Wives and Spinsters of England
A study of female characters in selected novels of Mrs Gaskell

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ABSTRACT

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The focus in Mrs Gaskell's works upon the lives of older women, women who are not obsessed with finding a husband, is rare among Victorian novelists. Whilst it is clear that the position of women in Victorian society is inextricably entwined with the development of the family - both legally and socially, the typical Gaskellian family is fragmented and discordant. Indeed, her work offers seemingly endless variations on the family pattern and it is in those communities composed entirely of women that the qualities of love and peace are most often found.

The period in which Mrs Gaskell wrote was one of particular interest for the whole question of women's relationships with women. Marriage was virtually the only option available for a Victorian heroine but few writers explore the possibility that this could mean a loveless life filled with regret and tragedy. Mrs Gaskell's presentation of married life focuses upon the repressive and destructive nature of patriarchal domination, the deadening misery that exists behind a loveless marriage, the reality of domestic violence and the squalor and despair to be found in those homes where abject poverty drives out "honour", "respect", and "chivalry".

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Chapter One

The Victorian Woman

The Victorian age:

> that strange period of human evolution... which in some respects, one now thinks, marked the lowest ebb of modern civilised society, a period in which...commercialism...cant in religion, pure materialism in science...the 'impure hush' on matters of sex, class division...the cruel barring of women from every natural and useful expression of their lives, were carried to an extremity of folly difficult for us to now realise (Carpenter 321-2)

Such was the judgement on the Victorian age given at the end of the first decade of the twentieth century. The Queen who gave her name to this period occupied the throne from 1837 to 1901, reigning for nearly two-thirds of the nineteenth century. Thousands of volumes have been written about the events of these years and there will doubtless be many more versions of events and an equal number of disparate evaluations. What is confirmed by every new book is that the Victorian age was a complex and bewildering phenomenon that resists generalisations. It is an age surrounded by myths and stereotypes and its 'true' values were often deliberately obscured by the historians and biographers of the following generation.

Writing in the period between 1848 and 1865, Mrs Gaskell is firmly placed in "that strange period of human evolution the Victorian age" (Carpenter 321). As a Victorian novelist, she addressed in her novels many of the

issues crucial to the period - "commercialism...religion, pure materialism in science..." and, what is of the greatest importance here, the role of women in society. Between the years 1851 and 1864, Mrs Gaskell wrote six novels, one biography and numerous short stories. All of her novels have women as the central characters and five out of seven of her major works are concerned with the lives of women past their youth. These novels chronicle the day-to-day experiences, emotions and struggles of her female characters and provide an insight into the way that women cope with their lives, regardless of whether they are wives, mothers or spinsters. This focus upon the lives of older women, women who are not obsessed with finding a husband, is remarkable among Victorian novelists and has attracted little critical attention:

> I think an unmarried life may be to the full as happy, in process of time but I think that there is a time of trial to be gone through with women, who naturally yearn after children (GL 16).

The majority of Victorian novelists conformed to the convention of the romance plot and the majority of young heroines ended their story at the church door - despite passionately phrased protestations on the way:

> Men of England! look at your poor girls, many of them fading around you, dropping off in consumption or decline; or, what is worse, degenerating to sour old maids, - envious, backbiting, wretched, because life is a desert to them; or, what is worst of all, reduced to strive, by scarce modest coquetry and debasing artifice, to gain that position and consideration by

> marriage, which celibacy is denied. Father! cannot you alter these things?...you would wish to be proud of your daughters and not to blush for them - then seek for them an interest and an occupation which shall raise them above the flirt, the manoeuvrer, the mischief-making tale bearer (Shirley 392).

By the end of the Great War the term Victorian had become a cliché, associated with hypocrisy, prudery, the development of the patriarchal, middle-class family and the concomitant repression of women. Yet, the idea of the 'Victorian" - of a disparagingly regarded cultural phase that started around 1837 and had a doctrine of sexual repression, perhaps hypocritical, as its key element - did not arise before Victoria's death. By 1919, however, Edmund Gosse could appeal with some confidence to his readers' experience of the phenomenon: "for a considerable time past everybody must have noticed, especially in private conversation, a growing tendency to disparagement and even ridicule of all men and things, which can be defined as 'Victorian'" (276-95).

Given the complexity of making generalisations about Victorian society together with the necessity of creating a framework within which we can assess Mrs Gaskell's contribution to our understanding of the Victorian heroine, we shall divide the rest of this chapter into two distinct sections: the first will deal with the creation of the stereotype or myth of the 'angel in the house' and will attempt to evaluate to what extent historical reality

conformed to this image and the second part will look briefly at how Mrs Gaskell's life, both as a woman and as a novelist, conformed to or challenged this stereotype. Although a thorough analysis of the development of the Perfect Lady is obviously not within the scope of this thesis particular attention in the first part of the chapter will be given to the major factors that influenced the development of this ideal of Victorian womanhood: religion, industrialisation, Queen Victoria and, most important of all, the flood of words that inundated Victorian society in the form of magazine articles and conduct manuals. These, and many other social and political factors, helped to create the model of the Victorian Lady and it is important to remember that the model existed - even if the reality did not.

By this questioning of the Victorians' concept of marriage and the role of women in society, and by assessing the discrepancy between literary views of married and single women (the 'angel in the house', the Dickensian chatelaine and perpetual mother, and the governess) and historical reality, we hope to evaluate Mrs Gaskell's attempts to push the margins of our understanding of the role of the heroine in her novels beyond the conventions of Perfect Lady, perfect wife, perfect mother.

There is no other woman in history who has attracted as much attention or been surrounded by as much controversy as

the Victorian Woman. Yet the picture remains a distorted one, changing as we, rather than she, change. Despite distortions and exaggerations the historical and sociological evidence of the era seems to suggest that women in the early nineteenth century were subject to a very inflexible socialisation process which virtually restricted them to one clearly defined role. Women, or rather middle class women, were confined to the home and almost the only outside influence was religion. The Protestant Ethic, which inspired men to work hard in order to be proved worthy in the after life, instilled in women a sense of moral obligation to husbands and family. Duty was paramount. In England in the first half of the nineteenth century the acceptance of the role of wife and mother as the only one appropriate for women of the middle class was so universal as to virtually preclude consideration of any alternative. Women who did not marry did not do so out of choice. They were failures and as such their ability to create a fulfilled, alternative life-style was extremely limited. Florence Kaslow in a seminar given at the American Family Therapy Association in June, 1990 points out that "[o]ur society has few clearly defined, positive roles in society for single women except perhaps for the kind maiden aunt, godmother, parent caretaker, and devoted secretary" (Kaslow 83). A conclusion that parallels the ideas expressed by most Victorians - read governess for secretary - and one

which makes a study of Mrs Gaskell's exploration of the subject of particular interest and relevance today.

Socialisation for Victorian women appeared to be so complete that even those who failed to fulfil all the requirements of the role did not turn to other avenues but continued to struggle unsuccessfully to imitate the stereotype. This is especially true of the governess, who was typically an unmarried lady lacking independent means. Although she was forced to work, she clung to the status of a gentlewoman and resisted descent into the ranks of the working classes (Peterson 7). Starting from this very narrow path, which encouraged the adoption of only one role, all encompassing, the Perfect Lady, the position of women in society, and in literature, steadily developed (Vicinus ix). However, within certain sectors of society this role was being challenged and women were demanding freer action and wider choice within the sphere of feminine, maidenly behaviour. Women were starting to weigh up alternatives and reflect self-consciously on the decisions they made and the effects of these decisions on themselves and others. By the middle of the nineteenth century the emerging consciousness of women coincided with an unprecedented concentration of talented female writers and the period in which Mrs Gaskell, George Eliot and the Brontës wrote was one of particular interest for the whole question of woman's nature and her place in society.

The fact that the highest position in the land was held by a woman would seem of vital importance to this development but the extent to which Queen Victoria influenced the position of women in society is not always easy to determine. Queen Victoria was the first monarch in British history to combine the 'public' role of head of the state with the 'private' one of wife and mother. She alone among married women was not governed by laws which involved surrendering both name and fortune to her husband. Yet, Victoria was not a philosopher or a leader of thought and opinion. Her position as Queen of one of the great powers of the world for sixty changing and eventful years provided English society with a challenging and thought provoking role model. That her subjects were conscious of her gender and the disturbing questions that this raised about power and gender in society was obvious from the attention of the press, the prolific number of cartoons and the nature of the street ballads of the time.

> Since the Queen did herself for a husband 'propose',
> The ladies will all do the same, I suppose:
> Their days of subserviency now will be past,
> For all will 'speak first' as they always did last!
> Since the Queen has no equal, 'obey' none she need,
> So of course from the altar from such vow she's freed;
> And the women will all follow suit, so they say-
> "Love, honour', they'll promise, but never - 'obey'
> (as quoted in Thompson 38).

Even so, Victoria did not actively espouse the cause of feminine rights amongst her subjects and during most of her reign women were pushed back into an exclusively domestic

environment, both as an ideological trend and as a practical way of ensuring the maintenance of the male work force at all levels of urban and industrial society. That the image of the Queen should change is not surprising given the fact that her reign spans sixty years but what is of note is how in the early years she symbolised a new, more liberal approach to government whilst by the end of her reign she represented ultra-conservatism.

The basic feminine role ascribed to all middle class (and many upper class) Victorian women only took on this narrow, comprehensive character towards the middle of the century. In pre-industrial times women had often been the advisors and partners of their husbands in the conduct of business and trade; some had managed businesses of their own. But the Industrial Revolution brought an increase in the volume and complexity of trade and an increase in wealth which led to the removal of business premises from the home (Pinchbeck 8). The laws relating to ownership of property made it difficult for a woman to have her own business, and so she remained at home and affected a life of idleness - though in fact, managing servants and the apparatus of the home.

Because status for the rising middle class was endowed by wealth, it was thought that it was not only unnecessary for one's wife and daughters to work, it was actually demeaning. The ideal of the Perfect Lady inevitably leads

to the Perfect Wife, as expressed in Ellis' Wives of England and in Patmore's idealisation of married love in The Angel in the House. The home was portrayed as a "sanctuary in which the husband could recover from the trials of his business life"(Banks 59). As Banks points out it would perhaps be more correct to say that the transition was from Perfect Wife to Perfect Lady, that is from "domesticity to idleness"(69). And so there developed the role of the leisured gentlewoman. The character assigned to this woman incorporated all the traditional feminine virtues, and was highlighted by one or two more recent additions. It has been described as

> the eighteenth century standard type of womanhood, sensitive and enduring at once frailer and finer than man ... blended insensibly with a more positive type evolved, in a humanitarian age, by the persuasive working of religious duty ... (and) if the convention was that the nineteenth century man liked them ignorant, there was no doubt at all that he expected them to be good; and goodness in that age of universal charity, imported the service of others (Young xiii).

The growth of large and impersonal cities led to increases in crime and immorality which alarmed the Victorians and gave rise to a "protective movement in morals (a code of purity, censorship and prudery) and an effort to idealise love and woman, including the mother, in the cause of pure conduct" (Houghton Pt iv). It was a woman's task to provide for men a refuge from worldly cares, and to bring her children up in a moral atmosphere which would ensure the adoption of proper standards and values.

> Not until economic conditions made gentility possible did the social climate permit the long nurtured plants of prudery and other repressive aspects of puritanism to burst forth (Houghton Pt iv).

A woman's position was reinforced by public opinion, including the opinion of other women socialised to their roles, and moral and religious teaching. Her life was absorbed by household activities and the daily concerns of the family circle. Men did not discuss their business and financial affairs or other problems with their wives and daughters. To be a middle class woman was, in the middle of the century, synonymous with being a wife and mother, and caring for the home. As a mother a woman did not express her personal views about the upbringing of her children; she was her husband's representative and her relationship to him was officially one of duty not familiarity - doubtful though this may have been in fact. To fulfil the stereotyped role very little intellectual ability or knowledge was needed. Knowledge and ideas threatened the status quo, and so they were labelled unwomanly. Learning and concern with outside affairs had to be suppressed and women were allowed only an interest in household matters and religion (Klein Appendix). To permit women to read books of a serious nature, other than religious ones, was considered dangerous, for they provided them with ideas which challenged their world of absolute seclusion. This is the idea of Victorian society that led to Carpenter's comment that it was indeed a "cruel

barring of women from every natural and useful expression of their lives...an extremity of folly difficult for us to now realise" (321-2).

Throughout the Victorian period the ideal of the perfect lady as a model of femininity was tenacious and all-pervasive, despite its inappropriateness for the objective situation of countless women. In the early part of the century many books and articles defining a woman's social position, regulating her conduct, and dictating her morals were published. Among them were the works of Mrs. Sarah Stickney Ellis, which first appeared in the eighteen-forties and which went through many editions. She identified the 'Women of England' as being selfless and devoted to others and their 'disinterested kindness,' she said, could be used for the moral guidance of men. The education of women should be of a kind to instill in them 'moral greatness' for she stressed that the women who produce the happiest effects on their fellow creatures (an aim towards which all women should strive) are morally rather than intellectually great. "The great business of a woman's life is to make herself agreeable" (Ellis 32). To this end she advised the "Women of England" not to affect delicacy and listlessness in an attempt to assume the manners and status of the aristocracy, for 'true refinement' never disqualified a woman from her 'proper duties' and the 'refreshment and invigoration' which come from their performance (Ellis Ch 3). She lectured on

the proper domestic habits to be cultivated by such women, impressing that all should be imbued with a charm stemming from disinterested kindness. In running the home, managing servants, in her treatment of others, she should set an example of respect and good manners which should prevail in company and at home. She noted in the female character a natural tendency to caprice, a weak and rash desire to be important, which she advised must be countered; love of approbation, not love of admiration, must be encouraged. She particularly demanded repression of the self in a wife's relations to her husband. For example, women should not hold forth on their own pet subject or intrude their preference and opinions into the conversation:

> Women should be able to converse on subjects adapted to the tastes and habits of their husband, in order to maintain an intellectual hold on his heart (Ch v).

Mrs. Ellis published a further manual specifically dealing with the conduct of married women: Wives of England: Their relative duties, domestic influence and social obligations. There were chapters on thoughts before marriage, the first year of married life, the characteristics of men, behaviour towards husbands, confidence and truth, the love of married life, the trials of married life, position in society, domestic management, treatment of servants, and so on.

Mrs. Ellis' position was quite clear:

> It is only in the married state that the boundless capabilities of a woman's life can be fully appreciated (Wives of England Ch. vi).

And

> The love of a woman appears to have been created solely to minister; that of a man to be ministered unto ... It is unquestionably the unalienable right of all men, whether ill or well, rich or poor, wise or foolish, to be treated with deference, and made much of in their own houses (Wives of England Ch. iii).

And she expected the English wife to

> employ herself through every hour fondly weaving one beloved image into all her thoughts (Ch. vi).

Similar theories of woman's nature continued to be put forward and to command attention in the publications of the day. A glance at the contents of current periodicals - Blackwoods and Cornhill Magazine, for example - reveals the immense interest of the readers and overall conservative opinion of contributors on this subject. When John Stuart Mill published On the Subjection of Women in 1869 it was considered dangerous and revolutionary and was loudly denounced, although it sowed the seeds of later revolt. The stand taken by Ruskin's Of Queen's Gardens or Tennyson's The Princess was more in keeping with the general attitudes towards women's education taken by members of the upper and middle classes: women should be taught separately from men, and trained to their particular station (Millet Ch II).

If the cornerstone of Victorian society was the family and the function of the perfect lady was marriage and

procreation then the sole purpose of education appeared to be to bring out a woman's "natural" submission to authority. As Frances Power Cobbe wrote in her autobiography:

> Nobody dreamt that any of us could, in later life, be more or less than an ornament to society. That a pupil in that school should become an artist or authoress would have been regarded as a deplorable dereliction. Not that which was good and useful to the community, but that which would make us admired in society was the raison d'etre of such requirement. The education of women was probably at its lowest about half a century ago. It was at that period more pretentious than it had ever been before, and infinitely more costly, and it was likewise more shallow and senseless than can easily be believed (as quoted in Klein 37).

This view of a woman's education as "shallow and senseless" was reflected in many of the novels of the period and it was a major factor in promulgating the myth of the genteel, but essentially useless, Perfect Victorian Lady. Chapter Four of this thesis discusses the presentation of female education in Victorian novels in some detail.

However, the effect of the conduct manuals upon the development of this ideal of femininity cannot be underestimated, and it is interesting to note that comment and advice was not limited to the theoretical. In 1845 Miss Eliza Acton published Modern Cookery for Private Families, and in 1861 Mrs Beeton's Book of Household Management was published. Mrs Beeton accepted the laws of etiquette and moral duty laid down by such writers as Mrs Ellis, and set out in great detail a practical guideline for behaviour in all situations that might be encountered in a middle class

woman's life. She covered the whole of domestic science - as well as giving recipes, she gave guidance on the management of servants, on entertaining and visiting, and 'all the other arts of making and keeping a comfortable home.'

> It has often been remarked that nothing is more delightful to the feminine members of a family than the reading aloud of some good standard work or amusing publication. A knowledge of polite literature may thus be obtained by the whole family, especially if the reader is able and willing to explain the more difficult passages of the book, and expatiate on the wisdom and beauties it may contain (Book of Household Management xlviii).

Ideally, this is how the middle class woman of 1860 spent her days. Although the pattern had not been so precisely formulated a decade earlier, undoubtedly very similar expectations were held by society at that time.

Florence Nightingale's diary reflects the frustration that is created by such a restrictive regime and her writing provides a voice for the many women of whom it was expected that "nothing is more delightful ...than the reading aloud of some good standard work or amusing publication":

> What have I done this past fortnight? I have read The Daughter at Home to father, and two chapters of Mackintosh; a volume of Sybil to Mama. Learnt seven tunes by heart, written various letters. Ridden with Papa. Paid eight visits. Done company. And that is all ... O weary days - oh evenings that never seem to end - for how many years have I watched the drawing-room clock and thought that it would never reach ten! and for twenty, thirty years more to do this! (as quoted in Woodham Smith 12)

Her words capture the stultifying monotony of such limited expectations; the "cruel barring of women from every natural and useful expression of their lives" (Carpenter 321-2).

An essential aspect of a woman's character, neglected by those who extolled her spiritual qualities and concerned themselves with her destiny, was her physical nature: her sexuality. But, impressed with evidence of immorality on a wide scale, it could not be totally ignored by society. An article in the Westminster Review in 1850 stated that

> Women's desires scarcely ever lead to their fall for the desire scarcely exists in a definite or conscious form, till they have fallen. In this point there is a radical and essential difference between the sexes: the arrangements of nature and customs of society would be more unequal than they are were it not so. In men in general the sexual desire is inherent and spontaneous and belongs to the condition of puberty. In the other sex, the desire is dormant, if not non-existent, till excited by actual intercourse (as quoted in Vicinus 83).

Women were praised for their moderating influence over men's uncontrollable nature; this was the basis of the 'double standard.' William Acton, an eminent Victorian doctor, echoed the opinion of the Westminster Review, writing:

> I should say that the majority of women (happily for them) are not very much troubled with sexual feeling of any kind ... sexual feeling in the female is in the majority of cases in abeyance .. and even if roused (which in many instances it can never be) is very moderate compared with that of the male (as quoted in Vicinus 83).

Acton was of the belief that generally the only passions felt by women were love of home, children and domestic duties and, if it were not for the desire for

maternity, they would rather be relieved of their husband's attentions. Mrs. Ellis was of the same conviction, and she counselled the "Women of England" to "suffer and be still".

C.W. Cunnington considered that during the first half of the century the position of women underwent a profound development: at the turn of the century she had been considered a servant; by the 1820's she was granted her favours; by 1850 she was beginning to exchange favours for privileges, but rights were still further off. According to Cunnington, these privileges she had acquired seemed more valuable than rights and she had become a Perfect Lady (Cunnington Ch IV).

