

THE HEART OF ELIZABETH GASKELL:

THE UNITARIAN SPIRIT

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and inspiration to those who come to know her today, as she was to her family and friends in her own lifetime.

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INTRODUCTION

Elizabeth Gaskell is one of four women writers of the Victorian era honored by a 1980 British special stamp issue celebrating a United Nations Decade for Women. Her inclusion with Charlotte and Emily Bronte and George Eliot graphically illustrates the esteem in which this writer is now held as one of the foremost authors of her time.¹ Although often a controversial writer, Mrs. Gaskell was respected and her works were widely read during her lifetime. After her death, however, her literary reputation suffered a steady decline. Despite a growing interest in the Victorian period and its novelists, Mrs. Gaskell and her writings inspired little serious consideration before Annette B. Hopkins' book Elizabeth Gaskell: Her Life and Work in 1952. In that work Hopkins recognized that a "reconsideration of Mrs. Gaskell's place among the Victorian writers of fiction [was] long overdue."²

Since that time there has been considerable effort to bring a greater depth of understanding and appreciation to

¹ "British Set to Honor Four Victorian Writers," Dallas Morning News, 7 July 1980, Sec. A, p. 19.

² Annette B. Hopkins, Elizabeth Gaskell: Her Life and Work (London: Lehmann, 1952), p. 332.

bear on the works of Elizabeth Gaskell. Now it is obvious from even a brief survey that "Both the variety of approaches and the perceptive enthusiasm of recent writers on Mrs. Gaskell's life and fiction testify to the healthy state of Gaskell criticism today."³ In the new upsurge of criticism, there seems to be a consensus that her writing hardly deserved the neglect and indifference which it met over the years after her death. Most critics at that time felt her high standing as an author would be lasting, but even then there were quite striking differences among them concerning the quality of her books. As Arthur Pollard has noted, "The reputation of Cranford was secure,"⁴ but, for example, the Nation's view that Sylvia's Lovers was not valid because of its lack in depicting passion was contradicted by the Saturday Review, which found vivid passion. Macmillan's Magazine praised North and South while the Athenaeum saw in it only a "prejudiced desire to right what is wrong."⁵ Significantly, Cranford was never

³ George H. Ford, ed., Victorian Fiction: A Second Guide to Research (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1978), p. 208.

⁴ Mrs. Gaskell: Novelist and Biographer (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966), p. 2.

⁵ Nation, 7 Dec. 1865, i, pp. 716-17; Saturday Review, 18 Nov. 1865, pp. 638-39, Macmillan's Magazine, Dec. 1865, pp. 153-56; Athenaeum, 18 Nov. 1865, pp. 680-90; cited in Pollard, p. 2.

challenged by critics; few critics felt Mary Barton would achieve lasting fame; yet it has retained its popularity.

Little of the criticism focused on the writing but instead tended to agree or disagree with Mrs. Gaskell's assessment of problems. This focus on the moral aspect rather than on the literary explains a good portion of the misunderstanding of Mrs. Gaskell's works. The books which dealt with timely problems were too often dismissed as outdated, both morally and socially. The universality of many of her themes has been consistently overlooked in the preoccupation with the moral, social, and political aspects. Although her ideas were often considered controversial during her career, Mrs. Gaskell's reputation as a highly ranked writer at the time of her death was first seriously challenged in W. Minto's article in Fortnightly Review. From the time this article was published Pollard detected a beginning trend of regarding Mrs. Gaskell as a "second-class novelist" with a "homely" style, and according her, "a high place among those who are comparatively unambitious in their efforts."⁶ Thus the trend turned gradually to neglect, moving from criticism of

⁶ W. Minto, "Mrs. Gaskell's Novels," Fortnightly Review, Sept. 1878, XXX (N.S. XXIV), 353-69; cited in Pollard, p. 4.

Mrs. Gaskell's moral views to misunderstanding of her motives and to her eventual relegation to those forgotten writers considered minor novelists.

Although the Knutsford edition of Gaskell's works in 1906 contained critical comment in the introduction, as did Clement Shorter's World Classics edition (1906-19), little other critical notice was taken of Mrs. Gaskell's works during the first half of the twentieth century. Studies by A. Stanton Whitfield and G. DeWitt Sanders appeared in 1929 and Yvonne ffrench's short biography in 1949, but it was The Woman Question by Aina Rubenius in 1950 that heralded a renewed interest in Gaskell's works after a long dearth of serious consideration.

This study not only was more scholarly than some of the past works but also pointed the path toward elements that modern readers might find pertinent in Mrs. Gaskell's novels previously shunted aside as dated and didactic. The appearance of the Hopkins biography in 1952 confirmed a new and sustained interest in a neglected and misunderstood artist. Perhaps most indicative of the change in stature accorded Mrs. Gaskell is the comment by Arthur Pollard: "In 1960 I described her as 'a major minor novelist.' Further acquaintance has generated deeper

appreciation."⁷ Further acquaintance has changed more minds than Pollard's.

In addition to the early moral criticism, other factors most certainly influenced Mrs. Gaskell's declining literary reputation before the renewal of interest in her works. The usual weeding-out process seems to have affected her works more than others of her era. Much of an author's reputation seems to depend upon the inclusion of the writer's works in anthologies. The Victorian era was so prolific with writers of fiction that space requirements prohibit all of merit from appearing. Dickens, Thackeray, the Brontes, and George Eliot seem to have crowded Mrs. Gaskell from the available pages. Scott has now suffered a similar fate, and George Eliot may be headed that way.

Also contributing to Mrs. Gaskell's loss of readership is a certain earnestness of her characters. They do not have the color of those of Dickens or Thackeray nor the passion and romance of the Brontes' creations. In subject matter, the social problems have obscured the personal relationships, and at first glance the characters in the

⁷ Arthur Pollard, "The Novels of Mrs. Gaskell," Bulletin of the John Ryland Library, vol. 43, no. 2, p. 423; cited in Pollard, p. 9.

early books might appear only vehicles for presentation of conditions. A deeper look disproves this assumption, but for a very long time few readers took the trouble for the deeper look. The realism of many of Mrs. Gaskell's characters has worked against them in popular regard. If many of her characters lack color, they are certainly more realistic than the unique, often exaggerated characters one finds in Dickens.⁸ But in the world of Manchester, seen through the eyes of an author who regularly attempted to minister to those in need, real life was made up not of colorful figures but of people meeting their problems in various ways, struggling to solve them in the usual manner of providing food, finding and keeping work despite little education, and rearing families in often sordid and depressing conditions. Color, passion, and romance are hard to combat with ordinary, everyday realism. There are no villains to hate, no seductresses to admire, no outlandish caricatures to remember.

Perhaps worst of all, insofar as student appeal is concerned, a strong didactic element, anathema to modern readers, is present in much of her work. In those works in which the didacticism is less obvious, the leisurely

⁸ Angus Easson, ed., North and South, by Elizabeth Gaskell (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. ix.

Victorian style deters the less sophisticated reader. Modern readers, especially students, do not like a lesson, and care even less to receive it in a weighty package. Mrs. Gaskell's short stories could serve as a valuable introduction to her longer works and could easily be included in anthologies, but these have been ignored, possibly because the novel genre has been rightly selected as the dominant development in the Victorian period, with little emphasis placed on shorter fictional works.

A trend toward greater understanding of the Victorian era may change this state of affairs. A new and deeper appreciation of this period has brought a belated realization that Mrs. Gaskell's works fill a previously unnoticed void. Like Jane Austen, she delights in the detailed minutiae of everyday life and commonplace customs, but like Dickens, she never loses sight of the suffering in the real world. Her unique contribution lies in her ability to view society realistically while maintaining her optimism in the goodness of man. One of Mrs. Gaskell's greatest literary assets is her presentation of the commonplace, even the lowly, in character and setting, while investing the characters with human dignity in the face of enormous, often insurmountable problems in a changing world.

Her intention in the beginning was to provide a voice for the poor whose suffering had been too long overlooked.⁹ These Manchester workers were often perceived as uneducated louts, alienated and brutish, living like animals;¹⁰ however, because of Mrs. Gaskell's church work involvement on a day-to-day basis she knew these workers as individuals, and her aim was to let the reading public meet them as such, not just as statistics but as persons possessing the senses and emotions of the destitute workers and their families.

In form, too, Mrs. Gaskell adhered to the commonplace structure, for the rhythm in the novels moves through antagonism, or conflict, to reconciliation. The opposing forces in this conflict are far from equal, with all the power of social convention, church, and public opinion, sometimes represented in a single character, ranged against a lone individual or a group of individuals. The reconciliation may not contain a happy ending, for it is often one between opposing individuals who have both lost and gained. Sometimes the reconciliation is between the

⁹ Lionel Stevenson, The English Novel: A Panorama (London: Constable and Company, Limited, 1961), p. 279.

¹⁰ John Lucas, The Literature of Change: Studies in the Nineteenth Century Provincial Novel (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1977), p. 39.

individual and God. During the conflict the reader has been made aware of the uniqueness of the individual, as well as the social forces brought to bear on him. The attitudes of society were often based on fear, misunderstanding, or unexamined following of convention. This conflict, ordinary as it may be in the real world, is nevertheless an unnatural state and the following calm restores an order to society, effected through reconciliation. The reconciliation of previously opposing forces is brought about by heightened understanding, which in turn releases a spirit of brotherhood and kinship.

David Cecil in Early Victorian Novelists views Mrs. Gaskell's insistence on presenting her moral views and the need for reconciliation as a distinct liability which increases her

. . . natural disinclination to keep her proper range. . . . In this she stands alone among her contemporaries. The others . . . had the same moral ideas but though they often enjoyed expounding them they never looked on this as their first duty as novelists. Mrs. Gaskell, devout wife of a Unitarian minister, sometimes did. A large part of her work is inspired, not by the wish to embody an artistic conception, but to teach her readers what she considered an important moral lesson.¹¹

¹¹ David Cecil, Early Victorian Novelists (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1935), pp. 220-21.

This statement is basically true except for two points. The "lesson"¹² she wishes to teach is nothing less than Christian tolerance, love, and goodwill; her "proper range"¹³ was hardly confined to the easy-going rural life depicted in Cranford since she alone of her contemporaries lived and worked among the people in Manchester and other places of which she wrote. Her distinctive and unusual combination of realistic presentation of characters at odds with society with the spiritual revelation that such knowledge could bring to her reader marks her work as peculiarly her own.

Just as Mrs. Gaskell was never willing to accept the Victorian stereotype of factory workers, neither was she satisfied to accept other stereotypes and conventions of the time without question. Mrs. Gaskell was not a rebel in the sense of wishing to destroy the social fabric; she wanted rather to mend it or replace worn spots with strong new threads. Accordingly, Mrs. Gaskell's concern reflected the general purpose of many Victorian novels. As Deidre David recognized, "they described and sometimes explained the workings of a society in the process of rapid and

¹² Cecil, p. 220.

¹³ Cecil, p. 220.

unprecedented alteration, and . . . they tried to clarify a proper and satisfactory place for the individual in that society."¹⁴ In addition, these novels "engaged in a complex series of mediations between the social actuality they represented and the desires of their predominantly middle-class readers that things not be the way they were in that actuality."¹⁵ Thus, Mrs. Gaskell brought her readers a vision of a way to change the actuality, to bring people together. True, it is a simple way, one of the oldest, but also one of the most difficult. The requirements are an intellect willing to learn and a heart willing to love one's fellow man, in fact the Unitarian spirit.

This study will be devoted to the reflection of the Unitarian spirit in Elizabeth Gaskell's major novels: Mary Barton, Ruth, North and South, Sylvia's Lovers, and Wives and Daughters--as well as the shorter works Cranford, "Cousin Phillis," and "Lois the Witch." It will attempt to show that an overall unity exists in Mrs. Gaskell's works in that they consistently express her Unitarian view of life. The reconciliation element which has been frequently

¹⁴ Deidre David, Fictions of Resolution in Three Victorian Novels (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), p. ix.

¹⁵ David, p. ix.

commented on " . . . as the all too obvious climax of many Gaskell plots is an inevitable outcome of her feeling for unity and human brotherhood."¹⁶

The didactic, moralistic element is present in her works as a conscious effort to present the practice of Christian love as the key to social improvement and family harmony. Chapter One will present background of both Elizabeth Gaskell's life and the Unitarian belief and practice to which she adhered. Also included will be a short history of the development of the Unitarian Church for an appreciation of its rich heritage, so important in Mrs. Gaskell's life. Further chapters will treat specific Unitarian beliefs as they appear in the various works. The Unitarian concepts that affect the morality of a society as well as the role of the individual within such a society will also be examined. Furthermore, the Unitarian trust in the intelligence of man to analyze values and make decisions, as well as the traditional Unitarian belief in the value of education and its contribution to tolerance, the touchstone of Unitarian practice, will be discussed. A summarizing statement in the

¹⁶ Edgar Wright, Mrs. Gaskell: The Basis for Reassessment (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 13.

conclusion will focus on the implications and importance of the Unitarian principles as a unifying factor extending across and pervading Mrs. Gaskell's works.

CHAPTER ONE

THE UNITARIAN HERITAGE

As Virginia Woolf so aptly observed, ". . . every secret of a writer's soul, every experience of his life, every quality of his mind is written large in his work."¹ Never was this statement better illustrated than in the works of Elizabeth Gaskell. The experiences of life that Virginia Woolf cited as being evident in an author's work are indeed present and duly traced by Mrs. Gaskell's biographers. Geoffrey Sharps in his work Observation and Invention has made an exhaustive review of the life experiences influencing Mrs. Gaskell's writing. As Sharps noted, Mrs. Gaskell observed certain things and "made her own, unique, comments on them,"² moralistic or otherwise. Even her earliest experiences are closely related to Unitarianism.³

¹ Virginia Woolf, Orlando: A Biography (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1928), p. 209.

² John Geoffrey Sharps, Mrs. Gaskell's Observation and Invention: A Study of Her Non-Biographic Works (Fontwell, Sussex: Linden Press, 1970), p. 7.

³ Angus Easson, Elizabeth Gaskell (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, Ltd., 1979), p. 4.

This ideology pervaded Elizabeth Gaskell's beliefs, lifestyle, and writing; Unitarianism is the heart of all she thought, did, or wrote. Wider than a viewpoint, more pervasive than a motif, more deeply integrated and all-encompassing than a theme, the author's Unitarian spirit found its expression in art through her writing as it manifested itself in her life in the act of living its principles.

This integration of life expressed in art is glimpsed in the comment by Walter Allen that Mrs. Gaskell's "serenity of spirit . . . existed side by side with a vigorous social conscience of which [the novels Mary Barton and North and South] are the fine expression."⁴ The flaw here, however, is in viewing the spirit and the conscience as separate in Mrs. Gaskell, albeit "side by side." The peculiar influence of Unitarianism melds the two--spirit and conscience--into one. The spirit can be serene only when the conscience is clear concerning one's duty. Unitarianism in its ideal practice is as much action as belief. It is a religion characterized by tolerance, rational thought, charitable works, and scrupulous

⁴ Walter Allen, The English Novel (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1959), p. 210.

honesty.⁵ These characteristics form the basis of Elizabeth Gaskell's life as well as the four corners of her literary world. At the center of both worlds for Mrs. Gaskell, realistic as well as literary is

. . . a recognized dependence of man upon the power greater than himself which he feels at the heart of things, animating, guiding, reconciling all by the action of a will that is neither above law nor subject to it, but is itself Law.⁶

Born at Chelsea in 1810, Elizabeth Cleghorn Stevenson had a heritage at birth of the particular kind of Dissent expressed in Unitarianism. Her father, William Stevenson, had prepared for the ministry,⁷ but certain scruples concerning earning his living by the practice of his religion caused him to cast about for other occupation. He eventually became Keeper of the Treasury Records and brought his family to London. Her mother, who died when Elizabeth was scarcely one year old, had been a Holland, and through her "Gaskell has connections with the great intellectual families of the Darwins and the Wedgwoods."⁸

⁵ Ephraim Emerton, Unitarian Thought (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1925), pp. 1-10.

⁶ Emerton, p. 9.

⁷ Yvonne ffrench, Mrs. Gaskell (London: Home and Van Thal, Ltd., 1949), p. 7.

⁸ Easson, p. 2.

After Mrs. Stevenson's death, Elizabeth was taken to live with her widowed maternal aunt, Mrs. Lumb of Knutsford, and was often in the company of her Holland relatives. These people were devout Unitarians, and the entire fabric of her life was composed of close family interaction within a framework of Unitarian worship and way of life compatible with the charm and easygoing pace of Knutsford.⁹

The provincial life at Knutsford did not, however, extend to the quality of the family members with whom the young Elizabeth was associated. Although she seems to have had little contact with her father after her removal to Knutsford, her life there provided ample love and stimulating attention. Readers who picture Elizabeth growing to young womanhood in an exclusively female setting in a provincial backwater lack the true circumstances surrounding her girlhood. Even though the immediate household of her Aunt Lumb contained besides herself and Elizabeth only Aunt Lumb's sister Abigail, Elizabeth did not lack for male influence and guidance nor young cousins as playmates.¹⁰ Her three Holland uncles, her grandfather, Samuel Holland, and her own brother, twelve years her

⁹ Winifred Gerin, Elizabeth Gaskell: A Biography (London: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 13.

¹⁰ Gerin, p. 10.

elder, formed a closeknit extended family of ". . . strong Dissenting stock."¹¹

All of the uncles had large families, each being married a second time, and all led busy, fruitful, and interesting lives.¹² The closest uncle, Dr. Peter Holland, was a local surgeon with a sizeable practice, a man dedicated to his work despite a severe injury some five years before Elizabeth came to Knutsford. Elizabeth often accompanied him on his rounds, and ". . . he was for her always the model of the practical, active man."¹³ Another uncle, Samuel Holland, was a successful quarry owner with holdings in Liverpool and Wales. Still another uncle, Swinton Holland, established himself as a banker and an active participant in London society.¹⁴ These early family influences seemed to focus on vigorous and successful lives within a Unitarian framework of dedication to family, community, and religion.

As Elizabeth grew, her social circle widened, yet still contained the Unitarian family spirit and guidance at its core. Her brother, in irregular visits to

¹¹ Gerin, p. 11.

¹² Gerin, pp. 10-11.

¹³ Gerin, p. 11.

¹⁴ Easson, p. 11.

Knutsford, influenced and encouraged Elizabeth's early attempts at writing and kept up an affectionate correspondence until his mysterious disappearance abroad.¹⁵ Family influence was also a factor in the choice of a school for Elizabeth. Avonbank, operated by a distant relative of Mr. Stevenson's second wife, provided Elizabeth with general instruction augmented by dancing, drawing, and music, as well as language study in Italian and French. Her memories of the school were pleasant ones, and Avonbank served as inspiration for setting in later episodes in her writing.¹⁶

Family care and influence did not end with her school days. After leaving Avonbank in 1827 for a sojourn in London, she later stayed with the Rev. William Turner family in Newcastle, ". . . a typical example of the connections between Unitarian families."¹⁷ William Turner had been a friend of Elizabeth's cousin Henry Holland since school days. Turner was a schoolmaster and a Unitarian minister whose particular type of social, practical Christianity must have ". . . appealed both to

¹⁵ Easson, p. 15.

¹⁶ Easson, p. 3.

¹⁷ Easson, p. 3.

the compassionate side of her nature and to her strong sense of justice."¹⁸ Elizabeth visited the Rev. Turner's family two winters and always wrote of her association with the family with love and deepest admiration.

On one of these visits, because of a cholera epidemic, Elizabeth and the Rev. Turner's daughter Ann were sent ultimately to Manchester to stay with the Turners' eldest daughter, wife of the Rev. Robberds, minister of Cross Street Unitarian Chapel. It was on this visit that Elizabeth met William Gaskell, at that time serving as the Rev. Robberds' assistant. Later he would become the pastor there, a position which he held until his death. He would also gain reknown as a lecturer, teacher, hymn writer, and essayist. Her marriage to a leading Unitarian minister of a large congregation in a fast-paced manufacturing center proved to be a turning point in her life.

Other than her family, the strongest factor during Elizabeth's young years at Knutsford was religion as she experienced its teachings in the "little primitive Unitarian Chapel in Brook Street,"¹⁹ which she attended

¹⁸ Gerin, p. 41.

¹⁹ Gerin, p. 13.

regularly with her aunt. The simplicity and informality of the little church were much the same as they had been since its inception in 1698. Elizabeth became close friends with the minister Henry Green and his family. The groundwork was laid here for an attitude of tolerance, charity, and service that complemented Elizabeth's own "generous and compassionate nature."²⁰

The influence of Unitarianism in Mrs. Gaskell's life is even more pervasive and deeply ingrained than that of sensitivity to surroundings and family. Unitarianism was such an integral part of her life that trying to form a concept of her separate from her religion would be like trying to separate color from the rainbow. Religion was not, for Mrs. Gaskell, a putting on of something special or a formal worship, although of course it included this, but instead a way of life, a unique belief and faith outwardly manifested in a code of behavior upon which every aspect of her life was based. Mrs. Gaskell could no more have written novels without her Unitarian beliefs at their center than she could have reared her children without the guidance of these beliefs.

As the particular imaginative world of a writer is wrought from that artist's "conception of life . . . in

²⁰ Gerin, p. 14.

the case of Elizabeth Gaskell there can be no doubt that hers was a religious conception."²¹ Her faith in her Unitarian beliefs certainly "determined her interpretation of those areas of life with which she dealt."²² The ethical considerations and religious implications in Mrs. Gaskell's works comprise the core and purpose of all that she wrote. The actual impact of Unitarianism on Mrs. Gaskell's life and work is difficult for the modern reader to understand without a grasp of the history, the development, and the characteristics of the Unitarian religion and tradition as these existed in Victorian England. To the Victorian no such study would have been needed, for the various forms of Dissent were known to some extent by almost everyone. The reactions to the Unitarian Church by the public often ranged from mild prejudice to active fanaticism.²³

By the nineteenth century, however, many Unitarians, particularly in the northern and midland counties where their numbers were quite high, held an assured place in

²¹ Enid L. Duthie, The Themes of Elizabeth Gaskell (Totowa, N. J.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1980), p. 150.

²² Duthie, p. 150.

²³ E. L. Elliot-Binns, Religion in the Victorian Era, 2nd ed. (London: Lutterworth Press, 1946), p. 344.

society.²⁴ Of course, this situation had not always been the case, and indeed, was not always the case even in Mrs. Gaskell's lifetime or her experience. For example, although she became fast friends with Charlotte Bronte, she always felt Miss Bronte's father, an Anglican minister, lacked complete trust in her because of her religious values. After Miss Bronte's marriage, Mrs. Gaskell was under the apprehension that Mr. Nicholls, Mr. Bronte's assistant as well as Charlotte Bronte's new husband, would reflect the elder Bronte's reserve and probably attempt to discourage the friendship.²⁵

Another incident which acknowledged a bias toward Mrs. Gaskell's religion occurred on one of her trips abroad with her daughters after she had become a rather widely known author. While the group was visiting in Heidelberg, an encounter with Charles Bosanquet, an Evangelical, precipitated a plea by her daughter Meta for her mother to explain their religious affiliation to Mr. Bosanquet, who had assumed they were Anglicans.²⁶ He had never met a Unitarian, and subsequently he and Mrs. Gaskell exchanged

²⁴ Duthie, p. 150.

²⁵ Edgar Wright, Mrs. Gaskell: The Basis for Reassessment (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 38.

²⁶ Easson, p. 11.

information and ideas quite amicably. A letter of October 19, 1858, to her oldest daughter, Marianne, describes the conversation that ensued on the walk home. At that time Mrs. Gaskell and Mr. Bosanquet discussed several points, with Mrs. Gaskell pointing out to Mr. Bosanquet that the Trinity is not mentioned in the Bible. Mr. Bosanquet then said, "that he felt a communion with 'anyone who seeks for their religion in the Bible and finds it there.'"²⁷

Although Unitarians stressed religious tolerance, other sects and religions often showed prejudice toward Unitarians. They were particular targets of hostility from both Anglicans and Evangelicals because of their anti-Trinitarian belief. For example, Bosanquet's parents were so outraged at his friendship with a Unitarian that they would never even agree to meet Mrs. Gaskell.²⁸ Also, a public advertisement in the Norfolk Chronicle in 1860 labeled Unitarians, "'outcasts from the Christian hope.'"²⁹

²⁷ Elizabeth Gaskell, The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell, ed. J. A. V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1966), GL 405. [This and all future references to Gaskell letters will use the Chappel and Pollard numbering system.]

²⁸ Letters, GL 485.

²⁹ Easson, p. 11.

Understandably, Unitarians often found themselves the target of hostility and prejudice, but they continued to believe that Christianity should be first and foremost a way of life. They attached more importance to the spirit than the letter of doctrine. This view is clearly illustrated by an incident in her life. To her American friend Charles Eliot Norton, as part of a long letter in March of 1859, Mrs. Gaskell mentioned an opportunity which Mr. Gaskell had declined, an appointment as minister to Essex Street Chapel in London. Mr. Ham, Mr. Gaskell's colleague, took the position, to Mrs. Gaskell's delight:

Mr. Ham goes (and we women Gaskells are none of us sorry--oh! for some really spiritual devotional preaching instead of controversy about doctrines,--about which I am more and more certain we can never be certain in this world.)³⁰

Such a view of the importance of spirit as opposed to doctrinal controversy is the very essence of tolerance in the Unitarian view.³¹

Although Mrs. Gaskell was typically Unitarian in her tolerance for other religions, she seldom expressed her

³⁰ Letters, GL 418.

³¹ Raymond V. Holt, The Unitarian Contribution to Social Progress in England (London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1938), p. 276.

deepest beliefs, preferring rather to live the religion she professed. Unlike others, she "never obtruded her religion on others."³² In a letter to a famous Puritan of the day, John Bright, Mrs. Gaskell said that she had read some material which he had sent her but admitted she was "not (Unitarianly) orthodox."³³ Her charming invitation to Mr. Bright to visit Silverdale specified, "I won't talk theology--Unitarian or otherwise--,"³⁴ and she assured him he was to concentrate only on enjoying himself.

Unlike many of her contemporaries, Mrs. Gaskell never used her religion to tyrannize over her children nor allowed it to crush the natural gaiety of her own spirits.³⁵ In a letter written to her daughter Marianne in 1854, evidently in answer to a comment concerning enjoyment of the Anglican Church service, Mrs. Gaskell expressed sympathy for Marianne's love of beautiful ritual but took a stand for rational belief:

I have been thinking about Church. I quite agree with you in feeling more devotional in Church than in Chapel; and I wish our Puritan ancestors

³² Gerin, p. 41.

³³ Letters, GL 593.

³⁴ Letters, GL 593.

³⁵ Gerin, p. 41.

had not left out so much that they might have kept in of the beautiful and impressive Church service. But I always do feel as if the Litany--the beginning of it I mean,--and one or two other parts did so completely go against my belief that it would be wrong to deaden my sense of it's [sic] serious error by hearing it too often. It seems to me so distinctly to go against some of the clearest of our Saviour's words in which he so expressly tells us to pray to God alone. My own wish would be that you should go to Chapel in the morning, and to Church in the evening, when there is nothing except the Doxology to offend one's sense of truth. I am sure this would be right for me; although I am so fond of the Church service and prayers as a whole that I should feel tempted as you do. With our feelings and preference for the Church-service I think it is a temptation not to have a fixed belief; but I know it is wrong to not clear our minds as much as possible as to the nature of that God, and tender Saviour, whom we can not love properly unless we try and define them clearly to ourselves. Do you understand me my darling! I have often wished to talk to you about this. Then the one thing I am clear and sure about is this--that Jesus Christ was not equal to His father; that, however divine a being he was not God; and that worship as God addressed to Him is therefore wrong in me; and that it is my duty to deny myself the gratification of constantly attending a service (like the morning service) in a part of which I thoroughly disagree, I like exceedingly going to afternoon service.³⁶

Such statements as being "not (Unitarianly) orthodox"³⁷ and "certain only of the uncertainty of doctrines,"³⁸ while

³⁶ Letters, GL 198a.

³⁷ Letters, GL 593.

³⁸ Letters, GL 418.

admitting she found a more "devotional"³⁹ feeling in the Anglican Church service, seem strange indeed for a woman married to a leading Unitarian minister who was herself active in church work throughout most of her life. These statements would hardly seem those of a woman whose Unitarian religion is often said to be the greatest influence on her work. Upon closer investigation into the background and development of the Unitarian Church, however, it is quite evident that within the church there was much latitude for differences. A wide divergence of belief was possible because of the Unitarian position on individual rational pursuit of truth. Tolerance for shades of differences in beliefs within their own ranks as well as the differing beliefs held by other Dissenters, Anglicans, and Catholics was a mark of Unitarian acceptance that each must arrive at the truth in his own way.

Possibly one of the reasons Unitarians felt so strongly that tolerance of others' beliefs was so important may be traced to the persecution inflicted upon early believers whose unorthodox ideas would later form the basis of Unitarianism in England. Known as Socinianism or Arianism, the roots of the major Unitarian belief stretch

³⁹ Letters, GL 198a.

back even past the teachings of Arius, a fourth-century priest of Alexandria. The Arian concept of Christ was based on early Jewish-Christian ideas that called Jesus the Son of Man and the true prophet. An unorthodox precedent had been set even earlier by Christian theologians of the second and third centuries who were influenced by Middle Platonism. God was "the Eternal One and Christ . . . the divine Logos (Word) who was the image of God and who enabled man to become one with God."⁴⁰ Arius's views were accepted for a time by the eastern Roman Empire, but were declared heretical at the Council of Nicea in 325. Orthodox reasoning that a subordinate Christ could not save man was adopted by the Nicaea and Chalcedon (451) councils firmly establishing the doctrine of the Trinity with Christ as God-man. Thus Arianism, an early form of Unitarianism, was formally denounced by the orthodox bishops. The concept of the restoration of all mankind to God on the Last Day (Early Universalism) was also denounced by orthodoxy, upholding the finality of heaven and hell. Although some liberal, radical, and rationalist reformers continued to adhere to the concepts of Unitarianism

⁴⁰ "Unitarians and Universalists," Encyclopaedia Britannica, 11th ed. (1911), vol. xxvii, p. 860.

