

**ELIZABETH GASKELL AND ROMANTICISM:  
THE ROMANTIC INHERITANCE AND HER SHORTER WORKS**

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## Notes on Style and Abbreviations

### Style

In matters of style I have consulted the MHRSA Style Book, fifth edition (London: Modern Humanities Research Association, 1996). These guidelines have been followed closely. Further clarification has been added as necessary. Short quotations included in the text of the thesis are generally given with the following information, as applicable: abbreviated title of text; volume number; page number and, in the case of poetry, the opening line number. Longer quotations, set off from the main text, give the abbreviated title of text; volume number; page number and, in the case of poetry, the opening and closing line number.

### Abbreviations

The first reference to any work is given in full. Subsequent references are given in an abbreviated form, as indicated after the first full reference. In the case of journals, the full title is given in the first reference, with a recognized abbreviated form in subsequent references, as in the following examples:

Full title	Abbreviation
<i>Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine:</i>	<i>Blackwood's</i>
<i>The Cornhill Magazine:</i>	<i>Cornhill</i>
<i>Edinburgh Review :</i>	<i>Edinburgh</i>
<i>Gaskell Society Journal :</i>	<i>GSJ</i>
<i>Sartain's Union Magazine :</i>	<i>SUM</i>

All short forms of books and articles can be traced in the Bibliography

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the relationship between Elizabeth Gaskell and Romanticism, as shown in her shorter works. This investigation will be conducted in three principal ways: a consideration of Romanticism as a cultural phenomenon; a discussion of the cultural environment in which Gaskell was nurtured; and a critical appraisal of a selection of her shorter works. The first chapter is a consideration and discussion of Romanticism as a cultural shift which manifested itself through the closing decades of the eighteenth century and the early decades of the nineteenth century. Aspects of this cultural shift considered include literature, music and the visual arts. The second chapter focuses on biographical considerations with particular reference to Elizabeth Gaskell's family circumstances and the kind of education to which she had access. The remaining chapters offer a detailed discussion of a representative selection of her shorter works. These texts have been chosen to reveal her early collaboration with her husband William Gaskell; her knowledge of Romantic poets; and ways in which she developed as a writer. This development shows an engagement with an increasingly wide range of Romantic poets and a willingness on her part to engage with the darker side of Romanticism, especially through the use of Gothic techniques. The focus is on Gaskell's shorter works because these texts have received far less critical attention than her full-length novels and because of her contribution to the rise of the modern short story, as a genre distinct from the novel.

## Chapter One: Introduction

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate Elizabeth Gaskell's relationship with Romanticism, as shown in her shorter works. In so doing, I hope to challenge accepted views, in which she is seen as principally a Victorian novelist. Chapter One will be a consideration of aspects of European and British Romanticism to provide a context for the discussion of Gaskell and her work. The second chapter will include a consideration of significant cultural influences on Gaskell's early life, a time which, because she was born in 1810, predated the Victorian era. The remaining chapters will focus on a representative selection of Gaskell's shorter works. This body of work has received far less critical attention than her full-length novels, since the success of the longer works has tended to obscure the quality and range of the shorter pieces. A selection of Gaskell's shorter works will be explored here to show how key aspects of Romanticism constituted an important influence on her development as a writer.

It is tempting to think of Elizabeth Gaskell's writing career as one that began with her first full-length novel, *Mary Barton*, written in 1847 and published a year later in 1848. It is a commonly held view that, following a personal loss, she suddenly took up her pen and burst onto the literary scene. This overriding association of Gaskell with *Mary Barton* contributes to her reputation as a Victorian novelist. If, however, we work backwards from 1848, we may recognize a situation that is more complex. Before *Mary Barton* caused a stir, Gaskell had three short stories published between 1847 and 1848 by William and Mary Howitt. In 1847 the

Howitts also published her essay on the lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Eight years before *Mary Barton*, William Howitt had published two of her descriptive essays. In 1837, a full decade before *Mary Barton*, she collaborated with her husband on *Sketches Among the Poor: No.1* for *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, a journal published monthly from its inception in the spring of 1817 and throughout the nineteenth-century.<sup>1</sup>

Even earlier than this, Elizabeth Gaskell had formed a habit of writing regularly, but with no thought of publication. Her earliest extant letters, written from June 1831 to August 1832, show a facility with language, and an ability to express thought and feeling while she was still a young and unmarried woman.<sup>2</sup> This habit of letter writing continued throughout her life and the letters indicate her awareness of audience as well as her developing consciousness as she grew from care-free young woman to a mature wife and mother. This awareness of audience stood her in good stead when writing for publication, since it enabled her to recognize the demands of publishers while pursuing her own artistic intentions. She was, therefore, able to draw on skills that were already demonstrated. Many of her letters written to close friends or relatives show a facility for understanding her own deep feelings, confronting them and expressing them lucidly to others. Her sensitivity is also demonstrated by the way in which she empathised with the feelings of other people. When writing to publishers and to other writers, she

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<sup>1</sup> For bibliographical information on Elizabeth Gaskell's writings, see *The Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature*, ed. by Joanne Shattock, 3rd edn, vol. IV: 1800-1900 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), cols 1291-1301; hereafter Shattock, *CBEL*, and Walter J. Smith, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Bibliographical Catalogue* (Los Angeles: Heritage Bookshop, 1998); hereafter Smith, *Catalogue*.

<sup>2</sup> *Further Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, ed. by John Chapple and Alan Shelston (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 1-21; hereafter *Gaskell Further Letters*.

adopted a more formal approach and, where necessary, demonstrated an ability to defend her own business interests.

A further example of Gaskell's early writing is the diary she kept from March 1835 to October 1838.<sup>3</sup> This journal was dedicated to her infant daughter, Marianne, and was not meant for publication. It was intended that only Marianne should read the diary and that she should read it when she became an adult, finding it most valuable when she herself approached motherhood. The diary is Gaskell's first sustained piece of writing, and it reveals as much about herself as it does about the early years of her first child. Not only does Gaskell record her child's activities and stages of growth; she also reflects on her own responses to these experiences. This diary, in recording the intimate relationship between mother and infant daughter, provides insights into Gaskell's feelings and her capacity to relate to the inner lives of others. In her introduction to Elizabeth Gaskell's diary, Anita Wilson observes that by the time Marianne was one year old she 'had become her mother's first character study'.<sup>4</sup> By the time her second daughter, Meta, was fourteen months old, Gaskell was noting in her diary the different personalities of the two children.<sup>5</sup> Observations such as these are made by most parents, but recording them in a diary is less usual, and, as noted by Wilson, her character studies developed into perceptive character sketches.<sup>6</sup> There is no doubt that motherhood gave Gaskell an opportunity to develop her aptitude

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<sup>3</sup> *Private Voices: The Diaries of Elizabeth Gaskell and Sophia Holland*, ed. by J. A. V. Chapple and Anita Wilson (Keele: Keele University Press, 1996), pp. 50-71; hereafter Chapple, *Private Voices*.

<sup>4</sup> Chapple, *Private Voices*, p. 21.

<sup>5</sup> Chapple, *Private Voices*, p. 68.

<sup>6</sup> Chapple, *Private Voices*, p. 27.



for character analysis and that she used this opportunity to the full. This fact is demonstrated in a letter to her sister-in-law, in which Gaskell says, 'These are my 4 children; for you must go on knowing them as they are, not their mere outsides, which are all you can see in pops'.<sup>7</sup> Gaskell's facility for psychological insight has been noted by her biographers. Winifred Gérin, commenting on the success of Gaskell as an author, placed emphasis on her ability to write about people 'from without and within, by the sheer sincerity of her sympathy and receptivity'.<sup>8</sup> In the concluding paragraph of her introduction to Gaskell's diary, Wilson takes up Gérin's point, noting that it reflects Gaskell's own attitude to her children (as quoted above), and that 'Gaskell's diary reveals the importance of her maternal role in developing these qualities'.<sup>9</sup>

*My Diary* will not be examined in this thesis because it was not intended for publication. For the same reason, Gaskell's sonnet 'On Visiting the Grave of My Stillborn Little Girl', composed in 1836, will be omitted. Her early essays published by William Howitt are also omitted. Her contribution to the second edition of William Howitt's *Rural Life of England* (1839), which describes old country customs, was extracted by William Howitt from a letter written by Elizabeth Gaskell in 1838 to his wife Mary.<sup>10</sup> While this letter was written in a

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<sup>7</sup> *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, ed. by J. A. V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1966, repr. 1997), p.161; hereafter *Gaskell Letters*. In this context pops are brief visits.

<sup>8</sup> Winifred Gérin, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990; 1st pub. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p.78; hereafter Gérin.

<sup>9</sup> Chapple, *Private Voices*, p. 41.

<sup>10</sup> Jenny Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories* (London: Faber, 1993), pp.117-118; hereafter Uglow, and *Gaskell Letters*, pp. 28-33. William Howitt's adaptation of Elizabeth Gaskell's letter can be found in William Howitt, *The Rural Life of England*, 3rd edn (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1844), pp.589-591. Howitt incorporated extracts from Gaskell's letter into his own chapter on lingering customs.

formal manner, with the intention of impressing the Howitts, it was not a self-conscious attempt at writing for publication, as were *Sketches Among the Poor: No.1* and *Libbie Marsh's Three Eras*. A more deliberate early attempt to write for publication was Elizabeth Gaskell's description of Clopton Hall sent to William Howitt in 1838 when she learnt that he was planning a book on historic houses. The book, *Visits to Remarkable Places: Old Halls, Battle Fields, and Scenes Illustrative of Striking Passages in English History and Poetry*, was published in 1840 and Elizabeth Gaskell's contribution takes the form of a letter which gives a descriptive account of a visit she made to Clopton Hall as a schoolgirl.<sup>11</sup> The principal significance of this piece of writing is the fact that William Howitt was so impressed with it that, in addition to incorporating the material into his own section on Clopton Hall in his chapter on Stratford-on-Avon, he replied to Elizabeth Gaskell urging her to 'use her pen for the public benefit'.<sup>12</sup> Although 'Clopton Hall' will not be discussed here in detail, it does provide evidence of Gaskell's early interest in the Gothic.

Although not all of Gaskell's early texts will be discussed in detail, an awareness of them enables us to recognize some of the qualities that were inherent in her writing. A recognition of these qualities, especially those discussed by Wilson and

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<sup>11</sup> William Howitt, *Visits to Remarkable Places: Old Halls, Battle Fields, and Scenes Illustrative of Striking Passages in English History and Poetry*, 2 vols (London: Longman, Orme, Brown, Green, & Longmans, 1840); hereafter Howitt, *Visits*. Howitt's section entitled 'Clopton Hall', is part of his chapter on Stratford-on-Avon (I, 130-146). Elizabeth Gaskell's contribution to this chapter (pp.135-139) is anonymous, the only attribution being Howitt's reference to a 'fair lady' who wrote to him on seeing the announcement of his forthcoming book. Gaskell's 'Clopton Hall' is reproduced in the Knutsford edition of *Mary Barton*, ed. by A. W. Ward, as 'Clopton House', pp. 505-508. For Mary Howitt's account of Elizabeth Gaskell's letter describing Clopton Hall, see *Mary Howitt: An Autobiography*, ed. by Margaret Howitt (London: Isbister [n.d.]), p.182; hereafter Howitt, *Autobiography*.

<sup>12</sup> Howitt, *Autobiography*, p. 182.

Gérin, challenges any belief that Gaskell wrote primarily in the realist mode, with success depending heavily on close observation of external facts, including precise geographical details. External facts are accurately represented in Gaskell's fiction, but not without signification. Her description goes beyond naturalism to include psychological realism. Her sensibility, probably inherent, and developed to a high degree as a young mother, enabled her to represent the inner life of her fictional characters as well as their physical appearance and surroundings. From her schooldays, and throughout her early adult life, Gaskell practised and developed a range of writing skills, including descriptive essays, versification, diaries, and letters. This means that she was working in recognisably Romantic forms: generally subjective, sometimes private and confessional. The recent publication of *Private Voices* and *Gaskell Further Letters* has made possible a wider readership of her diary and an expanded range of her letters, challenging earlier perceptions of Gaskell as a writer. It is now apparent that when, in 1847, her husband pointed her in the direction of professional authorship, she had served a valuable apprenticeship.

Gaskell's earliest surviving texts, including early letters, her diary dedicated to Marianne, and her contribution to *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, were written at the time that is generally understood to have marked the closing years of the Romantic period. It is, therefore, misleading to view her as entirely a Victorian. As Alan Shelston points out, many of her letters remind us of the fact

that Gaskell's formative years were pre-Victorian.<sup>13</sup> And this means that she was influenced, in no small degree, by the Romantic age.

Before discussing Gaskell's formative years I propose to discuss Romanticism as a cultural shift and its contribution to Elizabeth Gaskell's cultural inheritance. This is necessary, not only because Gaskell's formative years were pre-Victorian, but because adults who were significant to her, including family and close family friends, were themselves nurtured during the Romantic period. Consequently, she was exposed to a cultural inheritance derived from her family circle. Aspects of Romanticism to be discussed here will be principally writing, both poetry and prose. Consideration will be given firstly to European Romanticism, and then, more specifically, to Romanticism as it manifested itself in Britain. I shall conclude this chapter with a more detailed look at the contributions to British Romanticism that were most seminal for Elizabeth Gaskell. Wordsworth will be studied here for his subject matter, which was new to English poetry, and for his approach, in which all aspects of human life were given the potential to be poetic. For these reasons, Wordsworth represents a stream of Romanticism that influenced his own lifetime and the Victorian era. His influence on Elizabeth Gaskell will be explored in later chapters of this thesis.

There are difficulties in defining both the time span of Romanticism and the exact nature of Romanticism as a cultural shift. With regard to time span reference to the Romantic period here will be approximately to the final three decades of the

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<sup>13</sup> *Gaskell Further Letters*, p. xii.

eighteenth century and the first four decades of the nineteenth century, a time of political, social, and economic upheaval, encompassing the French Revolution and the Reform Bill. With regard to the term 'Romantic Period', this needs to be treated with caution, since it is a term that was applied retrospectively.<sup>14</sup> This retrospective recognition of a cultural shift or movement is not a strict classification, for not all writers of that period were what we now term Romantics. Neither is it true to say that all who wrote before or after that time were not Romantics, or did not show aspects of Romanticism. There is, moreover, the notion that Romanticism is not a question of epoch at all, but of temperament, with Romanticists and Classicists in all ages.<sup>15</sup> Hugh Honour, in his book *Romanticism*, says that 'Romanticism is precisely situated neither in a choice of subject nor in exact truth, but in a way of feeling'. This particular 'way of feeling', he says, was more complex than a crude reaction to the rationalism of the eighteenth century.<sup>16</sup> Nonetheless, with its elevation of the human imagination and feeling, Romanticism is seen by many to be in opposition to excessive rationality.

One of the first European writers to elevate human feeling during the Romantic period was Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832). His poetic drama *Faust* was begun in 1770. The first and most influential part was published in 1808: the second part in 1832. His novel, *Sorrows of Young Werther*, was published in

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<sup>14</sup> Marilyn Butler, *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries: English Literature and its Background 1760-1830* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), p.1; hereafter Butler. Butler reminds us that it was only in the later nineteenth century that an English Romantic 'movement' was recognized.

<sup>15</sup> Edward J. Dent, *The Rise of Romantic Opera*, ed. by Winton Dean (Cambridge, London and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 9; hereafter Dent.

<sup>16</sup> Hugh Honour, *Romanticism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991; 1st pub. Allan Lane, 1979), pp.14-15; hereafter Honour.

1774. Within his own life-time, Goethe was established in Germany as a writer of seminal importance for what came to be known as German Romanticism. While the European Romantic movement can be seen to have started in Germany with Goethe, the indications are that in France, Romantic writing began later. Victor Hugo (1802-1885) is regarded as the central figure in the Romantic movement in France. His most important works, however, were written during the later years of the Romantic era: *Cromwell* (1827), *Hernani* (1830), and *Ruy Blas* (1838). His most famous work, *Les Misérables*, was not published until 1862. It was not writing, but the visual arts, that led the way in French Romanticism. Throughout Europe and Britain, Romantic art was represented by the rise of landscape painting which often suggested man's longing for an ideal relationship with nature. During the Romantic period a secular communion with nature appeared to be taking precedence, in the minds of artists, over the ritualistic communion of Church ceremony.