Since the end of the First World War this is the image that has been emphasised and reinforced by successive writers on the Victorian era - to the point where the word 'Victorian' has become so absorbed into everyday vocabulary as to be thought of as synonymous with prudery, hypocrisy and sexual repression. This popular interpretation of the word has persisted despite the attempts over the last two decades to prove that a monolithic Victorian society simply did not exist and that it is not possible to make sweeping generalisations about a society that spans sixty turbulent years. Michael Mason in his recently published <u>The Making of Victorian Sexuality</u>, 1994, consigns most of the stereotype - the belief that the Victorians were guilt ridden, inhibited, hypocritical prudes - to the dustbin. He

demonstrates that historical evidence will not support the myth of widespread sexual repression and he quotes recent demographic research to indicate that between a third and half of all Victorian brides went to the altar pregnant (45). Although these figures refer more to working-class rather than middle-class women, the demarcation lines between the classes were far more blurred than we now assume. For example, Mrs Carson in North and South is married to a wealthy manufacturer and yet was a former factory girl; does that make her a middle-class wife but a working-class bride? Mason also points out that physical intimacy was an accepted part of courtship at all social levels. As I have mentioned before, the idea that a wife's relationship to her husband was one of duty rather than familiarity does not bear widespread analysis; middle-class couples kissed and cuddled publicly, and "unbridled sexual intercourse" was observable among the young in working-class dancehalls. Mason goes on to produce abundant testimony to establish that the Victorians fully recognised and approved of the sexual responsiveness of women, regardless of their social status. He takes issue with the remark quoted earlier by William Acton, "that most women are not much troubled by sexual feelings of any kind". He points out that this oft-quoted remark is without parallel in the medical literature of the period. Victorian doctors were, on the contrary, unanimous in acknowledging that a wife's

full sexual satisfaction mattered greatly to her husband and that many couples still clung to the belief that a woman could conceive only if she achieved sexual climax (176). Such ideas are a long way from the idea of Victorian husbands flocking to prostitutes for those sexual pleasures denied to them in cold marriage beds, where dutiful, but frigid, wives were obeying the edict to "Lie Back and Think of England!".

As this thesis is concerned with Mrs Gaskell's presentation of women in her novels, her unconventional treatment of the romance plot and her documentation of the day-to-day lives of married women perhaps we need to delve a little more into what Victorians would and would not accept in their marriages before we can comment on the originality of the presentation of her female characters.

Her own marriage and life are good starting points in terms of challenging the conventional representation of the Victorian wife. The daughter of a Unitarian, she was brought up after her mother's death by her aunt in Knutsford, Cheshire. Raised in a loving Unitarian family, she escaped many of the oppressions that beset other women in the nineteenth century. She was encouraged, as were all Untitarians , to think independently and to believe in the power of the individual to improve the condition of society. "Elizabeth Gaskell never doubted that she was born with the right and ability to change society. Her novels and her

life as a woman and social reformer were expressions of this theology of optimism" (Lansbury 15). As can be seen Mrs Gaskell was not subject to many of the constraints put upon Victorian ladies in general. The wife of an active Unitarian minister living in Manchester, she frequently visited the slums which housed all kinds of degradation. Yet her husband's prominence in his community and the fact that, after the publication of Mary Barton, she became a celebrity in her own right, meant that she also mingled with prosperous manufacturers, artists and writers. For Manchester was the cultural centre of the liberal middle class as well as the crucible of working class industrial life. It was Manchester which produced many of the social pioneers and legislators of the age, and Mrs Gaskell numbered amongst her close friends Sir James and Lady Kay Shuttleworth, both social reformers, Harriet Martineau, writer on political economy and human rights activist, and Susanna Winkworth, a prominent German scholar. She was second cousin to Darwin and Barbara Bodichon, nee Leigh-Smith. Mrs Bodichon was a leader in the campaign for married women's property rights and her pamphlet A Brief Summary in Plain Language of the Most Important Laws Concerning Women was one of the starting points for the reform of the laws concerning marriage. Fond of writing letters, Mrs Gaskell corresponded with Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Parthenope Nightingale - Florence

Nightingale's sister, Barbara Bodichon and, of course Charlotte Bronte. Clearly, Mrs Gaskell's literary, social and intellectual range does not reflect the stereotype of the Victorian lady - poorly educated, socially repressed and restricted, financially dependent and emotionally oppressed. In 1854 Mrs Gaskell signed the Married Women's Property Bill (GL 379), and during her married life she managed her own finances, travelled independently of her husband, and bought property in her own name. Still, critics have not been consistent in their appraisal of Mrs Gaskell either as social reformer, an independent woman or as wife. To my mind, it is obvious that Mrs Gaskell refutes the idea of the passive wife, and her marriage of 24 years standing appears to have been one of mutual respect and support. Some critics, however have cited the following extract as an example of her belief that women should not be independent of men, "I long for the old times where right and wrong did not seem such complicated matters; and I am sometimes coward enough to wish that we were back in darkness when obedience was the only seen duty of women" (GL 69). Yet, surely those words could be said today by any woman faced with juggling a family, a career, a divorce and by both men and women who are trying to understand the demands of relationships in a world where all the guidelines have disappeared. Nobody really wants to return to 'darkness' but life did seem much simpler then. Aina Rubenius in The Woman Question in Mrs

Gaskell's Life and Works suggests that the marriage between Elizabeth and William Gaskell was not a happy one and that this discontent influenced her treatment of wives in her novels. However, she appears to base this belief upon a rather mild, complaining tone that pervades many of Mrs Gaskell's letters, "[T]hen there's the plaguing Unitarian Herald; which takes up six or seven hours a week...and when he is at home, we only see him at mealtimes..."(as quoted in Rubenius 23). This seems a rather tenuous basis for implying that their marriage was not a fulfilling one - there are few married couples who do not indulge in complaining about their partner's more irritating traits from time to time, or of having insufficient time for family intimacy; the overall tenor of Mrs Gaskell's letters shows affectionate concern for her husband. Perhaps the most important point to be drawn from this is an awareness of how a critic or biographer can sometimes develop biases and slants from very sketchy evidence. In such a way many of the myths surrounding the Victorian period appeared to have emerged - it is revealing that Hallam Tennyson, commissioned to write his father's biography, destroyed the letters and documents he thought unfit for subsequent generations. Quite possibly, the Victorians themselves were not concerned about what subsequent generations thought about them, and were perfectly willing to tolerate a good deal of variation from the standards of conventional behaviour. Certainly,

according to the stereotype, Mrs Gaskell's marriage - her position as an independent, successful writer combined with her role of supportive wife and caring mother - was not the typical bourgeois marriage, yet it was accepted without comment in the social circles in which they mixed. The point being is that if Mrs Gaskell's marriage to a Unitarian clergyman, whose position demanded a certain degree of 'respectability' among his parishioners and the community at large, is not deemed shocking or unusual then perhaps we must assume that the Victorians were more tolerant in their interpretation of the 'ideal' marriage than the stereotype would have us believe. Phyllis Rose's book Parallel Lives, gives us an intriguing insight into the lives of some of Mrs Gaskell's contemporary writers and, as she admits, what they considered to be married and family life is bizarre even by today's standards. Of the five marriages that she discusses at least two of them were sexless, one was not a 'legal marriage', one was virtually a *menage à trois* for twenty years and one was not even consummated and ended in divorce. Admittedly, in choosing her couples, Phyllis Rose, selected only eminent writers of the time, not because she felt that they were representative but because they tend to have well documented lives and, I would suspect, because we all enjoy reading 'gossip' about celebrities. Whatever the reason, her book certainly supports the theory that the Victorians were more tolerant of deviations from the 'ideal' marriage

and the varied role of women within these marriages belies early stereotypes. The thrust of this thesis so far has been to establish the origins of the construct of the Perfect Wife and to question the extent to which the Victorians themselves conformed to this stereotype; however, our particular concern is to assess what the wives in Mrs Gaskell's novels contribute towards our understanding of the presentation of the heroine in the Victorian novel, and for this we must now look briefly at the depiction of marriage and love in the writings of the period.

The years following Victoria's accession to the throne saw major political and social changes and it was inevitable that these changes were reflected in novels whose authors "came into a world which was still palpitating with the excitement of the greatest social earthquake which humanity has ever undergone" (Greg 116). Electoral reform came with the Bill of 1832, and in 1839 the Chartists, workers including working women, demanded <u>their</u> right to vote and presented a mass petition to Parliament. The People's Charter was the first organised demand for the vote, and it included provision for women's rights, although the relevant clauses were later extracted as too radical, and even likely to endanger the cause. The Charter was once again presented and rejected in 1842. The "hungry forties" culminated in the great Chartist rally in 1848 which, significantly, coincided with revolution in France, Germany and the

Austrian Empire.

For a good part of the century the image of France to the English represented moral laxity. English insularity and narrowness affects many, though by no means all Victorian writers. The explanation of this view is in itself a broad topic and includes the suspicion of a Catholic nation by a Protestant one, the existence of the Napoleonic code in France, the excesses of the French revolution and many other matters. Certainly, in its treatment of sexuality and sexual deviance in particular France was the more liberal nation and England seemed to exercise severity in these matters as an art of national self-definition. French novels were thought to pave the way to "profligate morals, religious scepticism, and political tyranny" (Stephen 152). They displayed "the abandonment of all self-control or self-respect, the surrender of all manliness, dignity, or reticence, the hunger after the most diseased, unholy and extravagant excitement" (Greg 400). Many of these hysterical outpourings were specifically directed against the subjects of love and marriage:

> [T]he whole tone and temper of French fiction at present is corrupt and degrading. There is an absence of earnestness and of heart about it which in itself is an evil. Vice is either painted in alluring, fascinating, and sensuous colours, or it is touched off with a dash of gay and pleasant cynicism as something which sensible men and women do not think it worth their while to avoid, or to lament, or to condemn (McCarthy 47).

For, due to the rise of the circulating library, novelists

were replacing poets as "the unacknowledged legislators of the world"(P.B. Shellley, Defence of Poetry 159). The rise of the novel and its ascendency over poetry means among other things that novels became unofficial guides to the middle class or would-be middle class. The price of an audience included the author's duty to be mainly uplifting; their productions were "the favourite reading of the young... all secluded and most suffering people... women and unoccupied persons" (Oliphant 257). The novelist's role was clear:

> [He] is now completely Lord of the domain of Fiction. Whatever good or evil is to be done in the present day through that medium, must be done by him. He is the only dramatist whose plays can now command an audience... He is called upon to ... hold up a clear and faithful mirror to human nature.... His pages must give back the true reflection of a world of which morality is the law, and into which Christianity has entered (Christian Remembrancer 407).

A resurgence of interest in Mary Wollstonecraft's Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792) preceded the appearance of a new edition in 1844. Elizabeth Barrett Browning "read Mary Wollstonecraft when I was thirteen - no, twelve", and thus developed a "steady indignation against Nature who made me a woman" (Miller 125-26). There was growing dissatisfaction with traditional sexual roles and attitudes:

> The greatest social difficulty in the England of today is...the relations between man and woman.... The principal differences between ourselves and our ancestors is, that they took society as they

> found it, and never troubled themselves on the subject; while we are self-conscious and perplexed (McCarthy 40).

Significantly, it was 1848, the year of revolution in Europe, and of the great Chartist rally at home, that saw the publication of Vanity Fair, Jane Eyre, Dombey and Son and Mary Barton. All four novels challenged society's assumptions about sexual roles, marriage and family relationships, to the point that reviewers detected some alarmingly revolutionary tendencies in them:

> [T]he tone of mind and thought which has overthrown authority and violated every code human and divine abroad, and fostered Chartism and rebellion at home, is the same which has also written Jane Eyre (Rev. of Vanity Fair and Jane Eyre, Quaterly Review, 84).

The Quarterly, self-confessed defender of the public's morals, was echoed by several publications. For Blackwoods it constituted the most alarming revolution of modern times:

> [I]t was the new generation nailing its colours to its mast. No one would understand that this furious love-making was but a wild declaration of the "Rights of Woman" in a new aspect... it is but a mere vulgar boiling over of the political cauldron... Here is your true revolution. France is but one of the Western Powers; woman is the half of the world "(Oliphant 557-58).

In Dombey and Son, Dickens had written a near perfect indictment of the systems of patriarchy and capitalism. His portrait of Florence Dombey superbly illustrates the cruelty of the subordination of women within the property laws. Yet it was Jane Eyre that met with more disapproval than any of its contemporaries. Speculation as to the sex

of the author was rife and Charlotte Brontë's depiction of the life of the romantic but dissolute Rochester and the love and passion he inspired in Jane Eyre, effectively ended the myth of female innocence and passivity. Brontë's knowledge could only be explained by assuming she had "for some sufficient reason, long forfeited the society of her own sex": "good" women closed ranks against kept women such as was assumed of the author of Jane Eyre (Eastlake 176).

The period of Mrs Gaskell's authorship can thus be regarded as one of ideological action and reaction. The literature of the time bears unmistakeable traces of a crumbling away of definite traditional belief, and this levelling process was going on in the opinions of all the most active and cultivated minds.

In France Mrs Gaskell was credited with posing hitherto unanswered questions in the novel. The Edinburgh Review thought that she was in "a class of writers who show strong sympathies for all that is most opposite to the very foundations of English life" (Stephen 152). While she would never have subscribed to such a view of herself, she was profoundly aware of her conflicting selves, the "great number" of "Mes", as she expressed it in a letter to Eliza Fox (GL,69, p.108).

Mrs Gaskell died in 1865, the year that John Stuart Mill was elected to Parliament. In 1866 he presented an unsuccessful petition for women's suffrage in the Commons.

In 1867 the Woman's National Suffrage Society was formed in Manchester. Although Mrs Gaskell did not live to see any of these events, or the publication of Mill's important document, The Subjection of Women, in 1869, the work was the common property of Mill's disciples, who included, as we have seen, persons of Mrs Gaskell's own faith.

The aim of this chapter has been to attempt to evaluate the Victorian attitude towards women, both from the point of view of stereotype and historical reality, in order to provide a framework through which to re-evaluate Mrs Gaskell's contribution to the literature of love, marital relationships and the role of women. It is clear that she was an author equal to the task of chronicling the re-evaluation of sexual roles and attitudes, a process which was part and parcel of the changing society in which she lived. Her achievement has been greatly eclipsed by her more "exciting" contemporaries, Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot. Her life was not controversial, like George Eliot's, and she was, unlike Charlotte Brontë, "an authoress, the passion time of whose life has gone by" when she started to write (Masson 154). Yet, paradoxically, it is just this which is her great strength. In a letter of 25 September [?1862], she gave the following advice to an aspiring author:

> [A] good writer of fiction must have lived an active & sympathetic life if she wishes her books to have strength & vitality in them. When you are forty, and if you have the gift for being an

> authoress you will write ten times as good a novel as you could do now, just because you will have gone through so much more of the interests of a wife and a mother (GL, 515, p.695).

It is by this questioning of the Victorians' concept of marriage and the role of women in society, and by assessing the discrepancy between literary views of married and single women and historical reality that we hope to evaluate Mrs Gaskell's attempts to push the margins of our understanding beyond the traditional role of the heroine in Victorian novels.

Chapter Two

Marriage

The years 1840 to 1860 saw the emergence of formidable challenges to the institution of marriage and to the position of married women. As I have suggested in Chapter One, the Victorians saw the family and the role of the wife in a particularly complex way. The concept of family was enmeshed in the religious, legal, political, economic, social, philosophical, and perhaps even the scientific institutions and debates of the day. They understood that the family was implicated in all these discussions, but that it was exclusively in the domain of none; that is, the old purely religious view of marriage as sacrament no longer dominated, but retained enough authority that it could not be altogether ignored. Marriage and the family were already in the midst of substantial change, and the Victorians recognised that their views about the institutional family and the role of women had to be reassessed. The special stresses and problems of the Victorian home reflected the broader historical pattern of adapting the values of a deferential, hierarchical, patronage society to the values of an increasingly contractual, individualistic society.

While the Victorian period may have been the first in history to face the issue of patriarchy and the condition of women under its rule, the prevailing image of the Victorian

family remains that of the autocratic dominating male figure, the submissive wife and children who "are seen but not heard".

Kate Millet illustrates the polarity of opinion that existed upon the topic of women and marriage by comparing two of the central documents of sexual politics in the Victorian period - Mill's Subjection of Women and Ruskin's "Of Queen's Gardens". Compressed within these two statements is nearly the whole range and possibility of Victorian thought on the subject ("The Debate over Women: Ruskin vs Mill"). The exploration of the range of Victorian opinion on both the family and the position of women in society is in itself a broad topic and has been touched upon in Chapter One. However, a comparison of Ruskin's and Mill's view of the family provides a useful basis from which to assess Mrs Gaskell's presentation of married women and family life.

In "Of Queen's Gardens" Ruskin neatly outlines the differences between the sexes and creates two separate and distinct spheres of endeavour. His words reinforce the stereotype of feminine passivity and basically reassure women that if they stay at home and accept their subservient role the they will be loved, honoured and protected:

> The man's power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender...the woman's power is for...sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision...Her great function is praise...[and] by her office and place, she is protected from all

danger and temptation (84).

Such words deliberately avoid facing the issues of domestic violence, powerlessness, outrageous legal restrictions, stifling subservience and "the cruel barring of women from every natural and useful expression of their lives" (Carpenter 321-2). In complete contrast to the loving rule and loving submission that Ruskin dwells upon, Mill argues that a woman's position in Victorian society is little more than that of domestic slavery. She has even fewer legal rights than most slaves; she has no control over her own money, no protection from unwanted sexual intimacy, no right to the custody of her own children and little or no recourse in the case of brutality and violence. While Mill acknowledges that he has "described the wife's legal position, not her actual treatment," it still remains true that a wife in this period was legally the property of her husband. The conditions of any institution are liable to abuse, and one is dealing here with absolute power. The growing agitation for reform reinforced the awareness that these issues impinged acutely on Victorian sensibilities.

Leadership for reform of the legislation concerning women's rights was substantially female. In 1839 Caroline Norton, an eminent writer of children's books and social works, was involved in a public dispute with her husband over custody of their children. After suing for divorce on the grounds of adultery, George Norton claimed the right to

sole custody of their children as well as to any royalties that she might earn from her future writing. To draw public attention to laws that allowed such a flagrant miscarriage of justice, Caroline Norton wrote A Plain Letter to the Lord Chancellor on the Infant Custody Bill. In 1854 this was followed by Barbara Bodichon's A Brief Summary in Plain Language of the Most Important Laws Concerning Women which clearly outlined Mill's claim that a woman was little more than a domestic slave and that upon marriage she forfeited all rights to her own property. In 1857 Queen Victoria gave her royal assent to the Act for Divorce and Matrimonial Causes. The Englishwoman's Journal was founded in 1858 by a body of women, including Barbara Bodichon and Angela Burdett-Coutts, to highlight, among other inequalities, the high incidence of physical and mental abuse in marriage.

Political dissatisfaction was reflected in the popular literature of the period. By the 1860's a flood of "sensation novels", in which women murdered their husbands, or committed adultery or bigamy, reflected the "changed world in which we are now standing" (Oliphant 564). Significantly, most of their authors were women. Winifred Hughes argues that the sensation novel was, for the many women who wrote and read them, a substitute for their everyday lives, a re-enactment of the longed-for escape from marriage, of their suppressed rage and desire (The Maniac in

the Cellar Ch.2). Mill's Subjection of Women, published four years after Mrs. Gaskell's death, dealt the final blow to national complacency about marriage.

Although Mill's work was published after her death, there is little doubt that Mrs. Gaskell was aware of the liberal tendencies of her age, and indeed subscribed to them, to the extent of signing Barbara Bodichon's petition for a married women's property bill.

Inevitably, there was marked artistic dissatisfaction with both the position of women in society and their presentation in literature. George Eliot sardonically described the modern heroine as:

> usually an heiress, probably a peeress in her own right, with perhaps a vicious baronet, an amiable duke, and an irresistible younger son of a marquis as lovers in the foreground, a clergyman and a poet sighing for her in the middle distance, and a crowd of undefined adorers dimly indicated beyond. Her eyes and her wit are both dazzling; her nose and morals are alike free from any tendency to irregularity; she has a superb contralto and a superb intellect; she is perfectly well-dressed and perfectly religious; she dances like a sylph, and reads the Bible in the original tongues (Silly Novels by Lady Novelists 442).

