of her submission to Thornton and her eventual enclosure within a more narrowly-defined domestic sphere . . . being a woman means that Margaret has special access to sympathy and to moral values, which enables her to see Thornton, the workers, and the duties each owe to the other, more perceptively than Thornton can . . . At the end of the novel, however, Margaret subsides into “delicious silence,” and there is no indication that she will continue to influence Thornton with her “womanly instinct” . . . In the final analysis, *North and South* returns to a

depressingly limited picture of what “female influence” can contribute to social debate. (132-33)

Although Margaret’s surrender to Thornton is not as drastic as Lenard implies, and definitely not as didactic as Mary’s surrender to Jem in *Mary Barton*, it is important to note that Margaret’s social consciousness and, in many ways, her social power, remains distinctly attached to Thornton position as a dominant male. While growing into socially competent women, both Mary and Margaret are also growing closer to a dependence on themselves, as they are defined by the men in their lives. This dependence will change, however, as Molly Gibson’s social awareness increases.

In the last chapter of *Wives and Daughters*, Roger and Mr. Gibson discuss the end of Roger’s relationship with Cynthia and his new found feelings for Molly. Gaskell writes:

“My dear boy!” said Mr. Gibson, more affected than he liked to show, and laying his hand on Roger’s shoulder . . . “Mind, Molly is not Cynthia. If she were to care for you, she is not one who could transfer her love to the next comer.”

“You mean not as readily as I have done,” replied Roger. “I only wish you could know what a different feeling this is to my boyish love for Cynthia . . . I can see the pitying look in Molly’s eyes as she watched me; I can see it now. And I could beat myself for being such a blind fool as to – What must she think of me? How she must despise me, choosing the false Duessa.”

“Come, come! Cynthia isn’t so bad as that. She’s a very fascinating, faulty creature.”

“ . . . If I called her the false Duesza it was because I wanted to express my sense of the difference between her and Molly as strongly as I could. You must allow for a lover’s exaggeration. Besides, all I wanted to say was, - 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.” (642-43)

Despite Roger’s obviously strong love for Molly, through the entire conversation he is never able to say exactly how Molly differs from Cynthia. He has realized Molly’s sexuality and acknowledged her superiority, but cannot express what it is that has changed her in his eyes because Molly’s identity, along with Gaskell’s completed narrative voice, must remain independent of any male definitions. Unlike Mary in *Mary Barton* and Margaret in *North and South*, Molly’s awakening has occurred without the shaping of a man’s influence and can therefore not be defined through a man’s consciousness. Molly is not Roger’s Molly, but simply Molly and as a result she comes to represent Gaskell’s completed female identity, independent of any male established definitions and capable of supporting the consciousness Gaskell has realized throughout her works.

CONCLUSION

The BBC's 1999 video version of *Wives and Daughters* opens as a young Molly Gibson curiously explores the grounds of The Towers. She peeks in and out of corners, observing the adults around her as they gossip and discuss "important" issues. Bored, Molly escapes to the garden and eventually falls asleep alone and underneath a tree. She is awakened by the questioning glances of Clare, her future step-mother, and Lady Harriet Cumnor, who asks of the tired girl, "Who do you belong to," to which Molly replies, "I am Molly Gibson, please." With this response, and throughout the opening scene of the movie, Molly seems to be characterizing the very consciousness which Elizabeth Gaskell developed throughout the progression of her literary works. Like Molly, Gaskell was a careful observer of the society around her, but also more than willing to strike out on her own. Later, when found on her own, Gaskell holds on to her identity, just as Molly answers Lady Harriet with her name.

Mary Barton, *North and South*, and *Wives and Daughters* are novels full of Gaskell's social commentary and defined by her observations of the world around her. Through Mary's growing love for Jem Wilson, Margaret's interactions between the factory workers and Thornton, and Molly's maturation during the dramas of Hollingford, Gaskell creates a broad portrait of life that both informs and inspires her readers into action. Despite her obvious talent, however, Gaskell is often criticized for her lack of commitment to the art form, and critics argue that she could never equal such novelists as Dickens, Eliot, or Brontë because she is unable to sacrifice herself in the name of her writing. These critics want Gaskell to fit into a specific style, with specific writers, and her refusal to do so represents a failure in their eyes. In their disapproval, they, like Lady

Harriet in the film, are asking Gaskell to whom she belongs and she responds just as Molly Gibson does, by holding on to her identity and metaphorically stating her name.

Throughout the progression of her work, Gaskell's advancement as a novelist can be clearly documented. The development of her narrative voice moves quickly from *Mary Barton*, to *North and South*, and eventually to *Wives and Daughters* so that any holistic observations of the novels prove her growth. Likewise, her individual consciousness seems to evolve throughout the works as well, particularly through the budding awareness of their three main characters. As Mary grows into an understanding of working class life, as Margaret learns to balance her different attachments, and as both girls realize their identities as women, Gaskell's own consciousness seems to be coming into a more independent existence. This existence is culminated in Molly, who after accepting her sexuality and the power it entails, separates herself from any male-centered definitions of self and remains an independent, socially conscious woman.

Because of Molly's obvious independence, *Wives and Daughters* is often considered Gaskell's most complete novel, but this idea is somewhat ironic because of the fact that Gaskell died before she was able to conclude her writing. The argument can be made, however, that the missing final chapter is insignificant when compared to the novel as a whole. Throughout *Wives and Daughters*, Gaskell establishes such a strong foundation and voice that the novel seems to take on a life of its own. In about seven hundred pages, Gaskell is able to subtly develop her characters and their lives so that they become, by the novel's end, powerful forces that drive the story. In this sense, then, a conclusion becomes almost unnecessary because the characters have already

demonstrated the directions their lives will take. Duthie explains Gaskell's literary triumph throughout the novel, writing:

The composition of *Wives and Daughters* represents a higher level of achievement than in any of the other novels. For over seven hundred pages the author succeeds without apparent effort in holding the reader's interest with her 'every-day story' of the doctor's daughter, where dramatic scenes are few and life moves at a leisurely pace. Her narrative has none the less the 'unity, life and colour' she judged essential and moves so naturally towards its conclusion that, when it breaks off unfinished, no one is left in any doubt as to how it would have ended. (182)

Gaskell left behind a few notes to indicate her intentions for the novel's conclusion, but more importantly, she created within its plot, and especially within Molly's independent consciousness, such a strong life force that readers could be left with hardly any doubt as to how the story would complete itself.

The film's portrayal of Molly's statement, "I am Molly Gibson," brings to life the spirit that can be found underneath all of Gaskell's writing - the spirit of action and of truth that drove her to seek a complete female consciousness within her characters and herself. It brings to life the spirit of Elizabeth Gaskell, as much appropriate today as it was in Nineteenth Century, Victorian England, as it demands both an absolute understanding of the self and an absolute respect for the worldly responsibilities the self brings. Gaskell's works are not just a few sentimental calls to take action against poverty, or a few witty observations about the absurdity of rural life. Instead they are a literary map of the progression of the female consciousness in light of vital social issues

and concerns. As her characters struggle with these concerns, and allow their true selves to be realized, they come together to represent the development of Gaskell herself as she grows from the unknown author of *Mary Barton* to the creator of *Wives and Daughters*, able to stand on her own and proclaim, "I am Elizabeth Gaskell."

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