While British artists, most notably J. M. W. Turner (1775-1851), and John Constable (1776-1837), made an important contribution to Romantic art, through their depictions of landscape, it is literature that is most closely associated with English Romanticism. In *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries*, Marilyn Butler makes an association between the subjectivity of Romanticism and the increased popularity of literary biography in the first three decades of the nineteenth century. This interest, claims Butler, 'was part of a passion for documenting the natural world, including the human and social world'. What was beginning to

emerge was a taste for the 'artist as a hero'.<sup>17</sup> Classic biographies of the Romantic age include Boswell's *Life of Johnson* (1791) and Scott's *Life of Napoleon Bonaparte* (1827). The success of these books paved the way for the popularity of this genre, and for the increasing number of biographies published in the Victorian age, examples of which include Carlyle's *Life of Sterling* (1851) and John Forster's *Life of Dickens* (1874). When, in 1855, Elizabeth Gaskell began a biography of her friend and fellow-writer Charlotte Brontë, she initially took as a model Carlyle's *Life of Sterling*.

The subjectivity of Romanticism also found expression in journal writing, since the private and confessional nature of this form provides scope for the representation of personal feeling. It is also a literary form particularly compatible with women's opportunities for writing. As noted earlier in this chapter, a journal could provide an outlet for a young mother's maternal concerns. Where only short spaces of time could be snatched during the day for writing, diary entries, which can be quite brief but meaningful if they are consistent, can be the most convenient form of artistic expression. Of all journal writers who witnessed the Romantic age, the one who is most widely read today, though not in her own lifetime, is probably Dorothy Wordsworth (1771-1855). Susan Levin identifies, in Dorothy Wordsworth's writing, a Romantic concern with the growth of self and its relationship with the external world.<sup>18</sup> Dorothy Wordsworth's journals contain more descriptive detail than Elizabeth Gaskell's, which makes for longer

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<sup>17</sup> Butler, p. 2.

<sup>18</sup> Susan M. Levin, *Dorothy Wordsworth and Romanticism* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers, 1987), pp. 5-6; hereafter Levin.

documents, yet the time span is no greater.<sup>19</sup> As with Gaskell, Dorothy did not write her journals with an eye to publication. The Alfoxden Journal was written with her brother William and his friend Coleridge in mind, but the Grasmere Journals were written solely for William to read.<sup>20</sup> The 1803 Scottish Journal, composed after Dorothy, William and Coleridge had returned to Grasmere from their tour in Scotland in September 1803, was meant to be read only by family members and a small circle of friends.<sup>21</sup> For Dorothy, her journal writing may have become a process of conscious formation of her own self (something that may also be said about Gaskell's diary), but it also provides insights into the lives of her brother and Coleridge.

It is now recognized that, although the Romantic canon is dominated by male writers, women made an important contribution to literature during the Romantic period.<sup>22</sup> This writing often consisted of relatively short pieces, such as diaries, journals, letters, essays and reviews, though novels, too, were written by women during this time. One of the most prolific women writers of this period was Maria Edgeworth (1768-1849), who, from 1795 to 1834, participated in all the aforementioned forms of writing, sometimes in collaboration with her father

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<sup>19</sup> *The Alfoxden Journal* contains entries from January 1798 to April 1798; *The Grasmere Journals* contain entries from May 1800 to January 1803.

<sup>20</sup> Dorothy Wordsworth, *The Grasmere Journals*, ed. by Pamela Woof (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1993; previously pub. 1991); hereafter Wordsworth, *Grasmere Journals*. On page xv Woof notes that Dorothy wrote this journal solely for her brother William, while the *Alfoxden Journal* reflected an experience shared with William and with Coleridge. Neither journal was published in Dorothy's lifetime.

<sup>21</sup> Dorothy Wordsworth, *Recollections of a Tour Made in Scotland*, ed. by Carol Kyros Walker (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997), pp. 18-19.

<sup>22</sup> For a selection of writings by women during this period see *Women's Writing of the Romantic Period, 1789-1836: An Anthology*, ed. by Harriet Devine Jump (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997); hereafter Jump. Jump notes in particular a marked increase in women writers between the start of the eighteenth century and the 1790s (p. xi).



Richard Lovell Edgeworth, but also in her own right. Edgeworth's perspective encompassed domestic matters, including occupation for children, and ideas on education. She wrote stories and plays for children and, with her father, a treatise on education. In her *Letters for Literary Ladies* (1795), Maria Edgeworth took the opportunity to explore the dichotomy between sensibility and rationality, as it affected the lives of women.<sup>23</sup> In her own lifetime she was admired by other writers of the Romantic period, including Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832), who acknowledged his own debt to her for the development of the regional novel.

Central to the development of Romanticism, however, was the rise of a quite different kind of novel: the Gothic novel. Although Horace Walpole is often credited with initiating this particular genre with *The Castle of Otranto* (1765), women also made a vital contribution. Through the techniques and images of the Gothic, female writers could delineate a specifically female experience, one that often included reproductive concerns, and fears of patriarchal repression. One of the most enduring Gothic novels is Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), notable for its themes of monstrous creation, pursuit and terror. An earlier exponent of the Gothic novel was Ann Radcliffe (1764-1823), whose influence on later Romantic writers was so widely recognized that John Keats referred to her as 'Mother Radcliffe'.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Maria Edgeworth, *Letters for Literary Ladies, to which is added: An Essay on the Noble Science of Self-Justification* (1795), ed. by Claire Conolly (London: Dent; Vermont: Tuttle, 1993), pp. 39-58.

<sup>24</sup> For Keats's view of Ann Radcliffe, see the Introduction in Ann Radcliffe, *A Sicilian Romance*, ed. by Alison Milbank (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.9; hereafter Radcliffe, *Sicilian Romance*.

Gothic techniques, central to all forms of Romantic art, are derived from the human imagination and are, therefore, symptomatic of the Romantic imagination and an example of the importance attached to the imagination by Romantic artists. For the writer John Ruskin (1819-1900), it was the Gothic architecture of the Middle Ages that was important. For Ruskin, architecture was 'a science of feeling rather than of rule, a ministry to the mind, more than to the eye'.<sup>25</sup> For him, the architectural style that was most compatible with his view of architecture was that of the Middle Ages, because of its opposition to classicism. Although Ruskin's writing and art were completed mainly in the Victorian age, his Romantic inheritance is evident in many of his written statements, his paintings, and particularly in his influential six-volume work, *Modern Painters* (1843-1860), in which he defends the work of the Romantic painter, J. M. W. Turner. Although he is regarded as a Victorian, he was nurtured during the Romantic age and began his writing at the end of this period.

I would now like to turn to poetry of the Romantic period, and in particular to a group of British male poets, some of whom have been touched on earlier in this chapter. Most, but not all, are regarded as contributors to the Romantic canon. They are George Crabbe (1754-1832), William Blake (1757-1827), William Wordsworth (1770-1850), Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), Lord Byron (1788-1824), P. B. Shelley (1792-1822), and John Keats (1795-1821). While these poets make their presence felt, to a lesser or greater degree, in Gaskell's shorter works, they also represent the diversity and complexity of Romantic

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<sup>25</sup> Honour, p.145. Honour is quoting from John Ruskin, *The Poetry of Architecture* (1837-1838).

expression. This complexity is noted and discussed by Marilyn Butler in her conclusion to *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries*: “Romanticism” is inchoate because it is not a single intellectual movement but a complex of responses to certain conditions which Western society has experienced and continues to experience since the middle of the eighteenth century’.<sup>26</sup> Among poets, not all challenged the earlier formal properties of poetry as Wordsworth did. George Crabbe (1754-1832), for example, continued to use the rhyming couplets of his Augustan predecessors, although he broke new ground by focusing on the reality of life among the rural poor. His representations of rural life, however, are very different from Wordsworth’s. While the Lake poet sought to give dignity to his characters drawn from humble life, Crabbe took a more pessimistic view of human nature. Yet we recognize him as a poet of the Romantic period because he participated in that transformation in which common life replaced upper-class life as the focus of characterization and milieu.<sup>27</sup> This preoccupation with humble life aligns Crabbe with Wordsworth, but representation of humble life is not an essential requirement for the designation of ‘Romantic poet’. Coleridge, Wordsworth’s closest contemporary, and one of the most original poets, chose very different subjects, especially when we consider *Christabel* (1816) and *Kubla Khan* (1816). His most famous poem, *The Ancient Mariner* (1798), features seafaring men who have no social significance, but they are not the subject of the poem. Coleridge’s genius is hard to define, but it can be claimed that his greatest poetry, including the three titles mentioned above, is the product of the human

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<sup>26</sup> Butler, p. 184.

<sup>27</sup> For a discussion of this particular shift, see Angus Easson, ‘Statesman, Dwarf and Weaver: Wordsworth and Nineteenth-Century Narrative’ in *The Nineteenth-Century British Novel*, ed. by Jeremy Hawthorn (London: Edward Arnold, 1986), pp.17-29 (p.18); hereafter Easson, ‘Statesman, Dwarf and Weaver’.

imagination, rather than the product of human observation. For Coleridge, the human imagination was the highest faculty and the source of his best poetry. The imagination was central for William Blake, both as poet and as engraver. It is the imaginative scope and visionary quality of his poetry that makes him recognizably a Romantic poet, yet most of his poetry was available only in manuscript during his own lifetime, and not, therefore, much read until after his death. Keats was another Romantic poet for whom the imagination was often the source of artistic expression. And while he came from a fairly poor background himself, he did not choose to represent humble life in his poetry. In subject matter he could not be more different from either Wordsworth or Crabbe, for he frequently drew on the literature of ancient Greece and Rome and the world of legend. Of the younger Romantic poets, Shelley and Byron were different again. Shelley could be more overtly political in his poetry than Wordsworth; we only have to think of *The Mask of Anarchy* (1819) or, in the same year, his *Sonnet: England 1819*. Yet his use of imagery, when drawn from his experience of the natural sublime, can remind us of Wordsworth as he wrote in *The Prelude*, and of Coleridge. Perhaps the most Europeanized of the Romantic poets was Lord Byron, since he created the image of the Byronic hero, a law unto himself, opposing tyranny wherever he found it. For Marilyn Butler, Byron, Shelley and Keats can be seen as members of a clearly defined literary group, one that was extrovert and pagan, preferring narrative and drama to the confessional nature of autobiography.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Butler, pp. 123-124.

For none of these poets was Romanticism a complete break with the past. Coleridge offered new interpretations of Shakespeare; Wordsworth revered Milton; while others, as already noted, drew on the literature of the ancient world, the Bible, legend, or on the formal properties of earlier poetry.<sup>29</sup> Romantic poets could find inspiration in the poetry of Sensibility, exemplified by Thomas Gray (1716-1771), Oliver Goldsmith (1730-1774) and William Cowper (1731-1800); poets whose work mainly pre-dated the Romantic period proper, but who began the move away from Augustan values by placing more emphasis on emotion. The Romantic poets built on this break with their recent past, by making human feeling and imagination central to their own work. Among prose writers who were born in the early decades of the eighteenth century, one who was significant to Romantic poets was Edmund Burke (1729-1797). His theories of the Sublime, as expressed in his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), can often be seen to inform Romantic poetry, especially where the natural world is delineated. Eighteenth-century novels of Sensibility, in which emotion is emphasized, include Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey* (1768), Henry Brooke's *Fool of Quality* (1765-1770) and Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling* (1771).

Of all Romantic poets, the one who had the most influence in his own lifetime, and in the Victorian period, is William Wordsworth. As touched on earlier in this chapter, Wordsworth introduced new subject matter and a new approach to

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<sup>29</sup> For extracts from Coleridge's writings on Shakespeare's plays, see *The Romantics on Shakespeare*, ed. by Jonathan Bate (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), pp. 128-163. For an example of Wordsworth's debt to Milton, see Stephen Gill, *William Wordsworth: A Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), pp. 174-175; hereafter Gill, *Wordsworth: A Life*.

English poetry. Because Gaskell's response to Wordsworth was unequivocal, his influence on her writing is widely recognized. He will, therefore, be discussed in some detail here, although Gaskell's engagement with other writers of the Romantic age will not be forgotten. Wordsworth is a supreme Romanticist for the way in which he foregrounds human feeling in his poetry. He will be discussed here principally for his engagement with nature, religion, and society. He is often thought of as a nature poet since the natural world is central to his work, but he goes beyond description of nature, to show man's relationship with the natural world, and to enter into the mind and heart of man. For Wordsworth, nature and religion are often intertwined. His views on society, and man's relationship to society, find expression most notably in his contributions to *Lyrical Ballads*.<sup>30</sup>

With regard to nature, some of Wordsworth's early poetry shows an awareness of attitudes that were popular during the closing decades of the eighteenth century. *An Evening Walk* (1793) is purely a descriptive poem, showing heavy reliance on the use of adjectives, reminiscent of Picturesque tour guides written by William Gilpin (1724-1804), and Thomas West (1720-1779).<sup>31</sup> The following lines from *An Evening Walk* show the influence of the Picturesque:

'Cross the calm lake's blue shades the cliffs aspire,  
 With towers and woods, a 'prospect all on fire;'  
 While coves and secret hollows, through a ray  
 Of fainter gold, a purple gleam betray.

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<sup>30</sup> Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. by R.L. Brett and A.R. Jones (London and New York: Methuen, 1968; repr. 1984); hereafter Wordsworth, *LB*.

<sup>31</sup> William Wordsworth, *Poems, Volume I*, ed. by John O. Hayden (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977; repr. 1982), pp.77-87; hereafter Wordsworth, *Poems I*.

(Wordsworth, *Poems I*, 77-87. 174-177)

This kind of descriptive language, and the use of rhyming couplets, can also be found in the 1793 version of *Descriptive Sketches*, as shown by the following extract:

At such an hour I heaved the human sigh,  
 When roared the sullen Arve in anger by,  
 That not for thee, delicious vale! unfold  
 Thy reddening orchards, and thy fields of gold.

(Wordsworth, *Poems I*, 897-918. 702-705)

This poem was inspired by Wordsworth's 1790 walking tour of France and Switzerland. At the time of this tour Wordsworth was yet to formulate his own views on the language of poetry. It can, however, be claimed that this walking tour was a time when Wordsworth's perception of the natural world and of man's relationship with it underwent a profound change. It was an experience that witnessed the development of his poetic consciousness. Images of the natural sublime were to haunt him and inform his poem of 1798, *Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey* — 'the tall rock, | The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood' (Wordsworth, *LB*, 115. 78) — and *The Prelude* (1805) — 'The torrents shooting from the clear blue sky, | The rocks that muttered close upon our ears' (VI; 561). The natural world would no longer be the subject of mere observation and description. Representations of landscape were to become a crucial means by which Wordsworth would represent states of mind and feeling.

In *The Thorn*, a woman's disturbed mental state is enacted 'Not five yards from the mountain-path' (Wordsworth, *LB*, 71. 27). In *Michael*, a mountain brook is witness to a drama predominantly internal, for it is a story 'ungarnish'd with events' (Wordsworth, *LB*, 227. 19). Wordsworth had acknowledged, in his poetry of 1793, the Picturesque approach to nature, and, through his use of rhyming couplets, the formal properties of Augustan poetry. By 1798, however, he had made a break with the recent past by moving away from the Picturesque and the Augustan to the language and imagery of the Sublime and of Romanticism.<sup>32</sup> Significantly, this was the year that Wordsworth collaborated with Coleridge in the production of *Lyrical Ballads*.

It was also at this time that Wordsworth subsumed his radical self into his poetry, focusing on human suffering as subject matter, and, especially in *Lyrical Ballads*, trying out new poetic forms to make his work arresting to his readers.<sup>33</sup> Significantly, this is poetry which focuses, above all else, on human feeling: the sorrow of the shepherd who has lost the last of his flock; the lament of a childless mother; a child's feelings for her dead brother and sister; and many more, including the poet's exploration of his own inner life in *Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey*.

The composition of *Lyrical Ballads* is recognized as a key component of Romanticism and as a work that influenced many nineteenth-century writers,

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<sup>32</sup> For further discussion of Wordsworth's move from the Picturesque to the Sublime, see Matthew Brennan, *Wordsworth, Turner, and Romantic Landscape: A Study of the Traditions of the Picturesque and the Sublime*. Studies in English and American Literature, Linguistics, and Culture, vol. 5 (Columbia, S. C.: Camden House, 1987), pp.49-55.