By 1864 she had not changed much:

> It is a great pity that novelists in general delight to make their heroines such hopeless idiots....The heroine of the modern novel seems always as if she still ought to wear short-clothes and trousers with frills around them....Women have especial need, as the world goes, to be shrewd, self-reliant, and strong, and we do all we can in our literature to render them helpless, imbecile, and idiotic (McCarthy 47-48).

This growing dissatisfaction with the presentation of

women in fiction as "free from any tendency to irregularity" in nose and morals alike was beginning to find an expression amongst the more serious novelists of the period.

As far as the majority of novelists of this period were concerned, a woman's life appeared to be complete and her story ended when she reached the church door. There are few detailed portraits of married women, and the vignettes that we are given - Rosamond in Middlemarch, Dora in David Copperfield, Mrs Proudie in Barchester Towers - give us little insight into the thoughts, emotions, and difficulties that these women experience in their married state, *from their perspective*. In her presentation of the wives in her novels, Mrs Gaskell is pushing our understanding past the traditional view of the romance plot and her documentation of the day-to-day lives of these women is written from their perspective as central rather then secondary characters within the novel. It is clear that the position of women in Victorian society is inextricably entwined with the development of the family - both legally and socially - and this chapter will concentrate upon the presentation of the family, and the position of women within the family, in Mrs Gaskell's works.

In the seven major works that she wrote, along with numerous short stories and five "nouvelles", Mrs Gaskell presents a broad, and often unflattering portrait of the

Victorian family. Despite the fact that she has been complimented upon "the enjoyment she shows throughout in all the pleasures of home and family" (Masson 154), the typical Gaskellian family is fragmented and discordant. Indeed, her work presents an enormous range of family groupings and it is in those families where the father is not a strong oppressive force that the qualities of love, peace and support are most often found.

Marriage was virtually the only option available for a Victorian woman, but few English Victorian writers explore the possibility that this could mean a loveless life filled with regret and tragedy. Rather than presenting Ruskin's domestic idyll, Mrs Gaskell's presentation of married life for her female characters focuses upon the repressive and destructive nature of patriarchal domination, the reality of domestic violence and the squalor and despair to be found in those homes where abject poverty drives out "honour", "respect", and "chivalry".

It is obviously not possible to review the complete spectrum of family groupings offered in the entire Gaskell canon, so this chapter has selected certain works to illustrate three major areas of concern: Ruth explores the inevitable tragedy that must follow the tyranny of a patriarchal husband and father, Mary Barton deals with the disintegration of family life among the poverty-stricken, industrial working-classes and *The Grey Woman* demonstrates

the use of gothic fiction in order to imperfectly mask the theme of brutal marital violence seen in Mrs Gaskell's works on contemporary life. In Wives and Daughters , Mrs Gaskell's last, and considered by many critics her finest work, she has completed her move away from social concern to a feminization of concerns. As the title would suggest, this novel is rich in marriages, single girls and relationships, but a thorough exploration of its place in how Mrs Gaskell critiques the myth and stereotype of family and women would be a thesis in itself. However, not to mention it at all would be to ignore a rich and complex study of female characters and relationships. The final section of this chapter will look briefly at how the women in Wives and Daughters move in a web of promises, evasions, gossip, and secrets (primarily sexual secrets).

The family is the pivotal point for this evaluation; and in the middle of the nineteenth century the family represented for the middle-classes, stability, the transmission of moral principles and the inculcation of high standards of conduct. These were the values that Queen Victoria came ironically to represent for her country. On the face of it there could hardly have been a greater distance between individuals than existed between Victoria and her middle-class subjects, especially the women among them. As Queen she held the highest position in the land and was the only woman not subject to the laws governing a

woman's name and property, and in her own person she was far removed from the stereotypical Victorian woman - well-mannered, self-effacing, demure, submissive and devoid of passion. Queen Victoria was so far removed from the stereotype as to be almost its opposite - passionate, strong-willed, rather dumpy with manners that left much to be desired: "she laughs in real earnest, opening her mouth as wide as it can go, showing not very pretty gums...she eats quite as heartily as she laughs, I think I may say she gobbles" (Creevey 208). Nevertheless an atmosphere of middle-class family virtue surrounded the throne, to such an extent indeed that it has sometimes obscured the reality of royal life and experience. For all the superficial strictness of sexual morals which the age professed, there was still a great deal of irregular behaviour of all kinds , and most notable amongst this was Victoria's relationship with her Scottish servant, John Brown. Whether the relationship was a sexual one or not, the evidence is overwhelming that it was a relationship much closer and more intimate than that usual between employer and servant. The existence of such a liaison again illustrates the extent to which rather irregular relationships existed, and were tolerated , if not publicly flaunted, amongst the Victorians. To the vast majority of the middle-classes, however, the importance of the family, tradition and patriarchal domination was never more honoured than in this

era. The presentation of the family and the effect of family life on women in Mrs Gaskell's stories challenges the Victorian perception of family life from the perspective of the narrow stereotype as well from the more tolerant family groupings accepted by certain sectors of society. In fact many of her conclusions would be considered bizarre even by today's standards.

Lawrence Stone has suggested that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries England moved from a climate of thinking about marriages largely dominated by "interest" - typically meaning financial - to one based on the mutual affection of husband and wife - the companionate marriage (The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800 Ch. 8). In North and South Mrs Gaskell parodies this concept of a marriage of "interest" versus a "companionate" marriage; there is no sense of a younger generation learning by the last one's mistakes. History repeats itself in the person of Fanny Thornton, who is about to make a *mariage de convenance*, and Edith, who makes a successful marriage reminiscent of her mother's own:

> Mrs. Shaw said that her only child should marry for love - and sighed emphatically, as if love had not been her motive for marrying the General... Edith was very thoroughly and properly in love; still, she would certainly have preferred a good house in Belgravia, to all the picturesqueness of the life which Captain Lennox described at Corfu....Yet had anyone come with a fine house, and a fine estate, and a fine title to boot, Edith would still have clung to Captain Lennox while the temptation lasted; when it was over, it is possible she might have had little qualms of ill-

> concealed regret that Captain Lennox could not have united in his person everything that was desirable. In this she was but her mother's child; who, after deliberately marrying General Shaw with no warmer feeling than respect for his character and establishment, was constantly, though quietly, bemoaning her hard lot in being united to one whom she could not love (37).

Mrs Shaw made a deliberate choice to marry for financial security rather love, and now she can afford the luxury of regret. She fantasises about the past, shaping and redirecting it to indulge in nostalgic regrets. Lacking in romance, Mrs Shaw reconstructs her marriage as one of duty, sacrifice and emotional deprivation. Secure in her wealth and comfort, she can indulge in a sense of envy towards the sister who married for love without a regard for money. Irony lies in the fact that Mrs Shaw's daughter is now going to repeat her situation. Love might be what Victorian society liked to believe that all women desire, yet Mrs Gaskell can quite realistically assess that possessions may be chosen over passion.

Set in a northern industrial city and dealing almost exclusively with the lives of the working-class, Mary Barton was a new departure for the English novel. As the wife of a Unitarian minister living in Manchester, Mrs Gaskell had frequently visited the slums of this sprawling, industrial city and her acute observation both of the Mancunian people and of the dire poverty that existed amongst the destitute of the city makes her picture of the Davenports one of the

most effective portrayals of working class poverty in Victorian literature. Within the Victorian novel, the subject of abject poverty is largely ignored, with the notable exceptions of Dickens's portrayal of the battered bricklayer's wife in Bleak House, and the despair of Stephen Blackpool, an honest worker tied to an alcoholic wife, in Hard Times. However, Hard Times, the only novel in which Dickens makes an industrial northern town of central importance, is more the tragedy of Louisa Gadgrind than it is of Stephen Blackpool.

Significantly, most of the arguments for and against marriage reform were concerned with the middle-class public's gains and losses. However, the Englishwoman's Journal and, later, Mill, outlined the implications for indissoluble marriages for the working classes:

> And how many thousands are there among the lowest classes in every country, who...indulge the utmost habitual excesses of bodily violence toward the unhappy wife, who alone, at least of grown persons, can neither repel nor escape from their brutality (29).

The dissolution of conjugal and familial ties by the pressure of poverty reaches a climax in Mary Barton after the fire at Carsons' Mill causes the workers to be laid off. The long rhetorical passage that follows the description of the fire asserts at once the destruction of family life and the utter despair and hopelessness caused by hunger and want:

> There were homes over which Carsons' fire threw a deep, terrible gloom; the homes of those who would fain work, and no man gave unto them-the homes of those to whom leisure was a curse....There were desperate fathers; there were bitter-tongued mothers (oh God! what wonder!); there were reckless children; the very closest bonds of nature were snapt in that time of trial and distress (53).

It is in passages such as this, rather than in the contrived conversion of Mr Carson at John Barton's deathbed, that Mrs Gaskell is able to express her: "deep sympathy with the care-worn men, who looked as if doomed to struggle through their lives in strange alternation between work and want" (Preface to Mary Barton).

The dire sense of hopelessness that is engendered when a family experiences abject poverty reaches a peak in the description of the notorious Manchester cellars:

> You went down one step even from the foul area into the cellar in which a family of human beings lived....The window panes were many of them broken and stuffed with rags...the smell was so foetid as almost knocked the two men down...and to see three or four little children rolling on the damp, nay wet, brick floor, through which the stagnant, filthy moisture of the street oozed up; the fireplace was empty and black; the wife sat on her husband's chair, and cried in the dank loneliness...(98, my emphasis).

Here we have a description of real deprivation and poverty: there is nothing "homely" about this room. By appealing to the senses of sight, smell and touch, Mrs Gaskell has recreated for her readers the squalid conditions of the Mancunian cellars. The lack of light and warmth, the filthy wet condition and the foetid stench of the place "where a

family of human beings lived" is the background for the wife's desolation. The black, empty fire-place suggests the wife's mental and emotional condition, and the fact that she sits "on her husband's chair" as she cries "in the dank loneliness" perfectly reflects the desolation and disorder of her household. By an ironic juxtaposition, the description of Davenport's cellar follows hard upon the Barton's jovial tea-party. Such a portrait offends all the Victorian sensibilities, and the equation of godliness with cleanliness, the symbolism of the burning hearth, are exposed as empty clichés. Such a picture of abject misery presents a graphic indictment of Ruskin's vision of the home:

> ...it is a sacred place, a vestal temple, a temple of the hearth watched over by household gods...and the roof and the fire are types only of a nobler shade and light, shade as of the rock in a weary land, and the light as of Pharos in the stormy sea - so far it vindicates the name and fulfills the praise of home ("Of Queen's Gardens" 85).

The dissolution of family life through the pressures of poverty is also reflected in John Barton's own home, and it is within his household more than any other that we clearly see the the tragic effects of that "strange alternation between work and want". The novel opens with a minute description of the Barton's home: a warm, hospitable room, crammed with furniture,"(sure sign of good times among the mills)"(13); lit by a glowing fire, and with the blue and white curtains drawn to "shut in the friends met to enjoy

themselves" (12). The effect of poverty upon this house, is to strip it of all warmth and comfort. The earlier picture of a hospitable household, where pride in material possessions reigns, is replaced by a picture of stark deprivation:

> [B]y degrees the house was stripped of its little ornaments....The smart tea-tray, and the tea-caddy, long and carefully kept, went for bread... Then the blankets went...(107).

John Barton's frustration at his inability to get work turns into anger and bitterness and his moral deterioration is marked by an increasing violence towards his female dependants. No longer is he the fond and gentle father, and Mary bitterly exclaims:

> He seldom spoke, less than ever; and often when he did speak they were sharp angry words, such as he had never given her formerly....[A]nd once in his passion he had even beaten her (109).

As Mill points out:

> [I]n the most naturally brutal and morally uneducated part of the lower classes, the legal slavery of the woman, and something in the merely physical subjection to their will as an instrument, causes men to feel a disrespect and contempt towards their own wife which they do not feel towards any other woman, or any other human being...(29).

John Barton's wife is dead, but the fusion of sex and cruelty is dramatically confronted when he violently repulses his wife's sister, Esther:

> He gripped her arm--the arm he had just before shaken off, and dragged her, faintly resisting, to the nearest lamp-post. He pushed her bonnet back, and roughly held the face she would fain have averted, to the light, and in her large,

> unnaturally bright grey eyes, her lovely mouth, half open, as if imploring the forebearance she could not ask for in words, he saw at once the long-lost Esther; she who had caused his wife's death (116).

The language of this scene, with its troubling undertone of sexual abuse, contrasts the woman's frailty and passivity with the man's strength: "He flung her, trembling, sinking, fainting, from him, and strode away"(117).

In this context, it is significant to note Mrs. Gaskell's interest in "Janet's Repentance", one of George Eliot's Scenes of Clerical Life (1858), which features an alcoholic, battered wife. She wrote to Charles Eliot Norton:

> I think I have a feeling that it is not worthwhile trying to write, while there are such books as Adam Bede and Scenes from Clerical Life - I set "Janet's Repentance" above all, still (GL 581)

The story of Janet Dempster's degradation is a powerful indictment of society's attitude towards domestic violence and Janet's mother-in-law embodies the indifference the world shows towards the battered wife. In her ready desire to make Janet responsible for her causing her son's brutality, Mrs Dempster shifts the blame for his violence onto the innocent victim:

> "Janet," she said to herself, "was always running about doing things for other people, and neglecting her own house. That provokes a man..."(Scenes of Clerical Life 239).

Such a view endorses the opinion that it is the battered wife's responsibility if she is beaten but the author

intervenes with another perspective:

> Cruelty, like every other vice, requires no motive outside itself - it only requires opportunity.... And an unloving, tyrannous, brutal man needs no motive to prompt his cruelty. He needs only the perpetual presence of a woman he can call his own (239).

As I have mentioned earlier, Mrs Gaskell's awareness of the implications of domestic physical and mental violence is most graphically explored in her short stories, most of them tales of horror and imagination. In "Morton Hall", a story far enough removed in time to prevent readers' identification with its events and preoccupations, the clash of "fierce, strong wills" within a marriage results in unmitigated violence:

> He went to her, and in his rage he struck her... He unloosed his sash, and bound her arms tight...pushing her so that she was obliged to sit down on the bed side...(456).

In *The Grey Woman* (1861), Mrs Gaskell uses the extravagances of Gothic fiction to imperfectly mask the theme of brutal marital violence. Elements which would appear to divest the story of realism in fact dramatically highlight a familiar parable of domestic tyranny.

On first meeting Monsieur de le Tourelle, the young heroine of *The Grey Woman*, Anna Scherer, is neither attracted nor particularly respectful towards her prospective lover: "before the end of the evening I became a little tired of the affected softness and effeminacy of his manners."(257) Yet despite her reservations and downright

reluctance to marry this handsome stranger, Anna finds herself pressured into making this marriage simply because it is such an advantageous match. From following Madame Rupprecht's insistence that she receive M. de la Tourelle civilly and by accepting presents that she would have preferred to have refused, Anna is faced with the choice of either accepting the marriage or being esteemed "a heartless coquette all the rest of my days" (259).

Anna's helplessness is emphasised by the fact that she has no strong family support herself: her mother is dead and her father and brother live far away. This vulnerability of a young woman without a mother, and with no loving guardian, is a recurrent theme in many of Mrs Gaskell's novels and has been a convention of fiction since Defoe and Richardson.[1]

The Grey Woman, however, does not end with Anna's marriage: the main part of the story deals with the sinister violence that can develop within a close marital relationship. Anna's helplessness is emphasised over and over again , even before the marriage ceremony, "I had got into a net through my own timidity and weakness, and I did not see how to get out of it" (260). Once in the "net" the true horror of her position is revealed only once she has

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[1] In *Lois the Witch*, a young innocent orphan is condemned to death for witchcraft. The horror at the death of this young girl is intensified by the fact that it is her own aunt and protectress who is her niece's accuser, "Grace lifted up her right hand, and held it upon high, as she doomed Lois to be accursed for ever" (212).

become established in her husband's Gothic chateau in the isolated, desolate Vosges countryside. Here Anne learns to fear and dread her husband and his sudden outbursts of passion. Women to him are merely possessions and in a macabre scene full of violence and murder he boasts to his friends that:

> [I]f I suspected my wife of knowing more than I chose of my affairs, she would not outlive the day. Remember Victorine! Because she merely joked about my affairs in an imprudent manner, and rejected my advice to keep a prudent tongue...she has gone a long journey..." (275).

Surrounded by surly and uncommunicative servants, Anna has only her maid to develop a regard for, and her husband is jealous of even this familiarity.

The relationship that now develops between these three people is one of the most interesting comments upon marriage, family bonds and the potential of female relationships in all of Elizabeth Gaskell's works. Not only does the husband become such a picture of diabolical evil that Anna has to flee his presence, but the maid, Amante, assumes the role of both mother and husband to Anna. Disguised as man and wife, they escape from the clutches of Anna's murderous husband. Amante protects and shelters the pregnant Anna and the two form a bond of love and dependency, " I cannot tell you how much in these doubtings and wanderings I became attached to Amante" (287). At the end of their travels Amante and Anna maintain their respective roles and live together in Frankfurt, "We will

still be husband and wife; we will take a small lodging, and you shall housekeep and live in-doors. I, as the rougher and more alert, will continue my father's trade, and seek work of the tailor's shops" (297). Later, the birth of the child increases Anna's dependency upon Amante and the two of them love and cherish the baby girl, " a girl seemed all my own. And yet not all my own, for the faithful Amante's delight and glory in the babe almost exceeded mine" (298). A family group, yet not exactly the conventional, Victorian definition of the word!

Although, *The Grey Woman* is a gothic extravaganza, complete with gloomy castle, murder, blood, desperate and evil bravadoes and helpless female victims, its poignancy lies in Elizabeth Gaskell's ability to describe the emotions and feelings of these two women and the strength of their relationship.

The plight of the innocent, motherless woman and how, isolated and unaided, she is drawn inexorably towards her fate is taken up again in Ruth. The family situation that the women in both these works eventually surround themselves with is unconventional, yet supportive. In both cases the father is an undesirable, if not downright evil, figure. And, what is perhaps more surprising given the legal domination of women in Victorian society and the submissive role of wives, is that both women escape from the control and influence of these men.

In her collection of tales of mystery and horror, as well as in her novels, Mrs Gaskell presents to the Victorian reader a breadth and diversity of family groupings that challenges stereotypes, confounds the accepted bounds and provokes thought on the range of human relationships that can exist for women within society. Beneath the melodrama lies the reality of domestic violence and, in some cases, the threat of death. Deliberately set outside nineteenth-century England, her tales can still provide us with insights into the plight of the wife trapped in a marriage which society does not allow her to leave - whether for legal, social or financial reasons. This focus upon domestic violence and brutality within family life is the most serious challenge to Ruskin's definition of the home:

> it is the place of peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt and division ("Of Queen's Gardens" 85).

There is less material deprivation, and consequently, less physical violence, in Mrs Gaskell's middle-class marriages. The conflicts which emerge in her description of middle-class domestic life are usually emotional and mental, even intellectual. Her portrait of the middle-class wife is more subtle in its depiction of the cruelty which can be masked by respectability. Mrs. Bradshaw, for example, has "a sort of constant terror of displeasing" her husband which links her to Janet Dempster in terms of being a victim, if not in the severity of the abuse (Ruth 231). Her life is a

constant round of deceptions and prevarications designed to keep her husband's wrath at bay. This theme of the submissive wife dominated by the patriarchal husband has become something of a Victorian cliché. Firmly entrenched in the old, purely religious view of marriage, it focuses upon a strict interpretation of the supposedly Christian (Pauline) ideal:

> Wives, submit yourselves unto your husbands, as unto the Lord
> For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church and he is the saviour of the body. (Ephesians V 22-23)

The model family, according to St Paul, is particularly fierce in its prescription for the role of the wife - submission to the will of the husband, as to God. Whilst this doctrine was no longer unquestionably accepted, even amongst members of the Church, St Paul's views can serve as a basis for studying the attitude towards the patriarchal father and the dutiful wife developed in Victorian literature. For example, the presentation of a weak mother who subjects her will to that of the father is particularly strong in Hard Times. Mr Gadgrind is strict and domineering, and his wife is but a timid enforcer of her husband's wishes:

> "I have such unmanageable thoughts," returned his sister, "that they will wonder.'
> "Then I beg of you, Louisa," said Mrs Gadgrind, who had opened the door without being heard, to do nothing of that description, for goodness' sake, you inconsiderate girl, or I shall never hear the last of it from your father. And, Thomas, it is really shameful, with my poor head continually

> wearing me out, that a boy brought up as you have been, and whose education has cost what your's has should be found encouraging his sister to wonder, when he knows that his father has expressly said that she is not to do it" (47).