(Arianism) and Universalism, the movement lapsed into obscurity and disorganization for many years.

The next notable departure from orthodoxy occurred when Michael Servetus was burned at the stake in Geneva in 1553 for his refusal to renounce a belief in "the ineffable One as the basis of reality"⁴¹ rather than the Trinity. Despite pleas for tolerance from liberal humanists, others were also martyred or exiled. Some Anabaptists or radical reformers were also anti-Trinitarian, but the strongest gains for the anti-Trinitarian believers came with the establishment of the Minor Reformed Church or Polish Brethren which was based on a Unitarian theology inspired by Faustus Socinus, an Italian exile. This church flourished from its inception in 1565 until the seventeenth century. The Polish movement influenced radical thought in Holland and England through publications and the preaching of exiled ministers after the breakup of the church. Unitarian theology eventually became established in Transylvania, where it was granted religious tolerance and eventually legal recognition.⁴²

The acceptance which the Transylvania church attained did not promote tolerance for Unitarian ideas in other

⁴¹ Encyclopaedia Britannica, 11th ed., p. 860.

⁴² Encyclopaedia Britannica, 11th ed., p. 860.

countries, however. It was the Polish influence that first gained a foothold in England, but not without struggle. In London in 1614 and again in 1652 an English translation of the Polish Socinian catechism was burned. As the movement became more widespread John Bibble, an English Socinian, was exiled and some Unitarian Anabaptists were even burned during the reigns of Elizabeth I and James I.⁴³

As important as these early developments were, especially in establishing the precedents of independence of thought and action, the mainstream of British Unitarianism was an outgrowth of Calvinist Puritanism. The path was not a direct one. The great majority of the oldest Unitarian congregations "came into being as a result of the Great Ejection in 1662 when over 1,500 clergymen gave up their positions in the Church of England."⁴⁴ The Anglican churchmen such as Samuel Clark who held such unorthodox ideas were in a most awkward position. If they remained in the Church of England, "their influence was nullified by the incompatibility of their views with their subscription to the Thirty-nine Articles."⁴⁵ Anglican

⁴³ Earl Morse Wilbur, A History of Unitarianism: Socinianism and Its Antecedents (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1947), p. 3.

⁴⁴ Holt, p. 288.

⁴⁵ Holt, p. 288.

reformers petitioned Parliament to relax subscription, but this move proved unsuccessful.

The members of most of the congregations established in 1662 formed Dissenting congregations which often called themselves Presbyterians, but "they had no Presbyterian organization and no connection with the Scottish Presbyterians."⁴⁶ Others were Independent or Congregationalist while still others were Baptist.

Theophilus Lindsey, founder of the Essex Street Chapel, established the first Unitarian chapel in England in 1774, long after the Great Ejection. In leaving the Church of England because he could not in good conscience subscribe to the Articles, he was the exception rather than the rule in continuing in a ministry. The ejected ministers and those who left later, as Lindsey did, usually did not continue in the ministry but instead took up some other career.⁴⁷

In this respect, the character of Mr. Hale in the book North and South is more typical than the real-life Mr. Lindsey of Essex Street. Mr. Hale was not required to give up his living if he remained in the same position,

⁴⁶ Holt, p. 288.

⁴⁷ Holt, pp. 287-88.

but if he accepted a calling to another parish he would be required to reaffirm his subscription to the Articles. He felt that if he could not swear to these, even if he turned down the calling to avoid the dilemma, that he was practicing his religion under false pretenses.⁴⁸ Mr. Hale took a job as a tutor in Manchester. There is no indication that he considered seeking a position elsewhere in other faiths. This attitude is quite consistent with the scrupulous honesty practiced by the Unitarians.

Many of the churches established because of the Ejection died out during the eighteenth century, but of those that survived, about 160 became Unitarian. Thus more than half of the existing Unitarian Churches were descended from seventeenth-century Puritans.

It must be remembered, of course, that the ejected ministers of 1662 did not declare themselves nor consider themselves Unitarian. Their theology did not strictly conform to Unitarian belief at that time, nor did that of the congregations that established themselves in Dissent. Instead, they gradually came to be Unitarian in belief, if not name, after the middle of the eighteenth century.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Elizabeth Gaskell, North and South (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1970), p. 67.

⁴⁹ Owen Chadwick, The Victorian Church, Part I, 3rd ed. (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1971), p. 391.

These Dissenters' places of worship were often referred to as meeting houses, meaning "not a place where men meet each other but as a place where men meet God."⁵⁰ Traditionally these meeting houses were called chapels, the formal name usually containing only the location and not often including the denomination. For example, the large Unitarian church where Mr. Gaskell served for so many years was the Cross Street Chapel, not designated formally as to denomination. Many congregations which had considered themselves Presbyterian after the Ejection continued under the name of Presbyterian even after they had embraced the Unitarian beliefs. This change of belief was a gradual one, but by 1830 the majority were Unitarian in creed, "and of course, these congregations occupied the property and used the endowments of their Presbyterian forebears."⁵¹ The little Knutsford chapel that Mrs. Gaskell recalled all of her life with such fond memories was just such a meeting house. Established at a time when Dissenters tried to remain as inconspicuous as possible, the chapel had existed since 1698, the same year when an act was passed making a denial of the Trinity doctrine a penal offense.

⁵⁰ Holt, p. 289.

⁵¹ Chadwick, p. 392.

The Trust Deeds of such Dissenting chapels as were established at that time did not usually prescribe the nature of the doctrine to be preached there. These "Open Trusts"⁵² were thought by the nineteenth century Unitarians to have been set forth in this manner by their Puritan forebears so as to "allow for future theological developments, and . . . this openness of mind was a characteristic of English Presbyterians."⁵³ These new Presbyterians may well have been the most reluctant Dissenters of all time. They maintained a position of hope that they could be reunited with the Church of England, and "for a generation they refused to ordain new ministers of their own and only began to do so when it was quite clear that their hopes of comprehension would not be gratified."⁵⁴ As hopes dimmed for reinstatement as a part of the Anglican Church, the Presbyterian congregations began to take on a unique character, developing certain characteristics as well as solidifying their beliefs. Unitarians were not averse to an open proclamation of their beliefs. Their sermons were more intellectual than those of many dissenting pastors.

⁵² Holt, p. 289.

⁵³ Holt, p. 289.

⁵⁴ Holt, p. 295.

The congregations were generally educated, and they varied more than most churches and congregations in their beliefs.

The ideas of three men greatly influenced the Presbyterian, or moderate party among the English Dissenters. Calvin's doctrine of the absolute providential rule of God, the scientist Isaac Newton's picture of a mathematically regular universe, and the philosopher John Locke's plea for common sense and open discussion fused to form a nucleus for a different kind of statement of faith. Presbyterian Dissenters preached God as the sole creator and ruler of the world, best worshipped by a moral life, with Christ as a messenger for God and a model for man. Other than a rejection of the concept of the Trinity, "it is hard to find a doctrine which all those in the movement held."⁵⁵ A belief in the subordinate rank of Christ is "incidental"⁵⁶ rather than essential. Many Dissenters questioned the teaching about atonement and hellfire.⁵⁷ This different kind of statement of faith came finally to be that which was eventually recognized as Unitarianism. The moderate Presbyterians became something quite different in time although in most cases the congregations still

⁵⁵ Wilbur, p. 3.

⁵⁶ Wilbur, p. 3.

⁵⁷ Chadwick, p. 392.

met in the same chapels where they had been meeting since the Ejection had forced them from the Anglican Church.

This gradual trend toward independence of belief illustrates a notable feature of Unitarianism, the tendency to work out logically the wider principles of the Reformation rather than to formulate systems of theology. Unitarians resisted laying down a creed, stressing rather a free inquiry by individuals into personal religious belief. Unitarian Churches are in agreement on many points of doctrine with the theology of all churches and sects, both past and present.⁵⁸

Despite the wide divergence of opinion taken for granted in the Presbyterian and Unitarian Churches, a divisive note arose with John Wesley's evangelical revival. This Evangelical movement resulted in a renewal of orthodoxy that subsequently split the Dissenters into orthodox and liberal factions. Joseph Priestly, better known to moderns as a scientist, was a dedicated Dissenting minister who began to preach Unitarian Christianity. His concept of Jesus was that although a man, he was unique in his miracles and resurrection, with only God being all-powerful and all-knowing. Many old Presbyterian

⁵⁸ Wilbur, p. 586.

congregations who had not followed the evangelical lead of John Wesley became Unitarian, augmented by other groups of various kinds which adopted the Unitarian position. A precedent was set at this time by Dissenting preachers to use only the words of Scripture when asked to define their faith in orthodox terms.⁵⁹

As the split between the two factions widened, those who were determined to prove that dissent did not lead to heresy felt they must loosen the connection with Unitarianism. This break was finally accomplished by means of two lawsuits, by which the Unitarians inadvertently brought disaster upon themselves. When, in 1816, one of the Unitarian ministers was discovered to be in actuality a Trinitarian, the congregation tried to dismiss him, but it was held that their chapel was built when it was illegal to be a Unitarian; therefore no endowment could have been made to support Unitarian belief. Also, money later collected would necessarily be connected to the endowment and thus given to the Trinitarians.⁶⁰ The effect of the lawsuit was the loss of legal rights to chapel property by the Unitarians. The other case involved a fund left in 1704 by Lady Hewley for retired preachers or their widows

⁵⁹ Holt, p. 280.

⁶⁰ Chadwick, p. 393.

and administered by Unitarian trustees. Independents at Manchester challenged the trusteeship, and in 1833 won the suit. On appeals, the judgement was upheld finally by the House of Lords in 1842. This decision made it apparent "that anyone could challenge a Unitarian congregation and strip its endowments provided that the congregation existed before 1813,"⁶¹ which was the first time Unitarians were legally recognized. The Open Trust Deeds mentioned earlier had seemed in prior years to be an instrument peculiarly suited to those precepts of intellectual freedom later to be called Unitarian. The ruling, in effect, placed the developments resulting in Unitarianism beyond the scope intended in the Open Trusts.

The question was finally resolved, however, by the reasonable plea that "within living societies doctrine cannot be static."⁶² Finally a bill was introduced into the House of Lords on May 3, 1844, to remedy what many saw as an injustice and even a hardship in some cases. Known finally as the Dissenters Chapels Act, the bill was passed, but not without much agitation.⁶³ With this act, the

⁶¹ Chadwick, p. 397.

⁶² Chadwick, p. 397.

⁶³ Chadwick, p. 398.

little Brook Street Chapel at Knutsford established in 1698 well before the date of 1813 was spared the problems that might have arisen. Cross Street Chapel in Manchester, established in 1662 and destined to play such a dominant role in the lives of William and Elizabeth Gaskell and indeed in the course of the city itself, was particularly vulnerable until the Dissenters Chapel Act removed the danger of seizure of endowment and property.

Status and use of chapels also became the focus of one of the five points listed as grievances and formulated by the United Committee in 1833. From October of 1753 a man and woman could be legally married only in the Parish Church of England, unless they were Quakers or Jews.⁶⁴ Thus the little chapel that meant so much to the early religious life of Elizabeth Stevenson could not be the scene of her wedding; nor was it legal to be married in Cross Street Chapel, despite the fact that Mr. Robberds, whom Elizabeth revered, was its minister and William Gaskell, the groom, was the chapel's assistant minister.

Other points that many Dissenters saw as infringements of their civil rights included the following points:

- 1) State registration of births was permitted only in baptismal registers of parish churches.

⁶⁴ Chadwick, p. 80.

Children whose parents had chosen another form of worship were thus baptised into a faith which the parents had rejected.

2) The church yards that belonged to the Anglican Church were the burial sites for everyone. Until private companies established neutral cemeteries in London and a few chapels had little graveyard gardens, "the Dissenter must be buried in a cemetery either with rites which he disapproved or in total silence."⁶⁵

3) The degrees of the two great universities of Oxford and Cambridge, as well as a new college in Durham, were confined to those persons subscribing to the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England. These restrictions effectively barred Dissenters of every kind from the Universities.

The University College was founded in London in 1826 but could not confer degrees. To obtain a degree, a Dissenter was forced to cross the border into Scotland as William Gaskell had done. Mr. Gaskell remained a life-long advocate for education for everyone and proved an indefatigable worker in Manchester College, established

⁶⁵ Chadwick, p. 80.

in 1786. The United Committee placed the need for Dissenters to be admitted to Oxford and Cambridge to matriculate as a pressing matter.⁶⁶

4) Local taxation was administered by the parish church through a meeting of members to set tax rates for the parish. These taxes on all citizens were used not only to aid the poor and maintain roads but also to repair the parish church and pay for various other items concerning the church set by convention. This method of taxation compelled Dissenters by law to subscribe to a religion which they rejected. Organized resistance to this proved to be the "chief weapon for driving a wedge in the power of the Church of England."⁶⁷

The movement for abolishment of the four grievances as well as the parish marriage requirement found broad support. Public petitions in 1833 numbering 1,094 for relief from Dissenting disabilities gained 343,094 signatures.⁶⁸

These signatures represented a significant number in light of the general decline in church-going especially in

⁶⁶ Chadwick, p. 80.

⁶⁷ Chadwick, p. 81.

⁶⁸ Chadwick, p. 80.

the Church of England. Despite revitalization efforts in the Anglican Church early in the nineteenth century, as the towns grew this trend of non-attendance became increasingly evident in urban areas, particularly in the Church of England. A surprisingly large number of Dissenters of various kinds did attend church, however.⁶⁹ Although the Victorian era is perceived as a church-oriented society, the Church of England realized that as rural people moved to the cities they did not align themselves with a new church there. A survey which was made in 1851 "revealed in painful detail that the church had not succeeded in securing or recapturing the allegiance of large sections of society and particularly of the urban working-classes."⁷⁰ On Census Sunday March 30, 1851, there were eighteen million people in England and Wales, but "only seven million were shown to have attended a place of religious worship on that date."⁷¹ This figure was in all probability even an inflated number as those who attended both morning and evening worship were counted twice. Of

⁶⁹ J. H. Bettey, Church and Community: The Parish Church in English Life (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1979), p. 100.

⁷⁰ Bettey, p. 128.

⁷¹ Bettey, p. 128.

this seven million, only three and one-half million attended the Anglican Church. Even these statistics do not reflect the "pitifully small"⁷² attendance in cities as the overall figure represented "the comparatively large attendance in rural areas and the small country towns."⁷³ The Church of England had lost the loyalty of the working people.

It has been suggested that when people lived in villages where they had been known all their lives they attended from custom or social pressures, but when "working men and families moved to the new towns their attendance often lapsed in the new environment"⁷⁴ where they were comparatively anonymous in the crowded slums. From these statistics gathered by the churchmen of the time, it is evident that "the idea that Victorian churches were full or that church-going was the accepted normal practice is a myth."⁷⁵

As the attendance in Anglican city parishes lagged, the attendance of Dissenter chapels grew, despite the fact that many workers in the city attended no church. It is significant that in Mrs. Gaskell's first book, set in the

⁷² Bettey, p. 128.

⁷³ Bettey, p. 128

⁷⁴ Bettey, p. 129.

⁷⁵ Bettey, p. 129.

slums of Manchester, that church attendance, except for Alice Wilson, is not mentioned. From her charity work, Mrs. Gaskell was all too aware on a personal level that church attendance was not a part of the lives of many working people, as the 1851 census had also shown.

These findings were quite significant to the Gaskells. Cross Street Chapel was a large and prosperous church, counting some of the leading manufacturers in Manchester as members as well as many working-class people.⁷⁶ Of course the Gaskells knew quite well from experience that there were large numbers of people living in the working-class neighborhoods who did not attend Cross Street nor any other church. They, like many other Unitarians, were dedicated to an out-reach program that emphasized relief, both physical and spiritual, among the poor, whether members or not. Assistance was often dispensed on a personal basis in the areas where the people lived. Mrs. Gaskell was active in bringing relief during depressed times and was a diligent worker in the schools established for the under-privileged children who often worked all week in the factories. These Sunday schools were held on the only day off for the workers and their

⁷⁶ Gerin, p. 52.

children. The schools taught reading and other subjects as well as Bible study. Mrs. Gaskell was also active in procuring medicine for those unable to afford a doctor's services, as well as ministering to alcoholics, unwed mothers, and prostitutes.⁷⁷

Such extensive social programs established by Cross Street Chapel and other Unitarian churches ministered to the physical needs of the poor while the intellectual freedom which the Unitarians encouraged fed the spirit of its members. The scientific findings which shook the foundations of orthodoxy bolstered the framework of a religion based on reason and reinforced and augmented a belief in natural cause and effect rather than miracles. The new scientific advances that precipitated a crisis of faith in most churches probably contributed to the growth and expansion of Unitarianism.⁷⁸

The focus on reason and logic caused at least one problem in Unitarianism, however. Some believers found the intellectual approach to religion lacking in warmth and spirit. Unitarians became divided to some extent between those who founded their religion on rationalism

⁷⁷ Gerin, p. 51.

⁷⁸ Chadwick, p. 24.

and those who felt the church needed an infusion of spirit. James Martineau led this latter faction, but the church even in its search for a new spirit kept its belief in the power of human reason and the innate goodness of man.⁷⁹

For this reason, the scientific developments of the age, focused in Darwin's theory of the evolutionary processes, was not a threat to their faith but rather a "further confirmation in their belief in the power of human reason."⁸⁰ The Unitarians felt no loss of faith but rather "rejoiced as they saw the plan of nature being unfolded without recourse to marvel or mystery."⁸¹ Their religion was not dependent on a concept of fear of punishment in hell, nor heaven as a reward after suffering on earth. In response to the accusation often directed at Unitarianism as a system of morals rather than a religion to depend on for the eternal, Ephraim Emerton, a prominent American Unitarian religious writer, concludes, "The Unitarian draws no line between the religion by which he will live and that by which he is ready to die."⁸²

⁷⁹ David B. Parke, The Epic of Unitarianism (Boston: Starr King Press, 1957), p. 72.

⁸⁰ Coral Lansbury, Elizabeth Gaskell: The Novel of Social Crisis (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1975), p. 194.

⁸¹ Lansbury, p. 194.

⁸² Emerton, pp. 7-8.

Although the Unitarians were aware that neither morality nor philosophy constitutes religion, they were willing to focus on problems of the world and to trust God for the hereafter. Thus the religion of the Unitarians, focusing as it did on earthly problems, developed early a network for community service through their churches as well as by individuals.⁸³

Stressing as it did independence of thought, the concepts of Unitarianism attracted laymen of high principle from the very beginning. Some of the outstanding early leaders and even some as late as the nineteenth century were never publicly associated with Unitarianism but contributed greatly nevertheless. Such a person was Thomas Firmin. Despite the gradual growth and development of the ideas now thought of as Unitarian, the word was not applied nor even known in England until Firmin financed the publication of a series of Unitarian tracts in 1687 entitled "A Brief History of Unitarians, called also Socinians," written by Stephen Nye.⁸⁴ Firmin remained inside the Church of England as the Anglican Church required Assent to the Articles only by clergymen, not by laymen. During

⁸³ Holt, pp. 17-19.

⁸⁴ Holt, p. 284.

the seventeenth century many Unitarians were powerful both within and outside the Church of England. Many had close friends who were high officials in the Church, even "at the very time when an Act was being passed making the holding of anti-Trinitarian views a penal offence."⁸⁵

Thomas Firmin and John Biddle, who had been imprisoned and saved from death only by Oliver Cromwell's intervention, early set the standard for philanthropy as a part of the Unitarian ethic. Firmin said that he learned from Biddle that it was necessary to distrust mere token giving of alms, but instead to attack social distress by more stringent economic methods. Firmin was highly regarded and well known for his philanthropy. Some of this early efforts consisted of providing employment in 1665 after the Great Plague. Later in 1686, Firmin employed 1,700 people in a linen warehouse which he built to provide employment for the poor. The workers were paid at the prevailing wage, but Firmin considered this pay insufficient and augmented it by various supplements. A woolen mill was also established to be operated along the same lines, but neither of these factories was self-sustaining. Firmin collected funds from his friends as well as making

⁸⁵ Holt, p. 285.

large contributions personally. He established a store for corn and coal and sold them to the poor in hard times for cost. Firmin was largely responsible for rebuilding and improving Christ's Hospital while he served on its governing board, as well as being one of the earliest to work toward prison reform.⁸⁶

As important to the Unitarian belief as the charitable works were of such men as Firmin and Biddle, even more basic was the independence of thought and conscience upon which such actions are founded. Without this freedom of the mind and dependence upon rational use of man's intelligence, the cornerstone of Unitarianism, there could not have existed the Unitarian Church as it came to be in Mrs. Gaskell's time. Emerton states that the Unitarian position is basically "the right to differ, the most precious right of the thinking man."⁸⁷ Man's intellect, "a divine gift to man,"⁸⁸ should not be "degraded and insulted by being asked to accept things that are contrary to its normal processes."⁸⁹ This belief accounts for the Unitarian's strict adherence to honesty. Anything less is viewed as an insult to one's intellect.

⁸⁶ Holt, pp. 283-85.

⁸⁷ Emerton, p. vii.

⁸⁸ Emerton, p. 23.

⁸⁹ Emerton, p. 25.

This belief in the "right of the thinking man"⁹⁰ extends to the Unitarian attitude toward science as discovered truth which in the end must be beneficial to man's belief in God. On a more personal level, honesty in action and word was perceived as the logical expression of the mind and heart of a logical and moral person. Lack of honesty distorted and warped the social fabric as well as personal relationships. If society were dishonest or intolerant in its attitudes, the matter of honesty could become a very real dilemma, as it does for the Rev. Benson in Ruth, where Mrs. Gaskell explores the question of which is the greater honesty--that of obeying the heart or conscience or following the social conventions that exist in an unChristian-like society. The same mental toughness that forced Unitarians to look realistically at scientific findings and personal relationships also was responsible for their honesty in assessing the needs of society and for determining what their duty should be in helping to ameliorate these problems. In a letter to Eliza Fox in 1850 Mrs. Gaskell explores her conscience with honesty to analyze her joy in having a new house when she knows that so many are in need:

⁹⁰ Emerson, p. iv.

. . . if I had neither conscience nor prudence I should be delighted, for it certainly is a beauty. . . . You must come and see us in it, dearest Tottie, and try and make me see 'the wrong the better cause' and that it is right to spend so much ourselves on so purely selfish a thing as a house is, while so many are wanting--thats [sic] the haunting thought to me. . . .⁹¹

This self-awareness, perceived as a particular kind of honesty, gave rise to the concept that a true Christian must be of service to one's fellow man, wherever need was evident. Giving-in to one's feelings of sorrow and loss or for any reason avoiding one's Christian duty was perceived as sinful in a world filled with needs of other people. In large measure this belief became the catalyst that launched Elizabeth Gaskell into her career of professional writing. When William Gaskell became worried about his wife's physical and mental health after the death of their little son, it seems in character that he "urged his wife to sublimate her grief by writing a novel."⁹² He applied to this personal loss that concept which he had so often preached from his pulpit:

Sorrow turned inwards . . . was a dull and numbing emotion, but directed towards social

⁹¹ Letters, GL 69.

⁹² Lansbury, p. 18.

grief, it could not only heal, but be healed
in the process.⁹³

Mr. Gaskell's suggestion that his wife use her own particular talents in a way that would benefit those that they perceived to be in need bore abundant fruit. Mrs. Gaskell not only found a measure of relief from her sorrow but she performed a service to man that she was peculiarly fitted to do. Mrs. Gaskell had been something of a writer since girlhood, but she had used her talents mainly for her own enjoyment. She often expressed her ideas and feelings in diaries, journals, and the like. She had, however, shown an interest earlier in bringing the poor of Manchester to public attention when she and her husband had collaborated on a poem called "Sketches Among the Poor: No. 1" which was conceived as the first of a series. This poem which saw limited publication plainly indicates her interest in those about her in Manchester who were in dire need. As indicated in this poem, she viewed these poor people not only as numbers or masses of people, but as individuals with needs, desires, loves, and intelligence.⁹⁴ Her writing both she and her husband

⁹³ Lansbury, p. 18.

⁹⁴ Lansbury, p. 18.

saw as a service for others as well as a personal involvement that enabled her to go on with her life after the loss of their son.

William and Elizabeth Gaskell's great faith in working to help others attests to a strong tenet in their religion. Many people regarded the Unitarians "as less a religious sect than a political group, radical in temperament, reformers by design."⁹⁵ But in reality, the practicing Unitarian was "committed to social involvement as the visible expression of his faith."⁹⁶ For the Unitarian this insistence on action to overcome grief or other personal problems demonstrates as well as strengthens one's Christian faith. Mrs. Gaskell included such a reinvolvement in worldly concerns as a form of healing later in her short novelette "Cousin Phillis." The incident is in many ways a reflection of Mrs. Gaskell's life after the loss of her son. Phillis has collapsed after learning that the man she loves has married another in Canada. After suffering a long and almost fatal illness of brain fever, she gradually recovers but only up to a certain point. Although Phillis regained her physical strength, her energy

⁹⁵ Lansbury, p. 12.

⁹⁶ Lansbury, p. 12.

and interest in life did not return. She took little notice of life around her.⁹⁷ Neither her father's gift of blue ribbons nor her Latin books brought to her by her mother can bring her from her lethargy. It is, in this case, the family servant Betty who speaks the plain truth to her, much as Mr. Gaskell must have spoken to his wife Elizabeth:

"Now, Phillis!" said she, coming up to the sofa; "we ha' done a' we can for you, and th' doctors has done a' they can for you, and I think the Lord has done a' He can for you, and more than you deserve, too, if you don't do something for yourself. If I were you, I'd rise up and snuff the moon, sooner than break your father's and your mother's hearts wi' watching and waiting till it pleases you to fight your own way back to cheerfulness. There, I never favoured long preachings, and I've said my say."⁹⁸

Betty's "say" (and perhaps Mr. Gaskell's also), plain talk and common sense, provides the catalyst that no other appeal could accomplish. Only two short paragraphs follow this scene from "Cousin Phillis." Phillis herself suggests that she go for a visit to Paul's parents, something she had not considered before her illness changed her life so

⁹⁷ Elizabeth Gaskell, "Cousin Phillis," in Cousin Phillis and Other Tales, ed. Angus Easson, The World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 354.

⁹⁸ "Cousin Phillis," p. 354.

dramatically. Phillis expresses her belief that she "will go back to the peace of the old days."⁹⁹ Phillis is not aware of a change at this point, but she will never return to the "old days."¹⁰⁰ Her earlier laying aside her "childish pinafore"¹⁰¹ for "a woman's apron"¹⁰² hints at the change already begun and culminates in her decision to become a part of a larger world outside the farm. Although the story ends at this point, "one thing seems certain; that her final hope for a return to the old ways is a vain one. She cannot be a child again. . . ."¹⁰³ These days of innocence for Phillis are gone as surely as the days when Mrs. Gaskell treasured and loved her beloved little son. It is not the loss, according to Mrs. Gaskell's religion, but the going forward to fulfill duties to loved ones and society that ultimately makes a difference in one's world.

⁹⁹ "Cousin Phillis," p. 354.

¹⁰⁰ "Cousin Phillis," p. 354.

¹⁰¹ Angus Easson, ed., Cousin Phillis and Other Tales, The World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. xiii-xiv.

¹⁰² Easson, pp. xiii-xiv.

¹⁰³ Easson, pp. xiii-xiv.

Thus, action as a "visible expression of . . . faith"¹⁰⁴ is in great measure the basis of all of the major writing that Mrs. Gaskell produced.¹⁰⁵ This faith that found its expression in Mrs. Gaskell's writing emanated from a religion whose "theology was an optimistic affirmation of man as a rational being"¹⁰⁶ who could make a difference in his world through his own efforts. The practice of religion lay in "doing the good that came to hand."¹⁰⁷ Unlike other authors of the day who knew of the suffering factory workers and their families only by statistics, Mrs. Gaskell from her first-hand knowledge gained from church relief work knew the people as individuals--starving, desperate, and trapped individuals. Her powers of description were employed in Mary Barton, not to create the scenes of earthly beauty that she loved so well but rather to make her reader feel the numbing cold and chilling dampness, to experience the horror she had seen of a child literally starving to death. This book, as all that followed, was based on Elizateh Gaskell's fervent desire to help people

¹⁰⁴ Lansbury, p. 18.

¹⁰⁵ Lansbury, p. 18.

¹⁰⁶ Lansbury, p. 11.

¹⁰⁷ Easson, Elizabeth Gaskell, p. 12.

to know each other, to care for each other, and to solve their problems together with Christian love.