<sup>33</sup> Gill, *Wordsworth: A Life*, pp. 140-141.



including Elizabeth Gaskell, Charles Dickens and George Eliot.<sup>34</sup> Although Wordsworth had benefited from Coleridge's support and stimulus, the majority of the poems were written by Wordsworth himself. The Preface to the second and subsequent editions, amounting to a manifesto, set out Wordsworth's radically new ideas. In his poetry, feeling was to give importance to the action and to the situation; incidents of common life were to be made interesting. Because of its linguistic characteristics, and because of its relationship with the natural world, low and rustic life would be chosen to represent the essential passions of the human heart. Primacy of human feeling, direct forms of language, and man's relationship with nature: these were the principal components of Wordsworth's Romanticism. People on the very margins of society would be represented, not merely through external description, but through the delineation of their innermost feelings. Of all Wordsworth's poetry, it is that which is included in *Lyrical Ballads*, both the 1798 edition and the additional poems of 1800, that earned him a reputation, in certain quarters, as a poet of humble life. Wordsworth's later poetry was of less significance for Elizabeth Gaskell. We know she read at least part of *The Excursion* (1814), for she recommended it to Charles Bosanquet when writing to him in 1859 about the English Lake District. This is a long letter in which she discusses her considerable knowledge of walks in the Lake District, of local characters, and of the area's literary associations: the Arnolds, Wordsworths and Coleridges.<sup>35</sup> We also know that she looked forward to the publication of *The Prelude* in 1850, for she refers to it in a letter to Eliza Fox in August 1850, when describing a recent visit to the Lakes where 'all the world

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<sup>34</sup> Stephen Gill, *Wordsworth and the Victorians* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998); see especially Chapter 4, pp. 114-144, and Chapter 5, pp. 145-167; hereafter Gill, *Wordsworth and Victorians*.

[...] was full of the "Prelude".<sup>36</sup> It is also likely that her knowledge of Wordsworth's later poetry included *The Borderers*, published in 1842.<sup>37</sup> Nonetheless, it was *Lyrical Ballads* that remained the most significant Wordsworthian influence on her writing. While she responded to other poets too, it was the early Wordsworth, and in particular the Wordsworth of *Lyrical Ballads*, that formed the basis of her Romantic inheritance. This is especially true of her early short stories, though a return to this strand of Romanticism can also be detected in her mature work.

Because of his reputation as a poet of humble life, and because of his representations of nature, the influence of Wordsworth on Gaskell's writing is widely recognized. In subsequent chapters of this thesis, I will explore this influence in detail. At the same time, however, I hope to show that while Wordsworth was a significant influence for Elizabeth Gaskell, other aspects of Romanticism are also evident in her work. In this chapter I have tried to identify a Romantic legacy and this will underpin the remaining chapters of this thesis. In Chapter Two I will give consideration to Gaskell's cultural inheritance, and in the ensuing chapters I will take a close look at a representative selection of her shorter writings.

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<sup>35</sup> *Gaskell Letters*, pp.569-572. *The Excursion* is discussed on p.569.

<sup>36</sup> *Gaskell Letters*, pp.129-131. *The Prelude* is referred to on p.130.

<sup>37</sup> The possible influence of this work on Gaskell will be discussed in later chapters of this thesis.

## Chapter Two: Some Biographical Considerations

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate and establish the relationship between Elizabeth Gaskell and Romanticism, as shown in her shorter writings. The object of Chapter Two is to trace the development of Elizabeth Gaskell's consciousness, both as a woman and as an imaginative writer. Consideration, therefore, will be given to key events and cultural influences which accompanied her infancy, childhood and girlhood, up to the time of her marriage, and which are likely to have affected her developing sensibility. By tracing the development of Elizabeth Gaskell's consciousness, I hope to show how her sensibility developed in response to her own experience of loss, suffering and happiness. Through a consideration of events in her early life and of her cultural inheritance, I hope to show how her response to the Romantic sensibility was fundamental to the growth of her imaginative and spiritual life.

Elizabeth Gaskell's infancy will be considered here for two principal reasons: the early death of her mother, and the ensuing separation from her father and his household. Her childhood will be considered in the light of this loss and separation, thus challenging accepted views of her childhood days in Knutsford as entirely joyful. Consideration will also be given to her education, both formal and in the wider sense. Her girlhood will be considered for her continuing education; for her religious faith; and for the paternal influences that emerged in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, after the death

of her father. Her time in Newcastle will be considered as an important transitional stage in her life, since it led to her meeting with William Gaskell. The chapter will conclude with reference to her shared literary interests with William, particularly the poetry of Wordsworth and of George Crabbe, poets to whom she responded in her own way.

When considering cultural influences in this chapter, I shall focus mainly on writing, both poetry and prose, since this is the kind of culture to which she had most access when she was growing up in Knutsford and when she was at school in Warwickshire. With regard to Gaskell's early cultural influences, it may be helpful to recall that she was born during the high Romantic age, in the year 1810. This was just five years after the publication of the fourth edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, and only three years after the publication of Wordsworth's *Poems in Two Volumes*. In 1810 Wordsworth was living at Allan Bank, Grasmere, where he was working on *The Excursion*, although this was not published until 1814. Just five years had passed since he completed the first version of *The Prelude* (1805), not published until after the poet's death in 1850. Coleridge was writing for the *Courier*, and in the following year he began a series of lectures on Shakespeare and Milton. Just one year earlier, in 1809, Blake had unsuccessfully exhibited his paintings, the exhibition attracting adverse comment in *The Examiner*. Of the younger Romantic poets, Shelley, then aged eighteen, published a novel and, with his sister, *Original Poetry by Victor and Cazire*. From 1810 to 1811 Byron was in the Levant and working on the first two

cantos of *Childe Harold*. In 1812 he made his maiden speech in the Lords, opposing the Frame-Breaking Bill. This same year, when Byron made his speech, was the year of Napoleon's retreat from Moscow. In 1815, Keats began writing poetry. Throughout Elizabeth Gaskell's childhood the Romantic poets wrote and/or worked on revisions to their work. While most died during her early years, Coleridge lived till 1834 and Wordsworth till 1850. When Elizabeth Stevenson became Elizabeth Gaskell, in 1832, the future Queen of England, Victoria, was just thirteen years old. When the Victorian reign began in 1837, Elizabeth Gaskell was twenty-seven years old and the mother of two young daughters. Her formative years were behind her and they had coincided with a time of artistic activity that is now recognized as Romanticism.

This then was Elizabeth Gaskell's early cultural inheritance and one that helped to shape her development as an imaginative writer. It was, however, not the only influence on her development. Like all human beings she was shaped by family circumstances; by education; and by religion which, in her case, was principally Unitarian. Instead of taking a strictly chronological approach to Gaskell's life, I intend to examine Gaskell's early years, when she was Elizabeth Stevenson, thematically. I shall begin by considering her family circumstances; her education; and her religion; in that order, and then move on to her early engagement with Romanticism and her own early writing. Within these thematic groupings, more detailed aspects of her development will be approached chronologically.

With regard to family circumstances, it must be stated that there is no intention to invoke twentieth-century theories of psychology. If, however, we accept Wordsworth's assertion that 'The Child is father of the Man',<sup>1</sup> then we must surely accept that experiences of childhood have a significant effect on the way in which a young person develops into an adult and on the way in which that adult responds to the world around him, or her. When considering key events in the early life of Elizabeth Gaskell, it will be borne in mind that some of these events, such as loss of a parent, and separation from other blood relations, were far more commonplace in her time than in ours, but this does not necessarily lessen the effect of such events on the person concerned. What is crucial is the particular way in which one individual may respond to personal circumstances, even when such circumstances are not isolated, but commonly experienced at that particular time.

The favourable influence of Elizabeth Gaskell's childhood home in Cheshire has been well documented by biographers including Winifred Gérin (1976), Jenny Uglow (1993), and earlier by Mrs Chadwick (1913) and A. B. Hopkins (1952). More recent research into Elizabeth Gaskell's early life, however, has provided us with hitherto unknown information about her father William Stevenson, her brother John, and other people whose influence was central to the development of her consciousness.<sup>2</sup>

Consequently, we now have a clearer picture of Elizabeth Gaskell's early life. While

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<sup>1</sup> From 'My heart leaps up when I behold', 1807, in Wordsworth, *Poems I*, p. 522.

<sup>2</sup> See J. A. V. Chapple, *Elizabeth Gaskell: The Early Years* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997); hereafter Chapple, *Early Years*.

this picture excludes material deprivation, it does not preclude the possibility of emotional pain. I intend to show here that while the young Elizabeth Stevenson's life appeared to be satisfactory, and even privileged, it was dogged by an underlying current of sadness and perplexity. While there were no events in her life equivalent to Charles Dickens's experiences of the blacking warehouse and the debtors' prison, in terms of material deprivation, there were, nonetheless, events that caused her deep emotional discomfort. I would argue that this early experience of emotional suffering, which was often concealed, heightened her response to the private suffering of others. She was, therefore, quite early in her life, particularly receptive to Romanticism, with its emphasis on human feeling and imagination.

The most far-reaching events in Elizabeth Gaskell's life were those which occurred in her infancy: the death of her mother in October 1811; her father's decision to send her, in November 1811, to live permanently with her aunt in Cheshire; and his remarriage in 1814, followed by the birth of two more Stevenson children in 1815 and 1816. By the time Elizabeth Stevenson was six years old, her father had rebuilt his own immediate family, and, as a family group, it was one from which his elder daughter was destined to be excluded. Following these events, her relationship with her father, her place of birth, her half-sister, half-brother and stepmother was tenuous. Although always on the move in her adult life, her strongest associations were with her mother's relations in Cheshire and her marital home in Manchester. If William Stevenson had decided to keep his infant daughter following the loss of his wife,

Elizabeth would in all probability not have met and married William Gaskell, nor would she have set up home in Manchester, and her published writing — for she would surely still have become a writer — would have taken a different direction. Had she spent all of her formative years in Chelsea her writing might have displayed the urbane qualities associated with Thackeray, the wit and irony of Jane Austen or, like Dickens, have made London the focus of its attention. She might still have concerned herself with the cruelties of prejudice and social injustice, but she would not have become so closely associated with the provincial novel.<sup>3</sup>

Whatever his reasons for relinquishing the care of his young daughter, William Stevenson could not possibly have foreseen the consequences, in terms of literary output, of sending his daughter to live in the North West of England. To assume that this decision was taken lightly is to do Stevenson an injustice. He was faced with a dilemma common enough before twentieth-century advances in medical science brought post-natal mortality rates down. For a widowed father, difficult decisions had to be made. To take an example of a parallel case that is familiar to us, we may consider the circumstances of Patrick Brontë. Following the death of his wife, Maria Brontë, a surrogate mother had to be found, but there is no evidence to show that Patrick Brontë considered sending his children away on a permanent or semi-permanent basis, even though the youngest was not yet two years old. The closest he came to this was to send his four oldest daughters, Maria, Elizabeth, Charlotte and

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<sup>3</sup> For the concept of Gaskell as provincial novelist, see Wendy Craik, *Elizabeth Gaskell and the English Provincial Novel* (London: Methuen, 1975); in particular, Craik's Preface pp. ix-x.



Emily, to the Clergy Daughters' School, but this was principally to provide an education for the girls, and after the death of Maria and Elizabeth, he brought Charlotte and Emily home for good. From this time onwards, Patrick kept his family together at home until his children were old enough either to obtain employment as governesses or, in the case of Branwell, leave home to study art or work as a private tutor. Having failed to find a second wife, he took the course of action most satisfactory for his children, though probably not for himself: he persuaded his sister-in-law, Elizabeth Branwell, to spend her life in Haworth caring for her deceased sister's children and her brother-in-law.<sup>4</sup>

If William Stevenson had been able to draw on a network of family relationships as Patrick Brontë did, then perhaps Elizabeth would have stayed in Chelsea. There are two possibilities: one is that he was forced into a hasty decision, the second that he did not mind too much about parting with his infant daughter. The first can be understood, for his life was already difficult and beset with financial difficulties. The sudden loss of his wife, especially at such a time as this, could have left him feeling very uncertain about the best course of action. But in spite of his financial problems, he was not a poor man. He would, in all probability, have kept some domestic staff, to keep his home clean and to provide meals for himself and his son. Given that people of very modest means kept domestic servants he should not have found it

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<sup>4</sup>Elizabeth Branwell had already spent a considerable amount of time with the Brontë family when Mrs Maria Brontë died (Juliet Barker, *The Brontës* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1994), pp.71; 103-104; 116; and 142; hereafter Barker, *Brontës*).

impossible to employ a nanny.<sup>5</sup> He could also have considered asking Hannah Lumb and her daughter to come to his home in Chelsea, as Patrick Brontë had persuaded his sister-in-law to reside at Haworth Parsonage. Arrangements such as these would have been of a temporary nature anyway, given his subsequent re-marriage and re-establishment of family life with two more children.

As one single-parent family was exchanged for another, Elizabeth Stevenson was transferred from a motherless home to one that was fatherless. Although the young Elizabeth Stevenson went to a loving home in Knutsford there is evidence to suggest that the early loss of her mother was a recurring source of emotional pain to her. Writing in 1849, to thank a family friend for a parcel of her deceased mother's letters, she refers to 'the craving one has after the lost mother'.<sup>6</sup> The indications are that for Elizabeth Gaskell, there could only be one mother: the one she had lost. Although Hannah Lumb provided a home for Elizabeth and cared for her until her own death in 1837, Elizabeth was not required to address her aunt as 'mother'. In correspondence she referred to her as 'Aunt Lumb'. For Elizabeth Gaskell, Hannah Lumb was her best friend and 'more than mother'.<sup>7</sup> It must, therefore, have been painful to her when her father referred to her stepmother as 'your mother', especially as the second Mrs

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<sup>5</sup> It is noticeable that Patrick Brontë, on his very modest stipend, managed to employ Nancy Garrs as a nursemaid following the birth of his third child. Later on more servants were employed, including Sarah Garrs who replaced her sister Nancy as nursemaid following the birth of the fifth Brontë child. Nancy Garrs was then promoted to the position of cook and assistant housekeeper. The Garr sisters were replaced in 1824 by Tabitha Aykroyd, who remained a servant at the Parsonage until her retirement in 1839 (Barker, *Brontës*, pp. 71-72; 78; 134; 318).

<sup>6</sup> *Gaskell Letters*, pp. 796-797; the letter appears with the date incomplete, but the editorial footnote establishes the year as 1849.

<sup>7</sup> Chapple, *Private Voices*, p. 63.

Stevenson played no part in Elizabeth's mothering.<sup>8</sup> The indications, therefore, are that William Stevenson, as a father, was pragmatic rather than perceptive, and that his lack of imagination did little to alleviate his daughter's sense of loss.

Although Elizabeth's father ostensibly welcomed the daughter from his first marriage to his home, providing opportunities for them to get to know each other and to establish some rapport, this endeavour was clearly not very successful, as there is no indication of any real warmth between father and daughter. In none of her surviving letters does Elizabeth recall instances of looking forward to seeing her father. Neither is there any evidence of attachment to her stepbrother or stepsister. Perhaps she did not see them often enough to form any meaningful relationship; a fact likely to be more crucial than any difference in ages.<sup>9</sup> Childhood visits to her father's home in Chelsea were not recalled with any pleasure. Writing in an undated letter to Mary Howitt, Elizabeth Gaskell recalled these visits as times when she was 'very, very unhappy'. In the same letter she says 'the beautiful grand river [...] was an inexplicable comfort' to her. Without the river and some kind neighbours, she believed her 'child's heart would have broken'.<sup>10</sup> These words indicate a recollection of experiences that were deeply disturbing at the time, and which had significant consequences for her developing sensibility. Her father's house in Chelsea may have

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<sup>8</sup> Chapple, *Early Years*, pp 286-288. John Chapple reproduces William Stevenson's only surviving letter to Elizabeth, written from 3 Beaufort Row, on July 2nd, 1827, in which he refers to his second wife as Elizabeth's mother.

<sup>9</sup> Surviving records indicate that William Stevenson junior was baptised June 1815, and that Catherine Stevenson was born December 1816 and christened June 1817 (Chapple, *Early Years*, p.162).

<sup>10</sup> *Gaskell Letters*, pp. 797-798.

provided adequate material comfort, especially if compared to Charles Dickens's childhood homes in London. Nonetheless, in terms of emotional experience, the Chelsea household appears to have been, for the young Elizabeth Stevenson, something of a fretful dwelling. This distress, derived from her sense of maternal loss, and from the apparent lack of warmth between herself and her father and stepmother, appears to have haunted her young life. There are accounts of the young Elizabeth Stevenson seeking comfort from some personal sadness in the hollows of Knutsford Heath, in spite of the love and society of her Holland relations in Cheshire.<sup>11</sup> The significance of these accounts is that they point to a situation in which the young Elizabeth Stevenson was a solitary child. This early experience of solitariness would find expression in one of her shorter works, *The Moorland Cottage*, in which a child struggles to resolve emotional problems alone, seeking comfort from the natural world. In *The Early Years*, John Chapple notes that during the time she composed her diary on the progress of her first two children, she did not refer directly to her own childhood. He raises the possibility that as a young mother she did not trust herself, because 'she had been what she now saw in her daughter, a child of acute sensibilities'.<sup>12</sup> It seems likely that Elizabeth Gaskell's desire for her own children to be known for themselves, with their inner lives recognized, was a response to her own childhood, when her own emotional life was not always understood.<sup>13</sup> Just as Wordsworth's childhood experiences had educated him to feel deeply, so had Elizabeth Gaskell's childhood been an education of feeling.