Although a patriarchal figure, Mr Gadgrind is also an ideologue, which is more than can be said for Mr Bradshaw, whose domineering, blind manner is more reminiscent of the inflexible, self-righteous business-man, Mr Dombey, and whose harsh intolerance inflicts such hardship on his family. Mr Bradshaw's description, and that of his wife, are clear indications of conformity to the Pauline model: "He was a tall, large boned, iron man; stern, powerful, and authoritative in appearance....His wife was sweet and gentle looking, but as if she was thoroughly broken into submission" (153). Mr Bradshaw epitomises the Victorian patriarch; his children are intimidated and his wife "thoroughly broken into submission". His household is run according to rigid absolutism, and even his business partner wonders at "the inflexible integrity - and almost the pomp of principle - evinced by Mr Bradshaw on every occasion" (215). His four children are subjected to the strictest discipline and an unnatural seclusion is enforced, "Mr Bradshaw dreaded all intimacies for his son and wanted him to eschew all society beyond his own family" (418). The inevitable disaster is a tragic comment upon the lack of open love and affection exhibited in such a household. Lacking all sympathy and humane morality, Bradshaw believes

that he can live by the enforcement of principles alone. His attack upon Ruth when he discovers that she has had an illegitimate child, is abusive and vitriolic, you: " have come with your sickly, hypocritical face, imposing upon us all..." (337).

Yet it is in Bradshaw's attitude towards Ruth's "bastard son" (337) that Mrs Gaskell is making her strongest comment on the hypocrisy of Victorian society: "Do you suppose that he is ever to rank with other boys , who are not stained or marked with sin from their birth?...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" (340)

This expression of nonconformist morality reflects Bradshaw's harsh application of principles and underscores his lack of tolerance and human sympathy. The suffering of an innocent child in such a way makes Ruth as much a statement for the rights of the illegitimate child as it is a plea for a more sympathetic treatment of the unmarried mother. For Mr Bradshaw, however, warmth of human affection cannot be seen to temper the rigorous application of his principles. The consequence of this tyrannical control is the break-up of his family: a rejected son, an embittered wife and a discontented daughter.

Brought up to understand that external docility to his father's word is the most important of all values, Richard

Bradshaw develops into a weak, dissolute young man. Finally caught embezzling money from his father's firm, he is disowned and turned out of the family home. The bitterness and resentment that has been building up in Mrs Bradshaw explodes into a tirade against the tyranny of her husband:

> Oh! is not he cruel?...I've been a good wife till now....I have done all he bid me , ever since we were married. But now I will speak my mind, and say to everybody how cruel he is-how hard to his own flesh and blood....If I'm to choose between my husband and son, I choose my son..." (407).

This loss of the son through the inflexible attitude of the father parallels the situation of the Rector and his son in Cranford and parodies the situation in North and South where the son is exiled for standing up for values inculcated by his weak father.

Wherever there is an autocratic husband and father in Mrs Gaskell's works then disharmony and tragedy inevitably follow. However, she draws a fine distinction between the patriarchal and the paternalistic figure in her family groupings; the one is an unacceptable despot, the other is a caring, though often muddled figure.

At first, the Hale family life appears to be the exact opposite of the patriarchal, authoritarian Victorian family, where the word of the father is law and it is the duty of the wife to interpret that word and the place of the children to obey it, in fact, Mr Hale illustrates the paternalistic rather than the patriarchal figure. As the family's removal to Milton shows, Mr Hale is quite capable

of exercising totally authoritarian decisions, but his manner of doing so is devoid of the overbearing, fear inspiring attitude normally associated with patriarchal figures. Mr Hale is a weak, vacillating man who embodies all that is considered most feminine. At Oxford his colleagues "took him to their hearts, with something of the protecting kindness which they would have shown to a woman" (338). All his life he has avoided decisive action and rational thought and even his decision to leave the Church is vague and ill-defined. Typically, it is Margaret who has to take over; she is the one to break the news to her mother, provide the comfort and support as well direct and supervise the move. At the moment of the great crisis of his life, Mr Hale shows himself incapable of rational thought, emotional strength and just plain common sense. Unable to deal with people or emotions, he simply avoids contact, and lets others deal with any harsh realities that might stem from what could be called an extremely self-indulgent decision. To leave the Church because of his doubts and insecurities is one thing, to uproot his family without any thought for their well-being is another. Such an action is reminiscent of the unilateral action typical of the patriarch, although his manner of discussing it with Margaret is mild and appealing:

> "[w]e must go to Milton. That is settled. I can always decide better by myself, and not influenced by those whom I love," said he, as a half apology for having arranged so much before he had told any

> one of his family of his intentions. "I cannot stand objections. They make me so undecided." (71).

Despite this high-handed and insensitive action, the portrayal of the Hale home is not entirely a negative one. Concerned with the behaviour of individuals and the way they relate to one another, Mrs Gaskell shows us the range of human frailties and human strengths that can exist within the bond of marriage. Flawed though the relationship between Mr Hale and his wife seems, that these two middle-aged people truly love each other is unquestionable. Mr Hale is undoubtedly frustrating and inconsistent and Mrs Hale is querulous, irritating and entirely self-absorbed, but the love that underlies their relationship gives them comfort and strength in the face of death:

> "But he sat by the bed quite quietly; only, from time to time, he uncovered the face, and stroked it gently, making a kind of soft inarticulate noise, like that of some mother-animal caressing her young" (341).

The attention given to the patriarchal and paternalistic figures in all of Mrs Gaskell's novels is an essential element in the spotlight that she is turning on the problems inherent in the Victorian family ideal. Her male figures almost all fall into one of these two categories, whereas her female characters are far more complex.

Although in her fiction, Mrs Gaskell gives full due to

female rivalry, jealousy, cruelty and pettiness, one of her great subjects is still the closeness of women. The title of Wives and Daughters combines the titles of two manuals of female behaviour: Wives of England and its sequel, Daughters of England. Seen within this context, Mrs Gaskell's novel provides a subtle depiction of the conflicting roles and expectations of wives and daughters. The novel explores how language, or the lack of an effective language, is such a powerful determinant in how women perceive themselves and others. The two young girls in the novel, Molly and Cynthia are enveloped in an atmosphere of secrecy and deceit. In the world of Wives and Daughters, mystery and intrigue spill over from the world of books into real life: "never be the heroine of a mystery that you can avoid"(571), warns Mr Gibson. Gossip and deception are the weapons of the women in the town and both Cynthia and Molly are caught up in a web of secrets and concealment. Cynthia conceals the fact that she is being blackmailed by Mr Preston into keeping a promise to marry him that she made when she was only sixteen years old. Whereas Molly has her own secrets: she hides her love for Roger, she is involved in the intrigue to keep Osborne's marriage a secret, and she is instrumental in prolonging the secrecy of the underhand liaison between Cynthia and Mr Preston. Secrecy creates suffering and both Molly and Cynthia are shown to be hurt by living lives of deception. Cynthia's sad confession to Molly of her former

trust and confidence in Mr Preston, at a time in her life when she was without a protector, advisor, or even friends, results in Molly meeting with Mr Preston to demand a return of those letters: "written when she was almost without friends, to you, whom she looked upon as a friend" (532). The letter are returned and Molly's mission is apparently successful, but the implication of being embroiled in secret trysts and mismanaged love affairs is that Molly's own reputation is tarnished and she becomes the centre of scandalous gossip. She is powerless to defend herself against the town's slanderous talk because she cannot speak out without betraying somebody else's secret. She is forced to bear the ostracism and pain until helped by Lady Harriet's patronage. Molly is unable to clear her name herself and it is only after Lady Harriet "takes possession of her, like an inanimate chattel" (585) and parades her around the town, that the gossip is stilled. It is the power of the "Towers" that causes the town to "veer around" (585) in Molly's favour, not Molly's own ability to speak out and refute her accusations. She is forced to remain passive and silent, and this is as true for the impish Cynthia as it is for the "good daughter". Cynthia is unable to confront Mr Preston openly about his duplicity, her mother's constant manipulation forces her into an endless, petty existence of subterfuge, whilst her love and respect for Mr Gibson makes her afraid to make him her confidante.

Wives and Daughters can best be described as tragi-comedy, dealing as its sub-title indicates with the "Every-day" stories of women from all classes of life. As Mrs Gaskell's'novels move away from the demands of social reporting, and towards a more comprehensive examination of personal, rather than social, relationships, the pattern of failure becomes even clearer. Marital incompatibility is almost tragically inevitable. Mrs Gibson's response to her husband's sarcasm or indifference to her is to comment that:

> I think dear papa seems a little put out today; we must see that he has a dinner that he likes when he comes home. I have often perceived that everything depends on making a man comfortable in his own house(457-8).

This is straight out of a domestic manual: "the way to a man's heart is through his stomach". Ironically, it was the embarrassment caused by "a bad dinner" offered to the distinguished Lord Hollingford that prompted him to advise Mr Gibson:

> [I]f you found a sensible, agreeable woman of thirty or so, I really think you couldn't do better than take her to manage your home, and so save you either discomfort or wrong...(135)

It is Mr Gibson's desire to find a wife for himself and a mother for his child, in other words a "normal" family, that ironically provides much of the comedy - and tragedy -,of the novel. Indeed Wives and Daughters offers considerable variations on the family pattern, with two single parents of each sex, a Squire with two sons, and even a matriarchal

figure in the shape of Lady Cumnor.

As can be seen from this chapter, few of Mrs. Gaskell's fictional families ever attain "normality". Where a family of father, mother and children is depicted, it is in order to portray its dissolution by external forces. Frederick Hale's words serve as an epigraph for Mrs. Gaskell's heroes and heroines: "We are curiously bare of relations" (NS 330). Mary Barton is early motherless, Ruth is an orphan, the Cranford ladies are widows and spinsters, Margaret Hale's relations die in quick succession, and Sylvia Robson's father is hanged and her mother demented. It is ironical that David Masson should comment, in his obituary of Mrs Gaskell, on "the enjoyment she shows throughout in all the pleasures of home and family" (154).

Between the years 1858 and 1863 seven short stories were published:

> Infanticide, parricide, filial hatred, murder, bigamy, suicide, unfaithfulness are the ingredients, misery the pervading tone....In nearly all the stories, family feeling and natural affection are perverted or disrupted (Wright 172).

Within the enormous spectrum of family groupings that these stories cover, it is in those families where the father is not a strong oppressive force that the qualities of love, peace and support are most often found. Her depiction of family life is, for the most part at the opposite end of the spectrum from Ruskin's: "it is the place of peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from

all terror, doubt and division" ("Of Queen's Gardens"). Far more in sympathy with Mill, Mrs Gaskell explores the tragedy and despair that inevitably follows when the family structure is based upon the Victorian stereotype of the patriarchal husband and the submissive wife. She confronts the issues of domestic violence and brutality, both physical and mental, that can exist within the family bond and she provides virtually the only detailed description of the lives and homes of the urban poor in the North of England. Unlike the majority of novelists writing in the nineteenth century, Mrs Gaskell does not conform to the traditional romance plot and stop her heroine's lives at the church door. Marriage was virtually the only option available for the Victorian heroine, but few English writers explore the possibility that this could mean a loveless life filled with regret and tragedy. Chapter Three of this thesis will look at the portrait that Mrs Gaskell gives of an unhappily married woman in Sylvia's Lovers and Chapter Four will look at the alternative life style that many women in the nineteenth century actually experienced - the spinster.

Chapter Three

Sylvia

Sylvia's Lovers afforded Mrs. Gaskell the opportunity to examine, under the cover of fiction, certain implications about marital relationships and the position of women which she had only hinted at in her earlier novels. Mary Barton, North and South, and Ruth are all concerned, to varying degrees, with the woman's story but Sylvia's Lovers gives us the first detailed portrait of the disillusionment to be found in an unfulfilled marriage.

The plot of Sylvia's Lovers is Sylvia's story and the characters of Philip Hepburn and Charley Kinraid are considered here only in relation to their role as her lovers. It is a plot of frustrated desire on two levels: the disruption of the passionate relationship between Sylvia and Charley Kinraid and the awareness of the limited choices that are available to Sylvia as a woman. Sylvia can neither be the adventurous specksioneer herself nor run the farm that she loves: the patriarchal society into which she has been born has no place for a woman harpooner or a female farmer.

In providing us with a detailed description of the deadening misery behind a loveless marriage, Mrs Gaskell is going beyond the frustration voiced by many of the young heroines in Victorian novels and is raising profound

questions concerning the nature of love and marriage. Inextricably entwined with this most female of plots is the more universal theme of the repetitive pattern of human relationships, the permutations of desire and marriage, love and rejection. Each person's life is mirrored by somebody else's story and from the mirroring it appears that a person's capacity for happiness seems to depend less upon the marriage partner than upon a personal inner strength. Underlying this questioning of the nature of desire is the suggestion that love is a lottery - a dangerous game with high stakes: "Some folks is happy i' marriage, and some isn't. It's just luck..."(438).

The basis for a discussion on the nature of desire in Mrs Gaskell's works must begin by admitting the power of sexuality over reason. Sexual attraction is a dominant force in all the relationships in the novel - Sylvia and Charley, Philip and Sylvia, Hester and Philip, Jack Rose and Alice, Bell and Daniel - but the conclusion that Mrs Gaskell draws from these parallels remains essentially ambiguous. The brutal marriage of Alice and Jack is balanced by the enduring love and happiness found in the marriage of Bell and Daniel and our empathy for Sylvia trapped in her marriage to Philip is checked by her own awareness of the value of such true and patient love. The nature of love, sexual attraction and marital compatibility - the questioning of the issues of likeness and difference as the

basis for desire - forms the major concern of this novel. There is, however, no dramatic denouement, no solution or resolution to the questions that the work raises. The novel's conclusion remains ambiguous except for one point: every human being has the right to exercise personal choice. For most women in the nineteenth century the decision to marry, and the choice of a marriage partner is the one moment when they have the power to write their own story. In withholding Charley's message of love, Philip has taken away from Sylvia the right to choose her own life. It is this deceit that is the canker in their marriage and on this issue alone is Mrs Gaskell unequivocal: Philip's assumption of control, his desire to 'protect' Sylvia from a person whom he considers to be a philanderer is another example of the tragedy and discord that Mrs Gaskell believes inevitably follows patriarchal action.

As Chapter Two points out, the typical Gaskellian family is fragmented and discordant, and it is in those families where the husband is not a strong or oppressive force, or where he doesn't exist at all, that the qualities of love, peace an support are most often found. The end of Sylvia's Lovers provides no real resolution to the relationship between Sylvia and Philip but by living in a small community of women surrounded by non-threatening, non-erotic relationships Sylvia has rejected her husband, rejected the values of a paternalistic society and written

her own story.

Just as Mrs Gaskell is exploring new territory in her representation of Sylvia in this novel, so the setting that she puts her heroine in breaks away from the predominantly urban communities of her other works. By placing her novel on the Yorkshire moors, she is depicting a scene which is strange to most of her readers and in saying that human nature is different here, she can depict human nature differently - make women stronger, less forgiving and self-sacrificing, more committed to their passions and 'unconventional' in relation to their husbands and lovers. Mrs Gaskell's choice of this remote landscape shows the profound influence that her immersion in the family life of the Brontes had upon her. Her research for The Life of Charlotte Bronte had led to an increased acquaintance with the "wild and grotesque, instead of pleasant or picturesque" Yorkshire countryside (LCB 304). These elements are seen by Ruskin as examples of the Gothic in nature:

> [i]rregular and grisly islands amidst the northern seas, beaten by storm, and chilled by ice-drift, and tormented by furious pulses of contending tide ("The Nature of Gothic" The Stones of Venice, 6-7).

This is the landscape present in the unconscious of the protagonists of Sylvia's Lovers and the vast, wild landscape, the violence in nature, stands for the violence, the capacity for destruction, within the characters

themselves. If the motif within the Bronte novels may be said to be the storm, then its counterpart in Sylvia's Lovers may be said to be the sea. It is the sea that brings Darley, the murdered whaler, and Kinraid, the harbinger of romance, to the girl from the moors. The turbulence of the sea reflects passion and adventure and is a pervasive image for all three main characters. The last sound that Philip heard was "the lapping against the shelving shore once again" (500).

Sylvia's Lovers is Mrs Gaskell's first novel after The Life of Charlotte Bronte and it is heavily suffused with the atmosphere of the Bronte's native countryside. In her Preface to Wuthering Heights, Charlotte Bronte paraphrases Ruskin's "Nature of Gothic" on the ruggedness of Yorkshire character in an attempt to explain the nature of the men and women who lived on the moors:

> [T]he rough, strong utterance, the harshly manifested passions, the unbridled aversions and headlong partialities of unlettered moorland hinds and rugged moorland squires (Wuthering Heights 37).

Although it was Charlotte Bronte who was Mrs Gaskell's friend and whose biography that she had just completed, it is Emily Bronte's Wuthering Heights that provides the most useful comparative basis from which to explore the themes of love and rejection in Sylvia's Lovers. As we have mentioned, Charlotte Bronte completed the Preface to her sister's novel in 1850 and sent Mrs Gaskell a copy. Set in

the isolation of the bleak Yorkshire moors, Wuthering Heights deals with a similar triangle of characters, a tragic marriage and the question of the nature of desire: the attraction of 'likeness and difference'. The purpose of this chapter is not to make a detailed comparison between these two novels, but to use both the similarities and the differences as a tool with which to explore Mrs Gaskell's aims in writing Sylvia's Lovers and to assess the originality of her approach to the subject of women in an unhappy and unfulfilled marriage.

For Emily Brontë, in dream and vision, the moors figure significantly as an area of freedom: "She found in the bleak solitude many and dear delights; and not least and best-loved was - liberty" (LCB 158). In Wuthering Heights, the moor becomes a metaphor for something more than itself and all the strong scenes are punctuated by violent happenings in nature.[1] Sympathy between human and natural happenings veers fiction towards romance rather than the mainstream novel: "In England...the Brontes are part of a ...Romantic reaction against the new industrialism in the Midlands, which also produced the poetry of Wordsworth and Burns...(Anatomy of Criticism 306). In Sylvia's Lovers, the "wild, bleak moors shut in Monkshaven almost as effectively

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[1] In the Burkean penta^ (Kenneth Burke) there are five aspects to every fiction: scene, action, agency, actor, purpose. In naturalism scene is primary and in a severely naturalistic novel scene conditions everything.

on the land side as ever the waters did on the sea-board" (2). It is nature, not the community, which shares the drama of life. The "silvery greys and browns of the inland scenery" are deceptively tranquil, harbingers of "the fierce and stormy winter" (66). As in Wuthering Heights the moors in Sylvia's Lovers represent an area of freedom associated with childhood:

> Then she gazed out at the evening sky, high above the tiled roofs...and the longing to be out under the peaceful heavens took possession of her once more...she walked on...through the high, bleak fields at the summit of the cliff....But, below the sea rose and raged...Sylvia heard the sound of the passionate rush and rebound of many waters... [and] she was more quieted by this tempest of the elements than she would have been had all nature seemed as still as she had imagined it to be...(369).