Mrs. Gaskell's motives for the writing of Mary Barton are found in some of her correspondence. In a letter written in early 1849 in answer to one from Mrs. Sam Greg, wife of a literary critic whose family was important in manufacturing, Mrs. Gaskell says in part:

. . . I have heard much about the disapproval which Mr. Greg's family have felt with regard to 'M.B.,' and have heard of it with so much regret that I am particularly glad that Mr. Sam Greg does not participate in it. I regretted the disapprobation, not one whit on account of the testimony of it, but because I knew that such a feeling would be conscientiously and thoughtfully entertained by men who are acquainted by long experience with the life, a portion of which I had endeavoured to represent; and whose actions during a long course of years have proved that the interests of their work-people are as dear to them as their own. Such disapproval, I was sure, would not be given if the writing which called it forth were merely a free expression of ideas; but it would be given if I had misrepresented, a part as the whole, as that people at a distance should be misled and prejudiced against the masters, and that class be estranged from class. . . . Round the character of John Barton all the others formed themselves; he was my hero, the person with whom all my sympathies went, . . . because I believed from personal observation that such men were not uncommon, and would well reward such sympathy and love as should throw light down upon their groping search after the causes of suffering, and the reason why suffering is sent, and what they can do to lighten it.¹⁰⁸

In another letter dated January 5th (1848) to a Miss Lamont who had written Mrs. Gaskell a note praising Mary Barton, she replies:

'John Barton' was the original name, as being the central figure to my mind; indeed I had so long felt that the bewildered life of an ignorant thoughtful man of strong power of sympathy, dwelling in a town so full of striking contrasts as this is, was a tragic poem, that in writing he was 'my hero'; and it was a London thought coming through the publisher that it must be called Mary B. So many people overlook John B or see him merely to misunderstand him, that if you were a stranger and had only said that one thing (that the book shd have been called John B) I should have had pleasure in feeling that my own idea was recognized; . . . Some people here are very angry and say the book will do harm; and for a time I have been shaken and sorry; but I have such firm faith that the earnest expression of any one's feeling can only do good in the long run,--that God will cause the errors to be temporary, the truth to be eternal, that I try not to mind too much what people say either in blame or praise. I had a letter from Carlyle, and when I am over-filled with thoughts arising from this book, I put it all aside, (or try to put it aside,) and think of his last sentence--'May you live long to write good books, or do silently good actions which in my sight is far more indispensable.'¹⁰⁹

Had Elizabeth Gaskell been asked the question, "Are you your brother's keeper?" she would have answered a ringing "yes." Throughout all her works, the themes based on such Unitarian beliefs appear again and again: love of

¹⁰⁹ Letters, GL 39.

truth; tolerance for others, both religious and personal; love of one's fellow man; and faith in working through education and rational thought and action to correct wrongs and misfortunes. Mrs. Gaskell's beliefs are strong and heartfelt, but she is not a religious novelist per se in that she does not try to convert her reader to Unitarianism; indeed, "Unitarianism is a presence, rather than a force."¹¹⁰ While it is true that her work grew progressively more subtle in overt inclusion of a religious element as she gained in style, the Unitarian spirit is nevertheless at the heart of all that she wrote. It is this unique presence that sets Elizabeth Gaskell apart from other writers of her time. She found her best method of helping others in her efforts to help herself, and she "never doubted that she was born with the right and the ability to change society."¹¹¹ Her novels shine with the "expression(s) of this theology of optimism."¹¹² Unfortunately, Thomas Carlyle's wish as mentioned in Mrs. Gaskell's letter to Miss Lamont was only partially fulfilled. Mrs. Gaskell did not live long enough to write

¹¹⁰ Easson, Elizabeth Gaskell, p. 17.

¹¹¹ Lansbury, p. 15.

¹¹² Lansbury, p. 15.

as many "good books"¹¹³ as her readers may have wished, but those which she did write were produced in the spirit of doing good as she saw it. Not only were her actions good but her influence for good was magnified many times through her books. As a Unitarian, she would have asked nothing more.

¹¹³ Letters, GL 39.

CHAPTER TWO

TRUTH AND HONESTY

Mrs. Gaskell's Unitarian morality focused on truth as a vital ingredient in personal relationships as well as social interaction. This devotion to truth is apparent even in such a private record as the diary she kept during the early childhood of her daughter Marianne. As shown in many entries in this journal, she believed in dealing with children on a level of complete honesty and not only stressed the necessity to fulfill promises but also expressed a dislike of deceit in dealing with a young child by distracting his attention with "a suggestion to look for something not there."¹ Sharps concludes that "she would seem to consider any sort of convenient invention immoral, truthfulness appearing all important in her eyes."²

To Mrs. Gaskell, the concept of truth in thought is as important as truth in deed, especially as thought is applied to an analysis of the inner self. She not only

¹ Cited in John Geoffrey Sharps, Mrs. Gaskell's Observation and Invention: A Study of Her Non-Biographic Works, Forward A. Stanton Whitfield (Fontwell, Sussex: Linden Press, 1970, p. 19.

² Sharps, p. 19.

used her diary to chronicle Marianne's development, but also to keep in touch with her own inner self and always be on guard against faults of "anger, jealousy, and impatience."³ Nothing less than complete honesty in thought, word, and deed was acceptable as moral behavior to Mrs. Gaskell's Unitarian conscience.

The Unitarian stress on belief based on truth sought through the spirit and the intellect places the focus squarely on truth as a basic tenet of Unitarianism.⁴ Also dependent on this concept of truth is the belief that religious truth should not differ from other forms of truth; and that the truth which is based on spirit and intellect places a focus on man's intelligence as worthy of respect, a divine gift of God meant to be used for discovery of truth.⁵ Truth to the Unitarian is a most personal belief that works for the good of man; moreover, this belief cannot be based on "will, likes, or desires."⁶ Unitarians see man as worthy, a being who may trust himself

³ Cited in Sharps, p. 19.

⁴ Ephraim Emerton, Unitarian Thought (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1925), p. 20.

⁵ Emerton, p. 26.

⁶ Emerton, p. 27.

in thought and feeling because he is God's creation. Thus belief means

. . . that which appeals to all that is best in the whole man he is. . . . The highest sanction for beliefs is in the inner witness of his own enlightened reason and his own disciplined emotion. Through these he hears the voice of the spirit of all truth. By it he measures all authorities and traditions.⁷

To the Unitarian, truth is also the all important criterion against which he must measure not only wordly institutions and authorities but also his own personal sincerity of motive in social, family, and other personal relationships. The ultimate test of the validity of a particular belief or truth requires that such truth must at all times work for the good of man. If man's nature is to work for his good in the moral and spiritual struggle, then he must ground all his actions and thought on truth as discovered by the Spirit rather than on any theology, so-called truth set forth by others, or social convention as established by authority or earthly laws when these go against Christian conviction. This particular kind of honesty represented by integrity of principle then is placed before accepted convention.

⁷ Emerton, p. 27.

Mrs. Gaskell explores the effects on people's lives when fundamental principle is at odds with accepted convention. Such is the case in Ruth when the Reverend Benson and his sister Faith manufacture a socially acceptable past life for Ruth, who has been seduced, abandoned, and is at the point of suicide when she is taken in by Mr. Benson. While she is very ill, hovering between life and death, it is found that she is also pregnant. Mr. Benson, named only as a Dissenting minister, evidences concern for the young girl that he has met only briefly twice before. At the time Mr. Benson first became involved with Ruth he sees her as she is huddled in a field, without hope, in utter despair after Mrs. Bellingham, mother of Ruth's seducer, has taken her son away in a carriage, leaving only a cold, cutting note and 50 pounds. When Mr. Benson sees Ruth "crouched up like some hunted creature, with a wild, scared look of despair" he is filled with compassion for her. As Ruth bursts into sobs, these "wrung his soul." His first words are an involuntary prayer, "Oh, my God! for Christ's sake, pity her!"⁸ His desire to help her is only strengthened when Ruth attempts to throw herself in the

⁸ Elizabeth Gaskell, Ruth, with intro. by Margaret Lane, Everyman's Library, No. 673 (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1967), p. 95.

roaring stream far below the field. Every fiber of Mr. Benson's soul yearned to save one of God's helpless creatures. The sincerity of his motive in desiring to help someone so obviously in need cannot be doubted; his adherence to Christian truth and duty supercede any thoughtless following of convention toward the young woman about whom he has already heard ugly gossip. His faith truly makes him his brother's keeper.

After Mr. Benson determines that Ruth has no friends or family, literally no one else to whom she may turn for help, he feels even a greater responsibility toward her. In the crisis that arises after Ruth becomes ill, Mr. Benson appeals first to Mrs. Bellingham, who refuses to acknowledge any further responsibility in the matter above the 50 pounds that she had left for Ruth. Mrs. Bellingham further refuses to face the truth of Ruth's dilemma, blaming the affair on the innocent and naive sixteen year old Ruth rather than placing the responsibility on her more worldly wise son. After Mrs. Bellingham refuses her assistance, Mr. Benson finally turns to his loyal sister Faith, who comes to aid him in caring for Ruth simply because he sent for her. Together Mr. Benson and Faith must plan a future for the young girl who has been so cruelly abandoned by Mr. Bellingham, the one person

whom Ruth had trusted. Although Mr. Benson knows little of Ruth's past except that she had been staying at the inn with a man to whom she was not married, he feels a Christian responsibility toward Ruth which he asks his sister to share with him.

Mr. Benson's decision to help Ruth becomes even more firm and dedicated when he is told that Ruth is expecting a child, but Faith's understanding wavers in the face of this unexpected complication. As Aina Rubenius notes concerning the terrible life that often faces a "fallen woman" and particularly an unwed mother, "The chief cause of all the evils commonly resulting from a seduction was the rigorous attitude of the general public,"⁹ and it was from this almost inhuman treatment that Mr. Benson wished to protect the defenseless young woman. Mr. Benson is equally determined to provide protection for the innocent child against the rejection of society should the facts of the birth become known. Although Ruth is a character who in her innocence and lack of worldly knowledge is almost a pawn to the practiced Mr. Bellingham, her seducer, neither Mr. Benson nor Ruth ever glosses over the fact that the

⁹ Aina Rubenius, The Woman Question in Mrs. Gaskell's Life and Works, Essays and Studies on English Language and Literature (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1950), p. 192.

affair is a sin in God's eyes. It is in the hope of giving Ruth a chance to attain "purification"¹⁰ through her love for her child and atone for her sin, as well as to protect the innocent unborn child, that Mr. Benson concocts a plan that is to involve Mr. Benson, Faith, and Ruth in a deception that extends over many years.

The scene in which Mr. Benson makes his fateful decision to hide Ruth's past from public opinion is a powerful and moving one. Speaking to her brother, Faith Benson expresses shock at Ruth's attitude when the girl realizes she is to have a baby:

"Oh, I was just beginning to have a good opinion of her; but I'm afraid she is very depraved. . . . she whispered, quite eagerly, 'Did the doctor say I should have a baby?' . . . I thought it my duty to look as cold and severe as I could. She did not understand how it ought to be viewed, but took it just as if she had a right to have a baby. She said, 'Oh, my God, I thank Thee! Oh, I will be so good!' I had no patience with her then, so I left the room."¹¹

Mr. Benson's reaction to the news is anything but what Miss Benson expects from her brother. He explains his feelings to her, attempting to make clear his ideas:

¹⁰ Ruth, p. 118.

¹¹ Ruth, p. 117.

"Faith, do you know I rejoice in this child's advent?"

"May God forgive you, Thurstan!--if you know what you are saying. . . ."

"I do not think it is a delusion. The sin appears to be to be quite distinct from its consequences."

"Sophistry--and a temptation," said Miss Benson decidedly.

"No, it is not," said her brother, with equal decision. "In the eye of God, she is exactly the same as if the life she has led had left no trace behind. We knew her errors before, Faith."

"Yes, but not this disgrace--this badge of her shame!"

"Faith, Faith! let me beg of you not to speak so of the little innocent babe, who may be God's messenger to lead her back to Him. Think again of her first words--the burst of nature from her heart! Did she not turn to God, and enter into a covenant with Him? . . . here is the very instrument to make her forget herself, and be thoughtful for another. Teach her (and God will teach her, if man does not come between) to reverence her child; and this reverence will shut out sin,--will be purification."¹²

Mr. Benson's sister finds the morality of his reasoning questionable, but in contrast, he feels that he has been remiss in his duty heretofore "with evils of this particular kind." The ultimate authority for Mr. Benson is the example of Christ, as he perceives it. Mr. Benson

¹² Ruth, pp. 117-18.

makes his position clear through these words to Faith:

". . . once for all, do not accuse me of questionable morality, when I am trying more than ever I did in my life to act as my blessed Lord would have done."¹³

Other arguments are brought to bear upon the need for hiding Ruth's true circumstances. Mr. Benson reminds Faith that the great new responsibility Ruth will now have is "serious and solemn enough, without making it into a heavy and oppressive burden, so that human nature recoils from bearing it."¹⁴ Faith is finally convinced also when she recalls a young man of Mr. Benson's congregation who "would not have the situation [of his illegitimate birth]; he went to sea and was drowned, rather than present the record of his shame."¹⁵

So the decision is made by Mr. Benson that he will follow "the inner witness of his enlightened reason,"¹⁶ which requires deceit and a lie to keep Ruth's secret. The action is not without repercussions, however. Mr. Benson indeed feels the weight of the lie through the years. At a dinner given by Mr. Bradshaw for a political figure of questionable reputation, Mr. Benson bursts forth almost

¹³ Ruth, p. 119.

¹⁴ Ruth, p. 119.

¹⁵ Ruth, p. 120.

¹⁶ Emerton, p. 27.

involuntarily during a discussion of the use of improper means toward a worthwhile end, stating, "We are not to do evil that good may come."¹⁷ Thus we may deduce that his ideas concerning the deception have undergone change over the years. The outcome when Ruth's past is exposed is an unburdening of Mr. Benson's feelings to his sister who still defends their action. Faith points out that the time gained for Ruth has enabled her to grow "stronger and wiser, so that she can bear her shame now in a way she never could have done at first."¹⁸ Mr. Benson cannot agree, however, and in explaining his new insight he speaks also for Mrs. Gaskell. He denies to his sister that he is better than he was, or even as good. His reply explains succinctly what has happened to him:

"I have got what you call morbid, just in consequence of the sophistry by which I persuaded myself that wrong could be right. I torment myself. I have lost my clear instincts of conscience. Formerly, if I believed that such or such an action was according to the will of God, I went and did it, or at least I tried to do it, without thinking of consequences. Now, I reason and weigh what will happen if I do so and so--I grope where formerly I saw. Oh, Faith! it is such a relief to me to have truth known, that I am afraid, I have not been sufficiently sympathising with Ruth."¹⁹

¹⁷ Ruth, p. 253.

¹⁸ Ruth, p. 358.

¹⁹ Ruth, p. 358.

Faith still feels that their "telling a lie has been the saving"²⁰ of Ruth in that they need no longer fear she may go wrong. Mr. Benson summarizes the Unitarian religious position in his statement of renewed certainty: "God's omnipotence did not need our sin."²¹ A parallel incident to Ruth's deception is that of Mr. Bradshaw's lack of principle in choosing a candidate to back in the Parliament election to contest a Tory member from an old established family in the community. Mr. Bradshaw is the leading member of Mr. Benson's church and puts himself forward at all times as righteous and utterly unwilling to commit or condone wrong at any time. Mr. Bradshaw abandons his lofty principles as he searches for a candidate. He applies to a Liberal parliamentary agent in London who "would not act, right or wrong, for a Tory, but for a Whig the latitude of his conscience had never been heretofore discovered."²²

Thus begins a plot of deceit including bribery and other illegal and immoral acts concerning campaign money and bought votes. Mrs. Gaskell states once that "It was possible Mr. Bradshaw was not aware of the character of

²⁰ Ruth, p. 358.

²¹ Ruth, p. 358.

²² Ruth, pp. 247-48.

this agent."²³ This seems unlikely, however, but if he were not aware of the situation when he engaged the agent, he learned during his first interview with him what sort of man the agent is. Mr. Bradshaw is perfectly willing to compromise in any way he feels necessary to make his candidate successful. During the interview,

Mr. Bradshaw rather shrank from the knowing look. . . . He hoped that Mr. Pilson did not mean to allude to bribery; but he did not express this hope because he thought it would deter the agent from using this means, and it was possible it might prove to be the only way. And if he (Mr. Bradshaw) once embarked on such an enterprise, there must be no failure. By some expedient or another, success must be certain, or he could have nothing to do with it.²⁴

At the dinner at Mr. Bradshaw's at which Mr. Benson has spoken so vehemently about wrong-doing in a good cause, the conversation is an exercise in sophistry. The agent's friend, acting on behalf of the parliamentary agent and Mr. Donne, the new candidate, "professed a great disgust to the law as a 'great sham,' which involved an immensity of underhand action and truckling, . . . encumbered by useless forms and ceremonies." Mr. Hickson

²³ Ruth, pp. 247-48.

²⁴ Ruth, p. 248.

claims that "it was the very corruptness of the law which he was fighting against," and that the "great object in life" for him is the reform of the law. Despite Mr. Hickson's professed reverence for the law, he engages in underhand methods and defends them as necessary to gain a majority of Liberal members, which he glibly claims would see "the thing done." He asserts the purpose is "a good one, a lofty one, a holy one"²⁵ and that those on the 'right' side must "treat men as they are," not as they wish them to be.²⁶

The "glorious reform of the law"²⁷ that Mr. Hickson confidently asserts will occur is as little likely to happen because men such as Mr. Donne are put into office under false colors as that the opinions of society will be changed by presenting Ruth as something she is not. It is the supreme irony that the candidate Donne is in reality Mr. Bellingham, Ruth's callous seducer and father of her child. Although his treachery is never discovered, Ruth's secret is found out. Despite her great suffering, Ruth is happier than Mr. Donne (Bellingham).

²⁵ Ruth, p. 252.

²⁶ Ruth, p. 253.

²⁷ Ruth, p. 253.

The physical descriptions of the two are in complete contrast and mirror the changes each has undergone. When they see each other for the first time in many years, each assesses the other:

He was changed, she knew not how. In fact, the expression, which had been only occasional formerly, when his worse self predominated, had become permanent. He looked restless and dissatisfied. But he was very handsome still.²⁸

As Mr. Donne studies Ruth, he hardly recognizes her. He notes her "proud, superb turn of her head"; she seems of high quality, like "a Percy or a Howard for the grandeur of her grace."²⁹ The difference, of course, reflects the lifestyle each has followed. True to Mr. Benson's prediction, Ruth has devoted her life to her son, giving little thought to herself, and in consequence she has become a finer, nobler person; Mr. Donne, growing ever more callous and self-absorbed, has not even wondered what had become of Ruth until he sees the woman that he belatedly realizes is his former lover.

Ruth is totally undone after her secret is revealed, but after a time, she emerges as a person who can now

²⁸ Ruth, p. 257.

²⁹ Ruth, p. 257.

function as herself, without sham. In devoting her life to nursing without regard for her own safety, she wins the devotion and gratitude of the entire town. The townspeople now see her purity rather than her sin. Her life can now be lived openly in the clear light of truth which would have never been possible had her secret remained hidden.

It is also only after the lie has been discovered that Mr. Benson is able to make a statement asking for acceptance of those who, like Ruth, have erred. Mr. Benson feels he deserves the castigation that Mr. Bradshaw heaps upon him, but he speaks in defense of helpless women such as Ruth:

"Now I wish God would give me power to speak out convincingly what I believe to be His truth, that not every woman who has fallen is depraved; that many . . . crave and hunger after a chance of virtue--the help which no man gives to them--help--that gentle, tender help which Jesus gave once to Mary Magdalen."³⁰

Neither Mrs. Gaskell nor her finer characters such as Mr. Benson, Faith Benson, and several other minor characters feel that society is willing to treat unwed mothers or their children in such a way that they might have a

³⁰ Ruth, p. 347.

chance to rehabilitate themselves. Mr. Bradshaw speaks for society when he reminds Mr. Benson:

"Come, come, Mr. Benson, . . . The world has decided how such women are to be treated; and, you may depend upon it, there is so much practical wisdom in the world, that its way of acting is right in the long-run, and that no one can fly in its face with impunity, unless, indeed, they stoop to deceit and imposition."³¹

Mr. Bradshaw never seems aware that although his deed is different that he is guilty of those very faults which he decries in Mr. Benson. Until a lie has been acknowledged, however, the soul cannot begin to mend itself, and the voice may not cry out against the attitudes of society that are so damaging. Consequently Mr. Donne and Mr. Bradshaw are unredeemed; Mr. Benson and Ruth find peace within themselves and with God, for it is not possible for Mr. Benson to speak against society's wrongs until all secrets are brought into the open. Mr. Bradshaw on the other hand does not heed the truth that he hears:

"I take my stand with Christ against the world," said Mr. Benson. "Is it not time to change some of our ways of thinking and acting? I declare before God, that if I believe in any one human truth, it is this--that to every human who, like Ruth, should be given a chance of self-redemption--and that such a chance should be

³¹ Ruth, p. 347.

given in no supercilious or contemptuous manner but in the spirit of the holy Christ."³²

The Unitarian position on honesty extends to honesty of self, self-knowledge. One may not begin to mend that which is wrong until he admits that there is a wrong. Mr. Bradshaw has a stern code which he follows without benefit of insight. He confuses guilt and discovery. After he finds that his son is guilty of embezzeling Mr. Benson's money, he is unable to forgive him. Because he will not face the truth about himself and seek forgiveness for his political dishonesties, he is unable to forgive anyone else, even his own son, for wrongdoing. When Mr. Benson refuses to prosecute Richard Bradshaw, Mr. Bradshaw states his position, based on society's views:

"He is no longer as my son to me. I have always resolved to disown any child of mine who was guilty of sin. I disown Richard. . . . Of course, you understand that I must feel shame at our connection; it is that that is troubling me; that is but consistent with a man who has always prided himself on the integrity of his name."³³

When Mr. Bradshaw is determined to punish Richard, Mr. Benson tries to make him see that young Bradshaw is not

³² Ruth, p. 348.

³³ Ruth, p. 400.

a hardened transgressor, that he would benefit from mercy, and that punishment "would destroy every good quality he has."³⁴ Mr. Bradshaw seems to feel one mistake dissolves all good qualities one may have possessed. He says that Richard has deceived him and offended God. When Mr. Benson asks if all have not offended God in some way, Mr. Bradshaw seems completely unconscious of any wrongdoing he may have done when he answers: "Not consciously. I never do wrong consciously."³⁵ This is the worst of all lies, that of self-deceit. Both Mr. Bradshaw and Mr. Bellingham are unable to grow in spirit or human understanding because their self-deceit prevents such development.

Self-deceit also plays a major part in Philip Hepburn's treachery in Sylvia's Lovers. Philip witnesses the abduction of Sylvia Robson's sweetheart, Charley Kinraid, by a press gang, but he suppresses his knowledge and allows everyone in Monkshaven to believe a story which he alone knows is untrue. The concealment from Sylvia of Kinraid's impressment, which Philip alone saw, and Philip's "consequent marriage to her is the pivot on which the whole plot turns."³⁶

³⁴ Ruth, p. 401.

³⁵ Ruth, p. 401.

³⁶ Winifred Gerin, Elizabeth Gaskell: A Biography (London: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 215.

Although Gerin calls Philip "a fundamentally honourable man,"³⁷ the careful reader has clues before Philip's fateful decision for concealment that he is not totally honest with himself, and indeed in some ways, is not always honest concerning the law. Philip is always quick to defend law and order but is himself involved in smuggling as "everyone" is on this section of shore.³⁸ Perhaps this slight deviation from the law is based on common practice, but for him and his employers it is good business. As a tradesman, Philip is involved but not a participant in the chief occupation, indeed the lifeblood of the town, whaling. The town's most important people are not the county families who live above on the moors; the real power lies with "those who had the largest number of ships engaged in the whaling-trade."³⁹ In a town whose entire existence depends upon the sea, the depredations of the press gangs to man the admiralty's ships constitutes a harrassment to townfolk and a potent danger to homecoming ships filled with able-bodied seamen. The townpeople do not dislike

³⁷ Gerin, p. 215.

³⁸ Elizabeth Gaskell, Sylvia's Lovers, with an Introduction by Arthur Pollard, 1914; rpt. Everyman's Library, No. 524 (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1964), p. 37.

³⁹ Sylvia's Lovers, p. 1.

the officers of the press-gang themselves because no impressments have yet been made in Monkshaven.⁴⁰ It is suggested that perhaps the squires who live above Monkshaven are discomfited by the enormous wealth of the ship-owners and felt "that the check upon the Monkshaven trade likely to be inflicted by the press-gang, was wisely ordained by the higher powers . . . to prevent over-haste in getting rich"⁴¹ and feel it their duty to back admiralty by all the civil power that can be mustered should they be called upon. The young officers make pleasant dinner guests and are in some demand socially, and their business and trade are not discouraged in the local stores.⁴² It is plain that impressment is disliked in principle, but the officers are accepted because there has been no trouble. Business is first in Monkshaven.

On the day when Sylvia comes to town for material for a new cape, the peace is shattered by the impressment of men who have newly arrived on a whaling ship. Sylvia is in the shop where Philip works when the near-riot develops, and the difference in Philip and Sylvia's reactions

⁴⁰ Sylvia's Lovers, p. 8.

⁴¹ Sylvia's Lovers, p. 7.

⁴² Sylvia's Lovers, p. 10.

establish their differing personalities and outlook for the reader. Sylvia is emotional, giving way to her natural feelings of distress at activities of the gang. Philip and Mr. Jeremiah, the store owner, are more concerned with the disorder that the clerks left in their haste to join the people outside than they are in the life and death struggle ensuing in their own streets. Mr. Jeremiah's unctuous comment is, "Out of strife cometh strife."⁴³ Philip's only concern is to accompany his cousin Sylvia and her girlfriend home for their safety, but his unacknowledged motive is to enjoy the pleasure of Sylvia's company. His manner is of "grave content," and "anticipating so keenly the pleasure awaiting him in the walk, that he was almost surprised by the gravity of his companions as they prepared for it."⁴⁴ Both self-interest and self-deception are glimpsed in Philip in this opening scene of the book. Conversely, Sylvia is more attuned to the concerns of others, reacting warmly to those she meets who are waiting for the boat and sympathetically to those whose loved ones are taken by the press-gang.

Other clues follow confirming this impression of Philip. Even in the conversation with Sylvia's father,

⁴³ Sylvia's Lovers, p. 27.

⁴⁴ Sylvia's Lovers, p. 29.

Philip will not say he has not heard her father's story before, even though it is obvious that Robson wishes to tell it again.

Hepburn could not say that he had not heard it, for he piqued himself on his truthfulness. But instead of frankly and directly owning this, he tried to frame a formal little speech, which would soothe Daniel's mortified vanity; and of course, it had the directly opposite effect. Daniel resented being treated like a child. . . .⁴⁵

In a discussion with Mr. Robson concerning the operation of the press-gang, Mr. Robson jokingly tells Philip that it is not fair to the French to have equal numbers of fighting men as it takes four Frenchmen to equal one Englishman. Philip continues the argument in a serious manner, however, and predictably is on the side of law and order. He tells Mr. Robson, ". . . laws is made for the good of the nation, not for your good or mine."⁴⁶ Mr. Robson actually has the clearer view in his focus on how the law affects individuals: "Nation here! Nation there! I'm a man and you're another, but nation's nowhere."⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Sylvia's Lovers, p. 34.

⁴⁶ Sylvia's Lovers, p. 35.

⁴⁷ Sylvia's Lovers, p. 35.

Philip's first concern is business, and as a businessman he finds a comfortable assurance in a network of laws, even if these are sometimes unpalatable. Mr. Robson, like Sylvia, finds his morality within his own heart. Little bound by convention, Mr. Robson is a simple, direct, and independent man; unlike Philip, he is not a part of any network or group endeavor. He earns his living as a farmer now but earlier had been a sailor. His passionate nature and love of freedom had resulted in his maiming his hand rather than stay prisoner in a press-gang in his youth. Robson, although now "far gone in his Hollands and water,"⁴⁸ delivers his final opinion on the subject:

"What I think and say is this. Laws is made for to keep some folks fra' harming others. Press-gangs and coastguards harm me i' my business, and keep me fra' getting what I want. Therefore . . . Measter Cholmley should put down press-gangs and coastguards . . . an' if Measter Cholmley don't do what I ax him, he may go whistle for my vote, he may."⁴⁹

After the discussion ends with Robson's pronouncement on the function of laws, Sylvia chides Philip slyly because "he has been preaching up laws all t' way home," when she

⁴⁸ Sylvia's Lovers, p. 38.

⁴⁹ Sylvia's Lovers, p. 38.

"could ha' told a tale about silks an' lace and things."⁵⁰

Philip is nonplussed,

Not because of the smuggling; everyone did that, only it was considered polite to ignore it; but he was annoyed to perceive how quickly his little cousin had discovered that his practice did not agree with his preaching, and vexed too to see how delighted she was to bring out the fact.⁵¹

Philip Hepburn is a highly respected man in the community and is possessed of many fine qualities, but Mrs. Gaskell has carefully allowed the reader to glimpse the chink in his moral armor before the incident of Kinraid's kidnapping by the press-gang.

Charley Kinraid is a man similar in many ways to Sylvia's father. He, too, is a sailor, and is a highly respected specksioneer or harpooner. He is a relative of the Robson's neighbors, the Corneys, and his name is mentioned several times before he appears. During the fight with the press-gang when the earlier ship arrived, Sylvia's sympathies have already aligned themselves with the sailors. When another ship is beset and Charley Kinraid heroically defends his shipmates, Sylvia listens avidly as the story is related to her father. Kinraid

⁵⁰ Sylvia's Lovers, p. 37.

⁵¹ Sylvia's Lovers, p. 37.

is wounded severely, and one local sailor is killed in the encounter. When Sylvia finally sees Kinraid for the first time at the funeral of Darley, the murdered sailor, he is of almost mythic stature in her eyes. Sylvia and her father take food to the Corney home where Kinraid is recuperating and Mr. Robson is quite taken with the young man. Kinraid calls at the Robson home and the conversation of the two men is in striking contrast to that of Philip and Robson. The two men discuss smuggling, laughingly and openly, as well as former adventures on the whaling boats.