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<sup>11</sup> Chapple, *Early Years*, pp. 163-164, citing Anne Thackeray Ritchie's preface to *Cranford*.

<sup>12</sup> Chapple, *Early Years*, p. 164.

<sup>13</sup> See Gaskell's letter to Anne Robson, dated 1 September 1851 (*Gaskell Letters*, p. 161).

William Stevenson's sole surviving letter to Elizabeth was written when she was seventeen and will, therefore, be discussed later in this chapter. At the time of writing this thesis, there are no known surviving letters sent by William Stevenson to Elizabeth during her childhood, although unpublished letters continue to be discovered.<sup>14</sup> We do, however, have a letter from John Stevenson, who was twelve years older than his sister, written in December 1819, when Elizabeth was nine. This is an affectionate letter in which he appeals to her for sympathy in his clumsiness at a party. The fact that he knew she had read *Sandford and Merton* suggests that they were regularly in touch with each other, as does his reference to an earlier letter to her.<sup>15</sup> This bond between older brother and younger sister provided an ongoing link for Elizabeth with her lost mother. By the time she was eighteen, John was clearly proud of his attractive teenage sister and more than willing to spend time in her company. This is shown by the following extract from a letter written to her on 30th July 1828:

It is better to make up my mind to remain abroad – to quit even you who are all to me and the more I saw of you, the more I should regret quitting you – so in one way it is perhaps better I should see you no more - it will save me one pang.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Three unpublished letters were auctioned in London as recently as November 2001 (*Gaskell Society Newsletter*, 33 (2002), p.1).

<sup>15</sup> Chapple, *Early Years*, pp. 219-220.

<sup>16</sup> Chapple, *Early Years*, p. 318.

Here he expresses a depth of feeling more commonly found in a letter to a wife or mistress than to a sister. It is likely, however, that correspondence such as this would have been cherished by Elizabeth mainly for the link it provided with her lost mother. There is no indication that her affection or regard for John was excessive, since there is no evidence to suggest that she wished to be permanently re-united with her brother. By the time this letter was written she was able to explore other opportunities for her future through the network of social relationships in Cheshire. Even so, his early disappearance at sea was another source of sadness to her, and one that would haunt her, finding expression through her creation of fictional young men who serve in both the Royal and Merchant Navy.

Although Elizabeth Gaskell's childhood is closely associated with Knutsford, a substantial part of it was spent at boarding school in Warwickshire. The decision to send a child away to school, especially when the school is a long way from home, is one that is likely to have far-reaching consequences because of the enforced separation from all that is familiar. It is believed that William Stevenson played an important part in this decision and in the choice of school. As a man of letters he was in a good position to appreciate the value of formal education, and as a man from a Unitarian background he was likely to have recognized the benefits of education for a daughter. Clearly, Stevenson continued to be a guiding, though distant, influence on Elizabeth's life, for which reason I would like to focus a little more on his disposition before moving on to Elizabeth Gaskell's formal education.

Stevenson's disposition owed more to the Augustan than the Romantic age. Born the same year as Wordsworth, 1770, he did not, apparently, reject the dominance of rational thought, as the poet of Romanticism did. A study of William Stevenson's writings, such as his discourse on the value of classical learning and contributions to the *Edinburgh Review* and *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, reveal a deeply analytical and logical turn of mind. In his treatise entitled *Remarks on the Very Inferior Utility of Classical Learning*, published in 1796, he weighs up very carefully and thoroughly all the arguments in favour of classical learning and systematically refutes them. He concludes his argument by asserting that classical learning has no connection with the primary object of a good education, which, in his view, is knowledge of facts and habits of reasoning. Parents, he says, should not bow to authority, prescription, or example, when pursuing the improvement, utility, and welfare of their children.<sup>17</sup> His contributions to the *Edinburgh* included reviews of Professor Dalzel's *Collectanea Graeca Majora*, of John Pinkerton's *A Vindication of the Celts*, and of Pinkerton's *Modern Geography*, all published in 1803. There were further reviews for the *Edinburgh* in 1804, the year in which he was elected honorary member of the Newcastle Literary and Philosophical Society, and in 1809 the *Edinburgh* published his review of John Jamieson's *Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language*.<sup>18</sup> By the time Elizabeth was fourteen years old, her father was

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<sup>17</sup> William Stevenson, *Remarks on the Very Inferior Utility of Classical Learning* (Manchester: Nicholson; London: Symonds, 1796), pp. 35-36.

<sup>18</sup> For an account and appraisal of Stevenson's contributions to the *Edinburgh*, see Chapple, *Early Years*, pp.70-78.

contributing a series of articles on Political Economy to *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*. Even more than his earlier journalism, these articles demonstrate his passion for close reading and sound reasoning. But even William Blackwood found this zealous quest for truth to be excessive, or at least misplaced, in a journal that must achieve a reasonably wide circulation to be profitable. Stevenson's preoccupation with dry reasoning and logical deduction would not be to everyone's taste.<sup>19</sup>

To what extent the young Elizabeth Stevenson was aware of her father's writings is not known. As she spent little time in his household, she may not have known of them at all. Writing was not in any case his sole occupation, but an activity that supplemented his income from other sources of employment, which, from 1810, included his post with the Treasury. What is clear is that while she may have inherited an aptitude for writing from her father, her sensibility developed along lines that were in opposition to her father's. While he was prepared to analyse the theory of Political Economy, and his essays indicate that he was not uncritical of this theory, his daughter would demonstrate many years later, that she was less concerned with economic theory than with the effects of an economic system on individual lives.<sup>20</sup> Stevenson's disposition is perhaps well summed up by Katherine Thomson's description of a Record Office clerk living in Beaufort Row in 1820 to 1821 as

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<sup>19</sup> John Chapple quotes from a letter from Blackwood to Stevenson dated 21 December 1824 (Chapple, *Early Years*, pp. 272-273).

<sup>20</sup> See Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life*, ed. by Angus Easson (Halifax: Ryburn, 1993); hereafter Gaskell, *MB*, Ryburn (or *MB*, Ryburn), especially Gaskell's Preface, p.32, and the editorial note to this page on pp.401-402.



‘bottled and collared up with much care’.<sup>21</sup> Katherine Thomson was connected to Stevenson through marriage. As a novelist and historical biographer, she was likely to have been fairly perceptive about people, including those she only knew slightly.<sup>22</sup>

Stevenson’s choice of school for his daughter involved either himself or someone else in considerable expense; although they may have been a reduction in fees because of a family connection.<sup>23</sup> Recent scholarship indicates that Elizabeth Stevenson was enrolled at the Byerleys’ school in 1821 when the school was located at Barford and that she left school in the summer of 1826.<sup>24</sup> This five-year period away from her Knutsford home would have been important to Elizabeth, partly for the opportunity to mix with a wider circle of friends, but also for the chance to acquire good study habits through a structured education. The girls had the opportunity to learn more than social graces at the Byerleys’ school, as indicated in an itemised bill for one of the pupils.<sup>25</sup> The lessons in French, Italian, English and Composition would have

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<sup>21</sup> Uglow, pp. 21-22, quoting from Katherine Thomson, *Recollections of Literary Characters and Celebrated Places* (1854), I, 101-3. Thomson is describing ‘a Clerk in the Record Office’ whom she had met in a house in Beaufort Row, Chelsea. The description is believed to be of William Stevenson.

<sup>22</sup> Katherine Thomson was formerly one of the Byerly sisters, the women who ran the school Elizabeth Stevenson attended, but she gave up teaching following her marriage at the age of twenty-two to William Stevenson’s friend and new brother-in-law (Chapple, *Early Years*, p. 238). She subsequently became a professional writer of biography and of novels, most notably *Memoirs of the Court of Henry VIII* (1826) and *Constance* (1833). For a consideration of Thomson’s achievements and her possible connection with Elizabeth Gaskell, see Chapple, *Early Years*, pp. 251-257.

<sup>23</sup> For a discussion of this aspect of Elizabeth Gaskell’s schooling, see Chapple, *Early Years*, p.242.

<sup>24</sup> For an account of the Byerleys’ school, see Phyllis D. Hicks, *A Quest of Ladies: The Story of a Warwickshire School* (Birmingham: [n. pub.] [1949]), hereafter Hicks. Although Hicks does not reproduce records of enrolments in her book, she states that Elizabeth Stevenson went to the school when she was fifteen and left when she was seventeen (p.81). This time frame possibly relates only to the years when the school was situated in Stratford-on-Avon and might not take into account the school’s earlier years at Barford. For more recent scholarship, see Chapple, *Early Years*, pp.236-239.

<sup>25</sup> Hicks, p. 81-82.

provided the young Elizabeth Stevenson with a good educational grounding on which she was able to build later on in her life. That William Stevenson continued to take an interest in his daughter's education, is shown by some of the books he gave her during her schooldays. These included *The Female Mentor* in 1821, when she was eleven; William Cowper's *Poems* in 1823, when she was thirteen; and in 1825, her fifteenth year, Thomas Gray's *Works*. Both poets were deceased: Gray had been dead for fifty years and Cowper for at least twenty. This suggests that Stevenson preferred to look backwards for his poetry, rather than look to contemporary writers. Nonetheless, he was encouraging his daughter to read the poetry of Sensibility, an encouragement that bore fruit, for she included Cowper and Goldsmith, though not Gray, among her favourite writers by the time she was sixteen.<sup>26</sup>

The structured nature of formal schooling away from home possibly laid the foundation for Elizabeth Gaskell's ability to continue her education out of school through steady reading. Her allusions in letters, and in her fiction, indicate that as a child she had access to a range of reading matter that included, in addition to the books her father gave her, fairy tales, and chapbook versions of classics like *Robinson Crusoe* and *Pilgrim's Progress*.<sup>27</sup> Of all the books she read, the one we know she particularly enjoyed was Henry Brooke's *Fool of Quality*.<sup>28</sup> Brooke (1703-1783) was

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<sup>26</sup> Chapple, *Early Years*, pp. 236 and 283.

<sup>27</sup> For a brief survey of Gaskell's likely childhood reading, see Angus Easson, *Elizabeth Gaskell* (London: Routledge, 1979), pp.20-21; hereafter Easson, *Elizabeth Gaskell*.

<sup>28</sup> *Gaskell Letters*, p.562. Henry K. Brooke, *The Fool of Quality, with a Biographical Preface by Charles Kingsley, and a New Life of the Author by E. A. Baker* (London: Routledge; New York: Dutton, 1906; 1st pub. in 5 vols Dublin: Johnston, 1765-1770); hereafter Brooke, *Fool of Quality*.

educated in Dublin where he spent most of his life. His writing included a tragedy, *Gustavus Vasa The Deliverer of his Country* (1739), a play which offended both the Lord Chamberlain and Samuel Johnson.<sup>29</sup> In 1774 he published a novel of sentiment, appropriately called *Juliet Grenville: or the History of the Human Heart*. The book by Henry Brooke which Elizabeth Gaskell enjoyed as a child was the one which is regarded as the most characteristic of its author. The very essence of *The Fool of Quality* is expressed by one of its leading characters, the hero's father, when he says to another character, Mr Meekly, 'the understanding cannot reject what the heart so sensibly feels'. One of the book's parables includes a discussion on the education of schoolboys. Instead of putting emphasis on knowledge of facts and ability to reason, as Stevenson did later in the century, Brooke has his mentor, Mr Fenton, arguing for a different kind of value system. Awards would be given for evidence of what might be termed gentlemanly or Christian behaviour, such as good-nature, friendship, gratitude, generosity or honour.<sup>30</sup>

A second book which we know Elizabeth read as a child was Thomas Day's *Sandford and Merton*. Given that her brother also knew that she had read it, and that he was familiar with it himself, it seems likely that the book was a present from someone in the Chelsea household. It has much in common with *The Fool of Quality*, being a collection of moral fables linked by continuous narration, which, in *Sandford*

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<sup>29</sup> Charles Kingsley's Preface in Brooke, *Fool of Quality*, pp. xlv-xlvii and liii.

<sup>30</sup> See Brooke, *Fool of Quality*, pp. 33, for the earl's remarks to Mr Meekly and pp. 65-67, for Mr Fenton's ideas on educational rewards. It is worthy of note that Henry Brooke expresses an anti-Calvinistic view through the remark made to Mr Meekly, since John Calvin believed that the heart should not be trusted.

*and Merton*, is provided by a clergyman's lessons to two young boys. Many ideas expressed in Gaskell's early fiction and in her letters can be found in Thomas Day's book: objections to slavery, to excessive inequalities of wealth, and to the surface value of refined manners and fine clothes. Harry Sandford, the farmer's boy who lacks refinements, and who works with his hands to produce food for the table, is not only a willing pupil but is kind and brave. Tommy Merton, on the other hand, has become weakened, and insensitive to the needs and feelings of others, through too much indulgence by his slave-owning father. Only by sharing Harry's lessons with the clergyman, and staying at the Sandford farmhouse does he learn to be a better human being, endeavouring to live a useful life and to respect all human beings and living creatures.<sup>31</sup> Although the book is ostensibly aimed at young readers, and two of the principal characters are children, the author demonstrates his theories on Political Economy in some of the lessons given by Mr Barlow to the boys. The clergyman preaches against the evils of excessive consumption and says that all consumers should contribute to production. His most startling assertion is that if the poor do all the productive work they must be superior to the idle rich, whom he says do nothing that is useful.<sup>32</sup> Such a statement, made in the eighteenth century, can be seen as a development of a Christian ethic into the kind of radical Christianity that was favoured in the nineteenth century by Charles Kingsley, and which influenced Elizabeth Gaskell's thinking in the early part of her writing career. Pre-figuring

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<sup>31</sup> Thomas Day, *Sandford and Merton: The Original Edition, Unabridged with Illustrations* (London and Sidney: Griffith Farran Okeden and Welsh, 1783-89); hereafter Day, *Sandford and Merton*.

<sup>32</sup> Day, *Sandford and Merton*, pp. 31-32; 316-317.

aspects of Socialism, it could have been seen as too polemical had it not appeared in a book published for children.

While *The Fool of Quality* and *Sandford and Merton* are books we know with certainty that the young Elizabeth Stevenson read there are also indications that she may have read some of Maria Edgeworth's tales for children.<sup>33</sup> Maria Edgeworth, born in 1767, belonged to the same generation as William Stevenson and it seems likely that he would have approved of *Harry and Lucy*, her collection of tales for young children, in which the fictional children are given instruction in practical tasks, like brick-making, and are encouraged to think for themselves, activities likely to promote knowledge of facts and sound reasoning. Great emphasis is placed on the importance of parents explaining everything to their children, which is laudable enough, but all conversations are conducted in language that is formal and lacking any indication of normal maternal or paternal affection. When the six-year-old Lucy injures her hand by accidentally grasping a bee while she is picking flowers, her mother says,

I thank you, my dear, for getting me so sweet a nosegay, and I am very sorry you have been pricked in doing it. I am sure you did not intend to hurt the poor little bee;

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<sup>33</sup> John Chapple notes that the Edgeworths were known to the Holland family in Cheshire and as the *Harry and Lucy* series was first published by 1825, Maria's books would have been known at Knutsford (Chapple, *Early Years*, pp.168; 198). Elizabeth Gaskell's knowledge of Maria Edgeworth's tale "The Purple Jar" is noted by Angus Easson in the Ryburn edition of *Mary Barton*, p.409, explanatory note to p.82.

and we will walk home now, and I will put some hartshorn to your finger, which will lessen the pain you feel.<sup>34</sup>

*Harry and Lucy* in many ways serves to illustrate some of the ideas expounded in *Practical Education*, written by Maria and her father, R. L. Edgeworth. The quotation above does not, however, strike today's readers as an appropriate reaction to a child's pain and distress; the bee is given at least as much sympathy as the girl, and the implication that the girl has hurt the bee, rather than the other way round, seems calculated to promote feelings of guilt in the child. Nonetheless, the strict utilitarianism of the Edgeworths' ideas on education would, in all probability, have found a sympathetic ear with William Stevenson. He could have been their ideal reader.

William Stevenson did not lose interest in his older daughter's education when she reached the end of her formal schooling. His only surviving letter to Elizabeth suggests that he was quite anxious about her continuing education and about her overall development into a responsible young adult.<sup>35</sup> After providing his daughter with information about her brother's circumstances on board ship, he reminds Elizabeth, in a rather wordy fashion, of her duty to write to her brother. He also implies that Elizabeth has a duty to remind her aunts to write to John Stevenson. This is a heavy approach, but worse is to come. Elizabeth had no recollection of her

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<sup>34</sup> Maria Edgeworth, *Harry and Lucy: To Which are Added, The Little Dog Trusty, The Cherry Orchard, and The Orange Man* (London and New York: Routledge, Warne, and Routledge, 1860), p.19.