In ordinary middle-class life this area might not be so easily dramatised and Mrs Gaskell is using the moors and the sea as symbols of freedom. They form a contrast to the stifling nature of Sylvia's marriage and the restriction she experiences in her town home. There is the same town-country antithesis as in Wuthering Heights but Mrs Gaskell retains the symbolic status of these elements rather than allowing scene to condition everything. Many readers of Wuthering Heights have seen Catherine and Heathcliff as actually representative of the forces of nature, whereas Mrs Gaskell's choice of Yorkshire as a setting for Sylvia's Lovers is as much for the opportunity it gives her to explore unconventional characters as it is to show the

influence of "nature" on character. In a letter dated September 1853, Mrs Gaskell wrote:

> [Charlotte Bronte] told me such wild tales of the ungovernable families who lived or had lived therein that Wuthering Heights even seemed tame comparatively. Such dare-devil people, - men especially, - and women so stony and cruel in some of their feelings and so passionately fond in others. They are a queer people up there (GL 166, p. 244).

The women in Sylvia's Lovers exemplify the "strong and deep", stony Yorkshirewomen - all out-wardly controlled but strong and passionate in their love. As a young girl Sylvia is the antithesis of 'stony and cruel' but as a woman she is reminiscent of Catherine Earnshaw in her cruelty towards the man who loves her. She possesses none of the expected "feminine" virtues of charity, docility and forgiveness. Indeed, the Spectator considered her "as bad a specimen of womanhood as we were ever asked to study" (Rev. of Sylvia's Lovers, 1699). Significantly, Sylvia's Lovers was described by Lady Cavendish as "one of the best novels I ever read; but a cruel one" (Cruse 281).

Sylvia's Lovers is a much subtler reworking of Brontë lore, but the overall ethics are very similar to those of Wuthering Heights. "[E]nduring grudges, in some cases amounting to hatred...bequeathed from generation to generation" (LCB 61) were part of Yorkshire life. Religion is, at best, peripheral to a community which founds its "code of morals...upon that of their Norse ancestors"(LCB 71-72). Sylvia's inability to forgive her father's betrayer

and her own husband is part of the same ethos which motivates Heathcliff's revenge. Even Sylvia's rejection of her husband - "I'll never forgive yon man, nor live with him as his wife again"(404) - parallels Catherine's rejection of Edgar":

> What you touch at present, you may have; but my soul will be on that hill-top before you lay hands on me again. I don't want you, Edgar; I'm past wanting you...(Bronte 165).

The type had been encountered by Mrs Gaskell in Bronte country:

> [O]nce lovers or haters, it is difficult to change their feelings. They are a powerful race both in mind and body, both for good and for evil (LCB 61-62).

The triangle of Sylvia, Hepburn and Kinraid is reminiscent of that of Cathy, Edgar Linton and Heathcliff. The passion is, in essence, adulterous. The rivals for the woman's love are antithetical characters and, in both novels, the beloved returns after a long absence to find the woman he loves married to his rival.[1]

Despite the Brontean elements of wild passion and implacable emotions that form the background for Sylvia's

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[1] Mary Barton also begins with the conventional triangle - passionate, beautiful young girl with two suitors - one steady and dependable and the other exciting and charismatic - and both heroines living with a politically aware, highly volatile father. In both cases the lover offers security, not only for the heroine, but for her suffering parent. In Mary Barton the glamorous lover is rejected and the course of "true love", after a few twists and turns, runs smoothly. Sylvia, however, is a far more complex and fully developed character than Mary and the story of her life does not follow the conventional pattern - and then they lived happily ever after.

Lovers, the novel is essentially concerned with a more subtle presentation of the complexity of relationships. Sylvia is at the centre of all the relationships in the novel and each character is seen in terms of how it affects her. Her life as a married woman can only be understood in contrast to her life as a young woman. The novel poses searching questions on love and attraction, and choice - the ability to decide on action - is constantly being reassessed. Characters attain their desires only to find these are not what they really want. The focus is upon character in relationship to one another and each act of love is a reflection of someone else's desire.

As early as 1965, John Harvey in Character in the Novel documented the extent to which modern critics have denigrated character as a component in literature. However, the Romantic and post-Romantic emphasis on personality, individuality and originality, directed the attention of nineteenth century readers not only towards characters in literature but to an analysis of their motivation. At the extreme, this resulted in discussing a character as if he or she had lived: "the great characters live as truly as the memory of dead men. For the life after death it is not necessary that a man or woman have lived" (Butler 16).

The enormous moral value of literature, according to Harvey, is that we can have intrinsic knowledge of only ourselves and characters in literature and extrinsic

knowledge of others. To use E.M. Forster's typology, this can only be true of the "round" figure in literature (full of changes, surprises, developments) and not the "flat" or static figures . Harvey justifies this by dividing characters into protagonists and secondary characters. The protagonists collectively form the area in which the moral struggles of the book are played out. In a sense these characters are ends-in-themselves and not functions or means to an end; the novels exist to reveal their moral dilemmas and conflicts.

The minor characters in Sylvia's Lovers, while comparatively "flat" and undeveloped, play an immensely important part in the spinning of that web of human relationships which at once governs the narrative construction of the novel and provides the most elaborate metaphor for Mrs Gaskell's deepest sense of the interdependence of things. As will be shown at the end of this chapter these secondary characters serve as a mirror for Sylvia's fate by allowing the reader to briefly imagine alternative plots such as a Hester-Philip marriage, which in turn reveals another blighted love, that of Hester and William Coulson.

As I have pointed out, Sylvia is a complex character, and, in the chronology of Mrs Gaskell's works, she is the first one of her heroines that can be termed a "round figure". Up until this point, her characters have had a

tendency towards moral idealization; characters are depicted not as they are but as they ought to be - in the extreme is the character who is too good to be true or too evil to be believed. This is especially true of Ruth who, despite her position as an unmarried mother, is presented as a model of decorum and her power of forgiveness and tolerance approaches the sphere of angels - she dies from voluntarily nursing the man who seduced and then abandoned her. In contrast to Ruth, Sylvia is a far more subtle and complex heroine, and nearly half of the novel is taken up with the gradual unfolding of her character against the detail of daily life. As readers we are made aware of Sylvia's development from a young, giddy, rather shallow girl into a mature and thoughtful woman through narratorial comment, action and rather terse dialogue. Sylvia remains true to the image of the uncommunicative "stony" Yorkshire women and she is not given to long speeches, or prolonged self-reflection.

Above all, Sylvia's Lovers is a study of feelings, relationships and attitudes traced through the character of Sylvia against a background of social and family setting. It can hardly be called an "Every-day story" (Wives and Daughters title page), but it is a novel about ordinary people - a shopkeeper, a sailor and a farm-girl. In this sense Sylvia's Lovers is closer to what Northrop Frye would call the tradition of the novel in prose fiction rather than

the romance:

> The novel tends to be extroverted and personal; its chief interest is in human character as it manifests itself in society. The romance tends to be introverted and personal....The characters of romance are heroic and therefore inscrutable...(Frye 308).

In exploring the questions of love and attraction both before and after marriage, Mrs Gaskell is providing a unique glimpse into the complexity of marital relationships. It is the modern-day equivalent of the psychological novel and it attempts to address the issue of how far the quest for romantic love is an attempt to expand one's own identity. In his argument in favour of divorce, Mill wrote "[m]arriage is really, what it has been sometimes called, a lottery: and whoever is in a state of mind to calculate the chances calmly and value them correctly, is not at all likely to purchase a ticket" (Rose 109).

Sylvia Robson begins the novel as a complex reconstruction of Mrs Gaskell's passionate coquettes " ready to smile or to pout, or to show her feelings in any way, with a character as undeveloped as a child's, affectionate, wilful, naughty, tiresome, charming, anything, in fact, at present that the chances of the hour called out" (24). She is the centre of her parents' world, and is indulged in all her whims: "sadly spoilt...a lovely little dunce"(26). As the narrator points out, Sylvia is full of a natural gaiety, and although passionate and impetuous she is not insensitive to the feelings of those whom she loves. In those moments

in the novel when her mother is saddened by thoughts of her lost son, Sylvia is quick to perceive her mother's feelings and she responds fully and selflessly to her needs: "Sylvia, who had more insight into her mother's heart than Daniel, broke in with a new subject"(43). She is described in detail against the backdrop of this loving family and the farmlife at Haystersbank, and a picture emerges of a young beautiful girl whose affectionate nature is governed by impulsive feelings rather than rational thought. In contrast to this is the picture of Catherine Earnshaw as a child: she too loved to be out of doors and "it was one of their chief amusements to run away to the moors in the morning and remain there all day" (87), but in Catherine capriciousness has become wilful indulgence. Sylvia's impulsive feelings are always governed by a desire to please those whom she loves, whereas Catherine's feelings are dominated by spiteful, and often self-destructive emotions. Catherine's uncontrollable, passionate nature is vividly illustrated when she angrily confronts Nelly, the young family servant, because she remains in the room after Edgar has arrived. The scene reached its climax with Catherine viciously pinching and slapping Nelly, abusively shaking her young nephew "until the poor child waxed livid" (111), and then delivering a painful smack to her young lover's ear:

> She, supposing Edgar could not see her, snatched the cloth from my hand, and pinched me, with a prolonged wrench, very spitefully on the arm (111).

Catherine's reaction to being confronted with the cruel, petty violence of this act is to threaten to cry herself sick. Later on in her life, when Edgar seriously crosses Catherine by denying her contact with Heathcliff, the severity of her self-destructive reaction fatally harms her. On entering Catherine's room after she has shut herself away for three days, Nelly is shocked by her appearance:

> Both the expressione flitting across her face, and the changes of her moods, began to alarm me terribly; and brought to my recollections her former illness, and the doctor's injunction that she should not be crossed (160).

This basic difference in the characters of these two women is a crucial factor in how they develop as women; however, both look back on their childhood as a time of freedom and joy:

> I wish I were out of doors - I wish I were a girl again, half-savage and hardy, and free (Wuthering Heighs 163).

One of the most significant differences between these two heroines, for the purpose of this study, is Sylvia's lack of verbalised self-analysis compared to Catherine's indulgent introspection, her long speeches that could almost be transposed to Elizabethan tragedy. Mrs Gaskell deliberately emphasises Sylvia's lack of introspection and her inability to examine motives and intentions. At this point Mrs Gaskell appears to be taking a stand against the emphasis that her contemporaries put upon a character's self-consciousness:

> In looking back to the last century, it appears curious to see how little our ancestors had the power of putting two things together, and perceiving either the discord or harmony thus produced. Is it because we are further off from those times, and have, consequently, a greater range of vision? Will our descendants have a wonder about us, such as we have about the inconsistency of our forefathers, or a surprise at our blindness that we do not perceive that, holding such and such opinions, our course of action must be so and so...(68).

Characters in Sylvia's Lovers frequently act without thinking and they are typified by a noticeable lack of self-analysis or introspection. In a paragraph full of irony, Mrs Gaskell mocks the general trend of self-consciousness and self-analysis:

> In the agricultural counties, and among the class to which these four people belonged, there is little analysis of motive or comparison of characters and actions, even at this present day of enlightenment ....But, taken as a general rule, it may be said that few knew what manner of men they were, compared to the numbers now who are fully conscious of their virtues, qualities, failings, and weaknesses...(74).

Her deliberate choice to set this novel at the turn of the century allows Mrs Gaskell to distance the novel from the nineteenth century, but such narratorial comments keep us constantly aware of her voice and of the demands of the Victorian novel. Sylvia is, at this point, the "fresh and original" character that Mrs Gaskell is praising - she is impulsive, shallow and wilful, she seldom thinks, rationalises or prays. Circumstances, however, will change Sylvia, and one of the most poignant features of the novel is the suppression of natural gaiety in Sylvia herself as

events overwhelm and oppress her.

Philip Hepburn, Sylvia's cousin, is the young man that Sylvia's mother favours as her future husband. He is a quiet, dependable person, a shrewd business man, a loyal and trusted employee and an obsessed and obsessive lover. [1]

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[1] This idea of the jealous, possessive lover appears in two other works by Mrs Gaskell - Manasseh Hickson in Lois the Witch and Morin in My Lady Ludlow. In both cases obsessive and destructive love inevitably leads to tragic and evil consequence. In Lois the Witch a young orphan, Lois, emigrates to America and finds herself caught up in the witch-hunting hysteria that is sweeping New England. The relations with whom she is staying are unstable and fanatical and the eldest cousin, Manasseh, falls in love with her. Bordering on madness, Manasseh translates his lustful thoughts of Lois into religious fanaticism and insists that it is God's will that she become his wife. When Lois rejects him he is instrumental in causing her to be condemned to death by hanging:

> The stillness and silence were broken by one crazed and mad, who came rushing up the steps of the ladder, and caught Lois's body in his arms, and kissed her lips with wild passion (206).

In My Lady Ludlow, the character of Morin is more fully developed than that of Manasseh - perhaps because he is not mad. As a young French worker, living at the time of the French Revolution, he falls passionately in love with a beautiful, helpless aristocrat. Like Philip, he refuses to face up to the fact that the object of his desires will never love him. He is not quite such a one dimensional figure of evil as the lust-crazed Manasseh:

> I could fancy that if he had married Virginie, he would have coined his life-blood for luxuries to make her happy; would have watched over and petted her, at every sacrifice to himself, as long as she would have been content to live for him alone (91).

The ominous tone of the last words foretells the inevitable disaster that results from such blind, possessive passion:

> Morin cried out his words in a hoarse, passionate voice, clenched his teeth, his fingers, and seemed almost convulsed; as he spoke out his terrible love for Virginie, which would lead him to kill her sooner than see her another's (94).

Even the projected title for the novel emphasises the possessive aspect of Philip's love: "Philip's Idol". The blind, obsessive quality of this love makes Philip repulsive to Sylvia. She cannot bear him to make any reference to his feelings towards her and she does her best to avoid any kind of contact with him. Her attitude towards him is short and dismissive to the point of rudeness:

> "Good day, Sylvie," he said; "what are you wanting? How are all at home? Let me help you!" ..."I'm very well, and so is mother; feyther's got a touch of rheumatiz, and there's a young woman getting what I want" (25).

The eagerness of his language is beautifully contrasted with the terse indifference of hers. At this point in the novel her reply provides an example of the light, humorous touch that Mrs Gaskell brings to the dialogue. This is before events weigh down upon Sylvie and her marriage to Philip destroys the lightness of her heart. Such banter shows the natural sauciness of Sylvia's character and, what is more important, it shows how even from the outset of the novel Sylvia finds her cousin unattractive. There is never any element of flirtation towards Philip on Sylvia's part. Instead Philip ignores every signal that Sylvia gives him and persists in reading into the least friendly and begrudging gesture signs of hopefulness. This inability of the better educated, articulate young man to interpret Sylvia's feelings is contrasted with her quick, intuitive

grasp of the situation and her blunt comments on his well-meaning but long-winded conversations: "she tried not to show signs of weariness when he used more words - and more difficult words - than were necessary to convey his ideas" (128).

Into this situation steps the exciting, dashing "Specksioneer". Charley Kinraid is the most one-dimensional character in the triangle. He is in Harvey's terminology character-as function or rather character-as-relationship, in that our knowledge of him is largely derived from his relationship with Sylvia and her father. He represents the world of adventure, difference, conflict and excitement. This is the masculine world of seafaring and travel, a world of wild experiences that has been an integral part of Sylvia's upbringing but from which she is excluded because of her sex. Daniel Robson has regaled Sylvia with tales of wonder and fantastical adventures upon the whaling ships since she was a child and what Sylvia wants when she falls in love with Kinraid is not so much the man as the adventures - not Charley Kinraid but the "Specksioneer". Her love for him is based on her vision of him as a promise of difference, of excitement and glamour. His place in the novel is not so much for his character as his representative heroic status as harpooner and the focus this gives to his character in relationship to Sylvia. Her passionate love for Kinraid is a search for a kindred spirit, a way to realise

her own desire for travel and adventure:

> As a harpooner on a whaler, Kinraid is like a knight of chivalry to Sylvia. Through him she feels that it is possible to reach out and touch the fire of life itself (Lansbury 171).

This combined desire for likeness and difference in a mate is not, in itself, peculiar, but is in fact the normal expectation if we look at typical patterns. As we mentioned in the preceding chapter, Lawrence Stone in his research into marriage in England suggests that the attitude towards marriage changed from one dominated by the interests of the family (typically financial) in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to one based on free choice and the mutual affection of the husband and wife - the companionate marriage (The Family, Sex and Marriage in England in 1500-1800 Ch. 8). This does not alter the basic idea of attraction: like, but not too alike; different but not too different, but it does put a different slant upon the concepts of likeness and difference. To use a rough distinction, likeness ceases to be defined primarily in terms of external considerations like class or property interests, and is redefined largely as a matter of internal and subjective concerns, like temperament and emotions. Philip and Sylvia have obvious economic and family interests in common but they are not well-suited temperamentally: she is the epitome of the "northern woman" - "so stony and cruel in some of [her] feelings and so passionately fond in

others" (GL, 166, p 244) whereas Philip represents Christian forgiveness:

> Thee and me was niver meant to go together. It's not in me to forgive...I wonder if thy veins would run milk and water, so that thou could go and make friends, and speak soft wi' him as had caused thy feyther's death?...I tell thee my flesh and blood wasn't made for forgiving and forgetting...When I love I love, and when I hate I hate...(334-335).

Sylvia's desire for Charley Kinraid is based on this blend of likeness and difference. He reflects her own father in his choice of profession and in his charismatic, "dare-devil" personality and yet his status as a foreigner in their community endows him with all the qualities of the unknown, and therefore doubly attractive, stranger.

Sylvia projects onto Kinraid her own frustration with her inability to be more than the listener; she looks at the maps not to see where he is but to be a little closer to those places of wild exotic adventures:

> Stopping over the outspread maps, with her eyes...a good deal fixed on one spot on the map, not Northumberland, where Kinraid was spending the winter, but those wicked northern seas about which he had told them such wonders (114).

In this scene she is rejecting the lover who is trying to give her the lesson and is completely indifferent to the one who is so far away - what makes her heart beat faster is the wild tales of adventure. Love is a projection of Sylvia's own desires and needs.

It is in this displacement of her own personality onto her lover that Sylvia most parallels Catherine Earnshaw.

Catherine's famous assertion, "Nelly, I am Heathcliff" (122) is central to the whole issue of "likeness" in Wuthering Heights. Catherine's love for Heathcliff is based on their shared 'likeness' - "Whatever, our souls are made of, [Heathcliff's] and mine are the same" (121) and upon his perceived 'difference' as the mysterious gypsy child. Heathcliff's indefinition allows Catherine to perceive him as a fantasy, a wish-fulfilment in a similar manner to Sylvia's projection of Kinraid as a "knight of chivalry" (Lansbury 171).

"Likeness" is no simple issue in Wuthering Heights and the entire novel can be seen as a dramatic enactment of the complexity of what is the nature of attraction and desire. The resolution that Emily Bronte provides in her second generation marriage between Cathy and Hareton, as well as the gothic elements of wild storms and passionate recriminations, underlines the difference between the two novels, but the questioning of the very nature of likeness is a common theme that dominates both works.

Sylvia's Lovers takes this central concern and then explores the way in which each act of loving is a way to fulfil a need within the individual. The staid unimaginative Philip wants in Sylvia what his own character is lacking - spirit, passion, beauty and wilfulness. Phyllis Rose in Parallel Lives observes that this desire for a rounding out of character is the dominating force in John

Stuart Mill's love for Harriet Taylor:

> You could see how they complemented each other...where he was disinterested and balanced, she was intuitive, partial and sure of herself....This is what he had missed in those arid years: beauty, emotion, passionate response...(Rose 107).

Love promises the fulfilment of desires and needs and has little to do with the identity of the beloved; the actual character of the lover becomes obscured by the projection of the partner.

Throughout the novel, characters express their hopes, wishes and desires only to find them met with retractions, negations and confusions. Part of Philip's disappointment, the vague discontent experienced after his engagement, must owe something to his fiance's lack of sexual response:

> He could not have defined why he was dissatisfied; if he had been compelled to account for his feeling, he would probably have alleged as a reason that Sylvia's manner was so unchanged by her new position towards him. She was quiet and gentle; but no shyer, no brighter, no coyer, no happier, than she had been for months before. When she joined him at the field gate, his heart was beating fast, his eyes were beaming out love at her approach. She neither blushed nor smiled...(345-46).