When Kinraid calls on Sylvia with intention to win her love, Robson encourages both Sylvia and Kinraid in the match, but Mrs. Robson, away from home on a visit, knows nothing of the affair. Robson departs from his own open nature to conceal Sylvia's engagement from Mrs. Robson. In going against his natural inclination, Robson helps to establish a situation in which Sylvia is at a disadvantage in not being able to state to Philip nor anyone else that she has been engaged to Kinraid. In agreeing to her father's request, Sylvia has no valid reason to refuse to see Philip when he calls at the Robson home.

The conditions under which Philip attempts to win Sylvia's love are false on both sides. Each carries a

guilty secret that establishes a foundation of deceit for their later marriage. The secret that each has erodes their spirits in different ways. Sylvia's free, spontaneous nature is broken down by the hopelessness of her grief for the lost Kinraid. Philip carries a much heavier secret. The fate of all the characters in Sylvia's Lovers is affected by Philip Hepburn's failure to disclose what he knows concerning the disappearance of Kinraid. Not only was he witness to Kinraid's kidnapping not far from Sylvia's home, but also he might have warned him of the ambush from his point higher upon the path, but he did not. He murmured, "It is God's providence."⁵²

Fate has put both men on the path that can be gained from Sylvia's home. Charley is going to rejoin his ship, and Philip is beginning a journey to London. It is ironic that Charley's plight would have been unknown had Philip followed his better instincts and paused to gather some primroses to take to Sylvia as a peace offering before his trip. As Hepburn spies Kinraid coming down the path from Sylvia's house, he is consumed with jealousy and begins to follow him. As Kinraid turns the corner of the cliff, he is ambushed by four seamen from a boat anchored nearby.

⁵² Sylvia's Lovers, p. 185.

The men had come ashore for water but took the opportunity to seize what seemed a prize in the "active, strong, and evidently superior sailor"⁵³ now in their grasp.

Kinraid manages to wrench himself free, crying aloud that he is a legally protected whaler. As a bonded specksioneer to the Urania whaler, he is protected by the "17th section of ACT 26 Geo. III"⁵⁴ unless he does not return to his ship on time. The press-gang refuses to honor the bond, and after a fierce struggle, Philip hears the cry of someone wounded and finally a "strange silence."⁵⁵ When Philip looks down towards the sea from his hiding place, he sees that the men have bound Kinraid who seems to remain passive now with great effort. He endures kicks without a word when he is put into the bottom of the boat. With effort Kinraid turns his head so as to look toward Haytersbank and Sylvia although he knows the farm is out of sight, and in doing so catches sight of Philip in his vantage point behind a rock. Now that Philip is spied by the sailors as well as Kinraid, he finally speaks up for the ambushed man:

⁵³ Sylvia's Lovers, p. 186.

⁵⁴ Sylvia's Lovers, p. 186.

⁵⁵ Sylvia's Lovers, p. 187.

"I'm no sailor for yo' t' impress me: nor have yo' any right to take that fellow; he's a Greenland specksioneer, under protection, as I know and can testify."⁵⁶

The sailors are not interested in Philip's testimony as he comes slowly forward, "undecided what he should be called up to do or to say by the man whom he hated and dreaded, yet whom just now he could not help admiring."⁵⁷ Kinraid calls for Philip to tell Sylvia what he has seen, that Kinraid has been pressed, and more importantly:

"Tell her," continued Kinraid, rousing himself for another effort, "what yo've seen. Tell her I'll come back to her. Bid her not forget the great oath we took together this morning; she's as much my wife as if we'd gone to church;-- I'll come back and marry her afore long."⁵⁸

As luck would have it, Philip stumbles over Kinraid's hat which he had lost in the fight. It is tied with a ribbon which Philip had given to Sylvia. When Philip notices it as his ribbon, he is filled with hatred for Kinraid, not only because of the ribbon, but also because the sailors are laughing about the message Kinraid is trying to send to his sweetheart, and "it increased his rage against

⁵⁶ Sylvia's Lovers, p. 188.

⁵⁷ Sylvia's Lovers, p. 188.

⁵⁸ Sylvia's Lovers, p. 190.

Kinraid, who had exposed the idea of Sylvia to be the subject of ribald whispers." Before all this happened, "he had been almost relenting into pity for the man captured before his eyes; now he abhorred him."⁵⁹ Philip's distress concerning the disrespectful attitude of the men in joking of Sylvia as Kinraid's sweetheart is akin to distress felt when a religious object is violated. When Kinraid asks Philip to give Sylvia a message, he behaves in a practical manner, knowing the men do not know Sylvia. The coarse humor of the men, especially of the one who says he will keep the specksioneer from "running after other girls,"⁶⁰ infuriates Philip again as he has heard much local gossip concerning Kinraid's careless power over women. He has always been willing to believe the worst of Kinraid although nothing that Kinraid does in the course of the book is evidence that the gossip is other than just jealousy by women who read more into a relationship than there exists.

Hepburn at once begins to question how much responsibility he has in the case as to "how much of a promise he had made to deliver those passionate words of Kinraid's,"⁶¹

⁵⁹ Sylvia's Lovers, p. 189.

⁶⁰ Sylvia's Lovers, p. 190.

⁶¹ Sylvia's Lovers, p. 191.

and whether Kinraid had heard his muttered reply. It is quite clear that in Mrs. Gaskell's eyes, Philip's responsibility does not hinge on whether or not he gave a promise but on common decency. His duplicity is set when "the dread Inner Creature, who lurks in each of our hearts, arose and said, 'It is as well: a promise given is a fetter to the giver. But a promise is not given when it had not been received.'"⁶² His muttered sophistry fails to convince even himself.

The decision to remain silent is not a sudden impulse. At the moment he watches the boat with Kinraid sail away, he tells himself:

No fault of his! and yet it took him some time before he could reason himself into the belief that his mad, feverish wishes not an hour before--his wild prayer to be rid of his rival, . . . had not compelled the event.⁶³

In the end he convinces himself that his prayer has been granted and thanks God for it.

After Philip's return from London, he is met with the news that the town believes Kinraid dead, ironically because his distinctive hat has been found. Only Philip

⁶² Sylvia's Lovers, p. 191.

⁶³ Sylvia's Lovers, p. 191.

can tell of the circumstances surrounding its loss, and he remains silent, convincing himself that Kinraid is unworthy of Sylvia. He is sad to see Sylvia sorrow over the supposed death of her lover, but he keeps his secret, telling himself it is for Sylvia's good. Philip little knows himself, and his lack of self-knowledge leads him to deny the true and good within him. On the last evening just before leaving for London, he has tried again to warn Sylvia that Kinraid has "played false with other lasses, he' be playing thee false some o' these days, if thou lets him come about thee."⁶⁴ Sylvia does not believe the story and tells Philip so. Philip responds, "almost choking with grief at her manner to him and the regard for his rival, 'I never telled a lie i' my life.'"⁶⁵ Philip does not admit to himself that he has related only what he has heard and wished to believe, not what he knows to be the truth.

Philip is forced to face, at least to himself, what he had done when he fears that his action may be revealed.

When first Philip had heard in his shop that these three men-of-war might be seen lying fell and still on the grey horizon, his heart sank, and he scarcely dared to ask their names. For if one should be the Alcestis; if Kinraid should

⁶⁴ Sylvia's Lovers, p. 181.

⁶⁵ Sylvia's Lovers, p. 181.

send word to Sylvia; if he should say he was living, and loving, and faithful; if it should come to pass that the fact of the undelivered message sent by her lover through Philip should reach Sylvia's ears; what would be the position of the latter, not merely in her love--that, of course, would be hopeless--but in her esteem? All sophistry vanished, the fear of detection awakened Philip to a sense of guilt; and, besides, he found out, that in spite of all idle talk and careless slander, he could not help believing that Kinraid was in terrible earnest when he uttered those passionate words, and entreated that they might be borne to Sylvia. Some instinct told Philip that the specioneer had only flirted with too many, yet that for Sylvia Robson his love was true and vehement.⁶⁶

Philip attempts to convince himself that Kinraid is as he had first perceived him, and he has to content himself with this sophistry until he learns that none of the ships is the dreaded Alcestis: "So his previous fancies shrank to nothing, . . . and with them vanished his self-reproach."⁶⁷ His chance to admit his duplicity fades away.

Philip sets aside his worries for the time being and becomes a rock of dependence when Sylvia's father is arrested for his part in a riot in the town to release prisoners of the press-gang. Philip's assistance to Mr. Robson, like many of his other actions to gain Sylvia's esteem, is not based on pure altruism:

⁶⁶ Sylvia's Lovers, pp. 216-17.

⁶⁷ Sylvia's Lovers, p. 216.

He seemed to find out that to please the women of the household he must pay all possible attention to the man; and though he cared little in comparison for Daniel, yet this autumn he was continually thinking of how he could please him. When he had said or done anything to gratify or amuse her father, Sylvia smiled and was kind.⁶⁸

Philip himself is not totally without blame in the incident of the riot that results in Daniel Robson's arrest. Mrs. Robson warns Philip not to mention the press-gang to her husband. She tells him:

"It's a thing as has got hold of my measter, till thou'd think him possessed. He's speaking perpetual on it i' such a way that thou'd think he were itching to kill tham a' afore he tasted bread again. He really trembles wi' rage and passion; an' a' night it's just as bad. He starts up i' his sleep, swearing and cursing at 'em, . . . And what mun he do last night but open out on Charley Kinraid, and tell Sylvie he thought m' appen t' gang had got hold on him."⁶⁹

Almost without volition, Philip blurts, "An' who knows but what it's true?" As soon as the words were spoken, "he could have bitten his tongue off. And yet afterwards it was a sort of balm to his conscience that he had so spoken."⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Sylvia's Lovers, pp. 213.

⁶⁹ Sylvia's Lovers, p. 217.

⁷⁰ Sylvia's Lovers, p. 217.

Robson's fearful honesty will never allow him to regret his part in freeing men from the press-gang and burning the tavern that had housed them. Philip, the realist and man of order, sees "how fearful sometimes is the necessity for prompt and severe punishment of rebellion against authority."⁷¹ Philip devotes his time and money to Mr. Robson's defense, but he never actually disagrees with the stated law. His nature is one of dogged pursuit of method and order; his drive becomes an obsession to gain that which he prizes. He pursues Sylvia with the same single-minded focus that he brings to his pursuit of business success. His active part in Robson's defense and insistence on paying all the expenses, even returning the money Kester has put up out of love for his master, are possibly also a balm to his conscience. The care that Philip shows the father and Sylvia's mother finally win Sylvia's acceptance of Philip as her husband.

Sylvia's misgivings about the coming marriage are evident in the scene in which she tells her father's oldest friend Kester of her promise to marry Philip. He asks the pointed question, "An' who telled thee so sure and certain as he were drowned? He might ha' been carried off by t'

⁷¹ Sylvia's Lovers, p. 265.

press-gang as well as other men."⁷² When Kester will not give her certainty of chance, which of course he could not, that this was indeed Kinraid's fate, she allows expedience to rule instead of her heart and says that she is "pledged to him as strong as words can make it,"⁷³ forgetting that she had made a previous pledge to Kinraid.

Philip's last chance to unburden his conscience comes when Sylvia tells Philip what Kester has said, but Philip's reaction is of fear rather than guilt, as his "heart stopped beating; literally, as if he had come to a sudden precipice, while he had thought himself securely walking on sunny greensward."⁷⁴ Philip is only able to meet Sylvia's earnest look by drawing "a veil before his brain." His answer is given in "a kind of fierce despair that made him reckless what he said or did,"⁷⁵ in claiming there was a chance in life for anything not seen by one's own eyes, such as even her father's hanging, which she had not witnessed. This is lie by implication, as he has seen both acts, the impressment and the hanging. Philip

⁷² Sylvia's Lovers, pp. 278-79.

⁷³ Sylvia's Lovers, p. 280.

⁷⁴ Sylvia's Lovers, pp. 281-82.

⁷⁵ Sylvia's Lovers, p. 282.

unconsciously tells the truth when he tells Sylvia "if I chose I could tell tales,"⁷⁶ and that his love for her "is just terrible."⁷⁷

Sylvia's adamant refusal to discard her black mourning clothes for the wedding indicates that she is more involved with the past than the future. Philip's acceding to this wish proves that he will accept Sylvia under any circumstances. Such a marriage is doomed from the beginning.

The price that each pays in going against his nature is tremendous. Philip is tortured by dreams of Kinraid's return,⁷⁸ and Sylvia withdraws from her family and husband into solitude in her walks to the sea. Both Philip and Sylvia suffer from the unnatural marriage in their own way.

After the birth of their child, Sylvia suffers from a feverish depression, and when Philip enters the room she calls out for Charley with outstretched arms. Upon awakening she tells Philip her dream:

"Oh, Philip, I've been asleep, and yet I think I was awake! And I saw Charley Kinraid as plain as iver I see thee now, and he wasn't drowned at

⁷⁶ Sylvia's Lovers, p. 282.

⁷⁷ Sylvia's Lovers, pp. 282-83.

⁷⁸ Sylvia's Lovers, p. 213.

all. I'm sure he's alive somewhere; he were so clear and life-like. Oh! what shall I do? what shall I do?"⁷⁹

Philip for the first time tells a direct lie about Kinraid's disappearance:

"Kinraid's dead, I tell ye, Sylvia! And what kind of woman are ye to go dreaming of another man in this way and taking on so about him, when yo're a wedded wife, with a child as you've borne to another man?"⁸⁰

Sylvia retreats and remains passive after this passionate exchange, and Philip grows more and more successful. His entire personal life has been devoted to placing Sylvia, "his idol in a befitting shrine; and means for this were now furnished to him."⁸¹ Their entire lives are based on vows made in self-deceit. Philip can never forget Sylvia's words from long ago: "It's not in me to forgive; I sometimes think it's not in me to forget."⁸² The price of her attempting to forget the vows she had made to Kinraid have exacted a dreadful toll upon her. She is drawn again and again to the sea and almost convinces herself "there's no

⁷⁹ Sylvia's Lovers, p. 304.

⁸⁰ Sylvia's Lovers, p. 304.

⁸¹ Sylvia's Lovers, p. 293.

⁸² Sylvia's Lovers, p. 286.

earthly harm in it."⁸³ It is almost as if her thoughts cause Kinraid to materialize, as he is the officer aboard a ship that is foundering on a shoal. Sylvia herself lends a hand to the straining gang trying to free the ship, but Sylvia is unaware that Charley is aboard until his sudden appearance in the garden of Haytersbank Farm, her old home. That which Philip has dreaded for many months finally occurs as Sylvia tells him that Kinraid has come back to wed her. She is still almost in a state of shock as she confronts Philip: "He is alive; he has niver been dead, only taken by t' press gang. And he says yo' saw it, and knew it all t' time. Speak, was it so?"⁸⁴ In answer, Philip can only offer his love for Sylvia as an excuse for his lie.

"How was I to know if he would keep true to thee? It might be a sin in me, I cannot say; my heart and my sense are gone dead within me. I know this, I have loved you as no man but me ever loved before. Have some pity and forgiveness on me, if it's only because I have been so tormented with my love."⁸⁵

Then Kinraid pleads his love for her:

⁸³ Sylvia's Lovers, p. 316.

⁸⁴ Sylvia's Lovers, p. 316.

⁸⁵ Sylvia's Lovers, p. 327.

"Sylvia! . . . your marriage is no marriage. You were tricked into it. You are my wife, not him. I am your husband; we plighted each other our troth. See! here is my half of the sixpence. . . . When they stripped me and searched me in the French prison, I managed to keep this. No lies can break the oath we swore to each other."⁸⁶

Kinraid begs Sylvia to come with him and set aside her marriage to Philip, but at this moment her child cries. She is distraught and takes a vow that she will never forgive Philip nor live with him again as his wife. Her way is now clear to her as she tells Kinraid: "He's spoilt my life, . . . but neither you nor him shall spoil my soul."⁸⁷

Sylvia's nature, like that of her father's, is passionate and brooding. Her tearing apart of their marriage when she discovers the lie that Philip has let her believe is similar to Mr. Robson's burning of the tavern for the wrong done him so many years ago. She, like Robson, could never bring herself to be sorry for the words she had said to Philip that caused him to leave, nor would she ever say she was.

Sylvia and Philip's reconciliation can come only after she hears of Kinraid's rather hasty marriage and

⁸⁶ Sylvia's Lovers, p. 328.

⁸⁷ Sylvia's Lovers, p. 328.

her beginnings of recognition of the depth of Philip's devotion:

The idea was irresistibly forced upon her that Philip would not have acted so; it would have taken long years before he could have been induced to put another on the throne she had once occupied. For the first time in her life she seemed to recognize the real nature of Philip's love.⁸⁸

The first step in unravelling the deceptions and lack of awareness of themselves and each other is begun here as Sylvia recognizes that she had been on a throne to Philip, placed there as an idol. His single-minded striving to gain Sylvia as his wife had blinded him to honor and truth. Sylvia, however, begins to recognize that she in her turn had been a wife only in letter, not in spirit nor true devotion, thus making a mockery of her marriage vows. In their final meeting, Sylvia and Philip admit their wrongs to each other: he has told a lie; she has lived one. In pitying and forgiving each other, they are at last aware of the greater pity of God for them, as Philip says:

"I think and do believe as we shall meet together before His face: but then I shall ha' learnt to love thee second to Him, not first, as I have done here upon the earth."⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Sylvia's Lovers, p. 374.

⁸⁹ Sylvia's Lovers, p. 425.

Expressing as it did the theme that marriage must be based on trust and love on both sides, not on obsession nor deceit, the book was "little appreciated by the reviewers."⁹⁰ Mrs. Gaskell believed honesty should be the basis for marriage as it should be for all aspects of society, from government and laws to friendship and family relationships.

The same theme of honesty of relationships is explored in a more common-place setting in Wives and Daughters. Truthfulness is not so much an issue in Wives and Daughters as is the more subtle "deviousness sometimes to be encountered in social conduct which is far more difficult to detect and whose effects are more insidious."⁹¹ Mrs. Gaskell has set up a plot "involving the skillful interweaving of several almost equal and mutually enriching stories" with the story of Molly Gibson acting as "the uniting thread of the whole."⁹² As Molly Gibson gradually grows from child to woman in a home where she is often made to feel inferior by her stepmother, she "learns of

⁹⁰ Gerin, p. 229.

⁹¹ Enid L. Duthie, The Themes of Elizabeth Gaskell (Totowa, N. J.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1980), p. 157.

⁹² W. A. Craik, Elizabeth Gaskell and the English Provincial Novel (London: Methuen & Co., 1975), p. 201.

life and suffering and adds to the wisdom of innocence the wisdom of experience."⁹³ Molly's fidelity to truth, both in speech and thought, is directed toward herself as well as others. Only through frank and open examination of one's own thoughts and feelings can true maturity develop. This insight is never attained by her stepmother.

The several families in the story are used to present characters that illustrate differing life-styles and concepts of morality. The two single parents, Mr. Gibson and his new wife, Hyacinth Clare Kirkpatrick Gibson, are studies in contrast in their basic attitudes. These contrasts are manifested in their daughters, Molly Gibson and Cynthia Kirkpatrick. Two other families represent different types of old, established Hollingford residents, the Hamleys of the gentry and the Cumnors of the aristocracy. The lives of both these families become interwoven with those of the Gibsons. The various interactions within the families, particularly those of husband and wife and child-parent are presented in realistic detail and illustrate Mrs. Gaskell's concept of the importance of truth in interpersonal relationships.

Mrs. Gaskell relies on a mainstay of Victorian fiction in her presentation of Mr. and Mrs. Gibson in their new

⁹³ Craik, p. 201.

marriage. The less than perfect union of marriage partners was often depicted in Victorian literature as a moral lesson.⁹⁴ Mr. Gibson is "reticent, scrupulous, laconic, learned, dedicated to his work,"⁹⁵ and totally honest, while Mrs. Gibson is "shallow, affected, vain,"⁹⁶ and insincere to the point of dishonesty. Two people less suited to each other in temperament and values can hardly be imagined. Mrs. Gibson's self-serving manipulation of facts and Mr. Gibson's honesty and total lack of pretense combine to cause the slow deterioration of their relationship. Any sympathy the reader might feel for Mrs. Kirkpatrick because of circumstances early in her life which left her widowed with a young daughter to take care of are soured by her lack of self-knowledge and total self-absorption. "Full weight is given to the circumstances that have helped to make her what she is," Duthie notes,⁹⁷ but these circumstances in many others would be a means toward perfecting character rather than lowering its quality. Such is not the case with Molly's new mother.

⁹⁴ Gail Cunningham, The Woman and the Victorian Novel (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), p. 20.

⁹⁵ Gerin, p. 284.

⁹⁶ Gerin, p. 284.

⁹⁷ Duthie, p. 158.

Mrs. Gibson's protestations of sensibilities and steadfast adherence to truth serve to heighten the reader's sense of a spirit enslaved to duplicity, and the contrast between Mrs. Gibson's distortion of truth with Molly's clear-sighted candor is striking. Mrs. Gibson's lack of sincerity is all the more ironic when one remembers that Mr. Gibson's chief reason for seeking a suitable marriage is to provide Molly with a mother who would serve as a moral and spiritual guide. The early failure of guidance for her own daughter is repeated with Molly, her step-daughter. Fortunately, Molly's good character was already established by her father's honest and loving direction.

While Molly is still looking at the world with the eyes of innocence, she and the reader are introduced to the future Mrs. Gibson when Molly encounters her at a function at Cumnor Towers, where Mrs. Kirkpatrick is the companion of Lady Cumnor. Molly thinks Mrs. Kirkpatrick "the most beautiful person she has ever seen."⁹⁸ A lunch sent by Lady Cumnor for the exhausted little Molly is hurriedly yet gracefully eaten by the deliverer Mrs. Kirkpatrick when Molly feels too ill to eat. Molly admires

⁹⁸ Elizabeth Gaskell, Wives and Daughters, ed. Frank Glover Smith, with an introduction by Laurence Lerner, 1969; rpt. (New York: Penguin Books, 1980), p. 48.

Mrs. Kirkpatrick even though her hurry in eating suggested "she was afraid of some one coming to surprise her in the act."⁹⁹ When Lady Cuxhaven, Lady Cumnor's daughter, sees that all the food is gone from the tray she assumes Molly has eaten and says, "Come, I think there can't be much amiss!"¹⁰⁰ Although Molly does not understand the significance of the little scene, she nevertheless wishes that "her pretty companion would have told Lady Cuxhaven that she herself had helped to finish up the ample luncheon; but no such idea seemed to come into her mind."¹⁰¹ After Molly's headache has caused her to be taken inside and put to bed, she asks earnestly to be called in time to go home with her friends. Mrs. Kirkpatrick blows a kiss to Molly, tells her not to concern herself, and promptly forgets her.¹⁰² This incident completes the portrait of the self-centered but outwardly gracious Mrs. Kirkpatrick.

Gerin sees the character of the stepmother as a "figure of fun, a purely comic character,"¹⁰³ but her self-serving, self-deluding insensitivity causes Molly too

⁹⁹ Wives and Daughters, p. 48.

¹⁰⁰ Wives and Daughters, p. 49.

¹⁰¹ Wives and Daughters, p. 49.

¹⁰² Wives and Daughters, p. 49.

¹⁰³ Gerin, p. 287.

much embarrassment and frustration to be a true comic character. Although she is not a wicked person, she unfailingly and "inexorably advances from folly to folly with the utmost complacency . . . shallow, untruthful, and affected, insensitive to herself to all the finer feelings,"¹⁰⁴ yet constantly reproving her stepdaughter for want of feeling. Mrs. Kirkpatrick-Gibson knows every duty concerning the code of Christian behavior and nothing of its spirit. She is never aware that she is the total antithesis of all that she sees herself to be. Because of this lack of Christian spirit, Mrs. Gibson is unable to experience deep love, even for her daughter, and this void makes it impossible for her to conceive or understand a relationship of such closeness as Molly and her father have had.

Cynthia is all too aware of her mother's hollow semblances of charm,"¹⁰⁵ as well as her own shortcomings, in great part caused by her mother's neglect when Cynthia was a young and vulnerable girl. Cynthia can hardly bring herself to appear less than perfect in either Mr. Gibson's or Molly's eyes, but at one point all her past hurts pour out to Molly:

¹⁰⁴ Gerin, p. 287.

¹⁰⁵ Gerin, p. 288.

"We won't speak of mamma, for your sake as much as mine or hers; but you must see she isn't one to help a girl with much good advice or good-- Oh, Molly, you don't know how I was neglected just at a time when I wanted friends most. Mamma does not know it; it is not in her to know what I might have been if I had only fallen into wise, good hands. But I know it; and what's more, . . . I try not to care which I daresay is really the worst of all; but I could worry myself to death if I once took to serious thinking."¹⁰⁶

Cynthia's lack of candor, developed as a defense against her mother's insensitivity, extends even to her engagement, or as she would call it, her understanding, with young Roger Hamley. Molly's own unacknowledged love for Roger causes her to ask Cynthia if she loves him sincerely and truly. Cynthia evades the question with one of her own:

"You speak with all the solemnity of an adjuration, Molly!" said she, laughing a little at first to cover her nervousness, and then looking up at Molly, "Don't you think I've given a proof of it? But you know I've often told you I've not the gift of loving; I said pretty much the same thing to him. I can respect, and I can fancy I can admire, and I can like, but I never feel carried off my feet by love for any one, not even for you, little Molly."¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ Wives and Daughters, p. 486.

¹⁰⁷ Wives and Daughters, p. 422.

Molly begs her to stop speaking in this way. She says she should not have asked her: "it makes you tell lies!"¹⁰⁸ Although Molly was unaware at the time, Cynthia's promise to Roger is a lie itself as she has already made the same promise to another.

Cynthia's insistence on designating the understanding with Roger as less than an engagement and her requirement for secrecy concerning the quasi-engagement are part of the characteristic evasion of truth practiced in different ways by both Mrs. Gibson and her daughter. Cynthia is involved in two different escapades with young men after Roger has left on a scientific expedition. She becomes the object of affection of Mr. Gibson's former protege, Mr. Coxe, who had originally come to ask for Molly's hand but quickly fell under the spell of the beautiful Cynthia. Mr. Gibson's displeasure with Cynthia upon learning of her indiscretion wounds her pride. Afterwards she admits to Molly, "I've never lived with people with such a high standard of conduct before; and I don't know how to behave."¹⁰⁹ On further discussion with Molly, Cynthia says that she will probably not tell Roger of the incident and

¹⁰⁸ Wives and Daughters, p. 422.

¹⁰⁹ Wives and Daughters, p. 456.

that she feels that they may never marry, "so it's just as well not to tell him all my secrets, for it would be awkward for him to know them if it never came off!"¹¹⁰

Cynthia attempts to justify her flirtation with the young doctor by claiming that she "took pity on him, and consoled his wounded vanity"¹¹¹ caused by Molly's indifference to him. To Molly's further amazement, Cynthia hints at a possible entanglement with Mr. Preston, the Cumnor land manager. Although Molly is totally bewildered by the introduction of Mr. Preston into the conversation, she is later to become Cynthia's unwilling confidante on this same manner.

Molly's first awareness of the gravity of Cynthia's involvement with Mr. Preston occurs when she intercedes on Cynthia's behalf during a terrible scene between the two. Later, at home, Molly urges the distraught Cynthia to explain the incident on the road. Molly learns that Cynthia had known Mr. Preston long before she came to Hollingford. Five years ago when Cynthia was home for the holidays, her mother had gone to visit friends, leaving Cynthia to her own devices. A letter arrived giving

¹¹⁰ Wives and Daughters, p. 454.

¹¹¹ Wives and Daughters, p. 454.

Cynthia permission to visit some friends, but made no provision for money to take care of her expenses. Not knowing her mother's itinerary, she finally confided her problem to Mr. Preston, an intimate friend of her mother's. At his insistence he loaned her twenty pounds, which Cynthia never confided to her mother. Partially because of their mutual involvement in the secret, Cynthia accepted his marriage proposal. Despite her initial attraction to the handsome land manager, she soon felt the impropriety of their betrothal. Mr. Preston refused to release her and threatened to make public letters she had written to him earlier. Molly's suggestion that Mr. Gibson act in her behalf is rejected. She cannot bear to lose the respect of others, even if the respect is based upon a deception. Cynthia's insistence on secrecy finally spins a web that enmeshes even honest forthright Molly in a conspiracy that almost ruins her reputation in the little town of Hollingford. Molly finally relents and agrees to meet with Mr. Preston to try to get the letters back, and also promises never to reveal the circumstances. While carrying out this distasteful errand, Molly and Mr. Preston are seen together. Even though Molly can give her father no explanation of the incident, she does assure him that there was no wrong-doing on her part and she was never

involved with Mr. Preston. Mr. Gibson accepts Molly's word because their relationship has always been one of truth and honesty.

Such a relationship is never possible between Molly and her stepmother. When Mr. Gibson first marries, Molly often feels rebellious and angry at Mrs. Gibson's twisting of the truth. Later, as Molly matures her irritation gradually changes to pity. The realization comes of "something being wrong; the world out of joint"¹¹² in her father and stepmother's lives.

Blind herself as she would she could not help perceiving that her father was not satisfied with the wife he had chosen. Molly had been surprised at his apparent contentment; . . . and she was almost irritated at what she considered his blindness. Something, however, had changed him now. . . . His manner had grown dry and sarcastic, . . . Molly now learnt to long after the vanished blindness in which her father had passed the first year of his marriage.¹¹³

Molly knows the time of Mr. Gibson's change in attitude but she does not know the cause. The change is actually precipitated by Mr. Gibson's learning of his wife's eavesdropping on a conversation between himself and

¹¹² Wives and Daughters, p. 456.