<sup>35</sup> This letter, written in 1827, is reproduced and discussed in Chapple, *Early Years*, pp.286-288.

natural mother, yet here her father refers to his second wife, with whom Elizabeth had little rapport, as 'your Mother'.<sup>36</sup> Again duty rather than sympathy is implied, for Elizabeth's recent letter to her stepmother had consisted of a report on her study habits. There is no indication here that the young girl had felt able to share her feelings with the older woman. Work and study remain the focus of this letter. William encourages his daughter with her Latin and Italian studies, but he does not request his daughter to write to him on any matter other than work or study. The greatest degree of warmth is expressed through his reference to the *Literary Gazette*, a copy of which is enclosed with his letter. Here Stevenson refers to two books of the Romantic age. The year is 1827, and his daughter aged seventeen is introduced to, or reminded of, Sir Walter Scott's recently published biography of Napoleon, and a recent work by the Irish Romantic writer, Thomas Moore (1779-1852). By 1827 Scott was established as a writer of historical romances, and his influence can be detected in Gaskell's own historical fiction. Moore was a close friend of the Romantic poet Lord Byron, and in 1830 he published a life of his poet-friend. Since 1801 Moore had been publishing poetry, prose and sentimental songs.<sup>37</sup> One of these songs, 'Oft in the stilly night', became known to Elizabeth Stevenson, for Chapple notes that it appeared in one of her music books. Stevenson's letter continues with some rather mundane items of news and concludes with further exhortations, this time for his daughter to keep a journal in addition to keeping up her family

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<sup>36</sup> Writing to Ellen Nussey in 1857, Gaskell said, regarding the loss of a mother, 'I never knew what it was to have one' (*Gaskell Letters*, p. 891).

<sup>37</sup> *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, ed. by Margaret Drabble, 6th edn (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp 690-691; hereafter Drabble, *Oxford Companion*.

correspondence. For the second time he refers to Elizabeth's stepmother as 'Your Mother'. There is much in this letter to admire, a father's concern for his daughter's study habits and choice of reading; his desire for her development of self-discipline through journal writing and regular family correspondence. What is absent, however, is any display of feeling. It is ironic that the two books which he draws Elizabeth's attention to are by writers of a Romantic sensibility. The writers referred to here by Stevenson, together with his earlier gifts of Cowper and Gray may be seen as the young Elizabeth Stevenson's introduction to Romanticism. This introduction was strengthened by her enjoyment of Brooke's *Fool of Quality* and Day's *Sandford and Merton*. She had acquired the basis of a lifelong literary taste for the Romantic sensibility.

At the age of seventeen, Elizabeth Stevenson was, by the standards of her time, well educated and well read. There lingered, however, an underlying sense of loss and separation, which stemmed from the early death of her mother; and from her father's and stepmother's failure to integrate her into their family circle in Chelsea. The society of her Knutsford relations, and the pleasure she derived from her reading and from nature, may have helped to assuage these feelings of desolation. Nonetheless, we would also expect her to have found consolation in her religious faith. It is to this that I would now like to turn.



Elizabeth Stevenson was born into a strongly Unitarian family circle. William Stevenson had trained for the Dissenting ministry at Daventry Academy, the college where Joseph Priestly had studied. His Unitarian associations continued with an appointment, probably in 1793, at Manchester Academy as classics tutor. During his time in Manchester it is likely that he was converted to Arianism by the charismatic Dr Barnes at Cross Street Chapel. This experience was followed by an association with Dob Lane Chapel, where Stevenson preached for about three years. There is evidence to suggest that during this time he showed the influence of the strongly Socinian George Wiche, an old friend from his student days.<sup>38</sup> Elizabeth Stevenson's relations on her mother's side were also Unitarian in their belief, though Jenny Uglow claims that the Hollands represented a less radical side of Unitarianism.<sup>39</sup> It was, however, this side of the family that exerted the more positive religious influence. As a child, Elizabeth Stevenson regularly worshipped at Brook Street Chapel, Knutsford, with her Aunt Lumb. The influence of this chapel, and its minister, the Revd Henry Green, has been noted by Gaskell's biographers. Winifred Gérin, for instance, claims that the teaching in Brook St Chapel, supported by the example of the Holland family circle, suited the young Elizabeth's temperament, since this teaching precluded any notion of fear, while promoting ideas of charity and hopefulness.<sup>40</sup> It was in Knutsford that Elizabeth Stevenson became Elizabeth Gaskell, at the (Trinitarian) parish church.

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<sup>38</sup> For a discussion of Stevenson's religious background, see Chapple, *Early Years*, pp. 15, 23 and 32-36. Dob Lane Chapel was on the north-eastern edge of Manchester.

<sup>39</sup> Uglow, pp. 7-8.

<sup>40</sup> Gérin, pp. 13-14.

It is likely that religious considerations, on both sides of her family, played a part in the choice of school for the young Elizabeth Stevenson. Hannah Lumb, as a practising Unitarian, is likely to have favoured a school whose financial support came at least in part from a prominent Unitarian source.<sup>41</sup> This fact might also have influenced William Stevenson. The school to which Elizabeth was sent certainly attracted other Unitarian families, including the Nightingales, Martineaus and Leigh-Smiths, but this could be explained by the fact that the Byerleys' was a respected girls' boarding school and Unitarians recognised the importance of sound education for girls. The Byerley sisters were not, in any case, running a church school. There is no evidence to show that religious studies or scripture formed part of the curriculum. We do, however, know something about the patterns of religious worship at the school. Phyllis Hicks asserts that the Byerley sisters were Anglicans and that the girls regularly attended services at the parish church.<sup>42</sup> Girls from an Anglican background would, therefore, have been prepared for confirmation, and Elizabeth Stevenson would have received some religious instruction. The likelihood is that Elizabeth Stevenson was exposed to more than one kind of religious worship, conformist and non-conformist. She did not grow up in cloistered Unitarian circles, nor was she denied the experience of other Christian forms of worship. During her five years as a boarder she had contact with girls who were from a Dissenting background, including

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<sup>41</sup> The Byerleys were connected to the Wedgwood family through business and marriage relationships. Maria Byerley's cousin, Josiah Wedgwood, provided continuing financial help for the school (Hicks, pp.1 and 48-49). See also Chapple, *Early Years*, p. 238.

<sup>42</sup> Hicks, p. 82.

some who were specifically Unitarian, but she also had the experience of Trinitarian worship. By the time she left school, her range of religious experiences was comparatively wide.<sup>43</sup> The nature of her faith at this time remains unclear.

By the time Elizabeth Stevenson was in her late teens, she had lost both her father and her brother, for William Stevenson died in 1829, when she was nineteen, and John Stevenson was lost at sea prior to his father's death.<sup>44</sup> There would be no more paternal advice or influence from the father with whom she had felt less than comfortable; and the brother, of whom she had seen so little, would live on only in her imagination, helping her create fictional characters of young men missing at sea. Although she could still turn to her beloved Aunt Lumb for friendship, she was strictly speaking an orphan. She carried the emotional scars of her early motherless state and of her strained relationship with the Chelsea household. She had, however, been sustained by the poetry of Sensibility; the proto-Romanticism of Henry Brooke and Thomas Day; and by her appreciation of the natural world. To some extent, at least, she was also supported by her religious faith. Within two years of her father's death, Elizabeth would meet her future husband, in Greenheys, Manchester, the very location of the opening page of her first full length novel.<sup>45</sup> But before this meeting

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<sup>43</sup> According to one source, Elizabeth spent at least part of her holidays at the school (Chapple, *Early Years*, p. 238). If this is true, then her five years at school represented a very definite separation from the Unitarian environment of her Holland relations in Knutsford. Even if she did go home for holidays, five years boarding away would certainly have widened her horizons in religious terms.

<sup>44</sup> For the circumstances surrounding the disappearance of John Stevenson, see Chapple, *Early Years*, p.338.

<sup>45</sup> Jenny Uglow states that this meeting probably took place at the home of John Gooch Robberds, in Greenheys, Manchester. Elizabeth Stevenson had been spending time at the home of the Revd William Turner, a friend and relation through marriage of the Holland family, in Newcastle-upon-

could take place Elizabeth had a little more living to do and a new mentor would enter her life. Her time spent with this mentor, William Turner of Newcastle, would prove to be a consolidation of all the good that had gone before, in terms of family connection, education and religion. It was a time that would help to ease the heartache of her young life. To what extent this association was a consequence of her early separation from her father's household is open to speculation. Nonetheless, it does seem likely that if she had remained in Chelsea, she would have become more involved in the London branch of the Holland family, and less likely to have made extended visits to Tyneside.

John Chapple, in spite of his extensive research for *The Early Years*, notes that the two years between the death of Elizabeth's father, in the spring of 1829, and her first acquaintance with her future husband, in the autumn of 1831, are poorly documented and offer scope for further investigation. We do know, however, that during this time Elizabeth paid extended visits to some of her Holland relations and their circle of friends, including the Turners of Newcastle.<sup>46</sup> This meant that she was now moving exclusively in Unitarian circles, the most prominent member of which was the Revd William Turner of Newcastle, twice related by marriage to the Holland family. If she looked to anyone for paternal guidance, comfort or support, after her father's death, she may well have looked to William Turner. Nine years older than Stevenson and,

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Tyne. One of the Turner daughters was married to the Minister of Cross Street Chapel, Manchester, John Gooch Robberds. William Gaskell was his assistant minister (Uglow, p. 70). Greenheys was then a leafy suburb and home to many professional people.

<sup>46</sup> Chapple, *Early Years*, pp.343-344.

like Elizabeth's father, married to a member of the Holland family, he would seem a natural successor. Elizabeth would have been distantly related to his children and might have met them during her childhood although, as they were much older than herself, and two died in infancy, they would not have provided a circle of childhood friends.<sup>47</sup>

Although Elizabeth Stevenson's visits to the Turner household in Newcastle are not well documented, the indications are that they were far from being brief or sporadic. Winifred Gérin notes that she spent at least two winters at the Turner household following her father's death, and was sent to Edinburgh only to escape the cholera epidemic of 1830-1831. Jenny Uglow also claims two winters were spent with the Turners in Newcastle.<sup>48</sup> John Chapple notes her first stay in Newcastle in the winter of 1829-1830 and the likelihood of a second visit to Newcastle towards the end of 1830. Moreover, Elizabeth Stevenson's letter to Anne Burdett, Newcastle, June 1831, suggests a further stay in the area, for she refers here to a recent visit to a village across the river Tyne.<sup>49</sup> Later in life Elizabeth Gaskell acknowledged the influence of the Turner connection by describing *Ruth* as her 'Newcastle novel', and by drawing on Turner for her character of Thurston Benson in that work.<sup>50</sup> The fact

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<sup>47</sup> The oldest of the Turner children was born in 1786 and the youngest, Anne, in 1796. Two died before Elizabeth was born and one when she was an infant (Chapple, *Early Years*, p.446). Only Anne Turner seems to have played a part in Elizabeth's life as a friend or companion (Uglow, pp.63 and 70).

<sup>48</sup> Gérin, pp. 40-42, Uglow, p.56, and Chapple, pp.343-344.

<sup>49</sup> *Gaskell Further Letters*, p.1.

<sup>50</sup> For Gaskell's description of *Ruth* as 'my Newcastle novel', see Uglow, p.58. The resemblance between Turner and Benson is noted by Gérin, p. 133.

that she kept in touch with William Turner to the end of his life when he retired to his daughter's home in Manchester, and that he baptised Meta Gaskell, suggests that the Newcastle association was a happy one.<sup>51</sup> I propose, therefore, to discuss this association as an important transitional stage in Elizabeth Gaskell's life, and as one not yet fully appreciated. This time will be viewed as significant for three reasons: the development of her religious faith; the continuation of her education through reading; and her meeting with William Gaskell. With regard to religion, I hope to show that Turner introduced Elizabeth Stevenson to a Unitarian faith that tied in with the Romantic sensibility. It was during this time that she became aware of ways in which the Unitarian emphasis on reason could be modified by the Romantic stress on feeling. I also hope to show that during her time in Newcastle she was able to build on her previous education and, albeit unconsciously, prepare herself for her future as William Gaskell's wife, and for her future as an author in her own right.

Unlike William Stevenson, who had trained for the Dissenting ministry and then abandoned it in favour of other employment, William Turner devoted his life to the Unitarian ministry. The Turner household was, therefore, Elizabeth Stevenson's first experience of living under the same roof as a practising minister of religion. To some extent, at least, this must have prepared her for her later life in Manchester. William Turner's household also provided a literary environment. His involvement with the Newcastle Literary and Philosophical Society was augmented by his own

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<sup>51</sup> Uglow, p. 66.

considerable library at home, as indicated by the sale catalogue of his books.<sup>52</sup> These engagements with literature and with book collecting probably reflected a cultural inheritance, for his father, William Turner of Wakefield, had been a writer, publishing quite extensively in addition to following the profession of Dissenting minister. In addition to his religious and literary activities, William Turner of Newcastle was at the centre of a web of leading Unitarian families, including the Martineaus of Norwich and the Rankins of Newcastle. It was through his connection with another Unitarian minister, John Gooch Robberds, that he had the biggest impact on the life of Elizabeth Stevenson, for it was through Robberds that his young visitor met William Gaskell.<sup>53</sup> Given her early education at a school where at least one of the teachers became a professional writer, and given her father's success in writing for publication, together with the fact that she was now in a household where writing was a craft taken seriously, Elizabeth Stevenson was emerging as a product of a highly literate and literary environment.

It is interesting to compare the content and style of William Turner of Newcastle with that of William Stevenson's writing. It is not easy to identify the audience that Stevenson had in mind, but even his denunciation of classical learning does not seem to have been aimed specifically at young people, as the reader was more likely to be an educator than a student. Moreover, most of his subsequent journalism would

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<sup>52</sup> Chapple, *Early Years*, pp.382-384.

<sup>53</sup> As already noted, Turner's elder daughter, Mary, had married J. G. Robberds who was senior Minister at Cross Street Chapel, Manchester. It was at the home of the Robberds that Elizabeth met William Gaskell (Uglow, p.70).

appear to have been written for quite a narrow audience, one which already enjoyed the benefits of education and was likely to be of settled mind and habits; in short, people who already knew how to conduct their lives. His writings deal with external matters, sometimes exotic like his consideration of modern geography or abstract in the extreme as in his treatise on Political Economy, which is essentially Stevenson's theory on another theory, but the soul of man, or woman, was not the focus of his concern.

The case of William Turner is very different. In 1801 he wrote his *Discourses on the Duty and Reward of Looking to Ourselves: Addressed to Young Persons*. This was subsequently published, possibly with revisions, in 1818.<sup>54</sup> Taking as his text, the Second Epistle of Saint John, verse eight, he argues that external matters like honours, wealth and pleasure do not represent our real selves. 'A man's self', he says, 'is his soul, and his proper interests are those of his soul, — wisdom, good dispositions and purposes' (pp.4-6). The first part of this discourse, with its emphasis on the value of independent enquiry based on reason, investigation and evidence, would have appealed to William Stevenson, but Turner develops his treatise by distinguishing between state of mind and disposition and temper. Any avenue of investigation, however methodical, should, he says, be in the interests of 'virtue and religion'. When he says, 'This may appear to many a new and pathless field of enquiry', we see him as a man who is challenging existing assumptions. He is

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<sup>54</sup> William Turner, *Discourses on the Duty and Reward of Looking to Ourselves: Addressed to Young Persons* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: John Marshall; London: Longman, 1818).



apparently modifying the Enlightenment reliance on powers of reason by harnessing it to ideas of morality which are associated with states of feeling. 'Looking to yourselves' for Turner involves a monitoring of appetites and passions including selfishness, intemperance and vanity on the one hand against consideration, soberness and modesty on the other. When he talks about the 'science of your own mind and heart', we sense that he is in tune with the Romantics. The science of feeling is within his intellectual domain.

On New-Year's-Day, 1817, Turner took for his text, Psalm twenty-three, verse six, the image of The Good Shepherd. This sermon contains many elements of Unitarianism: the loving Father who endowed us with faculties of reason and understanding; God as merciful as well as righteous; and the need to look on the bright side, believing that all is for the best. When he talks about adversity and the purpose of suffering his sermon can seem platitudinous, but these are the words of comfort that would have gone to the heart of the young Elizabeth Stevenson had she heard or read them. When he says that adversity can strengthen us but should not harden our hearts, we feel that he is speaking from personal experience and is endeavouring to give hope to those who have yet to learn this hard lesson. When he talks about national adversity, he praises the enlightened and intelligent mind as a mine of wealth and prosperity and a means of diffusing knowledge. But he then says something that distinguishes him sharply from William Stevenson, and reminds us of another writer, for he states that the enlightened mind needs the feeling heart. Had he

read Wordsworth? If he had, it seems likely that he would have identified with him. When Turner proceeds to praise Britain for endeavouring to improve the lot of the lower classes at home and abroad, through acts of charity and philanthropy, quoting the work of British Missionary Societies and the rugged independence of the Kirkaldy Weavers, we perhaps catch a glimpse of the seeds of William and Elizabeth Gaskell's work in Manchester.<sup>55</sup>

In 1824, the year that William Stevenson was writing his essays on Political Economy, William Turner again addressed an audience of young people, this time students about to take their annual examination at Manchester College, York. As an invited visitor to the College, he took this opportunity to remind an audience of theology students of the importance of their inner lives. Taking as his text, the Gospel According to Saint John, Chapter twenty-one, verses fifteen to seventeen, 'Feed My Sheep', he stresses the importance of spiritual nourishment. 'We must promote the advancement of our flock', he says, 'not in external circumstances or worldly distinctions, but in mind and heart and life'. Perhaps because the audience included lay-students, as well as those who intended making the Ministry their profession, the sermon is not in any way heavy-going. The message is clear and straight-forward: follow Christ's teaching in your role as a Christian Pastor, but also in your daily life.