Shyness, coyness, blushing are all manifestations of sexual response. Sylvia's initial passivity extends to her married life:

> After all, and though he did not acknowledge it even to himself, the long-desired happiness was not so delicious and perfect as he had anticipated. Many have felt the same in their first year of married life;...(363).

Sylvia's heart is still with Charley Kinraid, so that

she cannot give her husband his most basic rights. She reserves her love, her passion, for her former suitor, with the result that she commits "adultery of the heart" (Matt. 5:28). Sylvia is unable to reject Philip's offer of marriage even though she knows that "[T]hee and me was niver meant to go together" (334) because, as a woman, she cannot run the farm. Within the world that she lives in she cannot achieve economic independence and so she must conform to the paternalistic value system surrounding her and marry Philip.

One of Mill's greatest objections to mercenary marriages was the fact that a woman could be "made the instrument of an animal function contrary to her inclinations"(57). Novelists were less direct, but sexual degradation is implied in Louisa Bounderby's exchange with her husband:

> "I suppose no one ever had occasion to think you too diffident, or too delicate, " Louisa answered him composedly: "I have never made that objection to you, either as a child or as a woman"(Hard Times 195).

Indeed, Philip Hepburn's discontent after he wins Sylvia arises from his awareness that she is not attracted to him. At times her revulsion for him assumes pathological proportions: "[T]he very sound of his footstep brought on a recurrence of the fever and convulsive movement" (376). When she tells Kinraid that the child in the cradle is Philip's, she is facing the full implications of her marriage, for the child is living proof of sexual relations

with a man she clearly finds repulsive. One particular episode in Sylvia's Lovers is remarkable by Victorian standards. After giving birth, Sylvia awakens from a feverish sleep:

> [S]he stretched her arms imploringly, and said, in a voice full of yearning and tears - "Oh! Charley! come to me - come to me!" and then, as she more fully became aware of the place where she was, and of her actual situation, she sank back and feebly began to cry (373).

The implications of such an action are not lost on her husband:

> "What kind of woman are yo', to go dreaming of another man i' this way, and taking on so about him, when yo're a wedded wife, with a child as yo've borne to another man?" (373).

This moment is the climax of their married life, it is here that their marriage irrevocably breaks down. Up until the birth of her child, Sylvia had passively done her duty as a wife. She obeyed Philip in all things, but without joy or feeling. Her attitude at the Foster's party contrasts sadly with her merry, giddy behaviour at the Corneys' New Year's party, "As it was, she sate, pale and weary-looking, on the very edge of her chair; she uttered the formal words which Philip had told her were appropriate" (349). On occasions she was able to escape the "comfortable imprisonment of her 'parlour'"(350) and ramble over the cliffs, revelling in the feeling of freedom and space. But she could not escape the fact of her marriage: "it was like lead on her morning spirits when she awoke and remembered that the decision was

made, the deed was done, the choice taken which comes to most people but once in their lives" (351). These words are such a heartbreaking description of the oppressive nature of her married life. Motherhood breaks into this weary pattern "like a ray of sunshine into a gloomy room" and Sylvia was "happy; yes, really happy for the first time since her irrevocable marriage"(351). Together, Philip and Sylvia discuss the future name of their child and decide to make the cloth that she had refused to wear for her wedding dress into a Christening outfit; a small rather mundane incident but the only loving moment of their married life - "[p]erhaps on that day Philip reached the zenith of his life's happiness"(353). Immediately afterwards Sylvia's health declines and she is sick and feverish. On coming into her room Philip overhears Sylvia's delirious call to her former lover and all the force of his jealous, possessive nature takes over. He berates her for her 'infidelity' and she withdraws from him forever: "Everything that a wife could do from duty she did; but the love seemed to have fled, and, in such cases, no reproaches or complaints can avail to bring it back" (357).
The disintegration of their marriage takes place before Kinraid re-appears in their lives: it is their basic incompatibility not the dramatic denouement that destroys their happiness.

In contrast to this the marriage of Catherine and Edgar

Linton, before Heathcliff's return, appears to be almost a model for the companionate marriage that Stone describes. Charlotte Bronte in her 1850 Preface to the novel describes the Linton marriage as a "model of constancy and tenderness" and Nelly recalls that the Lintons "were really in possession of deep and growing happiness" (114). This does not reflect the deep unhappiness of Sylvia and Philip's marriage even before the return of Charley Kinraid. Similarly, Edgar Linton is not, as Philip is, consumed by jealousy of the absent lover. His irritation with Catherine for her exuberant greeting of Heathcliff is based on his sense of the inappropriateness of greeting a former "servant" as a brother: "The whole household need not witness the sight of your welcoming a runaway servant as a brother"(118).[1]

It is the very nature of Philip's love that is unhealthy: "once more he felt that have her for his own he must, at any cost"(328); his need to possess Sylvia is physical "devouring the fair face and figure of her, his

[1] Catherine had determined before her marriage that her relationship with Edgar should not prevent her remaining close to Heathcliff: "He'll be as much to me as he has been all his lifetime. Edgar must shake off his antipathy, and tolerate him, at least" (122). It is her inability to control the characters of her lovers rather than Heathcliff's dramatic return that destroys her marriage, and her life.

future wife" (326).[2] This destructive jealousy is the direct cause of his losing Sylvia's affections forever: jealousy of Kinraid drives him to attack Sylvia verbally. But Philip is jealous of anyone to whom Sylvia shows affection: "[B]efore the end of that first year, Philip had learnt to be jealous of his wife's new love for Hester" (349) and he was even "half jealous of his child" (356). The possessive quality of such a love is antithetical to Sylvia's nature and their married life becomes increasingly like a prison "'A crust of bread and liberty' was much more accordant to Sylvia's nature than plenty of creature comforts and many restraints" (359). The day-to-day demands of her married life are irksome for her and she contrives to escape with her child out into the countryside as often as she can - "Once here she was as happy as she ever expected to be in this world"(359). This was the situation before Kinraid's return turned their lives upside down.

The scene where Sylvia discovers Philip's treachery is full of anguish and passion. No longer is she the passive dutiful wife:

> All that's done and ended. He's spoilt my life,- he's spoilt it for as long as iver I live on this earth; but neither yo' nor him shall spoil my soul. I'll never forgive yon man, nor live with him as his wife again...It goes hard wi' me

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[2] Such words recall the tragedy of Morin and Virginie as he sits watching her: "devouring her with his eyes"(My Lady ludlow 94). Jealousy in both men is a dominant and destructive force "he would have strangled a bird if she whom he loved was attracted by it from him (My lady Ludlow 92)

> Charlie, it does indeed. I'll never see yo' on this side heaven, so help me God! (383).

Vowing never to "hold Philip to be my lawful husband again", Sylvia enacts her own revolt, her own divorce (411). Ignoring the traditions and restrictions of a paternalistic society, Sylvia turns her back on her husband. Her course of action is remarkable by all accounts. She follows in the wake of earlier controversial heroines, like Catherine Linton and Helen Huntingdon, both of whom shut the bedroom door against their husbands once they were convinced of the failure of their respective marriages. The denial of conjugal rights is declared as much "a sin" as adultery itself (411).

Yet, despite her love for another man and her repudiation of her husband, she receives none of the punishment reserved for the adulteress - not even the transfer of her husband's affection to a worthier rival. Instead, it is the husband who is punished:

> Ay! go in the warm hearth, mother and child, now the gay cavalcade has gone out of sight, and the chill of night has succeeded to the sun's setting! Husband and father, steal out into the cold dark street, and seek some poor cheap lodging where you may rest your weary bones...(497).

Philip Hepburn, the deceiver, is disfigured and doomed to spend his days unrecognised by his wife and child. Mrs Gaskell's unorthodox plan of retribution elicited an angry response from some quarters:

> That the wrong was a bitter one may be allowed,

> but Philip had been the most loving of husbands, and affection can be born and is born every day of habit as well as of love. True art would have depicted the struggle between the old passion in its first revival, and the new and strong bond which bound Sylvia to Philip - the way in which a girl's fancy may be overcome by the habits and duties of her maturer life...no woman ever loathed a husband superior to herself, whose love had never slackened...(Rev. of Sylvia's Lovers, Spectator, 1699).

Despite the reconciliation at the end of the novel, the imaginative bent of the story refutes this last assertion - Sylvia does not love a husband: "superior to herself" and Mrs Gaskell has refused to judge her. Sylvia can value and appreciate the enduring quality of Philip's love but that does not make her love him in return "what would be her duty, if he came again and called her 'wife'? She shrank from such a possibility with all the weakness and superstition of her nature" (490). Their words to each other on Philip's deathbed confuse earthly and spiritual forgiveness and the resolution of their love remains ambiguous.

In Wuthering Heights, the diluted passion and toned-down characters of Cathy and Hareton, provide a second generation solution to that novel that Mrs Gaskell avoids. Sylvia ends her life living in a community of women, struggling to resolve the questions that her life and experiences with Philip and with Charley Kinraid have raised.

The fact that Sylvia can appreciate the faithful,

gentle quality of Philip's love and yet still shrink from a physical relationship with him is one of the central concerns of this novel - what is the nature of love, sexual attraction and marital compatibility? The novel provides seemingly endless permutations of loving and rejection - "fancy is three parts o' love, if reason is t'other fourth" (241). In this novel reason does not appear to play any part in selecting a future partner. Philip is obsessed with marrying Sylvia, despite every dictate of his mind and commonsense. She is an illiterate, giddy young girl who has no interest in learning:

> "Not read! and thee Philip's wife as was such a great scholar! Of a surety the ways o' this life are crooked! There was our Hester, as can read as well as any minister, and Philip passes over her to go and choose a young lass as cannot read her Bible"(421).

Hester, who would have been an eminently suitable partner for Philip, loves him with a completely faithful, undying passion. She has known him in his role as a loving son, a kind and devoted employee and a faithful friend, and knowledge of Philip's character had gradually blossomed into love: "Hester looked upon Philip as the best and most agreeable man she had ever known" (119). The contrast of this love, based on respect, admiration and trust, with Sylvia's wild passion for Charley would seem to point to a judgement on the different qualities of love. Hester remains faithful to her love for Philip all her life and never marries. Yet Hester is loved in her turn by Philip's

fellow lodger, William Coulson and "she could not bear the humble advances which Coulson...sometimes made. They seemed to disgust her with him" (120). There is no apparent reason that Hester should find Coulson's advances so repulsive as they seem ideally suited in faith and temperament: she is simply not attracted to him, "[I]t just shows what different views different men and women take of their fellow-creatures" (119). Hester is physically repulsed by William Coulson and attracted to Philip and that, not the knowledge of the sterling qualities of his character, is what makes the "little flush on the pale cheek, and the brightness in the half-veiled eyes whenever he was talking" (120).

The sexual attraction between Sylvia and Charlie is both explicit and, for once in this novel mutual. At the New Year's Party, they cannot keep away from each other:

> "What was Charley saying to her in that whispered voice....Why did they linger near each other....Why did Kinraid's eyes always seek her while hers were averted, or downcast, and her cheeks all aflame?" (149).

Between Sylvia and Charley, love is an exciting game: "they were like two children defying each other; each determined to conquer" (184). Marriage to Philip is forced upon Sylvia by circumstances outside of her control, yet Kester has warned her about the tragic consequences of marrying without love:

> But dunnot go and marry a man as thou's noane

> taken wi', and another as is most like for t'be dead, but who, mebbe, is alive, havin a pull on thy heart (325).

The power of sexuality over reason is powerful force amongst all the characters in this novel and by acknowledging the domination of desire in the characters of both her coquette and of her prim little 'Quaker", Mrs Gaskell is challenging the concept of the prudish, sexless Victorian lady.

Each act of love in this novel is a reflection of someone else and by presenting the reader with variations on the same pattern, Mrs Gaskell is posing more questions than she is providing answers for. Sylvia obviously thinks that her life would have been different if Philip had not chosen to withhold Kinraid's message of love from her "he kept something from me as would ha' made me a different woman, and someone else, happen, a different man"(409) and not only her own life but also the life of the woman that she has come to love:

> 'Poor Hester - poor, poor Hester! if yo' an' he had but been married together, what a deal o' sorrow would ha' been spared to us all!' (444).

One reason that Philip gives to himself to justify his lie is that Kinraid would not have been true to Sylvia and that she would have been unhappy. The story of Alice Rose and her marriage mirrors exactly the situation between Philip, Sylvia and Kinraid. As a young woman, Alice Rose was beloved by the staid, dependable John Foster but she would

have none of him. Her heart was won by the dashing, young sailor from the whale-ship and so they were married. Within one year Jack Rose proved himself to be a violent, drunken philanderer and he broke Alice's heart.

> A girl beloved by two - nay, those two so identical in occupation as he and Kinraid were - Rose identical even in character with what he knew of the specksioneer; a girl choosing the wrong lover, and suffering and soured all her life in consequence of her youth's mistake; was that to be Sylvia's lot? (240).

Sylvia is not 'punished' in this novel because, despite the fact that she rejects her husband, she has always been honest with him. The sin that Philip commits is in taking away from Sylvia the right to choose her own life. In her presentation of Alice Rose, Mrs Gaskell paints a graphic picture of a woman "suffering and soured all her life", but in marrying Jack Rose against the wishes of her family, Alice was exercising her right to be in control of her own destiny, to make her own mistakes. Bell Robson was another woman who chose to marry a glamorous specksioneer: "I thought I never could think enough on a man as had rode on a whale's back"(105). The marriage between Bell and Daniel Robson is one of the very few satisfying and fulfilling relationships in Mrs Gaskell's works, although even this marriage is destroyed when Daniel is hanged and Bell goes insane. However, it is a marriage that is damaged by external events, and the warmth and caring it exhibits is a counter balance to the story of Alice and Jack Rose.

Throughout the novel there exists these balances and counter-checks which stop the reader from drawing any definite conclusions:

> Then he went on to wonder if the lives of one generation were but a repetition of the lives of those who had gone before, with no variation but from the internal cause that some had greater capacity for suffering than others (240).

Philip sees in the story of Alice Rose's life a reason for justifying his act of deceit, but Mrs Gaskell will not let such a simple answer pass. As readers, we are forced to wonder if Sylvia and Charley would not have been as happy as Bell and Daniel or as Captain and Mrs Kinraid.

Each person's life is mirrored by somebody else's story, and a person's capacity for happiness seems to depend less upon their marriage partner, or lack of one, than upon their own inner strength - or is it just luck?

> Some folks is happy i' marriage, and some isn't. It's just luck, and there's no forecasting it. Men is such unaccountable animals, there's no prophesyin' upon 'em (438).

Alice Rose finishes her life surrounded by Hester, Sylvia and little Bella, a little cantankerous maybe but happy. Sylvia struggles to come to terms with her life and the passions of her own nature, not unhappy in her life with her daughter, Hester and Alice Rose:

> Alice, indeed, in her solemn way, was becoming quite fond of Sylvia; if she could not read and write, she had a deftness and gentleness of motion...Sylvia had a stock of patient love ready in her heart for all the aged and infirm that fell her way...with a lovely little child to give her

joy (423).

In this novel, Mrs Gaskell has presented us with a vision of life an endless variation on the same themes - love, desire, compatibility, hatred and rejection. Each set of lovers has its own story and each story reflects the life of another couple. The coda at the end of the novel increases this sense of life as a series of stories and it forces on us a self-consciousness about the convention of story telling in the novel. The irony here is that the story that we are left with on this last page refutes the direction of the entire novel; the 'legend' has become Sylvia's guilt and not Philip's deception:

> But the memory of man fades away. A few old people can still tell you the tradition of the man who died in a cottage somewhere about this spot, - died of starvation while his wife lived in hard-hearted plenty not two good stone-throws away (502).

Yet this is not quite the end; we are told that Sylvia dies before her child grows up and Bella is brought up by Hester Rose. The events in the story start to appear as if they belong in a kaleidoscope, one more twist and another pattern emerges. Mrs Gaskell is not going to give us the traditional beginning, middle and end; instead we have gained an insight into the life of one woman. Such a presentation is unique in Victorian literature in several ways. On one level we are given the opportunity to experience the day-to-day life of a very unhappy married woman, giving us, as John Harvey puts it, the opportunity to

gain intrinsic knowledge of her character. On the other level we witness the rejection of the paternalistic value system, partly in the understanding that Philip's guilt and subsequent punishment was because of his desire to possess Sylvia and control her life and partly in the presentation of an alternative life-style where women live with women.

Chapter Four

The Single Woman

> Most persons have but a very moderate capacity of happiness; but no person ever finds this out without experience, very few even with experience...if they remain united...they pass their lives together with fully as much happiness as they could find either singly or in any other union (as quoted in Rose 108).

John Stuart Mill wrote these words for Harriet Taylor as part of a closely argued paper on the indissolubility of marriage. Paradoxically, they can be taken as much for the case for remaining single as they can as a case against divorce. Happiness, according to Mill is not necessarily found in the acquisition of a marriage partner, it is a state of existence that each person has to work out individually.

Mrs Gaskell was a strong supporter of this belief that individuals should be responsible for their own lives. Her presentation of marriage and family life emphasises how discordant and tragic married life can be, and wherever there is an autocratic husband and father in Mrs Gaskell's works then disharmony and tragedy inevitably follow. As pointed out in Chapter Two, the typical Gaskellian family is fragmented and discordant and it is notable that it is in those families where the husband is not a strong, oppressive force, or where he doesn't exist at all, that the qualities

of love, peace and support are most often found. In fact her focus upon the lives of older women, women who are not obsessed with finding a husband, is rare among Victorian novelists, though it has attracted little critical attention. In the novels of this period marriage was the expectation of most of the heroines and even if it was not a conscious ambition, middle-class women were without an alternative that was either financially rewarding or emotionally fulfilling.

The first section of this chapter will look at how the spinster has been presented in the novels of Mrs Gaskell's contemporaries. Two major points will be stressed - the link between education and the ability to earn a living, and the importance of attitude in determining how an individual views herself and is viewed by others. The second section will focus upon a study of Cranford, a world populated only by women where "somehow the gentleman disappears" (39). The two sections together will show the originality of Mrs Gaskell's presentation of women in her novels; women who have passed the passion of youth, and who have formed relationships of a non-erotic, non-possessive nature. The study of Cranford will explore the dual aspects to the choice to remain single - the emotional (love, sharing, relationships and children) and the economic (financial stability and job availability). The analysis of Cranford will also show that Mrs Gaskell was breaking away from her

contemporaries in terms of the originality of her experiments with narrative and social observation as well as with her subject matter. Particular attention will be given to the role of the narrator and the play with literary texts.

The period in which Mrs Gaskell, George Eliot and the Brontes wrote was one of particular interest for the whole question of women's relationships with women. The 1851 census revealed that there was an 'excess' of over half a million females in the population, and the number of women likely to remain unmarried was dramatically increasing (The Census of Great Britain in 1851 88). The problem of how these women were going to be able to support themselves led to the promotion of such societies as the *Society for the Promotion of the Employment of Women* and the *Middle-Class Emigration Society*. The existence of such societies, together with the schools for the training of nurses, presented a very practical approach to the problem. However, the relationship between life and literature is not, of course, one of rigid causality and few novels reflect such a pragmatic approach. The young heroine appears to be faced with marriage, destitution or, horror of horrors, teaching. As chapter one of this thesis has clearly shown there were few acceptable roles presented to the Victorian heroine, other than to marry and become the Perfect Wife.

Not only was marriage the expectation of the majority of the heroines in the novels of this period, but these women were said to have an "innate desire for companionship of some much loved object" (Trollope 232), and if it was not a conscious ambition, they were brought up without any alternative view of the future. Contingency plans were not made lest they fail to marry, for they were led to believe that marriage was the natural outcome of their lives and this attitude was reinforced by all those around them. There are very few single women in novels of this date who are not potential brides. Most unmarried women are young and eager for their first encounter with the opposite sex, if not already embroiled in a relationship which will ultimately lead them to the altar. Even characters like Miss Carker (Dombey and Son), and who at first glance appears to have missed her chance, succeed in meeting and making their match. Two unmarried women stand out, both disappointed in their original choice: Lucy Snowe (Villette) and Lily Dale (The Last Chronicle of Barset). The former was to have married Paul Emanuel, and when he is presumed drowned there is no guarantee that she will not at some later date discover a substitute for this love. Lily Dale is one of the very few genuine spinsters to be found outside of Cranford, and for this we are kept waiting until 1867 when Trollope finally announces that to his knowledge she never married. Women who fail to secure a husband are given

by their authors no other prospect of happiness or fulfilment or, as Lily Dale puts it:

> It seems to be admitted that if a girl does not want to fall in love, she ought not to care for any other fun in the world (Last Chronicle of Barset 141).