¹¹³ Wives and Daughters, pp. 456-57.

another doctor concerning the ill health of the elder Hamley son Osborne. It is at this time that Mr. Gibson

. . . had been compelled to face and acknowledge the fact that the wife he had chosen had a very different standard of conduct from that which he had upheld all his life, and had hoped to have seen inculcated in his daughter.¹¹⁴

Mrs. Gibson thus forfeits her husband's esteem through her lack of honesty.

The friction so evident in the husband-wife relationship of Mr. and Mrs. Gibson is totally absent in the marriage of Squire and Mrs. Hamley. She is the center that keeps the peace and is the focus of the love of her husband and sons. After her death, there is little peace in the family as Squire Hamley, without the mediating involvement of his wife, is blind to the truth concerning either of his sons. Osburne Hamley, the future Hamley heir, has quite a different nature from the one credited to him by his father. In his total absorption with Osborne and the family name, Squire Hamley commits a sin in Elizabeth Gaskell's opinion. A love which is irrational and obsessive partakes "of the nature of worship, and the object of worship as she never ceased to reiterate should

¹¹⁴ Wives and Daughters, p. 432.

be God,"¹¹⁵ not husband, wife, or child. She herself as a parent recognized the danger as Squire Hamley never did of making a child an idol. Sharps observes that throughout the diary Mrs. Gaskell kept during Marianne's babyhood, she prayed she "may not make her too much my idol."¹¹⁶

Mrs. Gaskell sensed that over-attachment to a child clouds the perceptions, blurs the truth, and makes impartial assessment impossible. Squire Hamley sees Osborn only in relationship to his becoming Squire one day. His obstinance to any idea that he sees as a hinderance or distraction from this goal pushes these delays from his mind. Indeed, he refuses even to consider any evidence or discussion contrary to his own set opinion of Osborn's desires, worth, and future. This lack of honest assessment and tenacious adherence to misguided demands on the part of the father combined with a weak will in the son result in a secret that shakes the foundations of the family. Young Osborne has fallen in love with a French girl who is Catholic, and the two have a son. After Osborne's death, Squire Hamley's greatest sorrow is that he did not have the patience to listen to his son. However, he still does

¹¹⁵ Carol Lansbury, Elizabeth Gaskell: Her Life and Work (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1975), p. 160.

¹¹⁶ Cited in Sharps, p. 18.

not realize that his own lack of truth and honesty in his perceptions of his sons has caused their problems. Ironically, his only regret is that he did not love him more.

In the characterization of the remaining son Roger as a scientist, Mrs. Gaskell reflects the Unitarian belief in science as a search for truth. Squire Hamley remains "unconscious as ever to the force of change that Roger Hamley represents"¹¹⁷ and is only brought to a partial appreciation of his son's worth and renown by the money and attention Roger receives. Mrs. Gibson, like Squire Hamley, fails to appreciate the significance of Roger's fidelity to his own spirit. She has only considered him as a candidate for Cynthia's hand when she thinks he might become the heir to Hamley. In doing what he knows is best for himself, Roger gains an independence Osborne never knows.

In this novel, possibly Mrs. Gaskell's finest work, her focus on the part that self-deception plays in unhappy relationships is unmistakable. Cynthia, despite her progress toward an awareness of her own moral shortcomings, is unable to break the habits of a lifetime. Her emotions

¹¹⁷ Lansbury, p. 195.

are awakened, surrounded by a careful padding of convention and expediency. She is a finer person than her mother, but closer to her in some ways than she will dare to admit. Mrs. Gibson will remain always as she is because she lacks the ability to assess herself with honesty. Molly retains her clarity of vision and devotion to truth while gaining in tolerance. Her abandonment of her "adolescent admiration of Osborne, the poet, for Roger, the man of science,"¹¹⁸ is an indication of Molly's own developing emotional maturity, evidenced as well by her ability to gain understanding of her father's wife and to begin to accept her with good nature.

In Mrs. Gaskell's novel North and South, what Miss Stebbins calls the "lie motif"¹¹⁹ is modified in its use as concealment. This more restricted form of use of the "lie motif" is an important ingredient of the story, but the focus on honesty is not given the depth of treatment that it receives in such novels as Wives and Daughters and Sylvia's Lovers. The concealment of Margaret's brother is for what Margaret perceives to be his safety, but the

¹¹⁸ Lansbury, p. 196.

¹¹⁹ Lucy Poate Stebbins, A Victorian Album: Some Lady Novelists of the Period (New York: Columbia University Press, 1946), p. 114.

concealment culminates in deceit and finally a deliberate lie. Ironically, the lie had been unnecessary to protect her brother.

It is Margaret Hale's father's inability to continue in his position as a clergyman when he no longer agrees with the Articles of his faith that brings her as a stranger to a strange city. Although Mr. Hale is not required to swear to the Articles unless he changes positions in the Church, which he has carefully avoided, he feels it dishonest to remain even in the old position. Because of Mr. Hale's honesty of conscience, his family is uprooted and moved to Milton, usually equated with Manchester, where he takes a position as a private tutor. One of the first people Margaret meets is Mr. Thornton, her father's first and favorite pupil. He is one of the masters in the textile industry and is a man of great pride and integrity. Margaret, however, feels a social superiority over the men who operate the great manufacturing plants rather than engaging in a profession; she feels that the Miltonians are lacking in sensitivity, especially to the needs of the workers; and she feels that her personal moral position is somewhat higher than that of Mr. Thornton's. In an early conversation between them concerning an approaching strike, Margaret asks of

Mr. Thornton why he cannot explain to the men his reasons for retrenchment in the expectation of lowering of trade. He tells her that as "the owners of capital, (they) have a right to choose" what they will do with it. Margaret murmurs, "A human right."¹²⁰ In response to Mr. Thornton's further questions, she explains that he and other masters have a human right to do with their money as they please, and that the only reasons that he might do otherwise are religious ones. When he asks her if she does not credit him with having some religious opinions, even if differing from hers, she haughtily replies that these are not her affair. She does explain, however, that to her "there is no human law to prevent the employers from utterly wasting or throwing away all their money, if they choose; but that there are passages in the Bible which would rather seem to imply . . . that they neglected their duty as stewards if they did so."¹²¹

Margaret's feeling of superiority is shattered after she tells a lie of which Mr. Thornton becomes aware. Margaret is witness to an accident in a railroad station

¹²⁰ Elizabeth Gaskell, North and South, with an intro. by Martin Dodsworth, ed. Dorothy Collins (London: 1854; rpt. New York: Penguin Books, 1981), p. 164.

¹²¹ North and South, p. 164.

caused in part by her brother who is in the country illegally. To protect him, she feels she must deny being at the scene of the accident until he can be safely out of the country. The lie takes its toll on her conscience, however, and in the suffering caused its telling, not the least part is that Mr. Thornton knows of it. Her thoughts reveal her new awareness of her own vulnerability to moral error:

Of all faults the one she most despised in others was the want of bravery; the meanness of heart which leads to untruth. And here had she been guilty of it! Then came the thought of Mr. Thornton's cognizance of her falsehood. She wondered if she should have minded detection half so much from anyone else . . . any fall in opinion was as nothing to the shame, the shrinking shame she felt at the thought of meeting Mr. Thornton again. . . . She remembered--she, then strong in her own untempted truth--asking him, if he did not think that buying the cheapest and selling in the dearest market proved some want of the transparent justice which is so intimately connected with the idea of truth: and she had used the word chivalric--and her father had corrected her with a higher word, Christian; and so drawn the argument upon himself, while she sate [sic] silent by with a slight feeling of contempt.¹²²

In Margaret's new self-awareness that she has acted in such a manner to cause her to feel humiliated and even

¹²² North and South, pp. 377-78.

disgraced, she knows that she certainly will have no more contempt. Her self-superior attitude vanishes with the few small words of her lie. Moreover, Mr. Thornton reacts to the knowledge of her lie with charity. He is of the belief that the young man he has seen with Margaret is someone other than a relative and feels she must be in serious circumstances to deny her presence there. He asks his mother to ascertain if Margaret needs help or counsel. Although Margaret rejects Mrs. Thornton's supercilious offer, she feels heartened by Mr. Thornton's concern for her but very humiliated that he thinks she told a lie to protect a sweetheart. This lie, although told by Margaret to protect her brother, causes much uncertainty and misunderstanding between Margaret and Mr. Thornton. Their lives take a circuituous route before the two are reunited in understanding and love based finally on mutual respect and honesty.

Mary Barton tells no lie purposely but she, like Margaret Hale and many of the other heroines in much of Mrs. Gaskell's works, brings much sorrow on herself and others because she does not know her own mind. Mary's awareness of the true nature of love and her feelings for Jem Wilson come too late to avert the heartache and sorrow following Mary's vehement refusal of Jem's offer of love.

She shows bravery and fortitude, however, when she is called upon to be a witness at Jem's murder trial. Almost everyone except Mary believes Jem to be guilty of the murder of young Mr. Carson. As Mary talks to Job Legh concerning the subpoena she has received, she attempts to convince Job that Jem is innocent of the crime. She is sure that Jem had been out of Manchester on the evening of the murder, accompanying Will Wilson part of the way walking to Liverpool. As Mary talks to Job, she bursts into tears, saying:

" . . . it is hard if you won't believe me. How shall I clear him to strangers, when those who know him, and ought to love him, are so set against his being innocent."¹²³

Job reassures Mary that he will help her, right or wrong, but Mary is apprehensive concerning her questioning at the trial, saying that she will be so "glopped," that she shall not know what to answer.¹²⁴ Job's advice is that which Mrs. Gaskell saw as the most potent ammunition if troubles come, and a guide to life that can serve in all situations:

¹²³ Elizabeth Gaskell, Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life, with intro. by Stephen Gill (London, 1848; rpt. New York: Penguin Books, 1981), p. 197.

¹²⁴ Mary Barton, p. 315.

"Thou canst do nought better than tell the truth. Truth's best at all times, they say; and for sure it is when folk have to do with lawyers; for they're 'cute and cunning enough to get it out sooner or later, and it makes folk look like Tom Noddies, when truth follows falsehood, against their will."¹²⁵

Job Legh's advice stands Mary in good stead at the trial. Mary is exhausted from her journey to find Will Wilson to testify as to Jem's whereabouts on the night of the murder. She is barely able to cling to consciousness from stress and physical illness, as well as her secret knowledge that her own father is guilty of the murder. When the lawyer asks her in court which lover she had preferred, whether Jem, the man on trial, or young Mr. Carson, she answers the impertinent question honestly and sincerely. She had never confessed her love to Jem, nor her foolishness in having had her head turned by Mr. Carson, who made her think he meant to marry her.¹²⁶ She answers bravely:

"I never found out how dearly I loved another till one day, when James Wilson asked me to marry him, and I was very hard and sharp in my answer . . . and he took me at my word and left me; and from that day to this I've never spoken a word to him, or set eyes on him; though I'd

¹²⁵ Mary Barton, p. 315.

¹²⁶ Mary Barton, p. 390.

fain have done so, to try and show him we had both been too hasty; for he had not been gone out of my sight above a minute before I knew I loved--far above my life."¹²⁷

Because of her bravery in telling the truth, Mary's love for Jem is revealed at last. Her natural dignity lends credence to her reports in court that she never told Mr. Carson of Jem nor did she know how he could have become aware of their acquaintance.

All the witnesses for Jem tell straightforward simple truth, even though in the beginning the truth seems damaging to his case. Young Will Wilson's story of Jem's whereabouts on the evening of the murder is convincing and unvarnished, but the prosecuting lawyer tries to make it seem that Will is telling the story for a price. Calling the testimony incomplete, the counsel asks, "Will you have the kindness to inform the gentlemen of the jury what has been your charge for repeating this very plausible story?"¹²⁸ When Will understands the meaning of the lawyer, his indignation is righteous. He returns the insulting question in kind: "Will you tell the judge and

¹²⁷ Mary Barton, pp. 390-91.

¹²⁸ Mary Barton, p. 397.

jury how much money you've been paid for your impudence towards one, who has told God's blessed truth, and who would scorn to tell a lie, or blackguard anyone, for the biggest fee as ever lawyer got for doing dirty work?" Will's testimony is sufficient to gain Jem's freedom; however, Mr. Carson, the murdered man's father, is as convinced as ever of Jem's guilt. His hatred and longing for vengeance blind him to the truth that is evident to others less prejudiced.

After his trial, Jem's first thought is of Mary. When he finds that she has collapsed from strain and exhaustion, he keeps a vigil near her until she is able to return home.

Upon her return, Mary finds her father silent, withdrawn, and seemingly quite ill. Mary had become aware of her father's guilt in young Mr. Carson's murder before Jem's trial, but she could not bring herself to reveal the secret to anyone. She simply cannot "reconcile the two ideas, of her father and a blood-shedder."¹³⁰ Mary sees him now in his helplessness only as a father. At last Mr. Barton asks Mary to bring Jem Wilson there that

¹²⁹ Mary Barton, p. 397.

¹³⁰ Mary Barton, p. 422.

evening. As Jem and Mary enter they see Job Legh and Mr. Carson there with her father. It is apparent that Mr. Barton has confessed his guilt before his good and sturdy friend, Job Legh, and the one whom he has injured most, the murdered man's father. Mr. Barton is ready to accept any punishment, even the hanging Mr. Carson says will be Barton's lot. Telling how his conscience has tormented him for his sin, Barton says, "God above only can tell the agony with which I've repented me of it,"¹³¹ and admits he has been tempted to kill himself many times to get away from his own thoughts. He is ready to endure Hell-fire if he can only rid himself of his sin.

As Mr. Barton sees Mr. Carson's desolation and agony over his son's death, he feels deeply that he is cut off by his sin from offering Christian words of comfort. He felt he "had forfeited all right to bind up his brother's wounds."¹³² Mr. Barton's crime was based on his deluded efforts "to remove an overbearing partner from an obnoxious firm, who stood in the way of those who struggled as well as they were able to obtain their rights."¹³³ Now

¹³¹ Mary Barton, p. 433.

¹³² Mary Barton, p. 435.

¹³³ Mary Barton, p. 436.

in the clear light of reason, at last he sees the truth; ". . . now he knew that he had killed a man, and a brother,--now he knew that no good thing could come out of this evil, even to the sufferers whose cause he had so blindly espoused."¹³⁴ In his suffering, Mr. Barton at last recognizes the simple truth: "I did not know what I was doing, . . . God knows I didn't."¹³⁵

Mr. Carson wrestles with his hate by turning to a long forgotten source of truth, his Bible. He finds at last the words so similar to Mr. Barton's plea: "Forgive them, Father. They know not what they do." He is also reminded of the prayer, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." At last Carson is able to pity "the poor wasted skeleton of a man"¹³⁶ who had been driven to such extremes.

After losing his obsession for revenge, Mr. Carson now hungers for a knowledge of the circumstances behind John Barton's crime. He wishes to know all the truth. In a meeting with Job Legh and Jem Wilson, Mr. Carson asks them to "Have no scruple as to speaking the truth,"¹³⁷ as Jem cannot be tried again. Job answers with dignity:

¹³⁴ Mary Barton, p. 436.

¹³⁵ Mary Barton, p. 436.

¹³⁶ Mary Barton, p. 439.

¹³⁷ Mary Barton, p. 453.

"I'm not going to be affronted either for myself or Jem at what you've just now been saying about the truth. You don't know us, and there's an end on't; only it's as well for folk to think others good and true until they're proved contrary. Ask what you like, sir, I'll answer for it we'll either tell truth, or hold our tongues."¹³⁸

Mr. Carson seeks first the circumstances of the murder. After information is given, a deeper question for Mr. Carson concerns the motive for the murder, since Mr. Barton had been unaware of young Carson's attentions to Mary. Job says he can only judge from Barton's way of thinking and talking as he had never heard him say directly his reasons. But as Job sees the matter:

". . . he were sadly put about to make great riches and great poverty square with Christ's Gospel."¹³⁹ He says Barton did not care for material things nor wealth:

". . . but what hurt him sore, and rankled in him as long as I knew him (and sir, it rankles in many a poor man's heart far more than the want of any creature-comforts, and puts a sting into starvation itself), was that those who wore finer clothes, and eat better food, and had more money in their pockets, kept him arm's length, and cared not whether his heart was sorry or glad; whether he lived or dies,--whether he was bound for heaven or hell. It seemed hard to him that a heap of gold should part him and his

¹³⁸ Mary Barton, p. 453.

¹³⁹ Mary Barton, p. 455.

brother so far asunder. For he was a loving man before he grew mad with seeing such as he was slighted, as if Christ himself had not been poor."¹⁴⁰

Mr. Carson defends the position of the masters. He asks Job what he could have done? Job answers:

"The masters has it on their own conscience,-- you have it on yours, sir, to answer for to God whether you've done, and are doing all in your power to lighten the evils, that seem always to hang on the trades by which you make your fortunes."¹⁴¹

An awareness of the feelings and beliefs of the men concerning the crisis of unemployment and the responsibilities of the masters truly make a difference in Mr. Carson's outlook:

The wish which lay nearest to his heart was that none might suffer from the cause from which he had suffered; that a perfect understanding, and complete confidence and love, might exist between masters and men; that the truth might be recognized that the interests of one were the interests of all; and as such, required the consideration and deliberation of all; that hence it was most desirable to have educated workers, capable of judging, not mere machines of ignorant men; and to have them bound to their employers by ties of respect and affection, not by mere money bargains alone; in short, to

¹⁴⁰ Mary Barton, pp. 455-56.

¹⁴¹ Mary Barton, p. 458.

acknowledge the Spirit of Christ as the regulating law between both parties.¹⁴²

Mrs. Gaskell's firm, Unitarian belief in the power of truth is reflected again and again, in small ways and large, in all her writing. To Mrs. Gaskell, truth is power. Truth is not only its own reward in bringing self-knowledge and an easy conscience, but it is also the one necessary ingredient for the development of true understanding between individuals, masters and workers, and indeed among the classes themselves. Love of one's fellow man and true brotherhood, in her eyes so necessary to make the world a better place, must be first founded on truth as man is able to divine it, through his God-given intelligence.

CHAPTER THREE

EDUCATION AND INTELLIGENCE

To Elizabeth Gaskell, both in her own personal life and in her work, education and intelligence were prerequisite for full participation in the social structure of the nation, and both remained throughout her life as guiding forces underlying her Unitarian spirit. Elizabeth Gaskell, however, was born at a time in which little importance was generally given to education for women, and perhaps of even greater significance, many schools of the day were quite inferior, especially those which women might attend. Despite the emphasis on marriage for young women as the only suitable life expectation, the typical young girl received no instruction in the everyday duties of wife and mother. Instead, the emphasis was on socially accepted courses such as piano playing, embroidery and plain sewing, drawing, painting and dancing. These graceful accomplishments were designed to capture a suitor and prospective husband, but they were of little or no value, except perhaps for plain sewing, later in married life. If this education ill-equipped a young lady for marriage,

it was even more useless to young women from the middle or lower classes. These girls, too, looked forward to marriage as the "apex of success," but were often forced to spend their "'waiting years' at some sort of profitable employment." Their choices for employment were quite limited by society's expectations of suitable employment as well as their short-comings of education.¹

Despite the growing public awareness of the importance of quality education for young women, Elizabeth Gaskell was fortunate to be born into a Unitarian family. This Unitarian background ensured that she would be given every opportunity to reach her personal potential "in the cultivation of the intellect."²

In Elizabeth Stevenson's carefully chosen school environment, these years were happy ones for her, far different from those that her friend Charlotte Bronte endured. The two schools that these two women attended as young girls probably represent the extremes of educational opportunities available during this part of the Victorian

¹ Jane Stoffels Welborn, "Solitary Spheres: Gaskell's Single Women," Thesis Texas Woman's University 1979, p. 15.

² Enid L. Duthie, The Themes of Elizabeth Gaskell (Totowa, N. J.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1980), p. 115.

period. Mrs. Gaskell retained happy memories of these carefree but productive years throughout her life.

The school that was chosen for Elizabeth Stevenson was one operated by three young women who were uniquely prepared to conduct a successful and efficient school. Of eight Byerley sisters, six were eventually to become active in the school. The young women were the daughters of Thomas Byerley, a nephew of Josiah Wedgwood, who adopted Thomas, brought him into the firm and took an active interest in the education and future of the young Byerley daughters. These young women came into contact with artists and designers, as well as the aristocratic clientele of the Wedgwood business, as the family lived over the showrooms. These young women were also often in the unique position for that day of learning of the conduct of business. They were not inhibited by the fact that their father was in trade, as the Wedgwood china was of the quality and reputation of fine art. The young women were given the very best education available. It was planned early in their lives that they would have a school of their own, and this plan was made possible by a bequest of 200 pounds from Josiah Wedgwood to each of them.

The school was established on liberal lines and the appointments were gracious. The young women's business

experience made the school a practical venture with none of the miserliness sometimes associated with Victorian educational facilities. The Byerleys often entertained the girls over holidays, reported the latest fashions, and took a personal interest in their charges.

If the school operated by the Miss Byerleys may seem on cursory examination to be but a typical finishing school, that is hardly the case. The Byerleys were dedicated teachers and continued to serve the school after marriage. They took lessons in the summer holiday for subjects "in which they felt they were growing stale."³ Elizabeth could hardly have been more fortunate in her English teacher. Katherine Byerley was a thorough teacher who made the "study of literature a priority."⁴ Miss Byerley attained success as a writer under the name of Grace Wharton; her encouragement to Elizabeth on her compositions gained an added luster from the story that Miss Byerley had once been read to by Coleridge. Elizabeth's studies under the guidance of Miss Byerley were both inspirational and educationally sound.⁵

³ Winifred Gerin, Elizabeth Gaskell: A Biography (London: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 26.

⁴ Gerin, p. 25.

⁵ Gerin, pp. 23-26.

After Elizabeth's formal schooling was finished, she visited relatives in Wales, then came to London when her brother was lost at sea and remained there until her father's death in March, 1829. For a time she visited Swinton Holland's family in London, later visiting the home of the Rev. William Turner in Newcastle. This period of travel and renewed acquaintance with family friends exerted a lasting influence on Elizabeth as she expanded her social and moral horizons. Mrs. Gaskell's concept of Christian service was profoundly influenced by the selfless dedication of the Rev. Mr. Turner. As Mr. Turner was related by marriage to the Hollands, it was decided that Elizabeth would visit his daughter Anne during the winter. The friendship of the two girls proved to be enduring, and during the autumn of 1831, Elizabeth accompanied Anne to visit her sister, Mary Robberds, wife of the minister of the Unitarian Cross Street Chapel in Manchester. The visit proved eventful, as it was during her stay there that Elizabeth met Mr. Robberd's young assistant, William Gaskell.

This young assistant minister had received his degree at Glasgow University and trained for the Unitarian ministry at Manchester New College. Mr. Gaskell was a tireless worker, "combining intellectual brilliance with

the active life of teacher and preacher, . . . a university lecturer and a social worker."⁶ Since Nonconformists were excluded from Oxford and Cambridge, many of the Nonconformists took their degrees in Scotland as Mr. Gaskell did. Manchester College was founded with one of its purposes to provide a college education for Unitarians and other Dissenters. The words truth, liberty, and religion, inscribed over the entrance to Manchester College and to which the college was dedicated,⁷ provide a succinct summation of the creed of Unitarianism. Truth, discovered through reason, forms the basis for true liberty. These two concepts in turn support a religion which is and was dedicated to the active advancement of education. The college came to be a theological college, open to all who wished to study in an institution "where neither staff nor students were subject to credal tests."⁸ The College was supported mainly by Unitarians and in time, other universities were also founded and given active support by Unitarians. This active support is typical of the

⁶ Gerin, p. 46.

⁷ E. L. Elliot-Binns, Religion in the Victorian Era, 2nd ed. (London: Lutterworth Press, 1946), p. 458.

⁸ Raymond V. Holt, The Unitarian Contribution to Social Progress in England (London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1938), p. 21.

Unitarian regard for "a high standard of education as an essential qualification for their ministry."⁹

Unitarians were also particularly interested in science and comparative religion. Many ministers of the Unitarian faith were distinguished Fellows of societies such as the Royal Society, the Society of Antiquaries, and many others.

Thus, it is hardly surprising that both William and Elizabeth Gaskell, as Unitarians in fact and spirit, remained interested and active in various educational programs, both because of religious belief and personal experience. The Gaskells subscribed whole-heartedly to the Unitarian passion for bringing education to the working classes as well as to the more traditional recipients, the middle and upper classes. Mr. Gaskell's efforts in this endeavor were formidable. He conducted evening classes for boys, lectured regularly at Manchester New College in English literature, history, logic, and composition, as well as lecturing in evening sessions at the Mechanics' Institute for Working-Class Men. Mr. Gaskell also served on various special committees for educational improvements when occasion arose.¹⁰

⁹ Holt, p. 21.

¹⁰ Gerin, p. 52.

Mrs. Gaskell, as well as her husband, also became interested in the movement to provide basic schooling for the children who worked in the factories during the week and who remained essentially illiterate. The need for schools was evident to Mrs. Gaskell because of her close association with the working people in her charity work. The Sunday Schools established by the Unitarians, as well as those established by other sects, were organized to meet the need for educating those who would otherwise receive little or no schooling. The Unitarian Sunday Schools were more "open" than those of many other sects.¹¹ Many people objected to any study other than the Bible in these schools, but reading must be taught, of course, if the Bible were to be read and studied. One of the criticisms of the Unitarian Sunday Schools was that they were more interested in education than conversion,¹² which was probably true, given the Unitarian precepts of allowing each person to decide the truth for himself and a firm belief in education as an assist to rational thought.

All of the beliefs of Mr. and Mrs. Gaskell, both religious and personal, concerning education were

¹¹ Angus Easson, Elizabeth Gaskell (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, Ltd., 1979), p. 18.

¹² Easson, p. 18.

incorporated into the rearing and education of their children. Acceptance of individuality was an important part of this educational concept. Believing as Mrs. Gaskell did in the worth and dignity of the individual, "it was natural that she should be very conscious of the influence of education, the factor which can do so much to help the development of the personality but may also thwart or distort its growth."¹³ Her daughters were sent to schools carefully chosen by the Gaskells as best suited to their individual characters, whether their talents were musical, artistic, social, or intellectual. To Mrs. Gaskell a good education was perceived as essential for "opinions independent of any line of thought or set of beliefs" of any one particular group. She saw quite clearly the value of education in forming one's own opinions, rather than following that of society unthinkingly. Her own daughters were encouraged in "independent thinking as well as independent choices in life, whether in marriage or career."¹⁴ Education was primarily education for life and through life, but a reasonable amount of knowledge was indispensable for full participation in society. Her concept of

¹³ Duthie, p. 112.

¹⁴ Duthie, pp. 115-116.

education included as well a belief in beauty, nature and common sense, but always the most basic part of education was an understanding of moral truth.¹⁵

Evidence of Mrs. Gaskell's attitude toward and devotion to education in all its breadth is rather subtle in her works, although it figures to some extent in Mary Barton, North and South and Sylvia's Lovers as well as several of the shorter works such as "My Lady Ludlow" and "Cousin Phillis." Incidents concerning education may be found in each of the works named, but the attitude rather than the content is the significant factor.

In Mary Barton possibly the most important point that Mrs. Gaskell makes is that the working-class people are possessed of an intellect that could benefit from education if they but had the opportunity to gain it and suffer from its lack.¹⁶ Significantly, some of the characters seem to be fairly well educated in various areas, largely by their own efforts. Job Legh is interested in science as well as being somewhat knowledgeable in some minor points of law. When the sailor, Will Wilson, comes to visit Job and Margaret, ". . . he was deep in conversation with the young sailor, trying to extract from him any circumstances

¹⁵ Duthie, p. 113.

¹⁶ Duthie, p. 114.

connected with the natural history of the different countries he had visited."¹⁷ Job is quite disappointed when Will Wilson tells him a story of some men on his ship who claim to have seen a mermaid. Job is incredulous concerning the mermaid while Will is insulted that the old man does not believe the story of his shipmate. When Will is asked by the girls to tell more of his strange adventures, he feels he will not be believed, but to his surprise when he says he has seen a fish fly, Job now admits that Will is telling the truth. This turnabout is amazing to Will:

"Well now! you'll swallow that, old gentleman. You'll credit me when I say I've seen a crittur half fish, half bird, and you won't credit me when I say there be such beasts as mermaids, half fish, half woman. To me, one's just as strange as another."¹⁸

Will is an intelligent young man, but his lack of education prevents his seeing the difference between personal observation by a reliable witness, as Will is, and a "yarn" told by a shipmate. When Job gives the scientific name for the sailfish, Will thinks Job is only interested because

¹⁷ Elizabeth Gaskell, Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life with introduction by Stephen Gill (London, 1848, rpt. New York: Penguin Books, 1981), p. 197.

¹⁸ Mary Barton, p. 201.

the fish has a name like "Sunday clothes."¹⁹ When Will offers to give Job a dried flying fish, Job Legh's joy knew no bounds.

Mary turned to Job almost instinctively when she wished information concerning the value of an alibi in Jem's trial for murder. She appealed to Job "as one of the few among her acquaintance gifted with the knowledge of hard words, for to her, all terms of law, or natural history, were alike many-syllabled mysteries."²⁰ Mary writes well enough to have copied a poem down for her father, but her education is quite insufficient to attack complex matters.

Her father's interest in the union to represent the workers is hampered, also, by his lack of formal education. When Mr. Barton is selected by the union as one of the men to take their requests to place before Parliament, his neighbors, and indeed Barton himself, have so little knowledge of his mission that their requests to him would be humorous were they not pitiful in their lack of sophistication. One neighbor says:

"Well, there's many a thing I'd like yo to speak on to the Parliament people. Thou'lt not spare 'em,

¹⁹ Mary Barton, p. 201.

²⁰ Mary Barton, p. 128.