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<sup>55</sup> William Turner, *The Goodness of God Illustrated in the Appointment of Private and National Adversity: A Sermon Preached to the Congregation of Protestant Dissenters, Assembling in Hanover Square, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, on New-Year's Day 1817* (York: Thomas Wilson, 1817). In a footnote (p.24) Turner quotes from a petition signed by 800 Kirkaldy Weavers who argue articulately for a living wage and not charity.

The lay-students were expected to exercise the knowledge acquired at York by lending support to their Christian Ministers in their endeavours to 'feed his lambs'.<sup>56</sup>

The following year William Turner addressed an audience that would have been composed principally of the laity. This occasion was the first meeting of the Literary and Philosophical Society of Newcastle-upon-Tyne held in its new apartments; the date was sixth of September 1825. He took this occasion to set forth his views on the importance of knowledge as a means of raising up the condition of mankind. But just as he had argued that the enlightened mind needed feeling, so he now argues that knowledge needs good sentiments and principles. Tracing the history of the Newcastle Literary and Philosophical Society from its beginnings in 1792, when a group of gentlemen met informally, he considers the aspects of Newcastle that are favourable to the growth of such an institution: the indigenous raw materials and subsequent wealth that can give rise to a collective desire for learning and cultural activities. While noting the value of monthly meetings for discussion and papers, he stresses the importance of a library to encourage reading, not only for information but for pleasure. Although addressing a fairly privileged audience, Turner makes it clear that his concerns about education embrace a much wider milieu. He soon moves on

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<sup>56</sup> William Turner, *Attention to Christ's Flock, The Proper Effect and Evidence of his Ministers' Love to Him: A Sermon Preached at the Chapel in Saint Saviour's Gate, York, on Sunday, June 27, 1824, Being the Commencement of the Annual Examination of the Students of Manchester College, York* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Hodgson, 1824). Although Turner does not refer to the Divinity of Christ he does quote from John xiv. 24., 'and he that loveth me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him' (p.11). In the King James Bible, the wording is different, and is found in verse 23 as follows: 'If a man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him'. Towards the end of his sermon, Turner adds a section addressed directly to the Lay-Students of the College (pp. 22-26).

to argue for the provision of Public Libraries and praises Sunday Schools and Jubilee Schools for their work in improving the morals of the lower classes by teaching them the rudiments of reading and writing. Literary Societies, supported by Mechanics' Institutes, he argues, are to diffuse a taste for knowledge.<sup>57</sup> The Revd William Turner of Newcastle was clearly not the kind of clergyman who wanted to keep the masses in a state of subjection. For him, those people who were fortunate enough to be educated had a responsibility for the education of less privileged members of society. His was very much a pattern of living and working that would be followed by William Gaskell in Manchester throughout the greater part of the nineteenth century. Just how much the young Elizabeth Stevenson learnt directly from Turner while she was a guest in his household, is difficult to establish, but his sermons, discourses and addresses all give us a very clear idea of the kind of man he was. He cared about the poorest people in society, but he respected them and wanted to see them raise themselves up by their own efforts. He also cared about young people and wanted them to value their own inner lives. But when he advised them to value their souls more than external things, he was not advocating material poverty or offering a sop to the starving poor. Rather, he was teaching people how to live, whatever their financial circumstances or status in life. His faith was in the value of education as much as religion. Like Wordsworth, he recognised that men who do not wear fine clothes could still feel deeply. As a clergyman he also recognized that these feelings needed to be educated.

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<sup>57</sup> William Turner, *An Address Delivered at the First Meeting of the Literary and Philosophical Society of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Held in its New Apartments 6th September 1825* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Hodgson, 1825).

Some of William Turner's sermons were preached or printed during the years between Elizabeth Stevenson leaving school and going to live in Manchester as William Gaskell's wife. These are the texts, therefore, which are most likely to have been known to her. In 1827, the year that she left school, he gave a sermon in Newcastle-upon-Tyne to celebrate a hundred years of worship at Hanover Square Chapel. Tracing the history of the chapel and its Nonconformist predecessors, he places great emphasis on freedom of conscience, the study of the Scriptures and, above all, the value of reason. But the real object of this sermon is to explain his view of the Lord's Supper and to persuade more of his congregation to participate, as it has become thinly attended. He criticizes the doctrine of transubstantiation and the politicization of the rite of Holy Communion. It is these trends, in his view, that are keeping both old and young members of his congregation from participating in the Lord's Supper.<sup>58</sup> This sermon suggests that while Turner could emphasize the value of reason, he was also in favour of an emotional relationship with Jesus, through the shared experience of Holy Communion. For Unitarians the communion service could be an opportunity for spiritual fellowship and commemoration of the life of Jesus.

Less than a year after this text was printed, he returned to the subject with a sermon entitled *The Obligation and Proper Purposes of the Institution of the Lord's Supper*. Presumably his sermon of March 25th 1827 had not had its desired effect and he felt

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<sup>58</sup> William Turner, *A Sermon, Preached at The Chapel in Hanover Square, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, March 25, 1827, Being The Last Day of the Century since its Dedication to The Public Worship of God* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Emerson Charnley, 1827).

that further explanation of, and emphasis on, the purpose of this rite was needed, for in the original title only the word *Proper* is printed in italics.<sup>59</sup> Here he argues that the Last Supper established a rite which should be observed by all nations and throughout all ages. Central to its importance, he argues, is the universality of bread and wine; a simple act of eating basic food in the company of other Christians. When turning again to possible reasons for its decline, he claims that the celebration of the Lord's Supper has lost its universality. As an example he quotes the experience of Lord Barrington, father of Bishop Barrington, but a Dissenter himself, who was refused the Sacrament when attending an unfamiliar Dissenting chapel on communion day. Up to this point the sermon of February 1828 does not seem to add a great deal to the one given in March 1827, but he concludes by returning to an earlier allusion to the Test and Corporation Acts, which had been suspended annually, and which he describes as a 'perversity' at its 'most degrading height'. So strongly did he feel about this that he organised a petition from his congregation to the government asking for the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts. This petition was presented to the House of Commons on Tuesday 19th February by Sir M. W. Ridley. The Revd William Turner clearly meant business.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> William Turner, *The Obligation and Proper Purposes of the Institution of the Lord's Supper: A Sermon, Preached in the Chapel in Hanover Square, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, on Sunday, February 17th 1828* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: for the Unitarian Tract Society, Marshall, 1828). For the sake of consistency of style within this thesis, I have reproduced the title in italics, but used bold script for 'Proper' to highlight the word as Turner did.

<sup>60</sup> The Test and Corporation Acts were suspended annually; Turner campaigned for complete abolition.

In most respects, however, William Turner of Newcastle seems to have been a moderate and conciliatory man. Some Unitarians had made a point of denouncing the validity of the Ascension.<sup>61</sup> Turner's view of this supernatural event has not been found, but when it came to the Resurrection, surely another supernatural occurrence, he made his views very clear. In 1831, quoting extensively from the Scriptures, he asserted that Christ's resurrection is an established fact and the strongest proof of his divine mission. Once we accept the fact of Christ's resurrection, he argues, we accept the possibility of resurrection per se, and if the power of God is sufficient to raise one person, it must be sufficient to raise all the dead; hence a general resurrection for mankind and eternal life.<sup>62</sup> Again Turner shows himself to be a Christian and a Unitarian minister who would, in spite of his adherence to the principle of close reasoning, look for ways of bringing comfort to anyone in distress. More than forty years later, William Gaskell would take this belief in eternal life to bring comfort to another Unitarian.<sup>63</sup> Turner had pointed the way to a Unitarian faith that was warmed by the Romantic elevation of human feeling and by a Wordsworthian recognition of the depth of feeling in those who do not wear fine clothes. It was this combination of Unitarian faith and Romanticism that would bring Elizabeth Stevenson and William Gaskell together, and which would inform much of their work. For William, this work would include poetry lectures to working men in Manchester; for Elizabeth, it

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<sup>61</sup> See, for example, James Martineau's sermon on the Ascension, given in Liverpool in 1840, in *National Duties and Other Sermons and Addresses* (London, New York and Bombay: Longmans, Green, 1903), pp. 281-294.

<sup>62</sup> William Turner, *The Connexion Between the Resurrection of Christ and The General Resurrection: A Sermon, By the Rev. William Turner, of Newcastle-upon-Tyne* (Manchester: Forrest, 1831).

<sup>63</sup> See Uglow, p. 611, for William Gaskell's condolences to John Rely Beard's widow.

would be her writing, including her shorter works, a selection of which will be discussed in later chapters of this thesis.

Less is known about William's literary education than Elizabeth's, but a good grounding in poetry and versification manifested itself in his lectures for Manchester working men and in his hymn writing. It was possibly through his students that he became acquainted with the Lancashire dialect writers and developed an interest in etymology. His interest in language and particularly German enabled him to translate hymns from German into English. This interest in language in all its varieties may have struck a chord with Elizabeth, given her late father's knowledge of the subject. But unlike William Stevenson, William Gaskell was communicating directly with people who spoke something other than received English. It was probably this experience, with his non-standard English speaking adult students, that drew William Gaskell to Wordsworth and his claims for the merits of everyday speech.<sup>64</sup> If this is so, then it could have been through her husband that Elizabeth first became acquainted with *Lyrical Ballads*. Wordsworth did not share William Gaskell's interest in regional dialects. He did, however, admire some of William Gaskell's poetry. Since this had appeared anonymously, Wordsworth wrote to William, care of his publishers, singling out for particular praise, *Temperance Rhymes* and what he described as 'Verses founded on the beautiful old Welsh Custom, with which you

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<sup>64</sup> If William Gaskell was drawn to Wordsworth because of his claims for the merits of everyday speech, he may well have been disappointed to discover that the poet did not include regional dialect words in his depiction of language spoken by men or women in daily life.



have first made me acquainted'.<sup>65</sup> Wordsworth was not the only contemporary poet to interest William Gaskell, for his lectures on 'The Poets and Poetry of Humble Life' had also included the work of George Crabbe.<sup>66</sup> The influence of Wordsworth on Elizabeth Gaskell's writing is generally recognized, though not often discussed in close detail. The relationship between Crabbe and Gaskell, however, has only been noted in passing. Both connections will be explored more fully here, and in later chapters of this thesis.

We have noted the choice of reading matter sent to the young Elizabeth Stevenson by her father and the material likely to have been available to her at Knutsford. Given the publication history of Wordsworth's early poetry we see evidence of the way in which the poet was ahead of his time. Stevenson, therefore, as a man of conservative tastes, may not have lived to appreciate Wordsworth's poems. Had he lived another decade or so he might have shared his daughter's and son-in-law's taste in poetry as there is the argument that Wordsworth's initial reading public were followers of one of the poets approved of by Stevenson, William Cowper. Surprisingly perhaps, there is no evidence to show that Stevenson cared for the poet who was older than Wordsworth, and who combined the formal properties of Augustan poetry with descriptions of humble life, the Revd George Crabbe.<sup>67</sup> The influence of both

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<sup>65</sup> Letter written by Wordsworth from Rydal Mount, dated 22 July 1840, reproduced in R. D. Waller, ed., 'Letters addressed to Mrs Gaskell by celebrated contemporaries: now in the possession of the John Rylands Library', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 19 (1935), 102-169 (p.133); hereafter Waller, 'Letters to Gaskell'.

<sup>66</sup> *Gaskell Letters*, p.33.

<sup>67</sup> Amy Cruse, *The Englishman and His Books In the Early Nineteenth Century* (New York: Thomas Y Crowell, [n.d.]; London: Harrap, 1930), pp. 38-39; hereafter Cruse. Amy Cruse suggests that the

Wordsworth and Crabbe on Elizabeth Gaskell is considerable, and will be discussed more fully at a later stage of this chapter, and in subsequent chapters of this thesis. I would, however, like to stress here that while Wordsworth was the 'supreme Romanticist, Crabbe was a poet of the Romantic age, but only partly a Romanticist.

Born in 1754 and dying just four years before Elizabeth worked on his poetry at Sandlebridge, Crabbe's later years coincided with the high Romantic age, but although his early poetry was praised by Augustans, Romantic poets could be very critical of his work.<sup>68</sup> Nevertheless, Wordsworth's criticism of aspects of *The Village* needs to be treated with caution. The poet of the English Lakes had not been born into the kind of poverty that George Crabbe knew, nor had he witnessed, in the north of England, the absolute brutalising want which was the lot of agricultural labourers in eighteenth-century Suffolk. Crabbe's description may have been true to what he personally saw around him during his boyhood and into his adult life.

Crabbe was almost a generation older than William Stevenson, and one would expect Crabbe's poetry to have been known to Stevenson, since Stevenson's life-time

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public that was ready for *Lyrical Ballads* would have rejected much contemporary literature, but would have read Crabbe and Cowper, not uncritically, but (surprisingly, in the case of Crabbe) because of the soothing effect of their poetry. By 1783 George Crabbe had published *The Village*, in which he takes for his subject matter the trials of rustic life, especially for poor people.

<sup>68</sup> Dr Johnson, in a letter to Sir Joshua Reynolds, 4 March 1783, described *The Village* as 'original, vigorous, and elegant'. William Wordsworth, in a letter to Samuel Rogers, 29th September 1805, described Crabbe's description of the Apothecary in *The Village*, as 'false'. By May 1821, William Hazlitt was writing (*London Magazine*, III, 484-90), 'If the most feigning poetry is the truest, Mr Crabbe is of all poets the least poetical'. These comments are taken from *Crabbe: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Arthur Pollard (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), pp.41, 290, and 299; hereafter, *Crabbe Heritage*.

encompassed Crabbe's publishing career. During the years that Stevenson was writing for the *Edinburgh*, its editor, Francis Jeffrey, reviewed Crabbe sympathetically, comparing him favourably with the younger Wordsworth and other Lake poets.<sup>69</sup> Elizabeth first mentions Crabbe in a letter to her sister-in-law, in May 1836. He is one of the poets she is working on at Sandlebridge, but where she obtained the book is not known.<sup>70</sup> Quite clearly it could have been a present from either her father or her husband, or she might have read it in the Turner household. The appeal of Crabbe to Elizabeth could have rested mainly on his choice of subject matter, since rural life was part of her personal experience, although poverty in the countryside did not feature in her fiction to the same extent as urban poverty.<sup>71</sup> Nevertheless what Jeffrey described as Crabbe's 'truth of description' could have been seen as a model to the young woman who was aiming for fidelity in the development of her own skills in descriptive writing.<sup>72</sup>

Although Crabbe's concerns with rural poverty were at odds with Gaskell's tendency to portray country life in idyllic terms, his apparent inspiration for Elizabeth's and William's early collaboration in verse composition, and the fact that he became a subject of William's lectures in Manchester make his poetry a significant influence on

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<sup>69</sup> *Crabbe Heritage*, pp. 54-60.

<sup>70</sup> *Gaskell Letters*, p. 7.

<sup>71</sup> One possible explanation for this is that she mainly spent youthful years in the countryside and was to a certain extent protected from rural poverty by her own social position, whereas she lived in Manchester as a mature woman and, as a minister's wife, became more closely involved in the privations of those around her.

<sup>72</sup> Francis Jeffrey, unsigned review, *Edinburgh Review*, April 1808, xii, 131-51, in *Crabbe Heritage*, p.55.