These unmarried women do not tend to fall into the class of heroines as, unlike heroines, they have no prospect of marriage. They are often presented as queer eccentrics - unattractive, retiring and embittered, or hearty and unfeminine. This description from Middlemarch is a typical portrait of a spinster: "Brown, dull and resigned and altogether...just the sort of person for a governess" (Middlemarch 146).

The condition of spinsterhood is not a circumstance to which either the author or the reader could be easily reconciled in the mid-nineteenth century. Those women who fall into this category find themselves subject to enormous pressures to abandon this state in favour of matrimony. And where conformity to this preferred state of affairs is not secured, the spinster finds herself prey to even harsher treatment, for she frequently becomes the object of derision, is treated like an overgrown child or otherwise ridiculed. Rosa Dartle is felt to be thoroughly evil, Miss Haversham's bitterness verges on madness and even Miss Dunstable is regarded as a great curiosity. Their unnaturalness is the result of living a sort of half life,

unfulfilled by a husband or children. Most novelists in the nineteenth century presented this view of women in their novels:

> An old maid's life must doubtless be void and vapid - her heart strained and empty. Had I been an old maid I should have spent existence in efforts to fill the void and ease the aching. I should have probably failed and died weary and disappointed, despised and of no account, like other single women (The Professor 226).

Lily Dale is one of the few unmarried women outside of Mrs Gaskell's work who is realistically presented, but even she does not escape the social pressures and comes to believe in the image others have of her:

> I am losing all my romance, and getting to be an old maid....I do so hate myself for being such an old maid....I see it in people's eyes, and hear it in their voices. And they all talk to me as if I were very steady, and altogether removed from anything like fun and frolic (Last Chronicle of Barset 141).

The message given by the majority of the novelists of this period is clear: women cannot hope for happiness unless they marry. Such a viewpoint expresses the precise opposite of Mill's view on the basic happiness or unhappiness of the individual, and it is a perspective that we are not unfamiliar with even today.

In 1986 an article entitled "Too Late for Prince Charming" appeared in Newsweek, and caused a furor amongst white, college-educated single women. The article stated that there was only a 5% chance of women over 35 finding a

suitable partner and the overall implication of the article was that the lives of those women who did not find this 'suitable partner' were sad and meaningless. The article generated an overwhelming, and angry, response from single women who felt that the article presented a very negative and insulting view of them and that

> the responsibility for happiness goes back to one's self: with or without a mate, I'm determined to make a life of my own that is filled with good friends and good times. Attitude may not be everything, but it sure helps" (Nicola Pensiero, Newsweek, 9).

Or, as Janet Freeman succinctly puts it, "And all this time I thought I was single by choice...(Newsweek, 9).

K.G. Lewis in her paper What single women need most from their therapist (1990) stresses that remaining single can often be preferable to being married just to acquire a husband with a "male organ". She recommends that whilst therapists must acknowledge the sense of loss that some women experience at not having a husband or children, they must also emphasise the opportunities for enjoying life that being single can provide.

Whilst recognising that Erikson's epigenetic stage-model is not gender-neutral, it can provide a useful framework within which to consider the role of the single woman. According to Erikson's model, by the time a person has reached 30 the need to forge one's own identity has been resolved (Stage 5). The integration that takes place at this

period reflects "the accrued experience of the ego's ability to integrate all identifications with the vicissitudes of the libido, with the aptitudes developed out of endowment, and with the opportunities offered in social roles" (Erikson, 1963, 261). The next stage (Stage 6) is 'Intimacy versus Isolation' and at this point the individual is

> ready for intimacy, that is, the capacity to commit himself to concrete affiliations and partnerships...The avoidance of such experiences because of fear of ego loss may lead to a deep sense of isolation and consequent self-absorbtion (Erikson 263-264).

This view of people, whether male or female, who choose to remain single as a portrait of loneliness, isolation and distantiation does not fit the description of many of the single women of today. In light of the fact that in the U.S. the number of women exceeds the number of men who are single and available by a huge margin, estimated at well over a million (Lewis, 1990), it seems imperative that a new model be promulgated for single women. Such a model should take into account the closeness achieved with parents, siblings, relatives, and the pseudo-family attachments with close friends. Yet we still have "few clearly defined, positive roles in society for single women except perhaps for the kind maiden aunt, godmother, parent caretaker, and devoted secretary" (Kaslow 83). A conclusion that parallels the ideas expressed over a hundred years earlier by most Victorian novelists - read governess for secretary - and one which makes a study of Mrs Gaskell's exploration of the

subject of particular interest and relevance today.

Nowadays women who elect to choose a career often find themselves involved in professional education and training that consumes large amounts of time and energy and leaves little of these over for relationships and child rearing. These are the white, college educated, single women referred to in the Newsweek article and their careers - law, medicine, academe - provide them with financial security, status and job satisfaction. Education, and the career choices that it enables a woman to make, is the pivotal issue here, and this was as true a hundred years ago as it is today.

To develop a clear picture of the life of an unmarried woman amongst nineteenth century novelists it is therefore necessary to look at the alternative occupations that were presented to her as viable options and the type of education that she received that would enable her to support herself; only then can we comment upon what is unique in Mrs Gaskell's presentation of the single woman.

Novelists in the nineteenth century did not seem to be alive to the difficulties of women's employment for rather than its being realistically portrayed, it is usually sentimentalised or glossed over. And so often at the last moment a solution to the heroine's problem arrives in the form of a husband.

Given the poverty of women's education and its bias

towards genteel accomplishments, it is not surprising that women rarely adopted a career outside marriage through choice, for their education fitted them for few occupations:

> Men of England! look at your poor girls, many of them fading around you, dropping off in consumption or decline; or, what is worse, degenerating to sour old maids,- envious, backbiting, wretched, because life is a desert to them; or, what is worst of all, reduced to strive, by scarce modest coquetry and debasing artifice, to gain that position and consideration by marriage, which to celibacy is denied. Fathers! cannot you alter these things? Perhaps not all at once; but consider the matter well when it is brought before you, receive it as a theme worthy of thought: do not dismiss it with an idle jest or an unmanly insult. You would wish to be proud of your daughters and not to blush for them - then seek for them an interest and an occupation which shall raise them above the flirt, the manoeuvrer, the mischief-making tale bearer (Shirley 392). [1]

Caroline Helstone's impassioned plea to the 'Men of England' makes a direct correlation between a woman's education and her life-style. The picture she paints of the choices available to young girl are bleak and desperate: an invalid, a "sour old maid" or a coquette.

The education of the heroine in these novels is perhaps the most complex and ambiguous of all the factors that influence her. Education develops the intellect and provides skills which give us choices in life, yet the heroines in Victorian novels are given only very limited

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[1] It is intriguing to note that she addresses her appeal to remedy matters to the patriarchy - Fathers!. The apostrophe "Men of England" reflects Mrs Ellis's "Daughters of England" and "Wives of England".

choices.

The quality of the heroine's education is often unclear and the general opinion of leading characters is that too much education is not suitable for young ladies. Mr Stelling, the tutor in Mill on the Floss, is of the opinion that girls, "can pick up a little of everything... They've a great deal of superficial cleverness; but they couldn't go far into anything. They're quick and shallow"(139), and hence, read novels!

Such a view is widely held by fictional characters; both men and women believed that women had little intellect and that much of what the other sex studied was beyond them. Dorothea had suspicions that in Greek, "there might be secrets not capable of explanation to a woman's reason"(89). And Mr Brooke's opinion was that

> "such deep studies, classics, mathematics, that kind of thing are too taxing for a woman...There is a lightness about the feminine mind - a touch and go - music, the fine arts, that kind of thing - they should study these up to a certain point, women should; but in a light way, you know. A woman should be able to sit down and play you or sing you a good English tune"(55).

The heroine who is allowed to be a clever woman must be careful not to let her intelligence outstrip that of the hero. Adult women who have developed their minds, humbly receive instruction from one more advanced in knowledge than themselves - the hero. Caroline Helstone learns French from Robert, and Shirley asks her lover/tutor to, "teach me and

help me to be good...be my master where I am faulty" (624). In this way the heroine can advance without challenging man's overall supremacy. This is what the characters in the novels are saying; it is what the heroines are made to do, but is it what the authors wish actually to convey to the reader?

The female novelists in particular, are constantly satirising this view of a woman's intellectual capabilities. Dorothea might choose to marry because she wished to serve a mind that had the benefit of a truly great education rather than the, "toy-box history of the world adapted to young ladies which had made the chief part of her education"(112), and yet after only six weeks of marriage we find her crying with frustration and disappointment. As the narrator scathingly observes:

> How was it that in the weeks since her marriage, Dorothea had not distinctly observed but felt with a stifling depression, that the large vistas and wide fresh air which she had dreamed of finding in her husband's mind were replaced by ante-rooms and winding passages which seemed to lead nowhere? (228).

Readers are led, along with Dorothea, to make their own judgement about the relative intellectual capabilities of Dorothea and Casaubon.

Some heroines take up academic studies when they are grown up; Ruth Hilton learns Latin (Ch X1X) and Dorothea works at Greek (Bk 1 Ch V11) but neither pursues her course out of interest's sake or for her own benefit, for self-

improvement, but rather that she may be able to assist others - Dorothea her husband, and Ruth, her son. Another mother, Amelia

> Had sat up of nights conning lessons and spelling over crabbed grammars and geography books in order to teach them to Georgy. She had worked even at Latin accidence, fondly hoping that she might be capable of instructing him in that language (Vanity Fair 475).

Despite the fact that their reason for acquiring knowledge is purely selfless, these heroines are able make great strides into the "masculine" world of education without any formal training, whatsoever. Ruth Hilton was an apprentice seamstress, "her mind was uncultivated, her reading scant", yet she was able to gain enough formal education to become governess to the Bradshaw girls, " and her ambition was to learn Latin"(Ruth 177). Caroline Helstone, has been given no schooling and yet not only does she read and enjoy Shakespeare, she is able to make a tart analogy between Coriolanus and Robert Moore's philosophy towards his workers:

> "Here's Shakespeare, she said, "and there's Coriolanus. Now, read, and discover by the feelings the reading will give you at once how low and how high you are" (90).

Despite her obvious brightness, Caroline is far from being portrayed as an intellectual in the novel. She spends her day in boredom sewing clothes for the "jews-basket". She eventually marries the hero and her problems appear to be

over. However, the ending appears contrived and Bronte's intentions unclear, "The story is told. I think I now see the judicious reader putting on his spectacles to look for the moral..."(Shirley 646). What is not unclear is Caroline's frustration with the limited choice that her lack of education has provided her:

> "Caroline," demanded Miss Keeldar, abruptly, "don't you wish you had a profession - a trade?" "I wish it fifty times a day. As it is, I often wonder what I came into the world for. I long to have something absorbing and compulsory to fill my head and hands, and to occupy my thoughts"(229).

The education that Caroline, and the majority of the heroines in Victorian novels, has received means that she has no ability to exercise rational decision making in the choice of her role or life style. She must marry, become a governess, or die an old maid. She has made no progress in her ability to exercise control over her own life and she can anticipate no viable alternatives. What has changed, however, is that she is no longer prepared to play the role of Perfect Lady with contentment. She is frustrated with the lack of meaning and direction in her life and angry that her position as a woman has meant that she has not received the kind of education that would enable her to make choices. This is an important development in the novel as it requires the heroine to have developed a degree of self-consciousness; an awareness of the limits inherent in her situation as Perfect Lady that was not present in the novels

of the turn of the century. The voice of these women is, at times, strident and demanding - a far cry from Mrs Ellis's softly spoken, submissive "Daughters of England".

Jessie and Rose Yorke, the two sisters who represent the next generation in the novel, Shirley, perhaps express a vision of new possibilities for women. Jessie's response to her mother's insistence that she do nothing but perfect the domestic talents of sewing and serving is an impassioned cry of frustration and denial:

> "Right Mother! And if my Master has given me ten talents, my duty is to trade with them, and make them ten talents more. Not in the dust of household drawers shall the coin be interred. I will not deposit it in a broken-spouted tea-pot, and shut it up in a china closet among tea-things. I will not commit it to your work table to be smothered in piles of woollen hose. I will not prison it in the linen-press to find shrouds among the sheets: and least of all, mother...will I hide it in a tureen of cold potatoes, to be ranged with bread, butter, pasty, and ham on the shelves of the larder"(Shirley 400).

This is a clear and unequivocal statement of dissatisfaction with the conduct manuals and the myth of the Dickensian domestic chatelaine. This young woman is not going to become either a Perfect Lady or a domestic slave.

There is one more important area of education that must be considered in order to present a complete picture of the choices and experiences that were given to the young heroines in the novels of Mrs Gaskell's contemporaries - the boarding school.

Miss Pinkerton's establishment, Chiswick Hall, attended

by Amelia Sedley and Becky Sharp, boasts that it turns out young ladies fitted to a, "polished and refined circle", displaying,"those virtues which characterise the young English gentlewoman, those accomplishments which become her birth and station"(Vanity Fair 5). What Amelia has learnt is recorded in a letter from the school to her parents:

> In music, in dancing, in orthography, in every variety of embroidery and needlework, she will be found to have realised her friend's fondest wishes. In geography there is still much to be desired; and a careful and undeviating use of the backboard, for four hours daily during the next three years, is recommended as necessary to the acquirement of that dignified deportment and carriage, so requisite for every young lady of fashion.
> In the principles of religion and morality, Miss Sedley will be found to be worthy...(5).

That these worthy accomplishments are satirised by all the novelists is obvious, but whatever the intention, this is the type of formal education most often experienced by the heroines in the nineteenth century novel.

The experience of Jane Eyre at Lowood, is vastly different from the training given to the privileged "young ladies of fashion"(Vanity Fair 32). Lowood is a charitable institution meant to produce teachers and governesses and as such it is concerned with providing a rudimentary education rather than tuition in finer accomplishments. Much time is devoted to "repetition" in subjects such as arithmetic, history and grammar. Religious instruction is a major part of the curriculum. The girls are taught plain sewing, and,

if they show aptitude, may take part in music lessons and learn French and drawing. In graduating from Lowood, Jane Eyre is faced with no other alternative than being a teacher. She advertises herself as a young lady, "qualified to teach the usual branches of a good English education, together with French, Drawing, and Music"(Jane Eyre 86). And, when questioned by Rochester as to her ambitions, she tells him, "The utmost I hope is, to save enough money out of my earnings to set up a school some day in a little house rented by myself"(202). This echoes the ambition of Lucy Snowe in Villette, and appears to be the summit to which a middle class heroine who is forced to earn her keep, may aspire. There are simply no alternatives presented to an impoverished gentlewoman other than to be a needlewoman, a teacher or the family spinster/nurse.

Given the poverty of women's education and its bias towards genteel accomplishments, it is not surprising that women rarely adopted a career outside of marriage through choice, for their education fitted them for few occupations. As Amelia Sedley found when faced with the prospect of trying to earn money, her schooling may have provided her with "those accomplishments which become her birth and station"(Vanity Fair 2) but these "accomplishments" have no value in the marketplace.

> Amelia thinks, and thinks, and racks her brain, to find some means of increasing the small pittance upon which the household is starving. Can she give lessons in anything? paint card-racks? do

> fine work? She finds that women are working hard, and better than she can, for twopence a day (Vanity Fair 509).

She tries painting, but without success. No one will buy her work. Then she advertises herself as wishing, "to undertake the education of some small girls, whom she would instruct in English, in French, in Geography, and in Music" (662). But this also proves of no avail. Her education, like that of so many others, has fitted her for so very little, in fact it has reduced her to a worthless and irrelevant stereotype.

Rarely, if ever, are heroines able to derive satisfaction from their work. With the usual occupation - sewing and teaching - they labour hard, with little personal gratification. They are without responsibility and have no authority, a situation irksome to nearly all. The intensity with which these frustrations and deprivations can be felt is vividly expressed by Mrs Pryor, "a toil-worn governess perishing of uncheered labour, breaking down before her time"(Shirley 435).

Under such conditions these women could not respect the work they did nor the people with whom they worked, and but for their need to earn their bread would have abandoned it. However, most of the actual heroines do not need to resort to earning a living and it is not a major consideration in most Victorian novels. The spectre of having to become a governess occasionally presents itself, as with Caroline

Helstone, but a "solution" to the problem is usually found in the form of matrimony.

As far as the novelists of this period were concerned a woman's life appeared to be complete and her story ended when she reached the church door. Marriage was the expectation of all the heroines and even if it was not a conscious ambition, they were brought up without any alternative view of the future. In very few cases, notably Jane Eyre's, were contingency plans made lest they fail to marry, for heroines were led to believe that marriage was the natural outcome of their lives. In fact, there are few detailed portraits provided of young married women, and even fewer of elderly spinsters.

Mrs Gaskell is remarkable amongst her contemporaries in the emphasis that she puts upon the presentation of the single woman in her work. Not only did she write an entire novel based upon a group of elderly, single women but the spinster appears in all of her major works - from the subsidiary portrait of Alice Wilson to the complexity of Charlotte Bronte herself. Cranford, of course, is her most celebrated study. The importance of Mrs Gaskell's depiction of these single women is not just in the life-styles that she presents them with but in her ability to imbue these women with a sense of fulfilment and purpose. She believes, as does John Stuart Mill, that a person's capacity for

happiness is not dependent upon another human being. The fact that her 'spinsters' lead full, independent, and often happy lives mocks the prejudices that we have just shown that most Victorian novelists reveal in their novels. In her exploration of the lives of unmarried women, Mrs Gaskell makes a substantial contribution towards the picture of women in the Victorian novel as individuals with, as George Eliot puts it, " a share of the more independent life; some joy of things for their own sake" (ed. Haight 107).

The idea of the emotionally stunted maiden aunt, who is forced to become a financial burden upon her relatives and whose anomalous position in society is an embarrassment is completely refuted by the lives of Miss Jenkyns, Miss Barker and Miss Pole. Not only have these women chosen single lives - they rejoice at the decision, " 'A man,' as one of them observed to me once, ' is so in the way in the house!'" (2). These women do not live necessarily within the confines of their family, becoming the doting aunt or the superior servant. They actually exercise a personal choice and prefer to live alone, or with their siblings, creating strong social or 'family' ties outside of marriage. The lives that they lead are as happy or unhappy as their married counterparts and the deciding factor is not whether they have a husband but what their basic nature is.

In writing Cranford, a book about elderly women, with no clearly defined characters, no heroine, and, in fact, no

"plot", Mrs Gaskell is breaking away from her contemporaries both in terms of subject matter and in the originality of her experiments with narrative and social observation.

In the first place, Cranford examines many of the prejudices of eighteenth-century society in the nineteenth-century world. Not everyone welcomed the assimilation of wealth and birth, for wealth was usually acquired by trade, and it was tacitly understood that a man could not belong both to society and to trade at the same time. The eighteenth century was the age of economic expansion, of the slave trade, the East India Company and of the South Sea Bubble. It was an age when city merchants, like Defoe himself, bought titles and lands from the encumbered aristocracy. It was an age, in short, when social boundaries were shifting.[1] The ladies of Cranford are the relics of this eighteenth century society - relics living in the age of Dickens, who replaces Dr Johnson as a literary model, the railway, which kills Captain Brown, and industry which, in the shape of Drumble, threatens the town's strict "code of gentility" (Cranford 109). The narrator, the daughter of one of Drumble's captains of industry, oscillates between the two towns. She is thus able to regard Cranford's prejudices with affectionate irony:

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[1] Thus Squire Hamley in Wives and Daughters, who dates his land and titles from the Heptarchy, looks down upon the prosperous Lord and Lady Cumnor, who only "came in" with Queen Anne.