John, I hope. Tell 'em our minds; how we're thinking we've been clemmed long enough, and we donnot see whatten good they'n been doing, if they can't give us what we're all crying for sin' the day we were born."²¹

Another instructs him to ask why factory men must work longer hours than men in other trades, while still another asks that they make the masters break the machines, as these were seen as the cause of much of their trouble. John is almost as naive as the other men as he answers, "Ay, ay! I'll tell 'em that, and much more to it, when it gets to my turn; but thou knows there's many will have their word afore me."²² Parliament refused to listen to the complaints and requests so earnestly prepared.

John Barton may be uninformed in the ways of the government and business, but he, like many others of the working-class in Manchester and other cities as well, is intelligent and perceptive. Mrs. Gaskell knew there were others like her character Job Legh, botanists and scientists known throughout England, intellectuals reading philosophy, and mechanics (like Jem Wilson) whose inventions advance industrial technology; but even the illiterate like John Barton, she found to be possessed

²¹ Mary Barton, p. 128.

²² Mary Barton, p. 128.

of an intelligence that entitled them to be heard by society.²³

Margaret Hale in North and South is possessed of a bright and inquiring mind. Her interest in the causes behind the economic plight of the mill owners and the possibilities available to ameliorate the conditions of the workers indicates an intellect capable of original, independent thinking. After Margaret is left money and property by her godfather, she takes an interest in learning to administer her own affairs. Her intelligence and knowledge of the world enable her to make good use of her money. Her loan to Mr. Thornton is a good business decision. She is far from the description in Mary Barton of Mrs. Carson who led a useless and boring life, "without education enough to value the resources of wealth and leisure."²⁴ Mr. Thornton's natural intelligence results in his interest in furthering his education to enrich his life. He is interested in the classics, and the well-educated Mr. Hale finds him a stimulating companion.

Lacking motivation to acquire knowledge, Sylvia Robson in Sylvia's Lovers is totally disinterested in the

²³ Ellen Moers, Literary Women: The Great Writers (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, 1976), p. 28.

²⁴ Mary Barton, p. 254.

education that Philip wishes to teach her. Her only interest is in geography so that she may know the place where Charley Kinraid sails on his whaler. After many years, she once more becomes involved in learning, this time so she may study the Bible. Ruth Hilton in Ruth gains an education so that she may instruct her son. Mrs. Gaskell is aware that not everyone is inclined to gain a formal education, but her heroines who do so live a richer, more satisfying life. One of the assets of education is its power to help women achieve a fuller life and to enable them to reach self-fulfillment in a way not possible for one who lacks the tools of learning. It seems almost certain that Margaret's marriage will be the richer for her equal footing with her husband in intelligence and learning. Ruth Hilton finds fulfillment in becoming a nurse, as Mrs. Gaskell's acquaintance, Florence Nightingale, did.

Mrs. Gaskell's own personal creed, ingrained from Unitarian concepts of trust in intelligence, led her to campaign through her novels and stories for independence of will for women, freedom of choice concerning marriage, and bravery, strength and forthrightness of action. All of her own experience contributed to her opinion that women should be freed from restrictions unfairly imposed by

society on women's activities both in the home and in public life. The means to such a course for women she perceived to be through education and enlightened public opinion.

Conversely, although formal education is desirable in the Unitarian view, it is never considered to be desirable as a replacement for common-sense, nor is education seen as particularly valuable if it is used simply as a pastime, a toy or as a means of superiority over others. Although Philip Hepburn has superior academic knowledge to that of Sylvia Robson, his desire to teach her is founded on his desire to be near her, to prove his worth above others and to draw her closer to him in spirit. Despite his academic knowledge, Philip is "ignorant on the subject of love."²⁵

Typically, Philip is rebuked by one whose learning is quite limited, but whose perception of life is unerring. Old Alice Rose warns him, "Lad! it's not schooling, nor knowledge, nor book-learning as carries a man through t' world. It's mother-wit."²⁶ Mary Barton shows a surprising

²⁵ Janita M. Mantovani, "The Feminine World View of Elizabeth Gaskell," Diss. Univ. of Southern California 1974, p. 149.

²⁶ Elizabeth Gaskell, Sylvia's Lovers with intro. by Arthur Pollard, 1914: rpt. Everyman's Library, No. 524 (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, Ltd., 1964), p. 209.

intelligence and "mother-wit" in her determination to locate the missing Will Wilson to supply an alibi for Jem Wilson. She knows intuitively that no one, not Job Legh, nor Jem's mother nor the lawyer can persevere to locate Will as she would. Her experiences in Liverpool to find and bring Will back show an ingenuity little matched by any of Mrs. Gaskell's other heroines. W. A. Craik says of Mary:

Mary is the first example of a kind of character and situation Elizabeth Gaskell is especially drawn to: that of the perceptive, intelligent, sensitive girl, who is put to a great public and spiritual test.²⁷

Jemima Bradshaw in Ruth is also such a character. Jemima is a character who is a very human blend of charity, honesty, moodiness, and even jealousy. She is an obedient daughter,²⁸ but she will not be coerced or forced into unkindness, nor will she change her true self to gain marriage even with the one she loves, nor will she accept him under the conditions which her father sets forth. Jemima is a rather plain girl but intelligent, and her

²⁷ W. A. Craik, Elizabeth Gaskell and the English Provincial Novel (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1975), p. 35.

²⁸ Mantovani, p. 70.

father has money. Mr. Farquhar is a business partner of her father; as a suitable husband he is quite desirable. Jemima's father tells her "she should be honored that Mr. Farquhar would consent to marry her."²⁹ At the word consent Jemima becomes indignant; she refuses to enter into a marriage under such conditions.

Moreover, her moral courage is considerable when she attempts to defend Ruth to Mr. Bradshaw. She has known of Ruth's past for some time, and although initially she was conventionally shocked, she comes to see through her intelligence and honesty that Ruth is not what she had always been led to believe the "fallen woman" to be.

Ruth, too, shows perception and maturity as she "learns from experience to think for herself."³⁰ She recognizes that Bellingham's grudging offer to marry her represents a trap for her and her child and that his own sense of self-worth and individuality will be lost if she accepts his offer. This decision shows a great deal of intelligence and self-awareness as well as independence of thought. What Mrs. Gaskell views as courageous and intelligent, the world no doubt would perceive as foolish.

²⁹ Mantovani, p. 69.

³⁰ Mantovani, p. 64.

Mrs. Gaskell demonstrated in her own life and in her rearing of her daughters that she "wanted her daughters to be able to form their own opinions independent of any line of thought or set of beliefs."³¹ She herself refused to accept conventional or "ready-made opinions of others."³²

Basing judgement on facts to form an independent opinion seems to be a great concern for her and her daughters. She and her husband supported Meta in her engagement to Captain Hill despite "their great and justified concern over such a prospect"³³ because they did not wish to keep her from what she considered to be her happiness. When Captain Hill was recalled to duty in India and when the family subsequently learned facts about him which caused Meta to break off the engagement,³⁴ Mrs. Gaskell was sympathetic toward Meta, but she was quite distressed that she herself had so misjudged Captain Hill's character. Afterwards, Mrs. Gaskell was as "prepared to recognize an unmarried daughter's legitimate claim for an

³¹ Aina Rubenius, The Woman Question in Mrs. Gaskell's Life and Works, Essays and Studies on English Language and Literature (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1950), p. 118.

³² Rubenius, p. 118.

³³ Gerin, p. 197.

³⁴ Gerin, p. 202.

independent life and training for a profession" as she was for independent thinking.³⁵

Meta subsequently became interested in nursing as a career and later was attracted to art. Since Mrs. Gaskell revered Florence Nightingale, she considered nursing a noble calling. When Ruth decides upon nursing as her future occupation, Jemima demurs:

"You, a sick nurse! . . . you were fitted for something better. Why, Ruth, you are better educated than I am!" . . . "Your knowledge of Latin, for instance," said Jemima.³⁶

The opinions advanced by Jemima represent the conventional opinions of the day, while Ruth speaks for Mrs. Gaskell. It was considered quite "radical . . . to consider a certain degree of education essential for a nurse."³⁷ Ruth summarized her position when she says, "Still, you can't say any knowledge of any kind will be in my way or will unfit me for my work."³⁸ Although Mrs. Gaskell viewed nursing as a noble calling, "one looks in vain in

³⁵ Rubenius, p. 119.

³⁶ Elizabeth Gaskell, Ruth, with intro. by Margaret Lane, Everyman's Library, no. 673 (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, Ltd., 1967), pp. 384-85.

³⁷ Rubenius, p. 131.

³⁸ Ruth, p. 385.

Mrs. Gaskell's stories for an instance of explicit approval of factory work for women."³⁹ This is readily understandable as the work was often done under hazardous conditions, and the long hours caused neglect of home and family. Moreover, there was nothing in factory work that would make use of either intelligence or education. Money alone did not contribute to growth of individuality, as may be seen from the case of Esther in Mary Barton and Mrs. Wilson in the same story. Mrs. Wilson had injured herself in a factory accident before marriage and suffered ill health because of it. The conditions for seamstresses and dress-makers were not much better. Neither Mary Barton, nor Margaret Jennings, nor Ruth Hilton is seen to benefit from such an occupation. Margaret uses her talent to become a singer, and in this endeavor she finds fulfillment.

Mantovani sees Mrs. Gaskell's women characters as "More often than not, . . . helpless to determine their own fate."⁴⁰ This situation does not seem the case when one considers the society in which the stories are set. In every case, the women have choices; these choices are sometimes wise, sometimes foolish, but there is hardly

³⁹ Rubenius, p. 150.

⁴⁰ Mantovani, p. 110.

an instance when the heroine or other character is merely a pawn of circumstance. A great part of Mrs. Gaskell's belief is that people do have choices, and if these choices are based on intelligence, truth, and Christian belief one's life is worthwhile.

Two examples in which choice plays little or no part in the outcome of the story are "Cousin Phillis" and "Lois the Witch." Lois has no choices except those which lead to disaster because of blind intolerance. This story will be considered in some detail in another chapter.

Cousin Phillis, together with her father, is responsible for her own unhappiness. Mrs. Gaskell consistently stressed the "role of the individual in effecting change."⁴¹ Although mindful that heredity and environment are determining factors in human personality, she was convinced that intelligence, self-understanding, and free will "could operate to modify inherited nature and a given society"⁴² as well as to change the direction of an individual life. Phillis Holman makes no such effort. She remains an entirely passive figure for much of the story. The passivity of Phillis at a first consideration might

⁴¹ Coral Lansbury, Elizabeth Gaskell: The Novel of Social Crisis (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1975), p. 161.

⁴² Lansbury, p. 161.

seem to be a natural manifestation of an almost idyllic existence, but in actuality, this is not wholly correct.

Mrs. Gaskell's most "finished example"⁴³ of pastoral life is presented in "Cousin Phillis," but even here "she does not paint a scene of unrealistic perfection."⁴⁴ Whereas in North and South the southern agricultural life is described as slow-paced and less mentally stimulating than city life, in "Cousin Phillis," the farmstead as a place of peace and beauty is juxtaposed to the modern world as a railroad comes close to the farm. It is this railroad work which brings Paul Manning, a distant cousin to the Holmans, and his supervisor, Mr. Holdsworth, into the orbit of Hope Farm and its inhabitants, Mr. and Mrs. Holman and their daughter Phillis.

Mr. Holman and his wife seem devoted to each other, but Holman's love of learning is completely alien to his wife, so consequently it is shared with his daughter Phillis. He has wide intellectual interests including mechanics, law, and the classics. As such an interest in learning and education is typical of the Unitarian spirit, he takes pride in "using to the full intellect with which

⁴³ Duthie, p. 18.

⁴⁴ Duthie, p. 18.

God has endowed him, and is at home in the society of Manning, the engineer, . . . a thinker like himself."⁴⁵ On a visit to the farm, Paul Manning's father finds an interested and appreciative friend in Mr. Holman, who besides his intellectual interests is a successful farmer as well as a Dissenting minister. Both Holman and Manning are interested in improvements that will make farming more efficient. This attitude was shared by most Unitarians, who found the scientific spirit of the age congenial not only to natural science but to industrial progress as well.⁴⁶ Thus, because of Mr. Holman's scientific ideas and intellectual interests, the life at Hope Farm is a curious mixture of old and new, science and tradition, and mechanization and Arcadia.⁴⁷

The idyllic existence on Hope Farm, dominated to such a degree by the father, is intruded upon by the outside world in the persons of the cousin Paul and Mr. Holdsworth. These two gentlemen affect the lives of all the family, but are especially disturbing to the thoughts, attitudes, and lifestyle of the educated, yet naive daughter Phillis.

⁴⁵ Duthie, p. 175.

⁴⁶ Duthie, p. 87.

⁴⁷ Duthie, p. 19.

On his first encounter with Phillis, Paul finds the seventeen-year-old self-possessed, tranquil, and self-effacing. She is so caught up in her father's world that she describes to Paul in detail her father's mornings, which include a morning reading session with Phillis before a 6:00 breakfast. Holdsworth sees Phillis in many ways as a picture, a beautiful extension of the peace of Hope Farm. He is quite intrigued that she can read Dante's Inferno in Italian and knows Latin and Greek as well. All the books that Phillis reads are indicative of her tastes. One is a commentary on the Bible, another a practical guide on household routine, and yet another a book of prayer. Viewing the books as outmoded, Holdsworth furnished Phillis with some more modern books, an Italian novel and a new Italian dictionary. Paul feels Phillis' father will not approve of her reading a novel, but Holdsworth sees it as innocuous.

For all Phyllis' intellectual accomplishments, she is so sheltered that she has no knowledge of polite conversation except as utterly serious. This lack of social decorum is well illustrated when she, Paul, and Mr. Holdsworth are left stranded in a rainstorm. Phillis runs out of the shelter to retrieve Holdsworth's equipment. The following conversation is typical of their friendship.

"Now, Miss Holman, that's what I call wilful," said Holdsworth, as she gave them to him. "No, I won't thank you" (his looks were thanking her all the time). "My little bit of dampness annoyed you, because you thought I had got wet in your service; so you were determined to make me as uncomfortable as you were yourself. It was an unchristian piece of revenge!"

His tone of badinage (as the French call it) would have been palpable enough to any one accustomed to the world; but Phillis was not, and it distressed or rather bewildered her. 'Unchristian' had to her a very serious meaning; it was not a word to be used lightly; and though she did not exactly understand what wrong it was that she was accused of doing, she was evidently desirous to throw off the imputation. At first her earnestness to disclaim unkind motives amused Holdsworth; while his light continuance of the joke perplexed her still more.⁴⁸

Phyllis has had little opportunity at social conversation except with her father, who sees her as an intellectual companion, even though she remains a child to him in all other aspects. Later, Mr. Holman partially realizes the error of this perception.

Mr. Holman also now finds intellectual stimulation in his conversations with Mr. Holdsworth. Their discussions are often on intellectual matters over the head of Mr. Holman, and often even Paul Manning, as shown by his insight:

⁴⁸ Elizabeth Gaskell, "Cousin Phillis" from Cousin Phyllis and Other Tales, with intro. by Angus Easson, ed., The World Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 309.

After Mr. Holdsworth regained his health, he too often talked above her [Mrs. Holman] head in intellectual matters, and too often in his light bantering tone for her to feel quite at her ease with him. I really believe that he adopted this latter tone in speaking to her because he did not know what to talk about to a purely motherly woman, whose intellect had never been cultivated, and whose loving heart was entirely occupied with her husband, her child, her household affairs and, perhaps, a little with the concerns of the members of her husband's congregation, because they, in a way, belonged to her husband. I had noticed before that she had fleeting shadows of jealousy even of Phillis, when her daughter and her husband appeared to have strong interests and sympathies in things which were quite beyond her comprehension. I had noticed it in my first acquaintance with them, I say, and had admired the delicate tact which made the minister, on such occasions, bring the conversation back to such subjects as those on which his wife, with her practical experience of every-day life, was an authority; while Phillis, devoted to her father, unconsciously followed his lead, totally unaware, in her filial reverence, of his motive for doing so.⁴⁹

Mr. Holman's lowering of the conversation to fit his wife's capacities is not only patronizing, but also allows Phillis to fill the role of intellectual companion in his life which should by all rights be filled by his wife.

Even though Mr. Holman considers his daughter as his intellectual companion, Mr. Holdsworth sees Phillis, even with her book knowledge, as the personification of nature.

⁴⁹ "Cousin Phillis," p. 310.

He cannot picture her as anywhere but the farm because of her naivete in social and personal encounters. Phillis' natural beauty, her long lovely hair, bright eyes, and healthful glow,⁵⁰ inspire Mr. Holdsworth to ask permission to sketch her as Ceres, the goddess of harvest. During the sittings, Phillis is flustered by Holdsworth's sustained look, and "her colour came and went, her breath quickened with the consciousness of his regard; . . . she looked up at him, quivered, and suddenly got up and left the room."⁵¹

The sexual undertones are little understood by Phillis, but Holdsworth, "not speaking, his dark cheek blanched,"⁵² certainly did. As Holdsworth is called unexpectedly to leave for Canada, the ambivalence of his feelings for Phillis is evident as he packs the unfinished sketch of her: "What a sweet innocent face it is and yet so--Oh, dear!"⁵³ It is as impossible for the reader as it is for Holdsworth to visualize Phillis anywhere but Hope Farm. Holdsworth's home is the world; for all her

⁵⁰ "Cousin Phillis," p. 309.

⁵¹ "Cousin Phillis," p. 311.

⁵² "Cousin Phillis," p. 311.

⁵³ "Cousin Phillis," p. 315.

education, Phillis is a child, discussing Dante for her father's amusement. At no point in the story does Mrs. Gaskell show any real impact of Phillis' learning on her behaviour or her knowledge of the world.

Mr. Holman remains curiously unaware of what effect a fine looking young man such as Holdsworth might have on his daughter. When Paul repeats to Phillis the remark Holdsworth has told him, that he will return to gain her love, her unworldliness causes her to accept this indirect declaration as a vow. Betty, the family servant, unlike Phillis' father suspects something is amiss with Phillis. Paul's reassurance to Betty that Holdsworth never spoke to Phillis of love is disregarded:

"Aye, aye! but there's eyes, and there's hands, as well as tongues; and a man has two o' th' one and but one o' th' other."

"And she's so young; do you suppose her parents would not have seen it?"

"Well! if you axe me that, I'll say out boldly, 'No.' They've called her 'the child' so long--'the child' is always their name for her when they talk on her between themselves, as if never anybody else had a ewe-lamb before them--that she's grown up to be a woman under their very eyes, and they look on her still as if she were in her long clothes. And you ne'er heard on a man falling in love wi' a babby in long clothes!"⁵⁴

⁵⁴ "Cousin Phillis," p. 336.

The mother-wit of old Betty has hit upon the reason for Holdsworth's later defection. Phillis has been kept a child in her dependence and immaturity. Her feelings mark her a woman, but her lack of assertiveness proclaim her a child. All that Holdsworth sees is her ripe beauty, reminiscent of Ceres, arrayed in a little girl's pinafore.

After the news of Holdsworth's marriage in Canada, Mr. Holman turns bitterly on Paul because he had told Phillis of Holdsworth's love:

"To put such thoughts into the child's head, ' . . . to spoil her peaceful maidenhood with talk about another man's love; . . . Oh, the misery in my poor little daughter's face to-day . . . Paul! I thought you were one to be trusted-- . . . to go and put such thoughts into the child's mind."⁵⁵

Phillis comes in to defend Paul, and her father claims he does not understand her actions. As Mr. Holman hammers questions at Phillis, Paul feels his questioning is cruel and relentless. When Phillis admits her love for Holdsworth, but that he never spoke of love for her, Holman's reaction is almost that of parent whose small child tries to run away from home. He seems to have no conception of her need to love with an adult's feelings:

⁵⁵ "Cousin Phillis," p. 345.

"Phillis, did we not make you happy here?
Have we not loved you enough? . . . And yet you
would have left us."⁵⁶

As the strain she feels under this possessive declaration of love, Phillis collapses and after a serious illness and prolonged recovery, she has no will to regain her former health and tranquility. All that her father and mother do to try and help is to no avail.

The extreme reaction that Mr. Holman feels upon learning his daughter has loved another, even though the love is unspoken, one of gesture and look only, has its roots in a sin recognized as a danger by Mrs. Gaskell as a parent--that of making an idol of a child. Mr. Holman has done this by educating Phillis, not for her own good, but for his need of an intellectual companion, a void his wife could not fill. The ministers who come to Mr. Holman are misguided in his eyes concerning submission to God's will and punishment for sin. He replies to the first injunction but to the second, that of his sin of conceit and neglect of God because of excessive pride in his learning and of making an idol of his daughter, he "cannot answer--. . . will not answer."⁵⁷

⁵⁶ "Cousin Phillis," p. 346.

⁵⁷ "Cousin Phillis," p. 351.

Mrs. Holman is not without blame, however, for she has made an idol of her husband and in so doing has abdicated her responsibility to guide Phillis from childhood to young womanhood. She accepts all that Mr. Holman does, thinks, or says. Her powers of intellect are strangely dormant. Her perceptions of her daughter are not her own; they are Mr. Holman's, adopted as her own. Mrs. Holman in her total lack of education is no blinder to self-knowledge than her husband with his broad knowledge and education. Education is never seen as anything but desirable, but it is not enough in itself. The same intelligence that seeks knowledge of the world must look inward to seek understanding of the soul.

Ultimately it is Phillis who must take the responsibility for her own life. If her father has kept her a child, she has allowed it. Her lack of self-knowledge is not ameliorated by her education, because her learning failed to provide the most vital ingredient, the use of intelligence to gain self-awareness.

The first decision Phillis makes completely alone comes after Betty's plain statement of facts:

"Now, Phillis! . . . we ha' done a' we can for you, and th' doctors has done a' they can for you, and I think the Lord has done a' He can for you, and more than you deserve, too, if you don't do something for yourself. If I were you,

I'd rise up and snuff the moon, sooner than
break your father's and your mother's hearts wi'
watching and waiting till it pleases you to fight
your own way back to cheerfulness."⁵⁸

In her decision to visit relatives, Phillis shows she will take charge of her life. Significantly, this decision is one which will move her outward into the active world. It is obvious to the reader that through her increased insight, Phillis will never be the same, but she herself is unaware of this change. Having not yet experienced the world she seeks, she still looks forward to the only refuge she knows when she says to Paul, "--we will go back to the peace of the old days. I know we shall; I can, and I will!"⁵⁹ But the reader knows better, as we suspect Mrs. Gaskell understood, as well.

Unlike the literate but immature Phillis, Molly Gibson in Wives and Daughters is a simple, good, loyal girl who develops a mature understanding of herself and others, but the "inadequacy of her education is pathetic."⁶⁰ A young woman named Miss Eyre is hired to instruct Molly, but not to any great extent. Mr. Gibson has some learning

⁵⁸ "Cousin Phillis," p. 354.

⁵⁹ "Cousin Phillis," p. 354.

⁶⁰ Hazel Mews, Frail Vessels (London: University of London, Athlone Press, 1969), p. 65.

to do himself from his early position on education for women. He tells Miss Eyre as she begins her duties:

"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, and if I find more learning is desirable for her, I'll see about giving it to her myself. After all, I'm 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, and so you may teach the child to read."⁶¹

This teaching is similar to that in the school established by the Cumnors for the village girls where they are in effect taught to be good housemaids and cooks, except their reading and writing was slighted more than even Molly's.⁶²

Molly, called "dull and unexciting compared with Cynthia,"⁶³ wages a heroic struggle for an education that Cynthia never has to fight. Cynthia is sent to a boarding school, but learning seems to hold little attraction for either her or her mother. Mrs. Kirkpatrick's efforts at

⁶¹ Elizabeth Gaskell, Wives and Daughters, with intro. by Lawrence Lerner, ed. Frank Glover Smith, 1969; rpt. (New York: Penguin Books, 1980), p. 65.

⁶² Wives and Daughters, p. 37.

⁶³ Wives and Daughters, p. 95.

teaching are never perceived by her as anything but sheer drudgery. Ironically, Molly, who must struggle and fight for the privilege, finally convinces her father to let her have French and drawing lessons and manages to read every book in Mr. Gibson's library except his medical books. Molly's mind is one that naturally craves learning and,

Thus, in her own gentle and persistent way, she overcomes the opposition of her father to giving her any education beyond the minimum and, in spite of being surrounded by lesser characters in her stepmother and her stepsister, her superior qualities of mind and heart will not be stifled.⁶⁴

Molly's natural intelligence and love of learning will make her a perfect match for Roger.

Contrary to the relationship of Mr. Holman and Phillis, Mr. Gibson and Molly's relationship changes and in some ways deepens as she grows up. He is always very aware that Molly is developing into a young woman, and misguided as his choice was, it is to gain a mother for Molly that he marries again. He feels a mother's influence is necessary to her training and development, but as it turns out later, this influence is not important since Molly already has developed her sensibility and a keen

⁶⁴ Wives and Daughters, p. 96.

intelligence. Thus Molly serves as an excellent example of Mrs. Gaskell's belief in education as an outgrowth and an asset of intelligence.

Certainly, the words inscribed above Manchester College held a deep meaning for both the Gaskells. Each did whatever was possible to bring education to all who wished it. Mrs. Gaskell infused into her works a spirit of self-reliance and independence that make for true liberty. Liberty, like truth, can only be achieved through rational processes of the mind. This belief is a vital part of Mrs. Gaskell's Unitarian faith, written for all to see in her novels.

CHAPTER FOUR

TOLERANCE AND ACTION

To Elizabeth Gaskell the Unitarian philosophy encouraged a moral spirit essential to the foundation of a Christian nation. As education and intelligence were prerequisite to moral conduct, Mrs. Gaskell regarded tolerance and action as achievements of the Unitarian spirit at work in society. Fortunately, Elizabeth Gaskell as a young nineteenth-century Unitarian enjoyed a position in society which was greeted with acceptance and granted an assured status. The family at Knutsford had a secure social position as Unitarian belief "no longer represented a barrier to social recognition."¹ Her social circle was cultured and intellectual, especially after her marriage to William Gaskell. The Gaskells were not confined to Unitarians in their contacts in Manchester and elsewhere, as Mrs. Gaskell formed a wide circle of friends and acquaintances through her church work, her travels, and her writing, while Mr. Gaskell was well known in Manchester by leading citizens both in and outside his church congregation.

¹ Enid L. Duthie, The Themes of Elizabeth Gaskell (Totowa, N. J.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1980), p. 2.

Mrs. Gaskell's friendship with Charlotte Bronte is an example of the wide range of her acquaintance, as is her correspondence with George Eliot. Miss Bronte, of a prominent Anglican family, and Miss Eliot, an unchurched woman living with a married man, represent the extremes of social position of the Victorian period. Mrs. Gaskell could entertain with equal aplomb an Anglican bishop or an itinerant Sunday School teacher such as Travers Madge, a well known author such as Charlotte Bronte or a group of Manchester girls at a Sunday School meeting. Her friendships included Mme Mohl, "whose salon was one of the most famous in Paris"² as well as Harriet Martineau and Florence Nightengale.

These diverse friendships reflect her own personal tolerance which is also evidenced in the breadth of characters she creates in her writings. These characters form a broad spectrum of moral attitudes whether Church-going or not, and no matter what their religious affiliation. It is typical of her tolerant outlook that people of good faith are never identified as Unitarians. Indeed, her works contain numerous examples of both Anglicans and Dissenters, ". . . and in no case does their church or

² Duthie, p. 59.

chapel affiliation prejudice her treatment of them."³

Although formal Church or chapel-going is little mentioned in Mary Barton, several characters are identified as to religious affiliation. The only person mentioned specifically as a church attender is Alice Wilson, whose unselfish devotion to family and employers is noteworthy. She belongs to the Church of England and in every way exemplifies the attributes of a Christian life. The other characters are not identified as to religious belief except for Davenport, who is a Methodist. These are certainly not the only characters who manifest brotherhood and Christian love, however. Job Legh has no formal religious affiliation though he is a person of great integrity and kindness based on Christian belief.

Ruth Hilton in Ruth is an Anglican and attends Church regularly while she is a sewing room apprentice just as she had earlier while still at home. Mr. Benson, whose character is of surpassing sweetness and goodness, is a Dissenting minister while the servant in his home remains a staunch Anglican despite her loyalty and devotion to the Bensons. The most prominent member of Mr. Benson's congregation is the dictatorial and self-righteous

³ Duthie, p. 151.

Mr. Bradshaw, who sees himself as a Christian upholding morality. Mr. Bradshaw is "a churchgoer but hardly a Christian."⁴

Mr. Hale in North and South resigns his living in the Church of England for reasons of conscience while his daughter Margaret remains firm in her own belief and displays a remarkable tolerance for her father's action although she little understands it.

The minister who is so ineffectual in Sylvia's Lovers is an Anglican as are the characters in Cranford, but it is not in formal designation of religious affiliation that Mrs. Gaskell's tolerance is most evident. She sees with clear vision that good and bad exist in both Anglican and Dissenter. Questions of doctrine are not treated, but "Christianity, with its central doctrine of love,"⁵ is possessed by Anglican and Dissenter alike; but intolerance can also be found in the heart of both.

Although Mrs. Gaskell herself seems without sectarian bias, she is realist enough to recognize and show "prejudice, ignorance, and . . . social superiority"⁶ as factors

⁴ Arthur Pollard, Mrs. Gaskell: Novelist and Biographer (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966), p. 99.

⁵ Duthie, p. 152.

⁶ Duthie, p. 152.

that may govern actions and attitudes in certain of her characters. Sometimes prejudice is shown as ridiculous and humorous, while at other times prejudice and intolerance are shown to have tragic consequences. Whether foolish or fanatic, religious intolerance is always presented as "conduct which, either deliberately or unconsciously, contravenes the spirit of Christianity,"⁷ whether such conduct is that of Dissenter, Anglican, or non-churchgoer.