Elizabeth Gaskell. It has been noted that echoes of his poetry can be found in her writing, most notably *Cranford* and *Sylvia's Lovers*.<sup>73</sup> A. W. Ward noted a connection between *Cranford* and Crabbe's *The Maid's Story*, while Uglow notes a relationship between *Sylvia's Lovers* and Crabbe's *Ruth*.<sup>74</sup> It is difficult to establish just when Elizabeth first became acquainted with the poetry of Crabbe, but if this poet was already a favourite of William Gaskell's when she met him, it is likely that this relationship fostered her interest. Given that the *Edinburgh* and the *Quarterly Review* were read in many Unitarian households, it is also possible that both of the Gaskells' opinions of Crabbe had been influenced by reviews such as the one by J. G. Lockhart, who, writing in January 1834, described Crabbe as

the one who has sympathized the most profoundly and tenderly with the virtues and the sorrows of humble life - who has best understood the fervours of lowly love and affection - and painted the anxieties and vicissitudes of toil and penury with the closest fidelity and the most touching pathos.<sup>75</sup>

'The virtues and sorrows of humble life' and 'fervours of lowly love' would certainly find a place in Elizabeth Gaskell's Manchester, if less so in her portrayal of country life. The extent to which she had read Crabbe's poetry herself is unclear, and the

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<sup>73</sup> Uglow traces the influence of Crabbe on Elizabeth Gaskell (pp.101-102; 292; 483 and 507). On p.292 she discusses possible models for *Cranford*, noting A. W. Ward's comments on the relationship between *Cranford* and Crabbe's *The Maid's Story*. Uglow also notes (p. 611), William Gaskell's lectures on Crabbe.

<sup>74</sup> Uglow (p.292) cites Ward and (p.483) makes her own observation on Crabbe's *Ruth* and Gaskell's *Sylvia's Lovers*.

<sup>75</sup> J. G. Lockhart, unsigned review, *Quarterly Review*, January 1834, 1, 468-508, in *Crabbe Heritage*, p.316. A further selection of reviews on Crabbe will be considered in Chapter Three, when his poetry will be discussed more fully.

nature of her personal reaction to it is ambiguous. The influence of Crabbe could have been mainly vicarious, derived from another reader's views. Initially she took from Crabbe what she needed to get started in her professional writing, but in doing so she transferred the 'vicissitudes of toil and penury' away from the countryside, where she had known happiness, to industrial Manchester at a time when her adult sorrows were beginning.<sup>76</sup>

In the letter written in May 1836 at Sandlebridge, in which Elizabeth Gaskell refers to Crabbe, she says 'I have done all my *composition* of Ld B-, & done Crabbe outright since you left & got up Dryden & Pope- so now I'm all clear and straight before me'.<sup>77</sup> This letter is typical of those written to close friends or relations in that it lacks paragraphing and relies heavily on abbreviations. Wordsworth is referred to as W., and Lord Byron as Ld B-. At the top of page seven, before referring specifically to Byron, she writes 'I have brought Coleridge with me, & am *doing* him & Wordsworth [-] *fit place for the latter!*'<sup>78</sup> The editor's footnote states that this is a reference to the imitations of the poets which she and William Gaskell planned to do. Given that she and William intended to imitate poetry that focused on humble life, then *Lyrical Ballads* would seem a likely choice in addition to the poetry of Crabbe.

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<sup>76</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell's real feelings about Crabbe's poetry are hinted at in her letter to Mary Howitt, 18 August 1838, when she says that she and William had thought of writing '*rather* in the manner of Crabbe (now don't think this presumptuous), but in a more seeing-beauty spirit' (*Gaskell Letters*, p.33). The italicization of '*rather*' together with the caveat of 'a more seeing-beauty spirit' suggests something less than a wholehearted liking for this poetry, although the words in parenthesis suggest respect for Crabbe's work. This evidence suggests that her feelings for Crabbe at this time were somewhat ambiguous.

<sup>77</sup> *Gaskell Letters*, p. 7.

<sup>78</sup> *Gaskell Letters*, p.7.

Of the influence of *Lyrical Ballads* on Gaskell's short stories, there is no doubt, and this letter suggests that her interest in this particular poetry was fostered by her collaboration with her husband in his lectures. Two years after this letter was written from Sandlebridge, Elizabeth, when writing in a more formal manner to another writer, Mary Howitt, describes this project in greater detail and refers directly to one of the poems in *Lyrical Ballads*, 'The Cumberland Beggar'. Here is the clearest statement that Elizabeth, through her involvement with her husband's work, was deeply engaged with Wordsworth's most groundbreaking poetry.<sup>79</sup>

By the time Elizabeth Gaskell was referring to Wordsworth, and in particular *Lyrical Ballads*, the ground had been broken in the sense that this poetry was now widely read, with sales a considerable improvement on those of the first decade of the nineteenth century. When William Gaskell gave lectures on Crabbe and Wordsworth to manual workers in Manchester he was, as a minister of religion, bringing spiritual comfort to men, and perhaps women, whose lives had been disrupted or transformed by new working patterns, and a constantly changing environment. They were not educated people in the sense that we understand the word today, but would probably have participated in the pilgrimages to Rydal Mount or sent letters of gratitude to the poet had they been able to do so.<sup>80</sup> But *Lyrical Ballads* was, by this time, thirty years

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<sup>79</sup> *Gaskell Letters*, p.33.

<sup>80</sup> Gill, *Wordsworth and Victorians*, pp. 10-16. Stephen Gill discusses the way in which Rydal Mount had become a shrine to visitors during the 1830s and 1840s. Wordsworth was also by this time receiving written tributes in the post, some of which were effusive in the extreme.

old. It is rather like reading poetry in the 1990s that was written in the 1960s; but while some of the poetry and prose which caused a stir in the 1960s can strike today's students as old-fashioned, Wordsworth's poetry found its best audience a generation or two after it was first published. The fact that at the turn of the eighteenth century, Wordsworth found himself ahead of his time is evidence of the revolutionary nature of his work. It is, therefore, likely that Elizabeth and William Gaskell were appreciating Wordsworth, not so much for his new ideas about poetry, but for the spiritual comfort which they could derive from it and pass on to other people. As a writer, Elizabeth Gaskell was not alone in incorporating some of Wordsworth's ideas into her own novels and short stories, as many of her contemporaries, including those she admired, also saw the potential interest in humble lives, especially as the reading public was beginning to widen.

When Elizabeth Gaskell wrote about Wordsworth and Crabbe in the garden at Sandlebridge, a year before Queen Victoria ascended the throne, she was in the early stages of her life as a wife and mother. For four years she had lived in an industrial city, less protected from the harsh realities of life than ever before. She had become acquainted with some of the tribulations of married life, although the worst trauma was yet to come with the death of her only son in infancy, an event which would leave a deeper scar than the stillbirth of her first daughter. When writing from Sandlebridge she was in good spirits, her happiness stemming from her second baby's good health, the beauty of the garden and the wildlife nourished there, and her pre-

occupation with poetry. But when she says of Wordsworth, 'my heart feels so full of him I only don't know how to express my fullness without being too diffuse', she is referring only to Wordsworth the poet and not to Wordsworth the man.<sup>81</sup> This is another way in which a nineteenth-century reader relates to Wordsworth differently from one in the late twentieth century. This is not to say that today's reader is necessarily shocked or offended by the knowledge of the poet's illegitimate daughter; on the contrary this aspect of his life can make him appear more interesting. But during Elizabeth Gaskell's lifetime, any knowledge, in this country, of Wordsworth's affair with Annette Vallon was limited to his wife, Mary, and one or two very close friends. When in the same letter she refers to Crabbe as one who lacks the seeing-beauty spirit, she is expressing, from her own standpoint of personal happiness, reservations about the pessimistic tone of his poetry. In later chapters of this thesis, I intend to show how her relationship with the poetry of Crabbe and of Wordsworth developed.

In the eighteen-thirties and forties, Wordsworth the poet and man were seen in the same light, a kind of guru, or mystical leader providing spiritual guidance and comfort through his communion with nature and apparent insights into the lives and feelings of the poorest people in society. These were the perceived qualities that brought him the laureateship and his reputation as a man with social responsibility.<sup>82</sup> They were

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<sup>81</sup> *Gaskell Letters*, p. 7. (The expression here, though ungrammatical, is that of the original.)

<sup>82</sup> Referring to a written request, in 1845, from Hugh Seymour Tremenheere, an Inspector of Schools and assistant Poor Law Commissioner, to Wordsworth, asking the poet to make a contribution to social regeneration, Stephen Gill takes the view that Tremenheere was responding to the image of Wordsworth as the poet who spoke for the labouring poor (*Wordsworth and Victorians*, pp.23-28).



probably the qualities that Elizabeth Gaskell found so admirable in his poetry, which, although not overtly religious and at times even offensive to committed Christians, does carry echoes of some Christian concerns: compassion for the poor and respect for human life regardless of intellect or social status. Having said this, it could not have been entirely clear to what extent Wordsworth was a committed Christian or which branch of Christianity was closest to his own ideas of salvation. As far as religion is concerned it seems that he was all things to all people: some saw him as a pantheist, others as a Quaker, while there were those who saw him as High Anglican or even sympathetic towards Roman Catholicism. Many readers who found spiritual nourishment in his poetry found an alternative to any of the organised religions.<sup>83</sup>

The way in which Wordsworth was perceived in the 1830s made him, probably more than Crabbe, a firm favourite with Elizabeth Gaskell. Here was the poetry of humble life, but with a more 'seeing-beauty spirit', written in a new poetic language and with a religious content open to individual interpretation. Her own interest in varieties of speech, both geographical and social, would inform her writing. This engagement in language can be traced to her father and was almost certainly fostered by the interest she took in her husband's work. Her own liberal religious views would be compatible with the spiritual ambiguities in Wordsworth's poems. Had she known as much about the poet's private life as we do today, she might not have embraced his work quite so

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Gill also traces the origins of the National Trust to some of Wordsworth's ideas expressed in his *Guide to the Lakes* (pp.259-260).

<sup>83</sup> Stephen Gill discusses the ambivalence of Wordsworth's religious beliefs and notes the objections of 'exacting Christians' to the lack of Christian comfort offered in 'The Ruined Cottage' (*Wordsworth and Victorians*, pp. 68-80 and 100).

wholeheartedly. The fact that she did not have this kind of knowledge about Wordsworth enabled her to draw on his poetry quite freely. Her respect for him remained undiminished, for she took the opportunity to meet him at his home at Rydal Mount, in 1849, one year before the poet's death.

John Chapple concludes his book on Elizabeth Gaskell's early years with the Revd William James Fox's exhortation, to a mainly Unitarian audience in 1832, to 'complete the scenery of the poetry of poverty'.<sup>84</sup> This fusion of religion and literature brought Elizabeth and William together in the first place, became central to their marriage and formed the bedrock of Elizabeth's writing career. Her collaboration with her husband on *Sketches Among the Poor: No.1*, and, more significantly, her own *Libbie Marsh's Three Eras*, represent the first literary fruits of her father's early decision to part with his infant daughter by sending her to her Aunt's home in Cheshire. A consideration of these texts will be included in Chapter Three of this thesis.

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<sup>84</sup> Chapple, *Early Years*, p. 432. John Chapple quotes from William J. Fox's addresses in 1830 and in 1832. No details for the 1832 address are given, but the endnote on p.434 indicates that it appeared in the *Monthly Repository*, a Unitarian periodical owned and edited by Fox from 1831 to 1836.

## Chapter Three: Three Early Texts

### *Sketches Among the Poor: No.I,* *Libbie Marsh's Three Eras, and The Sexton's Hero*

In Chapter One of this thesis, I discussed aspects of Romanticism, and in Chapter Two I attempted to trace the development of Elizabeth Gaskell's consciousness from her early childhood to the time when, as a young wife and mother, she demonstrated an interest in, and enjoyment of, poetry. By this time, 1836, she was regularly writing letters and self-consciously keeping a diary, which she hoped her infant daughter, Marianne, would one day read. This delight in imaginative reading and writing fed into Elizabeth's relationship with her husband, and I concluded Chapter Two with reference to the poetry of poverty, which was already engaging William Gaskell's attention through his lectures to working men in Manchester, and which continued to interest him throughout his life.

The purpose of Chapter Three is firstly, to explore the collaboration in *Sketches Among the Poor: No.I* (1837), hereafter *Sketches*, and secondly to look at ways in which Elizabeth Gaskell moved away from this collaborative venture in verse to two individual pieces of writing in prose: *Libbie Marsh's Three Eras* and *The Sexton's Hero*, both published by William Howitt in 1847. The examination of *Sketches* will involve a consideration of George Crabbe's poetry, including its relationship to Augustan and Romantic versification; William Gaskell's involvement with the poetry of humble life, and his relationship to the self-taught poets of Manchester; and, finally, a close reading of *Sketches*, in which the

influence of earlier, and contemporary poets, on this verse will be discussed, together with an identification of Elizabeth Gaskell's likely tastes in poetry. The discussion of the two short stories will take into account Elizabeth Gaskell's knowledge of Romantic poetry.

It is widely understood that Elizabeth Gaskell's first conscious venture into professional writing, that is to say writing for publication, was her part in *Sketches*, the poem in which she collaborated with her husband.<sup>1</sup> It is also generally understood that this verse was inspired, or at least influenced, by the poetry of the Reverend George Crabbe (1754-1832). This assumption is well founded for several reasons. Firstly, William Gaskell's course of lectures on 'The Poets and Poetry of Humble Life' included material on the life and work of George Crabbe. There is also Elizabeth Gaskell's letter to Mary Howitt, written in August 1838, in which she refers to the influence of Crabbe.<sup>2</sup> A quick reading of *Sketches* certainly reveals similarities with some, but not all, of Crabbe's poetry, principally the use of rhyming couplets and iambic pentameter.<sup>3</sup> As far as subject matter is concerned, the influence of Crabbe can be found in the inclusion of a rural situation in *Sketches*, and in the choice of a female as the central character,

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<sup>1</sup> First published in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 41 (1837), 48-50. All references here are taken from Gaskell, *MB*, Ryburn, Appendix iii, pp. 397-400.

<sup>2</sup> *Gaskell Letters*, p. 33.

<sup>3</sup> Although Crabbe favoured this aspect of versification in many of his poems, including *The Village*, *The Parish Register* and *The Borough*, he did use other forms of rhyme and metre. For example, *Woman!* and *The Hall of Justice* both consist of four-stress lines, rhyming AB, AB. See *George Crabbe: The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. by Norma Dalrymple-Champneys and Arthur Pollard, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988); hereafter *Crabbe Works*. *Woman!* in *Crabbe Works* is vol. I, pp. 320-321; *Hall of Justice*, vol. I, pp. 311-319; *The Village*, vol. I, pp. 157-174; *The Parish Register*, vol. I, pp. 212-280; and *The Borough*, vol. I, pp. 360-598. All quotations from the poetry of Crabbe carry a reference to *Crabbe Works*, including volume, page and line numbers, in that order. A closer comparison of the poetry of George Crabbe with William Gaskell's will follow later in this chapter.

while Mary's economic circumstances provide a link with the poetry of humble life. But a more considered study of Crabbe's poetry, and a closer reading of *Sketches*, suggests that the influence of Crabbe is less significant than it might seem at first sight. The relationship between the Gaskells and Crabbe's poetry was complex. Although William and Elizabeth worked together on *Sketches*, they related to Crabbe as individuals, each in a different way. A recognition of Elizabeth Gaskell's response to the poetry of Crabbe, not least her ambivalence towards the older poet, is central to an understanding and appreciation of much of her writing.

Any study of Crabbe's poetry reveals certain anomalies. His output spanned the years from 1780 to 1819, but with a gap of twenty-two years between 1785 and 1807 when he did not publish any poetry at all. He was not a close contemporary of Wordsworth, since he was born sixteen years earlier, but much of his poetry was written during the time we now call the Romantic era, and by 1819 he was being compared with Wordsworth, and Robert Burns, as the poet of the people. Arthur Pollard, in *Crabbe: The Critical Heritage*, argues that Crabbe stands between the Augustans and the Romantics, but shows total allegiance to neither.<sup>4</sup> The fact that *The Village* (1783) was praised by Dr Johnson places his early poetry in a tradition that pre-dates Romanticism.<sup>5</sup> But he published *The Parish Register*, his second long poem about village life, in 1807, nine years after the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads* was published, and two years after Wordsworth had

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<sup>4</sup> *Crabbe Heritage*, p.1.

<sup>5</sup> *Crabbe Heritage*, p. 41. Dr Johnson, in a letter to Sir Joshua Reynolds, 4 March 1783, stated that he had read Crabbe's *The Village* 'with great delight.' In the same letter, he praised the poem's originality, vigour and elegance. When Reynolds forwarded this letter to Crabbe, he pointed out how sparing Johnson usually was with his praise (*Crabbe Heritage*, p.41, fn.2).

completed the twelve book edition of *The Prelude*. By this time Dr Johnson had been dead for twenty-three years, and what came to be known as English Romanticism was now pre-eminent. William Blake was fifty years old and had been writing poetry for almost a quarter of a century.<sup>6</sup> Coleridge, aged thirty-five, had published *The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere*, and had completed *Christabel*. Crabbe continued to describe life in rural communities, and, in particular, the lives of the poorest people, most notably in *The Borough* (1810) and *Tales of the Hall* (1819). But unlike Wordsworth, he tended to concentrate, not merely on the lower orders, but on the lowest levels of morality. His characters are frequently brutish in their behaviour, but he offers little insight into their moral condition. Even his apothecary, in *The Village*,

Who first insults the victim whom he kills;  
Whose murd'rous hand a drowsy bench protect,  
And whose most tender mercy is neglect,  
(*Crabbe Works*, I.165. 283-285)

is denied any humanity in his dealings with other people.