> [S]he had a little fear lest, since my father had gone to live in Drumble, he might have engaged in that 'horrid cotton trade', and so dragged his family down out of 'aristocratic society' (106).

This question of trade is confronted head on in the so-called sheltered world of Cranford and prejudices melt away in the face of need. The practical solution that the women come to is far closer to that promulgated by *The Society for the Promotion of the Employment of Women* than it is to anything else found in a nineteenth century novel. Mary Smith, the narrator, points out the paucity of Miss Matty's education and the limited choices that this presents her with but she does not stop there:

> What she piqued herself upon...was making candle-lighters, or spills (as she preferred calling them), of coloured paper, cut so to resemble feathers, and knitting garters in a variety of dainty stitches...But would anyone pay to have their children taught these arts...No! there was nothing she could teach to the rising generation of Cranford; unless they had been quick learners and ready imitators of her patience, her humility, her sweetness, her quiet contentment with all that she could not do (185-86).

Despite her lack of education, Miss Matty does have to earn her own living and she finally ends up running her own small tea business. The Miss Barkers had run such a profitable milliner's shop that when Miss Barker died, Miss Betty was able to retire and "set up her cow; a mark of respectability in Cranford almost as decided as setting up a gig is among some people"(106). The humour does not disguise the practical attitude towards having to earn money. Instead of

bewailing their education, or lack of it, the inhabitants of Cranford assess their strengths and weaknesses and set their goals accordingly. Miss Jessie after the death of both her father and her sister calmly reviews her situation:

> "I can sew neatly...and I like nursing. I think too I could manage a house, if any one would try me as housekeeper; or I would go into a shop as a saleswoman, if they would have patience with me at first" (59).

Such a pragmatic attitude is refreshing after the passionate lament of the heroines in the novels of Mrs Gaskell's contemporaries. The type of jobs that Miss Jessie is contemplating may not be high powered or well paid but they reflect her abilities. She is not daunted at the prospect of becoming an 'old maid' - though who living in Cranford could be? - and she does not view work as demeaning. There is neither the passionate tone of frustration found in Caroline Helstone (Shirley) nor the ineffective despair voiced by Amelia (Vanity Fair).

The treatment of Cranford is deliberately light, the tone gentle and humorous, but this does not preclude the work providing insights into the most fundamental questions. Critics have dismissed it for its "lightness of treatment" (Wright 108) and Coral Lansbury considers it to be "the cracked touchstone" by which Mrs Gaskell's works have come to be judged, but Patsy Stoneham in her analysis of women's literature has stressed the preeminence of Cranford in her re-evaluation of Mrs Gaskell's canon (Elizabeth Gaskell 22).

Cranford is a story about women, written by a woman and self-consciously narrated by a woman. Ruth and Sylvia's Lovers were both concerned with female plots and in both novels the heroine ends up gaining the support and love that she needs from living in a community of women and feminized men. But Cranford has no conventional plot; it is a collection of stories self-consciously linked together by a female narrator. Even the concept of character is questionable, the reader is firmly kept at a distance. We may observe Miss Matty's grief at the death of her former lover, Farmer Holbrook, but we are never privy to her thoughts or feelings. The 'romance' is unfolded gradually through anecdote and speculation. Miss Pole tells Mary Smith, our narrator, of this old love story, but he "would not have been enough of a gentleman for the rector and Miss Jenkyns" (69). After meeting Mr Holbrook in town they are invited to his house and Miss Matty sees for the first time the place that might have been her home. "'I think it is very pretty,' said Miss Matty, with a soft, plaintiveness in her voice, and almost in a whisper"(73).

Miss Matty herself never speaks of her former love and there is a feeling that, along with Mary, we should not pry too much:

> But she never spoke of any former and more intimate acquaintance with Mr Holbrook....[S]he had shut it up close in her heart; and it was only by a sort of watching...that I saw how faithful

> her poor heart had been in its sorrow and its silence (78).

There is nothing ludicrous about this middle-aged love, but we are not allowed to get too close. Miss Matty cannot be a heroine or a fully rounded character because a character cannot grow if we are not able to gain knowledge of that growth. The characters in Cranford have to be assessed using a different criteria than that used for other Victorian novels. It is not a social novel or a political novel or a romantic novel, and its characters are barely characters. The only person that 'grows' in the novel is Mary Smith. Her role as the narrator has a multiplicity of functions - she is the anonymous reporter who links together the 'stories', she is the amused commentator that highlights both the strengths and the weaknesses of this community of elderly women and finally she is the active participator who becomes a fairy godmother and arranges the reunion of Miss Matty with her long lost brother. In the definition of a rounded or full character, Mary Smith is as close as we get in Cranford. This lack of a heroine, this focus on characters as a group, is an unusual literary convention amongst Victorian novelists and it is part of Mrs Gaskell's strength as a female novelist, and it is part of the strength of Cranford, part of the message from a society that has created its own rules, its own "strict code of gentility". "If called upon to define the work in terms

of literary genre, it would be necessary to see Cranford as Utopian literature" (Lansbury 86). Although no Utopia can ever seem paradise for all people, this community seems a little restricted even by Utopian standards - only elderly, eccentric, single women of a certain gentility need apply. However, the magic of Cranford does indeed lie in its presentation of a life-style for elderly spinsters that is full of interest and enjoyment. This community of women is not bitter or frustrated, and the ladies of Cranford have an inherent dignity that is not compromised by the fact that they all have an "individuality, not to say eccentricity, pretty strongly developed"(39). They do not consider themselves "old maids", nor do they view themselves as women who will die "weary and disappointed, despised and of no account" (The Professor 226). On the contrary, the love and respect that these women hold for one another emphasises the importance of attitude in determining how an individual views herself and is viewed by others:

> We all love Miss Matty, and I somehow think we are all of us better when she is near us (218).

The most unusual aspect of Cranford is that Mrs Gaskell has written a novel based around a group of elderly, quaint spinsters that holds our interest. We are truly fascinated by the day-to-day unfolding of their lives.

In presenting the story of these lives Mrs Gaskell continues her experiment with narrative technique in the

conspicuous playing with literary texts. Literature is both a subject and an agent and as such has a profound and acknowledged influence on the lives of the characters. The feud between Captain Brown and Miss Jenkyns at the start of the novel is on account of the merits of Charles Dickens and Dr Johnson. The importance of this disagreement is not the symbolism of change, as represented by Dickens, Drumble and railways, but the perception that the attack on the style of Dr Johnson is an attack on Miss Jenkyns herself. She has formed her own style of writing based on this high-flown, formal language:

> [Miss Jenkyn's] hand was admirably calculated, together with her use of many-syllabled words, to fill up a sheet, and then came the pride and delight of crossing...the words gathered size like snowballs, and towards the end of her letter, Miss Jenkyns used to become quite sesquipedalian (90).

Her life has been spent in writing letters for her father and even her hopes for the future had once been centred upon becoming the wife of an archdeacon in order to continue to write letters for him. In a very personal way the language that Miss Jenkyns has acquired has formed the type of person that she has become and has created the limits through which she can express herself: "Dr Johnson was, as she said, her model..."(48).

This conscious use of literary texts continues as the novel experiments with textuality, the layering of family letters, literary allusions, poetic quotations and anecdotal

stories. The love scene at Woodley where Miss Matty visits Mr Holbrook contains one of the most telling and humorous, insights into Mrs Gaskell's use of literature to highlight the difference between the ways in which men and women respond to language. Mr Holbrook reads out loud to the only woman that he has ever loved Tennyson's "Locksley Hall". This passionate description of a marriage ruined by the interference of the heroine's family and by her own weakness is a reflection of Mr Holbrook's own situation. However, Miss Matty falls asleep, lulled by the words and Miss Pole is caught up in counting stitches. The passion of the poem was never part of Miss Matty's character and such violent emotion is inaccessible to her. The scene is made doubly ironic by the fact that not only does Miss Matty fail to grasp the meaning of the poem or the parallel with her own life but her inappropriate comparison of this "pretty book" with "that beautiful poem of Dr Johnson's my sister used to read" (77), illustrates to the reader that all such high literary language has the same incomprehensible and soporific quality to her. On the other hand the poem, with its strongly passionate, masculine perspective is totally absorbing for Mr Holbrook who in his turn completely fails to understand Miss Matty's response - or even realise she has been asleep:

> "Pretty! madam! it's beautiful! Pretty, indeed!" "Oh yes I meant beautiful!" said she, fluttered at his disapproval of her word. "It's so like that beautiful poem of Dr Johnson's..."

> "I don't remember it," said he reflectively, "But I don't know Dr Johnson's poems well. I must read them." (77)

In her use of literary allusion in this scene, Mrs Gaskell is employing a similar technique to the 'mirroring' that she used to such effect in Sylvia's Lovers. Locksley Hall reflects the facts of Miss Matty and Mr Holbrook's love affair, but Miss Matty cannot even hear the words. In his absorption in the poem, Mr Holbrook fails to see that Miss Matty is asleep. Miss Matty's naivety reflects the innocence of the heroine within the poem itself and each layering of meaning only serves to underline how the man and the woman in this scene fail to understand one another - exactly as they did thirty years before.

The humour of this scene does not lessen the tragedy of the thwarted love affair. Miss Matty's rejection of her lover when she was a young girl is even more poignant as we realise how much she still cares for him after all these years:

> She gave me some good reason for wearing her best cap every day, and sat near the window, in spite of her rheumatism, in order to see, without being seen, down into the street. He came (78).

"He came" but he came in order to say that he was going to visit Paris - the Mecca of the Romantics and, to the popular mind, sexual revolution. Mr Holbrook dies shortly after his visit, and Miss Matty has to contend with the death of an old lover and the death of her dreams. The tragedy is very

real and is made even more palpable by the way in which she suppresses all outward signs of her grief as if this would still be a disloyalty to her dead sister and father who had so disapproved of the match:

> This effort at concealment was the beginning of the tremulous motion of head and hands which I have seen ever since in Miss Matty (81).

These thwarted love affairs are a tragic product of the autocratic Victorian family, and Mrs Gaskell presents a fine balance between revealing the waste such blind interference causes in women's lives and the fact that these women go on to live full lives. The situation where a young girl rejects the man she loves because he is not good enough for her family recurs in many of Mrs Gaskell's works, but it is in The Life of Charlotte Bronte that it becomes a serious indictment against a paternalistic authority.

Patrick Bronte opposed his daughter's marriage to his curate, because, as Mrs Gaskell wrote to John Forster "she had the chance of some body higher" (GL, 289 195). Charlotte herself wrote to Ellen Nussey (18th Dec 1852)

> I am afraid...that papa thinks a little too much about his want of money: he says that the match would be a degradation, that I should be throwing myself away, that he expects me, if I marry at all, to do very differently; in short, his manner of viewing the subject is, on the whole, far from being one in which I can sympathise (Wise & Symington 30-31).

However, although Charlotte Bronte might express her disagreement with her father's views, she would not consider

going against his wishes. The sense of duty and selflessness is too deeply embedded in her belief in herself as a woman. Her father's threat that if she marries "he will leave home and set up housekeeping for himself" is enough to prevent her from accepting the offer of marriage. At thirty-five years of age her primary concern was still to provide a comfortable and supportive home-life for her father.

This concept of aging parents expecting their unmarried daughters to remain at home and look after them was a contributory factor in the increase in the number of single women in Victorian society. Other elements that contributed towards the changes in the pattern of family life in the nineteenth century took place on a number of different levels. One dimension was demographic, evident in a marked decline of infant and child mortality, a gradual drop in fertility and a lengthening of life expectancy. These shifts made the family a much smaller, more psychologically intense unit. The change in the economic self-sufficiency of households - less domestic industry - meant increased isolation and separation from the work force. As has been pointed out in chapter one, closely related to this separate sphere of domesticity were profound changes in middle-class women's roles and status. The result of these demographic and economic changes was the creation of the narrow, nuclear family with an autocratic father and submissive wife and

children. This sometimes led to the situation of the young girl's unwilling rejection of her lover, but another more significant effect of this repressive family unit was the bond that was created between brothers and sisters. In an age in which individuals felt cast adrift in a world of social change the sibling bond acquired new symbolic significance as an emblem of continuity and stability, a model of warmth, security and support. This presentation of siblings living together is an important aspect of Mrs Gaskell's presentation of unmarried women. The relationship between siblings living together is an essential part of the harmony of certain united family groupings. Faith and Thurston Benson in Ruth provide the most interesting example of the type of life that an unmarried woman could expect from forming a home with her brother. A typical Sunday, before Ruth and her baby appeared in the home of the Bensons, reveals domestic quietism and joy. Mr Benson would be in his study teaching the young boys and Miss Benson would be in the parlour with her, "neat-tippeted maidens" (151). Brother and sister are full of love and affection for one another and it was by her own choice that Faith Benson refused to marry for, " she would never leave Master Thurston, as could never marry" (164). Within this portrait of sibling affection, Mrs Gaskell also provides an interesting commentary upon the 'natural superiority' of male character and intellect. At a time when it was

customary to think of the man as the dominating force, in the Benson household brother and sister have reversed male and female characteristics. Elizabeth Gaskell has given to Faith those attributes normally associated with the Victorian male; a strong, decisive ability to act with little or no doubt or introspection, she, " had the power which some people have , of carrying their wishes through to their fulfilment; her will was strong, her sense was excellent, and people yielded to her" (115). Thurstan Benson is a quiet gentleman more at home with ideas and books than he is with people and events. He blushes at improper suggestions or events (122) and turns to his sister when it comes to making the practical decisions over how Ruth could be integrated into their home, "How could it be managed, Faith?" (122). However, his feminine characteristics make him sensitive and considerate rather than incapable and ineffectual. He does not shirk responsibility, as does Mr Hale in North and South, but rather reflects and meditates upon social morality and the truth behind sin. Once convinced that he is right, then he will brave public censure and personal loss to defend his beliefs. Together, he and Faith complement one another and the home that they have formed is full of the giving and receiving of affection that Elizabeth Gaskell felt should be the mainspring of family life.

This presentation of a household of sibling love is a

reflection of the peace found in Cranford. Mr Peter, the long lost brother, returns to live with his sister, Miss Matty, at the end of the novel. Although this much-hoped-for return does appear rather awkward and contrived in the novel, it was a literary cliche that actually reflected an aspect of Victorian life. Elizabeth Gaskell lost her own brother at sea and she, like Miss Matty, must have dreamt of his return.

However, unlike the Benson household, Peter arrives to live with his sister only after her home life is already established. Miss Matty has passed through various crises in her life and when Peter arrives she is happy, content, loved and successful. It is her friends that have replaced the role of the family, giving her support, love, kindness, sharing and intimacy. At the time when she faced financial ruin, it was Miss Pole who arranged the meeting of concerned female friends who helped her to financial security. The love that brother and sister have for one another is strong, but Cranford is more a celebration of friendship than of sibling affection.

The high value put upon friendship is prevalent in all of Elizabeth Gaskell's novels, but it is singularly important in Cranford. Women living happy, full lives supported by the love and friendship of other women were a challenge to both the Victorian picture of women and the Victorian understanding of the family. "In the context of

Victorian society, it was a singular heresy [for friendship] to be endorsed quite so openly" (Lansbury 88).

In 1870 the Saturday Review published two articles entitled "Friendship"(15 Jan 1870 pp. 77-8) and "The Exclusiveness of Women" (19 Feb 1870 pp.242-3). These articles presented women as incapable of forming close supportive relationships and implied that "you seldom see any sense of the community of sex" (Saturday Review 243). In reply to such an attack on a woman's incapability of forming deep and meaningful friendships, Frances Cobbe wrote in Fraser's Magazine:

> If she have no sister, she has inherited the blessed power of a woman to make true friendships, such as not one man's heart in a hundred can ever imagine...Nor does the 'old maid' contemplate a solitary age as the bachelor must usually do. It will go hard but she will find a woman ready to share it (Celibacy v. Marriage. Old Maids, their sorrows and Pleasures, Feb. 1862, p.233).

This "blessed power of a woman to make true friendships" is at the heart of the Cranfordian community. The ladies gather together to play cards, to socialise, to entertain one another and when it comes to giving "real,tender good offices to each other whenever they are in distress, the ladies of Cranford are quite sufficient (39).

Single women living on their own in any era often need to create these "pseudo-families" to replace the function usually provided by a family. In practical terms this means providing emotional support in times of tragedy and death,

providing financial support in times of economic hardship and providing social support at anniversaries and celebrations. At the first death in Cranford, Captain Brown's funeral, Miss Jenkyn's support of Miss Jessie was "invaluable, allowing her to weep her passionate fill" (57). Miss Pole's unassuming organisation of financial aid to Miss Matty in her hour of need is a touching example of the type of quiet, undramatic type of support that is offered as true friendship in Cranford. However, friendship is really put to the test when the ladies have to brave the horrors of Darkness Lane on a night when robbers abound. Miss Pole and Miss Matty have for many years spent the anniversary of Mrs Forrester's wedding day with her, but this year the invitation has arrived in the middle of the terror inspired by the threat of thieves in the area. As readers we are led to believe that these robbers are more imaginary than real, but the fear that they inspire in the ladies of Cranford is certainly real and Miss Matty makes a tour of inspection of her house every night, armed with a poker. Mrs Forrester's house lies a little outside Cranford and the only way to get there is through a dark and lonely lane and both Miss Pole ano Miss Matty would far rather stay at home, however, "they gallantly determined to nail their colours to the mast, and to go through Darkness-lane rather than fail in loyalty to their friend" (147). This drop in the level of intensity from the funeral of a friend to a scary walk through a lane

could be considered more an example of bathos than true feeling, but that would belittle the very real effort that these two women were prepared to make in order that their friend would not be left "to a solitary retrospect of her not very happy or fortunate life" (147).

The day-to-day lives of this female community bear testimony to Frances Cobbe's maxim on the "blessed power of a woman to make true friendships" (233). Mrs Gaskell has created a world where the attitude of the women in Cranford could be used over a hundred years later as the forerunner to Nicola Pensiero's words:

> the responsibility for happiness goes back to one's self: with or without a mate, I'm determined to make a life of my own that is filled with good friends and good times. Attitude may not be everything, but it sure helps" (Nicola Pensiero, Newsweek, 9).

However, whilst the lack of a husband is considered no disadvantage at all: the lack of children for a woman is not treated in the same way by Mrs Gaskell. Both Miss Matty and Miss Benson are presented as being incomplete women without the presence of children in their homes. Miss Benson, and her middle-aged servant, Sally, initially express a strong antipathy towards the idea of a baby being introduced into their lives, "Lord bless us and save us! -a baby in the house! Nay, then my time's come, and I'll pack up and begone. I never could abide them things. I'd sooner have rats in the house" (138). Yet with the introduction of a baby into the house both these women become its willing

slave, practising many small economies in order to make the child's life one of ease and comfort. Of all family relationships, it is the maternal one which is the strongest, yet over and over again in Mrs Gaskell's novels this role can extend beyond that of the actual family. Miss Benson's love for the child is tapping her deepest instincts for "Nature had intended her warm instincts to find vent in a mother's duties; her heart yearned after children, and made her restless in her childless state, without her well knowing why" (196). Similarly Miss Matty, after expressing a wistful longing after children, eventually finds herself living with a baby god-daughter who "was as much at home in her arms as in its mother's" (288). It is the inclusion of a young child into their lives that makes these women "happy and satisfied and peaceful"(Ruth 196)

The fact that Mrs Gaskell writes about the bond of maternal love being developed between a child and an adult other than its biological mother is hardly surprising considering the deep love and affection she held for her own aunt. In a similar way many of the unmarried women in her novels become surrogate mothers: Amante, Miss Matty, Hester Rose, Miss Benson and Sally all develop the deep bond of maternal affection towards the babies in their home.

> I think an unmarried life may be to the full as happy, in process of time but I think that there is a time of trial to be gone through with women, who naturally yearn after children (GL 16).

This focus upon the lives of older women, women who are not

obsessed with finding a husband and who live happy and fulfilled lives is unique among Victorian novelists. Not only do the Cranford ladies successfully run small businesses, support one another in times of need or stress and celebrate social events and anniversaries together but they have fun - despite the fact that they are elderly spinsters.

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