Mrs. Gaskell's spirit of tolerance reflects the Unitarian insistence on acceptance of individuals, social groups, and other religions. Intolerance is especially incongruent with Unitarian belief since conscience based on individual decision must always take precedence over convention. This Unitarian attitude of tolerance was quite unusual as adherence to convention was accepted almost without question by the general public.⁸ This unthinking obedience to social pressure often resulted in a bigoted intolerance and lack of help for those who needed it most.

⁷ Duthie, p. 152.

⁸ W. A. Craik, Elizabeth Gaskell and the English Provincial Novel (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1975), p. 49.

Intolerance is as much a danger to those who are guilty of it as it is to those who are its overt victims. One of the effects of intolerance is a moral blindness to those who fall under its sway. The prejudiced person can no longer determine truth. Mr. Bradshaw in Ruth is such a victim. His unreasoning, preconceived opinions concerning sexual misconduct blind him to Ruth's true nature and worth after he discovers that she has an illegitimate son. There is irony in the situation in which Mr. Bradshaw confronts Ruth with his accusations. While he is blind to the facts, Mr. Bradshaw trusts Ruth implicitly, and in fact, asks her to intercede with his daughter concerning Jemima's unusual behavior. Ruth is trusted to take his younger daughters to another of his homes on holiday and is considered capable and suitable to act as their teacher and moral guide as well as surrogate mother and chaperone. After he learns of Ruth's past, he can no longer see the truth. When his eyes are opened to the truth in the strictest sense, he can no longer see the reality of the truth that is before him. After accusing Ruth of wantonness, which Mr. Bradshaw says he loaths more than all other sins, he also labels her as depraved and disgusting. Mr. Bradshaw's bigotry and total lack of Christian understanding, kindness, and sympathy provide the reader an

ugly picture of the conventional attitudes of Victorian England toward "fallen women." When Jemima attempts to defend Ruth, Mr. Bradshaw turns in fury on his daughter, blaming Jemima's more tolerant attitude on Ruth's influence:

"And I will tell you how much your witness is worth. . . . It only convinces me more and more how deep is the corruption this wanton has spread in my family. She has come amongst us with her innocent seeming, and spread her nets well and skillfully. She has turned right into wrong, and wrong into right, and taught you all to be uncertain whether there be any such thing as Vice in the world, or whether it ought not to be looked upon as Virtue. She has led you the brink of the deep pit, ready for the first chance circumstance to push you in. And I trusted--I trusted her--I welcomed her. . . . I was duped into allowing her bastard . . . (I sicken at the thought of it)--That very child and heir of shame to associate with my own innocent children! I trust they are not contaminated."⁹

Later when Mr. Bradshaw calls Mr. Benson to account for his part in the deception, Mr. Benson attempts to explain something of the circumstances of Ruth's youth. After her son was born, they had known her in their home for a year before she came in the employ of Mr. Bradshaw, but nothing Mr. Benson says can calm Bradshaw's rage:

⁹ Elizabeth Gaskell, Ruth, with intro. by Margaret Lane, Everyman's Library, No. 673 (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, Ltd., 1967), p. 336.

"I suppose most depraved women have been innocent in their time," said Mr. Bradshaw with bitter contempt.

"Oh, Mr. Bradshaw! Ruth was not depraved, and you know it. You cannot have seen her--have known her daily, all these years, without acknowledging that!"

. . . "I saw her daily--I did not know her. If I had known her, I should have known she was fallen and depraved, and consequently not fit to come into my house, nor to associate with my pure children."¹⁰

Mr. Bradshaw's intolerance extends even to Ruth's innocent child who knows nothing of illegitimacy. Mr. Bradshaw's cruelty is almost more than Ruth can bear as he tells her:

"Do you suppose your child is to be exempt from the penalties of his birth? Do you suppose that he alone is to be saved from the upbraiding scoff? Do you suppose that he is ever to rank with other boys, who are not stained and marked with sin from their birth? Every creature in Eccleston may know what he is; do you think they will spare him their scorn? 'Cannot bear it,' Indeed! Before you went into your sin, you should have thought whether you could bear the consequences or not--have had some idea how far your offspring would be degraded and scouted, till the best thing that could happen to him would be for him to be lost to all sense of shame, dead to all knowledge of guilt, for his mother's sake."¹¹

Not only has Mr. Bradshaw's intolerance blinded him to Ruth's true goodness and sweetness of nature, but he is

¹⁰ Ruth, p. 347.

¹¹ Ruth, p. 337.

also blinded to his real motives in the rage that he feels. His extreme prejudice prevents his recognition of what he might have perceived to be his Christian duty to help someone unfortunate. His remarks to Mr. Benson when he calls the minister to account are revealing:

"Why choose me to be imposed upon--my household into which to intrude your protegee? . . . I say," said Mr. Bradshaw, stamping his foot, "how dared you come into this house, where you were looked upon as a minister of religion, with a lie in your mouth? How dared you single me out, of all people to be gulled, and deceived and pointed at through the town as the person who had taken an abandoned woman into his house to teach his daughters?"¹²

In this telling little speech, Mr. Bradshaw proclaims unknowingly his real complaint, his hurt pride. His anger at Ruth and Mr. Benson help him conceal from himself his own prejudice and lack of Christian kindness and tolerance.

Mr. Bradshaw mirrors the attitude of society toward unmarried mothers. It was this lack of sympathy and cruelty of intolerance that Mrs. Gaskell daringly attacked in Ruth. Mrs. Gaskell is in the vanguard of an emerging nineteenth century "impetus which strove to establish a

¹² Ruth, pp. 345-46.

basis of sympathy for those who had sinned against purity."¹³ Mrs. Gaskell's intent in Ruth was to illustrate that the prostitute and the fallen woman were not necessarily one and the same, although Victorian society tended to equate loss of virtue with moral corruption.¹⁴ This intention explains the exemplary innocence of Ruth's character. There must be no mistaking her moral superiority.

Such is not the case for the figure of Esther in Mary Barton. Mrs. Gaskell's presentation of Esther is brutally honest and typical in its description of the prostitute.¹⁵ Although "seduction and betrayal, adultery and shameful pregnancies are accepted plot devices in the fiction throughout the period,"¹⁶ the inclusion of Esther does little to advance the plot, but it is not for this reason she is included. She is presented as a pathetic and broken woman rather than a hardened sinner. Mrs. Gaskell obviously defied the Victorian moral scheme

¹³ John R. Reed, Victorial Conventions (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1975), p. 59.

¹⁴ Reed, p. 58.

¹⁵ Patricia Beer, Reader, I Married Him: A Study of the Women Characters of Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte, Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1974), p. 135.

¹⁶ Gail Cunningham, The New Woman and the Victorian Novel (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), p. 20.

even here, as Esther is presented as a figure of pity rather than a lesson.¹⁷ Mrs. Gaskell appeals to society for tolerance, understanding, and forgiveness rather than giving a lesson already known.

John Barton's brutal rejection of Esther's plea for a moment of his time shows his inherent disgust for her fall rather than pity for her degradation. He does not stop to think that his own character is undergoing change for the worse. Just before his encounter with Esther, Barton purchased opium and finds himself often in need of it or drink "to bring him into a natural state,"¹⁸ but he has no tolerance for these same needs in others.

On the other hand, Esther persists in her efforts to warn of Mary's danger in her relationship with Mr. Carson. She foresees Mary's downfall as she did not see her own. Esther knows all too well the prejudice that will keep her lover from marrying beneath his class and the scorn that will follow when the relationship is ended. Esther's refusal of Jem's later offer to help her return to her family is based on her need for drink as well as her knowledge of society's intolerance of what she has done.

¹⁷ Cunningham, p. 20.

¹⁸ Elizabeth Gaskell, Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life, with intro. by Stephen Gill (London, 1848; rpt. New York: Penguin Books, 1981), p. 168.

John Barton and Esther are more alike than John would dare admit. They are both scorned by the world. Each has transgressed against the values of society--she, the middle-class ideal of purity and chastity of womanhood; he, the established and accepted rights and unbridled economic power of the property owners, in this case the masters of the mills. Society held the fallen woman in "absolute loathing,"¹⁹ as evidenced by the earlier cited attack on Ruth Hilton Denbigh after Mr. Bradshaw learns of her earlier indiscretion. The fallen woman quite often became the prostitute, however, as Victorian society and literature often treated the two interchangeably in attitude. Loss of maidenly purity, or as the Victorians would blush to say, virginity, was seen as moral corruption and depravity in the woman.²⁰

Mrs. Gaskell provides ample evidence that Esther is the victim of ignorance, social intolerance, and not the least of the factors, working conditions that are difficult at little more than starvation wages. Prostitution often became the only occupation for a woman untrained to find

¹⁹ Jane Stoffels Welborn, "Solitary Spheres: Gaskell's Single Women" Thesis Texas Woman's University 1979, p. 87.

²⁰ Reed, p. 59.

a decent, well-paying job.²¹ The fallen woman also lacked family backing and resources, in most cases, because of the pressure of public opinion, and this loss of support as much as her own lack of training, caused the abandoned woman to enter into a life that might provide a living for herself and child, if there were one.

John Barton, no less than Esther, is the victim of a society which looked with fear and apprehension on a new kind of worker--one who demanded a decent wage, banded together in unions and went out on strike to gain these objectives. Workers no longer believed that "the production of wealth by the few, meant, somehow, and in the long run, welfare for the many; and that conventional behavior grounded on a traditional creed was enough to satisfy all right demands of humanity."²² Young's discussion of the movement for factory reform illustrates how frightful factory conditions were when it is realized that the abysmal conditions set forth in the Factory Act of 1838 were considered advances! All textile factories were to be governed by a ten-hour day for young people under

²¹ Coral Lansbury, Elizabeth Gaskell: The Novel of Social Crisis (New York: Barnes & Nobel, 1975), p. 52.

²² G. M. Young, Victorian England: Portrait of an Age 2nd ed., 1936; rpt. Oxford Paperbacks, No. 12 (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 100.

eighteen, and a forty-eight hour week for children under thirteen, and the children were to attend a school for two hours every day. However, the school to attend often was non-existent. Of course, no provision was made for unemployment, injury on the job, or sick pay. The New Poor Law was viewed by many as using the workhouse system as a means of applying factory discipline to the pauper.²³

Barton is a skilled weaver in an industrial textile mill. As a man who is intelligent but uneducated, industrious, and kind in his relations with others, he is gradually radicalized by "the fluctuations in trade against which workers are powerless, but on which capitalists appear to him to thrive."²⁴ It is quite obvious to Barton that "economic conditions over which he has no control produce the personal tragedies that invade his life, from the corruption of his sister-in-law to the death of his wife,"²⁵ the illness and death of his little boy, his unemployment and the grinding poverty that ensues. An economic disaster of falling markets results in the closing of the mills and laying-off of the workers. The

²³ Young, pp. 48-49.

²⁴ Ellen Moers, Literary Women: The Great Writers (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1976), p. 27.

²⁵ Moers, p. 27.

only effects on the masters that Barton can discern are profiting by insurance, increased or sustained prosperity and leisure to give parties.²⁶

Mrs. Gaskell admires the intelligence of the Manchester people. She views them always as individuals, men worthy of respect, containing the potential for reasonable action. They strive to maintain the dignity of home-life and hospitality, despite conditions that appall those, like Mrs. Gaskell, who visited and did church work in the working-class sections. Although part of her motive in writing the book Mary Barton may have been, as Moers suggests, to convey the "hazards of society's failure to attend to that voice,"²⁷ it would seem from Mrs. Gaskell's own stated purpose contained in the preface, as well as her real sorrow for the feeling of abandonment that John Barton felt more deeply than hunger and privation, that the book was written as a plea rather than a warning. Mrs. Gaskell's deeply held beliefs in tolerance and brotherhood grounded in love would most certainly have led her to feel quite sincerely that it was her Christian duty to speak for those who could not speak for themselves.

²⁶ Moers, p. 28.

²⁷ Moers, p. 28.

Her intention is plain in the following excerpts from the Preface:

. . . I had always felt a deep sympathy with the care-worn men, who looked as if doomed to struggle through their lives in strange alternations between work and want; tossed to and fro by circumstances, apparently in even a greater degree than other men. A little manifestation of this sympathy, and a little attention to the expression of feelings on the part of some of the work-people with whom I was acquainted, had laid open to me the hearts of one or two of the more thoughtful among them, . . . The more I reflected utterance to the agony which, from time to time, convulses this dumb people; the agony of suffering without the sympathy of the happy or of erroneously believing that such is the case.²⁸

When other writers of the time had to turn to information such as Blue Books and Reports of Royal Commission concerning the great industrial cities, Mrs. Gaskell had accurate information gained personally from relief work among the classes about which she wrote.²⁹ She was a tireless worker during these times of strikes and lay-offs in bringing help and comfort to those affected by such economic disasters.³⁰

²⁸ Mary Barton, Preface, pp. 37-38.

²⁹ John Geoffrey Sharps, Mrs. Gaskell's Observation and Invention: A Study of Her Non-Biographic Works, Foreword by A. Stanton Whitfield (Fontwell, Sussex: Linden Press, 1970), p. 53.

³⁰ Sharps, p. 53.

These qualifications alone might make her views more respected than she has been given credit for.

John Lucas in The Literature of Change sees her novels Mary Barton and North and South as "studies of the effects of industrialization on working-class and middle-class families."³¹ He also sees these novels "weakened by their author's readiness to slacken her realistic grip on probabilities in order to make room for some convenient liberal pieties," calling the "vision of 'reconciliation'" a "crude" suggestion that master and worker will eventually learn to understand, respect, and finally to love one another.³² He sees such understanding as little more than a simple and fatalistic acceptance of reality, and he finds Mrs. Gaskell's suggestion of the figures of Thornton and Higgins as friends or of Barton and Carson as representative of possible solutions, as "silly."³³

Far from being a silly solution to a complex problem that was of primary importance to the continuing growth of industry, her reconciliation theme couched in religious

³¹ John Lucas, The Literature of Change: Studies in the Nineteenth Century Provincial Novel (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1977), p. 1.

³² Lucas, p. 1.

³³ Lucas, p. 2.

terms shows an almost startling similarity except for terminology to observations by Thomas Carlyle in the Past and Present:

'We have more riches than any Nation ever had before; we have less good of them than any Nation ever had before. . . . In the midst of plethoric plenty, the people perish; with gold walls, and full barns, no man feels himself safe or satisfied.'³⁴

Carlyle sees an "organic link between the members and the body, between the men out of work and the Nation."³⁵ In this situation he perceives a danger to the body itself. His expressed need for a relationship is not one of equality, but it is one in which both parts sees a responsibility to the other. Mrs. Gaskell found herself in the company of such writers as Charles Kingsley and Thomas Carlyle and others who saw the problem in much the same light, that of a need for understanding between the classes. Engels finds the answer in an uprising which he sees as imminent. Mrs. Gaskell hopes the answer will come through Christian love and action to bridge the gap of awareness between the two sides. The problem is the same

³⁴ Stephen Gill, Introd., Mary Barton, pp. 11-12.

³⁵ Gill, pp. 11-12.

to all; it is the solution that is different but strangely similar in the hoped-for outcome.

The workers in the industrial cities and the conditions in which they lived became the focus for countless studies, analyses, surveys, and census figures during the 1840's. Mrs. Gaskell was aware of these attempts to determine the extent and scope of the problem through statistics and analysis, and of the value of such reports to economists and planners, but Mrs. Gaskell's concept of help for one's fellow man focused on the individual, rather than on groups. Although Mrs. Gaskell saw the problem in Mary Barton as the perceived indifference of one segment of society toward another, her particular contribution was in making this broad and complex problem personal through the characters in her novel. She was convinced that statistics and reports do not have the impact that personal acquaintance carries. Even John Barton, in assessing the problem, used the Biblical analogy of Dives and Lazarus. In all of the crises of Mr. Barton's life, what is more apt than the description of "the rich man spurning the beggar at his gate?"³⁶ Barton knows that the strength of the working-classes lies in their organization into a union

³⁶ Gill, p. 9.

or a larger force than individuals, but he sees the problem in individual terms in relation to his family, his friends, and the masters that he sees on the streets of Manchester. He recognizes that there is "a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us, that would come from thence."³⁷

The Unitarian focus on action on behalf of those in need depended, of course, on recognizing those who were in need. This recognition Mrs. Gaskell tried to accomplish in her novels Mary Barton and North and South. Her motive in writing these works, especially Mary Barton, was to reveal the essential humanity of the working-class which could only be done by her giving the voice to one man, John Barton.³⁸ Mrs. Gaskell's appeal to her readers goes beyond tolerance to brotherhood. This spirit of brotherhood, in the Unitarian concept of religion, is then manifested in action to help those in need. Such a spirit of brotherhood is what she hoped sincerely would result. A new spirit of understanding is what she saw as the ultimate solution to the suffering of those living in the poverty of Manchester. They asked nothing except a recognition of their condition.

³⁷ Luke 16: 19-26.

³⁸ Mary Barton, Preface, pp. 37-38.

Mrs. Gaskell asked more: she felt that the Christian spirit would respond with love and generosity if the problem were truly perceived. Others had written the tracts and reports concerning the machines, the economic stress of crises and layoffs, workers' associations, riots, and strikes, legislation needed, and all the other problems making up "the Condition of England question,"³⁹ but it fell to Mrs. Gaskell to pluck individuals from the thousands to state the case for all. Miss Harriet Martineau, also a Unitarian, analyzed the economics of trade in Illustrations of Political Economy and explored the union movement in A Manchester Strike. Mrs. Tonna in Helen Fleetwood explored child labour "in the language of the Evangelical tract,"⁴⁰ while Disraeli's novel Sybil, or the Two Nations appeared in 1845, "giving a London politician's view of the industrial crisis."⁴¹ But the Manchester story had yet to be told by anyone who was familiar with the city's conditions as a resident until Mrs. Gaskell did so.

The only work that approaches Mary Barton in its power to present scenes of urban degradation and misery is

³⁹ Gill, p. 13.

⁴⁰ Moers, p. 26.

⁴¹ Moers, pp. 23-26.

Engels' Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844.

Engels declared "that the relationship between worker and employer was one of direct antagonism."⁴² Even as early as the 1830's, Asa Briggs pointed out that it was a commonplace to attribute "'basic social and political differences to economic divisions of interest between mill owners and workers,'"⁴³ and moreover, these differences were seen as absolute. Visitors such as Briggs saw no sympathy between the upper and lower classes of society. There existed "'no mutual confidence, no bond of attachment.'"⁴⁴ In a Times report in 1819 of the Peterloo disturbance, a reporter wrote: "'Their wretchedness seems to madden them against the rich, whom they dangerously imagine engross the fruits of their labour without having any sympathy for their wants.'"⁴⁵ In a handbook published by Love and Barton in 1842, The Handbook of Manchester, Love notes that there is probably no town in England other than Manchester where the differences between the rich and poor are so great, or the "barrier between them so difficult to be crossed."⁴⁶ Although sympathetic to the suffering of the poor, he

⁴² Lucas, p. 34.

⁴⁵ Lucas, p. 35.

⁴³ Lucas, p. 34.

⁴⁶ Lucas, p. 35.

⁴⁴ Lucas, pp. 34-35.

showed little grasp of the fluctuations of the textile market or the pay of the operations when he observed that the workers might have saved money during times of employment and pay for their improvidence during times of unemployment.⁴⁷ Love feels that the workers do not "elevate themselves, even when they might, from a state of even servile dependence."⁴⁸ He sees a trend to rely on charity for free medical service and other services. Love blames this on the moral condition of the working class that needs raising, and until that is the case, sees no way to make a permanent improvement to the conditions that exist. Gill notes that whether or not the argument is specious, the fact that Love must reduce the thousands of suffering individuals to abstractions may be noted from his use of expressions such as "this class," or the "moral condition."⁴⁹ This dehumanization was the attitude that Mrs. Gaskell found most degrading and misleading. No distinction was made between well-paid operatives and those with menial, low-paying jobs, those who were sick or well, and in referring to men as "hands" as was often done, their individual humanity is overlooked or negated. The problem

⁴⁷ Gill, p. 10.

⁴⁹ Gill, p. 11.

⁴⁸ Gill, p. 11.

that Mrs. Gaskell saw had been perceived by many others. Its solution in greater communication between the classes was not new with her. What was new was her emphasis on the individual and on Christian tolerance, love and brotherhood as the ultimate answer. Mrs. Gaskell knew instinctively that passing of laws depended partially on a correct and sympathetic evaluation of the problems of the poor; she knew as well that laws do not heal wounds inflicted by uncaring and uninformed masters and owners. Bringing about a heightened awareness of the need for understanding and tolerance between owners and workers is the motive behind her first work Mary Barton and a great factor in her other industrial novel North and South.

Mrs. Gaskell graphically illustrates the total lack of understanding of the masters and the lawmakers to the plight of the workers. In the first such instance, told in the past as having occurred when the story opens, John Barton is presented as a "good, steady workman, and, as such, pretty certain of steady employment."⁵⁰ Mrs. Gaskell notes that in his confidence in his ability to provide that he spent all that he made, referring evidently to the charge of improvidence made in Love's report. However, as

⁵⁰ Mary Barton, p. 61.

we are introduced to Barton's household in its best times later, it is simple, containing only the barest necessities. The unexpected failure of the mill where Mr. Barton works and the generally poor business conditions in the rest of the community force him into such an extent of poverty that he cannot even provide a nourishing meal badly needed by his ailing son.

His cynical attitude toward the supposedly suffering masters begins when he sees Mrs. Hunter, a master's wife, having her carriage loaded with her purchases for a party. On his return home, he finds his son dead.⁵¹ Barton's cynicism for the masters is intensified when he hears of a fire at a mill where the Wilsons are employed. Barton observes when told of the fire, "And much Carsons will care, for they're well insured, and the machines are a' th' oud-fashined kind. See if they don't think it a fine thing for themselves. They'll not thank them as tries to put it out."⁵²

Mrs. Gaskell observes in the voice of the narrator that "John Barton was not far wrong in his idea that the Messrs. Carson would not be over much grieved for the

⁵¹ Mary Barton, pp. 60-61

⁵² Mary Barton, p. 87.

consequences of the fire in their mill."⁵³ It is important here to note that just as Mrs. Gaskell knew first-hand of the conditions in the working section of Manchester, she was also well acquainted with many of the leading manufacturers of her city. Indeed, many of the factory owners attended Cross Street Chapel or other Unitarian meetings. Some of the successful masters were greedy and indifferent to the welfare of the men they employed, while others were outstanding leaders in reform. Men such as Strutts, the Fieldens, the Ashtons and the Gregs were recognized even in their own day as far above their time in labor relations. Some were divided between "humanitarian ideals and the political economy which they believed to be a scientific expression of inviolable law."⁵⁴ Still others possibly felt little responsibility toward the workers in their factories. At any rate, Mrs. Gaskell had a wealth of personal knowledge upon which she was able to draw for her picture of mill owners.

Mrs. Gaskell assesses the effects of the fire and the consequent unemployment from the viewpoint of the owner of the mill:

⁵⁴ Raymond V. Holt, The Unitarian Contribution to Social Progress in England (London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1938), p. 26.

They were well insured; the machinery lacked the improvements of late years, and worked but poorly in comparison with that which might now be procured. Above all, trade was very slack: cottons could find no market, and goods lay packed and piled in many a warehouse. The mills were merely worked to keep the machinery, human and metal, in some kind of order and readiness for better times. So this was an excellent time, . . . for refitting their factory with first-rate improvements, for which the insurance money would amply pay. They were in no hurry about the business, however. The weekly drain of wages given for labor, useless in the present state of market, was stopped. The partners had more leisure than they had known for years; . . . There were happy family evenings now that the men of business had time for domestic enjoyments.⁵⁵

The life of the unemployed workers is given in terrible contrast to that of the owners. Mr. Wilson asked his friend John Barton to accompany him to another worker's home who is ill and totally without food or firewood in his home. Mr. Barton takes the remains of his own dinner and accompanies Wilson to the cellar inhabited by Davenport and his family. The children tear the food from Barton's hands and it disappears in an instant. Such description of a place inhabited by human beings has seldom been given in a book, though it coincides with descriptions given by Engels in his manuscript of The Condition of the Working Class, except here we are introduced to the people who must live in this filthy, unhealthy place.

⁵⁵ Mary Barton, pp. 95-96.

The dehumanizing conditions are illustrated in the actions of the husband as he snatches at tea brought for the wife "with animal instinct, with a selfishness he had never shown in health."⁵⁶ In other homes, as in this one, people huddled in bed together for warmth and some even bought opium with their few pennies to keep the children from crying. Mrs. Gaskell shows suffering of the poor far outweighing any vices of which the public is aware.⁵⁷

When Barton determines that Davenport has been a steady worker for Carson for three years, he urges Wilson to go to Mr. Carson's house to seek an infirmary order for Davenport. When Wilson arrives at Carson's home he is faint with hunger, but no one thinks to ask if he is hungry. All is luxury at the Carsons, even among the servants. Carson does not remember the name of Davenport, but gives the order to Wilson anyway on his recommendation. Young Mr. Carson gives Wilson five shillings from his pocket for the sick man. The order cannot be presented until Monday, and it is so long before then that Wilson feels the order given him to be worthless. In point of fact, Davenport dies soon after Wilson's return, his last words being, "Oh, Lord God! I thank thee, that the hard

⁵⁶ Mary Barton, p. 101.

⁵⁷ Mary Barton, p. 96.

struggle of living is over."⁵⁸ The two homes exemplify the stark contrast of what each considers hard times.

Some critics have criticized Mrs. Gaskell for her death scenes, but for the poor of Manchester, death was a frequent visitor. In a survey by Joseph Adshead Distress in Manchester: Evidence of the State of the Labouring Clases in 1840-42, the statistics show that there were 2,040 cellar homes containing 3,479 children under the age of 12.⁵⁹ Life was precarious at best, but the children of the Ancoats area died not only from illness but from hunger and fevers brought on by squalid living conditions. The child mortality rate for this area was estimated at 35 to 40 percent. Death took its toll not only of children, but of men and women as well at a fearful rate.⁶⁰

Mrs. Gaskell's Unitarian ideals of tolerance and Christian brotherhood demanded that when one became aware of a prbllem, one turned to action to solve the problem. Mrs. Gaskell lived her ideals to the utmost, just as she advocated through the characters' actions in her books. Just as Mrs. Gaskell attempted to minister to the needs of the poor in the name of religion, so it was religion that

⁵⁸ Mary Barton, p. 110.

⁶⁰ Duthie, p. 65.

⁵⁹ Gill, p. 14.

she saw as the solution to the social problems, not economics or legislation. In her view, a personal relationship of understanding and tolerance between the masters and the men, the working-class and the middle-class, should be the first necessity.⁶¹ Barton has the capacity to feel for his fellow man. Even the strike-breakers, the knob-sticks, are objects of pity for him if they are injured or insulted, as the one who had vitriol flung at him by one of the strikers. His progression toward violence, however, is inflamed by this incident, as it is by the "deep mortification"⁶² which he experiences when he goes to London as a part of the group to present the Charter to Parliament. He and other men are never allowed to present the document officially, and in fact are asked to move aside for horses and carriages bound to a party for the queen. This incident causes his loss of faith in the processes of government, just as earlier happenings had caused him to lose his faith in the masters and the precepts of the Bible. He becomes "sour and morose"⁶³ and feels that since hope is gone, there is little reason to live.

⁶¹ Duthie, p. 162.

⁶³ Mary Barton, p. 218.

⁶² Mary Barton, p. 218.

The ultimate insult which he cannot endure is that to his dignity and manhood. After a meeting with the masters, a scrap of paper is found drawn by young Carson in clever caricature of the ragged appearance of the operatives who came to bargain with the masters. One operative whose likeness is startling says he cannot laugh, as "It seems to make me sad that there is any can make game on what they've never knowed; as can make such laughable pictures on men, whose very hearts within 'em are so raw and sore as ours were and are, God help us."⁶⁴ But John Barton says that "It makes me more than sad, it makes my heart burn within me, to see that folk can make a jest of earnest men."⁶⁵

John Barton sees an act of vengeance on the callous and unthinking young Carson as a blow struck on behalf of the dignity of the working men. After Barton realizes that the deed he has committed is in fact murder and that a grieving father and mother had loved their son just as he had, ". . . his own breaking heart passed judgement on his crime."⁶⁶ As Job Legh explains to Mr. Carson, Barton is

⁶⁴ Mary Barton, p. 238.

⁶⁵ Mary Barton, p. 238.

⁶⁶ Winifred Gerin, Elizabeth Gaskell: A Biography (London: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 88.

"sadly put about to make great riches and great poverty square with Christ's Gospel."⁶⁷ Job knows Barton for a "loving man before he grew mad with seeing such as he was slighted, as if Christ himself had not been poor."⁶⁸

For this story Mrs. Gaskell was condemned by some of the Manchester millowners as well as the London Tory press, but she was steadfast in her belief that she had only done her duty as a Christian. Her sentiments are expressed to her cousin Edward Holland in a letter which states in part:

My poor Mary Barton is stirring up all sorts of angry feelings against me in Manchester; but those best acquainted with the way of thinking and feeling among the poor acknowledge its truth; which is the acknowledgement I most of all desire, because evils being once recognized are half way on toward their remedy.⁶⁹

Her husband supported her efforts wholly. His entire career was spent in Manchester, working all his life to ". . . bring enlightenment and encouragement to such men as John Barton who crowded his evening lecture rooms at the Mechanics' Institute and Owen's College."⁷⁰ Any

⁶⁷ Mary Barton, p. 455.

⁶⁸ Mary Barton, p. 456.

⁶⁹ Elizabeth Gaskell, The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell, ed. J. A. V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1966), GL 39a, pp. 826-27.

⁷⁰ Gerin, p. 89.

criticism of Mary Barton paled into insignificance in the glow of praise from Thomas Carlyle. His letter to her was treasured greatly. The true test of the effectiveness of the book could be measured in the reaction of the masters. A family friend and fellow Unitarian, Mr. Edmund Potter, a calico printer, bought the book for his men; many were buying it to give to their work-people's libraries.

Again and again, whatever the setting, Mrs. Gaskell's concept of tolerance as manifested in brotherhood and action on behalf of one's fellow man is shown through the actions of her various characters. In North and South Margaret Hale persisted in her visits to the invalid daughter of a workman whom she had met. Bessie Higgins was dying of the effects of her factory work, but Margaret provided her with companionship despite their diverse backgrounds. Mr. Higgins would only allow Margaret's first visit after he assured himself there was no hint of patronage on Margaret's behalf. Through their mutual friendship with Martha Hale, Mr. Thornton and Mr. Higgins came to a greater understanding of each other.

Mary Barton is still another character that reflects the spirit of tolerance and brotherhood. When she finally becomes aware that her aunt has no home and is but a woman of the streets, Mary determines to offer Esther a home.

When Jem questions Mary as to what they might do for her, Mary answers, "She's none so happy in her ways, think ye, but what she'd turn from them if any one would lend her a helping hand."⁷¹ Jem is still not convinced as Esther had once turned down an offer of help because she said she could not break her habit of drinking. Mary's faith, and possibly that of Mrs. Gaskell also, is shown in her answer to Jem:

"You never will persuade her if you fear and doubt, . . . Hope yourself, and trust to the good that must be in her. Speak to that,--she has it in her yet,--oh, bring her home, and we will love her so, we'll make her be good."⁷²

Although it is too late to help Esther because society has done its work too well, the appeal to the good hidden within the heart of even the lowest furnished the motivation for the help that Mrs. Gaskell, Florence Nightingale, and others extended to the poor and sick of the Manchester slums. The Bensons show this kind of Christian tolerance and help for the unfortunate Ruth; this act of kindness by the Bensons very possibly kept Ruth Hilton from a life such as Esther had lived.

⁷¹ Mary Barton, p. 462.

⁷² Mary Barton, p. 463.

Other opportunities of the good done by extending a helping hand to those in trouble are found in Mary Barton. When Mary is lost and utterly unable to go any further on her own, the kindness of the old seaman, Mr. Jones and his wife, is God-sent. In Sylvia's Lovers, no one could prove a more loyal friend than old Kester, Sylvia's father's hired hand. He truly gives his all to help his master's defense and would devote his life, if need be, to help Sylvia in any way she would accept. Kester's sister, the Widow Dobson, has a heart as kind as her brother. She insists that the sick Philip, whose true identity is unknown, be allowed to stay with her simply because not many would treat him with kindness nor provide him with suitable food for the small amount which he had. Sylvia, too, has learned the meaning of charity. The money which she gives to Kester's sister is used partly to feed the old tramp, and she is happy that she can assist.

Though Mrs. Gaskell's works abound with personal instances of kindness, there are others who are presented an opportunity to help someone but refuse to do so through indifference and cold intolerance. These serve as a moral lesson to the reader. Mrs. Thornton in North and South represents such a person. Only because of her son's insistence, Mrs. Thornton goes at last to see Mrs. Hale and

is honest to the point of cruelty. When asked by the dying Mrs. Hale to be a friend to her daughter, Mrs. Thornton's selfishness causes her to promise:

"I will be a true friend, if circumstances require it. Not a tender friend. . . . It is not my nature to show affection even where I feel it; Still I promise that in any difficulty in which Miss Hale . . . ever comes to me for help, I will help her with every power I have, as if she were my own daughter. I also promise that if ever I see her doing what I think is wrong--such wrong not touching me or mine, . . . I will tell her of it, faithfully and plainly as I should wish my own daughter to be told."⁷³

Mrs. Hale does not understand the promise so hedged in with reservations, but she thanks Mrs. Thornton for her kindness. Mrs. Thornton says, "Not kindness!" She is "ungraciously truthful to the last."⁷⁴ Her conscience is eased by her grudging promise. It is Mrs. Thornton rather than Mrs. Hale who suffers from her cold and intolerant attitude toward Margaret. Mrs. Thornton misses an opportunity to have a loving and satisfying relationship that would never be possible with her own daughter.

Two other characters show a callous disregard of one in need of help in Ruth. Mrs. Mason to whom Ruth is

⁷³ Elizabeth Gaskell, North and South, with intro. by Martin Dodsworth, ed. Dorothy Collin (1854; rpt. New York: Penguin Books, 1981), p. 307.

⁷⁴ North and South, p. 307.

apprenticed, makes no provision for Ruth to have companionship or comfort on her day off, and coldly dismisses her from her position when she sees her in front of the inn with Mr. Bellingham, an act which she considers an impropriety. She makes no inquiries nor attempts to determine what help Ruth might need in this strange place.

Mrs. Bellingham, young Bellingham's mother, is even more callous in her treatment of Ruth. She assumes that Ruth is impudent and hardened and of improper character. She counts as nothing Ruth's tender care and concern for her son. Henry Bellingham half-heartedly takes the blame upon himself for the affair with Ruth, but the mother coldly insists that he cast her aside, and even insists that he not explain the circumstances to Ruth personally. As they leave without telling Ruth of it, Mrs. Bellingham leaves 50 pounds for Ruth and an insulting and degrading note reminding Ruth that if she persists in her ways of vice, she will have not only her own sins upon her head but those of other young men that she leads astray. Mrs. Bellingham views her actions as quite handsome and liberal under the circumstances. The contrast between her actions and those of the Bensons is a study in cruelty based on convention as opposed to Christian kindness that defies convention. If the laws of God and the rules of man are in

conflict, Mrs. Gaskell usually finds herself on the side of God. The Bible, as the guide to society in its behavior, would condemn "certain unchristian laws of Victorian society such as the one that damned the fallen woman without hope."⁷⁵ Mrs. Gaskell hopes that her books may bring a particular kind of insight, and that this insight carries with it the power not to misjudge, but indeed, to make choices based upon Christian charity. Unitarians felt a great reverence for the Bible as a source of spiritual strength as well as an unerring guide to moral conduct if read and studied in the light of reason and truth. The example of Jesus in forgiveness and kindness was one which Mrs. Gaskell felt any Christian should attempt to follow.

Mrs. Gaskell saw as a remedy for the various ills and shortcomings of tolerance and brotherhood in individual relationships as well as the larger segments of society, "simply stated, . . . the application of the Golden Rule. She believed that only through personal acquaintance and contact would greater tolerance come, and only through greater tolerance and sympathy"⁷⁶ would individual

⁷⁵ Edgar Wright, Mrs. Gaskell: The Basis for Reassessment (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 41.

⁷⁶ Gerald DeWitt Sanders, Elizabeth Gaskell, with bibliography by Clark S. Northrup, Cornell Studies in English (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1929), p. 27.

prejudices give way to love and brotherhood. The broader aspects of society are ultimately composed of individual human actions. If individuals become more tolerant, so society as a whole will grow in tolerance and understanding. By the nature of Mrs. Gaskell's faith, love is an active moral principle.⁷⁷

The suppression of natural affection and love "in the name of duty and religion"⁷⁸ leads to a prejudice that flourishes when normal traditions and restraints are lacking. A valid judgement of religion can only be based on the conduct it produces, not by its stated creed nor the profession it makes.⁷⁹ Mrs. Gaskell explores the harsh uncharitable Puritan ethic, descended from the same common ancestry as Unitarianism. The Puritanism as practiced in an isolated community, turned in upon itself and always on the edge of violence is a religion that is "a perversion of true Christianity in its rejection of love and mercy."⁸⁰

Probably the only Christian sect which Elizabeth Gaskell found depressing and for which she had little tolerance was the Calvinists.⁸¹ The Unitarian regretted

⁷⁷ Wright, p. 52.

⁸⁰ Wright, p. 169.

⁷⁸ Wright, p. 168.

⁸¹ Letters, GL 405.

⁷⁹ Wright, p. 169.

his position outside the main body of Christian belief, accepting this exclusion as a consequence of his faith, but the Calvinist ". . . rejoiced in . . . isolation and saw it as visible witness to his virtue in a world of sinners."⁸² Calvinists suffered from a total lack of humour, a frustrated sexuality, and a morbid introspection, searching always for signs of punishment for sin or reward for virtue. This concept was alien to Unitarian belief. To the Unitarian, humanity was basically and inherently good, not evil. The human passions, when governed by reason, became a source of personal fulfillment rather than a source of torture.⁸³ Despite the Unitarian stress on self-knowledge and understanding, Elizabeth Gaskell saw a difference between self-understanding and idle dreaming and abstract speculation.⁸⁴ These to her were a source of danger to the human soul.

The Puritan characters in "Lois the Witch" are out of harmony with their surroundings. Always the forests are viewed as gloomy, forbidding, and the source of danger and death. The rural scene depicted in "Lois the Witch" seems

⁸² Lansbury, p. 156.

⁸³ Lansbury, p. 156.

⁸⁴ Duthie, p. 19.

to exist in another world from the golden scenes shown in "Cousin Phillis." The world in which the Hicksons live is a reflection of their own inner darkness, a monstrous and terrifying manifestation of the anguish within their souls. In this world tolerance is seen as sin and weakness of spirit. "Lois the Witch" shows a community that accepts the bizarre as normal and insanity as religious vision; the "terrifying fact is that most of those involved, both prosecutors and victims, believed and trembled."⁸⁵

Even Lois Barclay, the orphan sent to her relatives in Salem, has seen a witch once in Barford put to the water test. Lois' knowledge of witchcraft and old folk superstitions is only an interesting diversion to her; too late she realizes these matters represent sincerely held beliefs for the Puritan community she is entering.

Lois is sent to her uncle as her only relative. Her mother's last words had been to find her uncle and ask him for a home based on the bonds of family affection. The uncle is old and sick, totally dominated by his wife, Grace Hickson. It is Grace who meets the young girl with coolness for a reason she could not admit to herself:

⁸⁵ Angus Easson, Introduction to Cousin Phillis and Other Tales, with intro. by Angus Easson, ed., The World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 122.

Born and bred in New England, Grace Hickson had a kind of jealous dislike to her husband's English relations, which had increased since of late years his mind yearned after them, and he forgot the good reason he had had for his self-exile, and moaned over the decision which had led to it as the great mistake of his life.⁸⁶

When Mr. Hickson cries to find his sister is dead, Grace upbraids him as "forgetting in Whose hands life and death are!"⁸⁷ When Lois reacts with "scarcely disguised indignation"⁸⁸ to her aunt's contemptuous tone, the aunt sets forth her ideas concerning Lois' behavior:

" . . . Nay, lass," said she, catching the expression on Lois's face, "thou are never going to brow beat me with thine angry looks. I do my duty as I read it, and there is never a man in Salem that dare speak a word to Grace Hickson about either her works or her faith. . . . I would advise thee rather to humble thyself, and see if the Lord nay not convert thee from thy ways, since he has sent thee to dwell, as it were, in Zion, where the precious dew falls daily on Aaron's beard."⁸⁹

The first verse of Psalm 133 which is omitted in Grace's reference to dwelling in Zion lends an irony to her speech

⁸⁶ Elizabeth Gaskell, "Cousin Phillis," Cousin Phillis and Other Tales, with intro. by Angus Easson, ed., The World's Classics (Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 122.

⁸⁷ "Cousin Phillis," p. 122.

⁸⁸ "Cousin Phillis," p. 122.

⁸⁹ "Cousin Phillis," p. 122.

of which she seems unaware: "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity."⁹⁰ Grace Hickson fulfills the letter of Christian help in giving a home to her husband's niece, but she coldly withholds the spirit of Christian love in her relationship to Lois. Her first words in response to Lois's introduction by her escort to the village are cold and rejecting: "I know nothing of her."⁹¹ These words foreshadow their entire relationship. Mrs. Hickson never grows to like or even know Lois.

When questioned about the letter telling of Lois's coming, she says no such letter came from his sister. Without any provocation, Grace opens up old wounds by saying:

"His sister Barclay, she that was Henrietta Hickson, and whose husband took oaths to Charles Stuart, and stuck by his living when all godly men left theirs--"⁹²

This attack on her dead minister father Lois perceives as an implied insult. Lois returns a spirited answer, even to her own surprise. The answer expresses a tolerance which her aunt is incapable of feeling:

⁹⁰ Psalm 133:1.

⁹¹ "Cousin Phillis," p. 119.

⁹² "Cousin Phillis," p. 119.

"They might be godly men who left their churches on that day of which you speak, madam; but they alone were not the godly men, and no one has a right to limit true godliness for mere opinion's sake."⁹³

In a manner of speaking the lines are drawn between the two characters, as well as between tolerance and understanding and prejudice and lack of feeling: the two stared at each other "unflinchingly" for a moment. Lois's eyes finally filled with tears, while her aunt's stare remained "dry and unwavering."⁹⁴ The inevitable outcome is prefigured in this first meeting. Lois is spirited and brave, but her youth and warm heart are ill-matched against the relentless, self-righteous religiosity of Grace Hickson. Yet, in a sense, in winning a spiritual victory in refusing to save her own life by removing a course of which she knows nothing, Lois's faith proves in the end a sustaining one, while the religion of Grace "has not only fomented madness but instigated murder."⁹⁵

The stern and unfamiliar habits in her new home are a source of bewilderment to Lois. Her cousin, Manasseh, is a man who seems teetering on the brink of madness. After

⁹³ "Cousin Phillis," p. 120.

⁹⁴ "Cousin Phillis," p. 120.

⁹⁵ Lansbury, p. 158.

he falls in love with Lois, he translates his desire into a divine command, complete with omens and visions, which he says are as binding to Lois as they are to him. He attempts to use a sort of spiritual blackmail to force Lois's acquiescence to a match which is abhorrent to her. Manasseh ignores the fact that in point of morality, she could not be his since she is promised to another in England. Manasseh lives increasingly in dreams and prophecy, escaping reality in the disordered clutter of his mind. In his vision he saw the spirit offer Lois two choices, one of white for a bride, the other of black and red for a violent death. Grace Hickson is aware that her son is mentally disturbed, but she protects him at any price, all in the name of religion. The other members of the family exhibit similar tendencies of obsession in various ways. The younger daughter Prudence takes a gleeful and impish delight in mischief, while Faith sees Lois as the thief of love intended for her by young Pastor Nolan. Her perception is so distorted that she is unaware of the vehemence of Faith's love for him.⁹⁶

Dark tales run rampant in the community of Salem and the "tension builds up to a climax when the two young

⁹⁶ "Cousin Phillis," p. 147.

daughters of the stern Pastor Tappau are seized with a hysteria thought to be demonic possession caused by witchcraft, which acts like a deadly contagion,"⁹⁷ and predictably an old Indian servant Hota who has amused herself and the children with tales of spells, is the first victim. Lois, too, is claimed as a victim. In one way or another, Lois is destined to be a victim in this ingrown, distorted society. If she saves her life, she must be the bride of Manasseh; if she saves her soul, she must die as a witch condemned. The only person without the excuse of a disordered mental condition, or true belief in Lois's role as a witch is Grace Hickson. Grace believes in witchcraft, but she does not truly believe Lois to be one. Yet she is ready to sacrifice Lois to death if Lois refuses to become wife to the son to whom she can deny nothing. She tells Lois, "I value thee not, save as a medicine for Manasseh, if his mind get disturbed again, as I have noted signs of late."⁹⁸ Puritan or not, this perversion of marriage is a sin in any religion.

Both Lois and Manasseh are doomed; but the manner of the death of each speaks for itself. Lois states her position:

⁹⁷ Duthie, p. 143.

⁹⁸ "Cousin Phillis," p. 147.

"Sirs, I must choose death with a quiet conscience, rather than life to be gained by a lie. I am not a witch. I know not hardly what you mean when you say I am. I have done many, many things very wrong in my life; but I think God will forgive me them for my Savior's sake."⁹⁹

Manasseh has finally broken the bonds with which his mother had restrained him, and after Lois is hanged, he comes crazed and mad, rushing up the steps to catch Lois's body in his arms, kissing her dead lips with wild abandon. Then, as if possessed by a demon, as it was later whispered, "he sprang down, and rushed through the crowd, out of the bounds of the city, and into the dark dense forest, and Manasseh Hickson was no more seen of Christian man."¹⁰⁰

Mrs. Hickson has fallen prey to the old fear that Mrs. Gaskell saw as a trap: she has made an idol of her son, and in so doing she has covered her sin in the garment of religion. Mrs. Gaskell realized the dangers of the imagination, "for which she prescribed a remedy often mentioned in her fiction: ". . . to attend to present realities, to observe with care the concrete and close at hand,"¹⁰¹ especially to avoid error of intolerance and to

⁹⁹ "Cousin Phillis," p. 184.

¹⁰⁰ "Cousin Phillis," p. 190.

¹⁰¹ Sharps, p. 323.

guard against elevating a mortal into the position that should only be occupied by God.

To the Unitarian, tolerance, although necessary, in itself is not enough. Tolerance must be accompanied by love and brotherhood rather than being a mere acceptance of differences. Those who claim tolerance but exhibit indifference lack the true Christian qualities that set the Unitarian spirit apart from that of other Christian groups of the time. True tolerance, as Mrs. Gaskell demonstrates in her life and in her works, is not confined to absence of malice but includes the presence of love called forth by the spirit of brotherhood. Action and involvement in both the physical and spiritual needs of others is to the Unitarian the logical evidence of tolerance expressed in Christian brotherhood. Tolerance for those of differing beliefs, for those of different social station and for those suffering spiritual defeat or moral degradation implies recognition of need. This need, honestly assessed, carries with it to the Unitarian the responsibility for action.

CONCLUSIONS

While it is undeniable that Mrs. Gaskell's fiction "deepened in scope during the eighteen years of her writing career,"¹ this growth is possibly the effect of an increase in skill rather than that "she realized the limits of her orthodox morality,"² as Mantovani suggests. Her fictional worlds are not as simple as they often seem on the surface, and the problems that arise in the various settings often involve individuals in struggles that try their spirits. Mrs. Gaskell is realistic enough to know that individual honesty, love of one's fellow man and attempts to fulfill one's responsibilities may not change the world, but that these values have the power to change human hearts. Ultimately that is all anyone may ask.

Although the elements of Mrs. Gaskell's Unitarian faith are woven throughout each of the works, it is in Cranford that the various elements are presented in the most subtle way. Cranford is generally thought to be Mrs. Gaskell's celebration of her quiet years of growing-up

¹ Juanita M. Mantovani, "The Feminine World View of Elizabeth Gaskell," Diss. University of Southern California 1975, p. 207.

² Mantovani, p. 207.

in the little country town of Knutsford, and indeed, possibly it is. She only intended to write two or three stories for Dickens' publication, Household Words,³ but public demand for more Cranford stories finally resulted in a book.

Mrs. Gaskell's vantage point as an adult looking back on a beloved time and place enhances and clarifies her perceptions of her youth, and it is for this reason that the evidences of Mrs. Gaskell's beliefs may be perceived to suffuse the story and characters rather than having been included in a conscious way. In a letter from Charlotte Bronte, the question concerning objectivity is broached as to the temptation for the writer to make "the characters more amiable than the Life." Miss Bronte asks, "Does no luminous cloud ever come between you and the severe Truth, as you know it in your own secret and clear-seeing soul?"⁴ Because Mrs. Gaskell "did frequently try to ameliorate her characters and situations to point a moral,"⁵ the Truth in

³ John Geoffrey Sharps, Mrs. Gaskell's Observation and Invention: A Study of Her Non-Biographical Works, foreword by A. Stanton Whitfield (Fontwell, Sussex: Linden Press, 1970), p. 125.

⁴ Elizabeth Gaskell, The Life of Charlotte Bronte (1908; rpt. Everyman's Library, No. 318 (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, Ltd., 1960), p. 382.

⁵ Mantovani, p. 80.

Cranford is unique because here she had no moral to present and no social purpose to fulfill. This book displays Mrs. Gaskell's Unitarian concepts so truly, unconsciously testifying that her spirit was one of tolerance, dedication to truth, and moral responsibility based on Christian love. It is this spirit against which all morality must be measured. Cranford, in many ways, measures up quite well.

In this quiet village all the elements of life are present, albeit drawn upon a smaller canvas. Cranford is a very private world, but a microcosm of a larger world with its tragedy and humor, bravery and cowardice, selfishness and generosity that make up life everywhere. Although the focus is on a small circle of "Amazons" whose affairs are all-important to themselves, "a sense of a real community is conveyed"⁷ by reference to servants, shopkeepers, the surgeon and other diverse groups essential to life anywhere. The little village cannot escape the influence of the outside world as witnessed by those who come and go, as well as by the failure of the bank in the

⁶ Elizabeth Gaskell, Cranford, with intro. by Frank Swinnerton (1906, rpt. Everyman's Library, No. 83, London: J. M. Dent & Sons, Ltd., 1959), p. 1.

⁷ Sharps, p. 132.

neighboring town of Drumble with such devastating effects on Miss Matty. Mary Smith, a resident of Drumble but a frequent visitor to Cranford, is the narrator of the story.

The circle to which Miss Matty belongs is one composed of spinsters and widows, each with a social position dictated by the late father's position in the case of the spinsters, or the late husband's rank in the case of the widows. Only one unqualified person has breached the walls to reach the inner ranks. This is Miss Barker, the ex-milliner, but she knows her place and does not presume too much on the sensibilities of the ladies. Convention is king, or queen, in Cranford.

The "faint tinge of . . . hauteur that excluded men"⁸ from the select circle of the Cranford world is a form of self-deception of much the same caliber as the economies practiced in the name of good taste. Although the small deceptions in Cranford in some instances are little more than efforts at dignity and self-respect, others are not so innocuous. The rejection of Miss Matty's one suitor on snobbish grounds as well as the treatment of her by her sister ultimately stifled any efforts of Miss Matty to find self-confidence, independence, or love. She herself

⁸ Mantovani, p. 204.

is not blameless in this respect, however, as she put the conventional standards of deference and respect for her father and sister above her own feelings. Accommodation to others replaces self-assertiveness. In this she errs. Her brother Peter followed his own path, and although he leaves Cranford, he was not forced to take this action. Although Mr. Jenkyns is intolerant of the son's mischief, Peter might have asserted his independence there if he had persevered, as Miss Matty might also have done. The Cranfordians have substituted form for freedom, subterfuge for self-knowledge. As a result life in Cranford lacks the richness and depth of passion and feeling.

On the two occasions when Miss Matty reacts with honesty according to her own belief rather than relying on the standards of convention, she is rewarded with happiness and fulfillment. Her progress toward self-understanding begins almost accidentally with the reverie of her youth brought about by seeing her former sweetheart after almost thirty years. Mr. Holbrook has remained a bachelor. A subsequent visit to his home (made by Miss Matty under extreme prodding and with Mary and Miss Pole as chaperones) shows him to be a simple, unaffected man who loves poetry and who finds beauty in simple scenes. He is romantic at heart, as he decides

to visit Paris, where he has always wanted to go, before it is too late. He dies soon after his return, but the experience has awakened a sense of loss and regret in Miss Matty. In what is probably the first real decision of her life she goes against her dead sister's precepts and tells her maid Martha that she may have "followers" if she likes. It is evident that she does not want to be a hindrance to romance for someone still young enough to find it. This act of kindness is repaid many-fold when Miss Matty finds herself without funds or home. Martha's love for Miss Matty results in furnishing a home for her when she has no other resources.

The other occasion when Miss Matty acts according to her convictions indirectly results in her first independent efforts to enter into a wider circle than the ladies with whom she has passed her time heretofore. As a stockholder in the failing Town and Country Bank, stock purchased against the advice of Mr. Smith by her strongwilled sister, Miss Matty feels a responsibility to purchase one of the bank's notes which a young man is unable to cash in a store. As a stockholder, her conscience will not allow the man to lose his money when she has the amount to pay him for his note within her purse. Although the collapse of the bank brings financial ruin to the already beleaguered

Miss Matty, the bank failure is a blessing in disguise. Her old routine is broken. She must live with Martha and her husband Jem, and she must earn her own living, all of these conditions formerly beyond even imagination. Her new-found independence in operating a shop selling tea brings her a measure of freedom and self-reliance. Her ties to Martha and Jem bring her the joys of life with a baby in the house which had been denied heretofore.

Mrs. Gaskell does not "mock or criticize her spinsters because they have chosen, or fate has delegated them, to a solitary sphere." Rather, it is in the delightful presentation of their quiet but purposeless lives that she gently reproves "Victorian society whose strict conventionality so confines its single ladies unable to live normal and fulfilled lives."⁹ But in Mrs. Gaskell's presentation of Peter, Mrs. Fitz-Adam, and above all, Miss Matty, she demonstrates the optimism in the human soul that pervades all her works.

Intelligence, honesty, self-awareness, and tolerance are as important in Cranford as they are everywhere, but the hold of convention often inhibits independence and growth. But growth does come. No friends could be more

⁹ Jane Stoffels Welborn, "Solitary Spheres: Gaskell's Single Women," Thesis Texas Woman's University 1979, p. 86.

unselfish than the group gathered by Miss Pole to form a fund from their own meager incomes to augment Miss Matty's inadequate resources. They keep their donation amounts secret so as not embarrass each other or Miss Matty. Although the fund becomes unnecessary after Miss Matty opens her store, the Christian regard for another is touching.

From her first efforts at a diary encouraged by her brother so that she would have ready material to use in her letters, to her final almost-finished novel Wives and Daughters, Mrs. Gaskell drew upon real life observations for her raw material. But more importantly, she shaped and molded this material according to her concept of the Christian life as she perceived it from her Unitarian background and beliefs. It is her unwavering faith in the ultimate perfectability of mankind, if he but use with love the intellect and the will that God gave him, that shines forth from her novels.

This faith, the essence of the Unitarian creed, furnished Mrs. Gaskell "a rule of conduct, a way to the inner ideal life that yet stressed the full play of reason, and a sympathy which sought to include all Christians and understand all creeds."¹⁰

¹⁰ Angus Easson, Elizabeth Gaskell (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, Ltd., 1979), p. 4.

Mrs. Gaskell's own professional career began as an act of Christian service to her fellow man. The writing of Mary Barton was meant as a service to the poor so that England might be aware of their suffering, but as a service as well to those people who had it in their power to provide help for others if they but knew the need.

Mrs. Gaskell "acts on the faith that if facts are known, the improvement may follow,"¹¹ and in providing this improvement, the givers may be more blessed than the receivers. The need for understanding between classes is shown to be a two-way street; hence, the pair of industrial or social novels, Mary Barton and North and South, written from opposing viewpoints. Possibly no other writer of the time could have known so intimately two such diverse segments of society. In her plea for tolerance and understanding based on Biblical precepts, Mrs. Gaskell was never so foolish as to believe this way to be an easy one. Simple perhaps, but not easy. She truly believed that until there is brotherhood, legislation and charity are only temporary bandages applied to a deep and festering wound. The only real cure is a love for others, manifested in action and understanding.

¹¹ W. A. Craik, Elizabeth Gaskell and the English Provincial Novel (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1975), p. 4.

Personal human relationships are in many ways even more important than social relationships. Mrs. Gaskell never forgot that a large group was really many individuals. For this reason, Mrs. Gaskell chose to illustrate her concepts through the changes in individuals that might someday grow into changes in society.

Even on the purely personal level, however, inter-relationships, especially within the family circle, are a matter of great interest to Mrs. Gaskell. Her own experience and her Unitarian beliefs convinced her that all relationships should be firmly based on truth and trust. Truth is central to Unitarian belief and is discovered through the use of intelligence: truth undergirds all other beliefs and actions. Truth is as essential to self-knowledge as it is to knowledge of others. Only through truth can reality be discovered. To blind oneself to truth is to delude oneself. Basing personal relationships on delusion is disastrous, as evidenced in Sylvia's Lovers.

The question of law and convention opposed to human right is also explored in Sylvia's Lovers. Such questions as tolerance toward those who defied convention arose again and again. Seeing the human responsibility as dominant over the demand of society when the two conflict was a question that Mrs. Gaskell felt should be considered

by all of society. Such conflicts were often rooted in fear or self-deception, manifested through intolerance and lack of concern for others. Although Mrs. Gaskell's stand is obvious, she ". . . leaves it to her readers, . . . to initiate the social and economic reform and the change in social attitudes"¹² that she is confident they will find if they search diligently for truth. The avenues for such search are reason and the Bible.

Education as a means toward understanding the world and its people and problems was always important to Mrs. Gaskell as to all Unitarians as a means to discover truth. The effects of education, or the lack of it, are explored to some degree in all her works. Perhaps Margaret Hale in North and South benefits most from her education, built as it was on a loving and truthful heart. Mrs. Gaskell's country-bred common sense, however, never let her believe that education and native intelligence were interchangeable or that the possession of one obviated the need for the other. It is quite possible that if driven to a choice, Mrs. Gaskell would have chosen what she called mother-wit or common sense. Education in the purest sense is, of course, a blend of the two. The

¹² Welborn, p. 116.

characters who are fortunate enough to achieve this kind of education develop independence, confidence, and freedom in choices.

Seldom has a writer remained so true to a vision of life as Mrs. Gaskell does, whatever the setting or the time of her work. Her Unitarian spirit is not an addition to her works; it is the firm basis upon which her stories and tales are enacted. Her world is one in which happiness, humour, love, and kindness can exist if one searches both his heart and mind for truth.

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