Crabbe's view of life and humanity was so dismal he could not even express much optimism on the occasion of Baptism, since new lives for him must include at least one 'Child of Shame': offspring of a miller's daughter, betrayed by a sailor who is subsequently killed in a war.<sup>7</sup> Marriages, too, are gloomy affairs: 'Next at our Altar stood a luckless Pair, | Brought by strong Passions and a Warrant there' (I.

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<sup>6</sup> Blake's *Poetical Sketches* were printed in 1783, but not publicly distributed until much later.

<sup>7</sup> *The Parish Register*, Part I., 'Baptisms', *Crabbe Works*, I. p. 220; I. 278.

240. 105). For Crabbe, unbridled passion leads to a “shot-gun” wedding, marital strife and poverty. His closed couplet, which concludes his warning against strong passions, ‘Ah! fly temptation, Youth, refrain! refrain! | I preach for ever; but I preach in vain!’, is repeated, or echoed in slightly different words, throughout Part II, ‘Marriages’, in *The Parish Register* (l. 240. 129).

Crabbe’s detailed description of humble life does not often penetrate surface appearance, limiting his poetry to mere observation and lacking any philosophical insights. In *The Borough* he describes ‘naked Children’, who are ‘roll’d in Dust’, and (presumably the children’s mother) ‘the Dame, who, loosely drest, | Wooes the coy Breeze to fan the open Breast’ (l. 530. 314). This is a description, not merely of humble life, but of slum-life, where all self-respect has been eroded, for,

Careless she found her Friends who dwelt beside,  
 No rival Beauty kept alive her Pride:  
 Still in her bosom Virtue keeps her place,  
 But Decency is gone, the Virtue’s Guard and Grace.

(*Crabbe Works*, l. 531. 324-327)

For Crabbe, even this is not quite human life at its basest; for when the mother with her naked children take shelter, it is in a crumbling tenement, which is provided, not through any act of philanthropy, but, apparently, through feelings of cynicism and even sadism as portrayed by Crabbe’s use of irony in the following lines:

See that long-boarded Building! — by these Stairs  
 Each humble Tenant to that Home repairs —  
 By one large Window lighted — it was made  
 For some bold Project, some Design in Trade:  
 This fail'd, — and one, an humourist in his way,  
 (Ill was the humour,) bought it in decay;  
 Nor will he sell, repair, or take it down,  
 'Tis his, — what cares he for the talk of Town?  
 "No! he will let it to the Poor; — an Home  
 Where he delights to see the Creatures come."

(*Crabbe Works*, I. 531. 328-337)

In this communal accommodation, all aspirations to moral dignity are abandoned,  
 since

In this vast Room, each Place by habit fix'd,  
 Are Sexes, Families, and Ages mixt, —  
 To Union forc'd by Crime, by Fear, by Need.

(*Crabbe Works*, I. 531. 344-346)

Even Francis Jeffrey had reservations about this particular section of *The Borough*, for although he praised the description of the building for being 'complete and highly finished' he expressed the view that Crabbe frequently wasted his powers on unworthy subjects.<sup>8</sup> Crabbe's unworthy subjects could include characters who are, to the reader, totally outside the limits of human sympathy. This is most notable in Letter XXII, 'The Poor of the Borough', in *The Borough*, for Peter Grimes is a character who lacks a single redeeming moral

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<sup>8</sup> See *Crabbe Heritage*, pp. 84-99, for Jeffrey's unsigned review in the *Edinburgh*; his comments on this section of *The Borough* are on p. 95.



feature. Scorning his father's love as a youth, and showing no genuine sorrow at his death, 'But being drunk, wept sorely when he died' (I. 565. 11), his callousness develops into sadism, in which he abuses his own apprentices to the extent that they die as a consequence of his ill-treatment.

So gloomy is Crabbe's view of human nature that even romantic love must be degraded. The young sailor, in *The Parish Register*, has motives which appear to be entirely mercenary in his courtship of Lucy, the miller's daughter, as he confesses to himself "This *Miller's* Maiden is a prize for me; | Her Charms I love, his Riches I desire" (I. 221. 292). But the sailor is not alone in his avarice, since Lucy's father also expresses ambition that is less than admirable:

Proud was the Miller; Money was his pride,  
He rode to market, as our Farmers ride,  
And 'twas his boast, inspir'd by spirits, there,  
His favourite *Lucy* should be rich as fair.

(*Crabbe Works*, I. 221. 285-288)

Female characters who are gullible and, therefore, too easily betrayed in love, appear frequently in Crabbe's poetry. In *The Borough*, Letter XX, 'The Poor of the Borough', he introduces the tale of Ellen Orford, firstly by rejecting poetry written in the manner of the Gothic, and then by allowing the eponymous heroine of the poem to speak for herself: "My Father died — again my Mother wed, | And found the Comforts of her Life were fled" (I. 547. 126). Betrayed by a man of superior social class, who had 'vow'd his Love and Truth' (I. 548. 147), poor

Ellen becomes an unmarried mother. Her shame leads to expulsion from home after which she ‘With a frail Sister shar’d an Hovel’s gloom’ (I. 549. 182).

Other representations of women betrayed in love include Ruth, in Book V, ‘Ruth’, *Tales of the Hall*, who reminds us a little of Elizabeth Gaskell’s heroine in *Cousin Phillis*, since she is described by her mother as “‘ tall and fair, and comely to behold, | Gentle and simple, in her native place”” (II. 344. 120). But Crabbe’s Ruth undergoes more traumas than any Gaskell heroine, for not only is she denied “‘an husband for her only son”” (II. 347. 234), she must also choose between destitution and a loveless marriage with a man who is described by her mother as ‘a reptile, who, beneath a show | Of peevish zeal, let carnal wishes grow’ (II. 351. 380). Placed literally between the devil and the deep blue sea, Crabbe’s most unfortunate heroine, not surprisingly, chooses the latter by drowning herself in a sea as stormy as her own life.

Although Crabbe’s choice of subject matter, the lives of poor people in rural situations, led to comparisons with other poets of humble life, these comparisons were not always favourable. Writing about ‘the Lower Orders, as the subjects of fictitious composition with a moral aim, scope, and tendency’, in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, John Wilson compared Crabbe unfavourably with Burns, Wordsworth and Scott. The greatest fault of Crabbe, he argued, was that he did no more than ‘delineate’ his subjects. While Robert Burns was fired by his native genius, and Wordsworth was guided by philosophic thought, Crabbe, lacking

these facilities, was able only to draw the face of life and, in consequence, often degraded the lives of ordinary people.<sup>9</sup>

Crabbe's view of humanity, as expressed in his writing, is so dismal that it prompted W. S. Landor to say 'Crabbe entered it [the human heart] *on all fours*, and told the people what an ugly thing it is inside'.<sup>10</sup> This is a fair and reasonable assessment of a poet whose outlook on life was so much at variance with that of the Romantic poets, even though he wrote during the Romantic period. It is hard to imagine that Elizabeth Gaskell would have found lasting pleasure in the poetry of Crabbe, but we do have to recognize the fact that she found much to admire in it, in spite of her reservations. In her own writing she could deal with imprudence and betrayal, and even acts of malevolence, but it is rare indeed for her to leave either her fictional character or her reader entirely without hope. Her characters are seldom punished excessively, and the harshness of officialdom is balanced by acts of individual kindness. Her writing is, in the main, upbeat in tone, reflecting her own ability to deal positively with all the painful aspects of life. For her, the human heart has at least the potential to be beautiful. But while Elizabeth Gaskell recognizes this potential, and represents it in her fiction, she does not close her eyes to the wrong that can be present in human behaviour. A consideration of some of her short stories, in later chapters in this thesis, will reveal acts of duplicity, betrayal, unprovoked nastiness and the taking of life. But while Crabbe wrote as an observer, she tried at all times to look into the minds of her

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<sup>9</sup> Cited in *Crabbe Heritage*, pp. 307-313. These comments are found on pp. 308, 309 and 311. Although Wilson starts his argument by comparing Crabbe with Burns, Wordsworth and Walter Scott, he omits Scott from his argument as it develops.

<sup>10</sup> Walter Savage Landor, *Imaginary Conversations*, 1842, quoted in *Crabbe Heritage*, pp.298-299.

characters, however reprehensible their actions, and it is this approach which separates her from Crabbe and aligns her with Wordsworth.<sup>11</sup> While it is not entirely clear what drew her to the poetry of Crabbe, it is likely that she admired his representation of realistic detail, together with his readiness to focus on the lives of poor people and all of their human frailties. These aspects of human life are present in her own writing, but usually modified by her own 'seeing-beauty spirit'. It seems safe to conclude, therefore, that Elizabeth Gaskell read Crabbe's work quite extensively, and drew on what she found most admirable, for there are certainly indications in her writing that Crabbe's poetry provided the germ of an idea at least.<sup>12</sup> But this germ, however valuable, was adapted by Gaskell to comply with her own personal philosophy.

It has been noted that most Unitarian families subscribed to the *Edinburgh* and the *Quarterly*, and that Elizabeth Gaskell had access to these journals.<sup>13</sup> Both magazines included reviews of Crabbe's poetry from the first decade of the nineteenth century through to the mid-eighteen-thirties. For more than ten years, from 1808 to 1819, Francis Jeffrey, of the *Edinburgh*, reviewed Crabbe

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<sup>11</sup> In his book on eighteenth-century poetry, James Sutherland argues that Crabbe remained a spectator of the poorer classes, and not interested in their minds, while, in contrast, Wordsworth was willing to look into the most unpromising of human souls (*A Preface to Eighteenth Century Poetry* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966; 1st pub. Clarendon Press, 1948), pp.101-102).

<sup>12</sup> In addition to the short stories discussed in this thesis, some of Gaskell's full-length novels indicate her knowledge of Crabbe's poetry. For example, Crabbe's reference to the press-gangs in his poem *Ruth*, 341-353 (345), is sometimes regarded as source material for Gaskell's *Sylvia's Lovers*. Crabbe's proliferation of betrayed girls could have encouraged Gaskell to treat the subject of unmarried motherhood in her own way, for even Ruth's punishment of an untimely death, in Gaskell's *Ruth*, is offset by the kindness received in the Benson household.

<sup>13</sup> Describing Elizabeth Gaskell's early reading habits, Uglow claims that most Unitarian families took the *Edinburgh* and the *Quarterly* (Uglow, p.42). Gaskell's continuing awareness of the *Edinburgh* is noted by Uglow (p.234), and of the *Quarterly* (p.404). See also *Gaskell Further Letters* for Gaskell's reference to the *Edinburgh* (p.128) and to the *Quarterly* (p.106).

extensively, praising him for his veracity and realism. Robert Grant, writing in the *Quarterly* in 1810, was more qualified in his praise, but, by October 1834, Lockhart, the editor of the *Quarterly* from 1825, was praising Crabbe for being, in his opinion, a 'Christian poet', and the supreme 'poet of the poor'. This is the review in which Crabbe is said to be 'the one who has sympathized the most profoundly and tenderly with the virtues and the sorrows of humble life'.<sup>14</sup> It is generally understood that William Gaskell was by this time giving his lectures on *The Poets and Poetry of Humble Life* to working men in Manchester. It is also believed that these lectures included papers on Crabbe, but if they survived they have not been located. The fact that he continued to include the poetry of Crabbe in his lectures suggests that his enthusiasm for this poet was greater than that of his wife, or that he was prepared to draw on him in a different way or for a different purpose.

While the reviews in the *Quarterly* and the *Edinburgh* may have heightened the Gaskells' interest in the poetry of Crabbe, they did not necessarily form the opinions of either William or Elizabeth. Elizabeth Gaskell's reservations about Crabbe were supported by the comments of imaginative writers, who were both contemporaries of Crabbe, and who ranked among her favourite poets, since they often criticised Crabbe for his poor taste, or lack of imagination. Writing in the eighteen-thirties, Wordsworth commented on Crabbe's lack of imagination, and even questioned the accuracy of his description of lowly life. Wordsworth noted

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<sup>14</sup> *Crabbe Heritage*; Jeffrey's reviews are reproduced on pp. 54-60; 84-99; 163-171 and 227-238. Robert Grant's review, in which he describes Crabbe as the poet of reality in low life, is reproduced on pp. 117-134. Grant praises Crabbe's poetic talents but laments his choice of subject. Lockhart's review is reproduced on pp. 315-321; his comments quoted above are on p.316.

Crabbe's intrinsic lack of imagination following an incident in which Crabbe extinguished a thread of smoke from an expiring wick which Wordsworth was silently admiring. Exactly when this incident took place is not certain, but it was first noted in 1831.<sup>15</sup> The incident no doubt lent support to an earlier opinion expressed by Wordsworth, in which he attributed Crabbe's 'want of popularity to a want of *flow of feeling*, — a general dryness and knottiness of style and matter *which it does not soothe the mind to dwell upon*'.<sup>16</sup> Wordsworth's criticism of Crabbe could, however, be of a twofold nature, for there were instances when he did not even agree with those writers who praised Crabbe for his truthful description. Writing in February 1834, to the poet's son, George Crabbe, Wordsworth argued that in his experience of life in the north of England, idiots and lunatics from the poorer classes were not found in workhouses, but were at large in the community. Clearly not wishing to offend the feelings of George Crabbe junior, he sweetened this pill of criticism by concluding with an admission of respect for Crabbe, the poet, and expressed a belief in the lasting qualities of his verse.<sup>17</sup>

Byron, whose poetry Elizabeth Gaskell had worked on in the garden of Sandlebridge in the summer of 1836, could be ambivalent in his praise for Crabbe. In a long poem, written in 1809, he penned the following lines: 'This fact in Virtue's name let CRABBE attest: | Though Nature's sternest painter, yet the best'. Yet by 1817, Byron had modified his enthusiasm for the stern painter by

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<sup>15</sup> This anecdote is from the Diary of Sir Walter Scott; cited in *Crabbe Heritage*, p. 291.

<sup>16</sup> From a letter from J.G. Lockhart, Sir Walter Scott's son-in-law and biographer, to his wife, on 25th August 1825, in *Crabbe Heritage*, p. 291.

<sup>17</sup> From a letter to George Crabbe's son, in *Crabbe Heritage*, p. 291.

voicing criticism of Crabbe's subject matter: 'Crabbe's the man, but he has got a coarse and impracticable subject'.<sup>18</sup> It seems fair to say, that although Crabbe wrote poetry during the romantic period, and although he focused on humble life, as did Wordsworth, his work often represented the antithesis of Romanticism.

It was in a letter written on 12th May 1836 that Elizabeth Gaskell referred to her own work on Crabbe and this date is believed to represent the start of her collaboration with her husband on an imitation of the poets and poetry of humble life.<sup>19</sup> Fifteen months later, in a letter dated 17th August 1838, to her sister-in-law, Elizabeth Gaskell, she described an evening at home when William read his first two lectures on poetry to the assembled guests. In this same letter she refers to requests from two organizations for William to repeat his lectures. The following day, 18th August 1838, in a more formal letter to Mary Howitt, she gave an account of her husband giving four lectures to 'the very poorest of the weavers in the very poorest district of Manchester, Miles Platting, on "The Poets and poetry of Humble Life"'. She goes on to describe the success of these lectures; and William's plans for more on the same subject, and says that she and William are '*picking up* all the "Poets of Humble Life"' that they can think of.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, in spite of William's success, her own feelings about this work are shown to be mixed, as she concludes this letter in a manner that is ambiguous and even contradictory. She states that the Poetry of Humble Life is met 'even in a town', which implies some element of surprise at finding the combination of

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<sup>18</sup> These quotations by Byron are from *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, and his *Letters and Journals*, respectively; both are in *Crabbe Heritage*, pp. 294-295.

<sup>19</sup> *Gaskell Letters*, p.7.

<sup>20</sup> *Gaskell Letters*, pp. 25, 26-27 and 33.

poverty and poetry in an urban setting. To illustrate her point she says that such a district is known to her and to William, and the poetry is that of mutual concern in which 'the poorest poor | [...] have been kind to such | As needed kindness'. But this quotation is from one of the poems in *Lyrical Ballads*.<sup>21</sup> It is from the pen of Wordsworth, and it is immediately followed by a shift in which she abruptly changes tack and refers to Crabbe. Almost immediately after praising this particular passage in 'The Old Cumberland Beggar', for its 'beautiful truth', she says that she and William 'once thought of *trying* to write sketches among the poor, *rather* in the manner of Crabbe'. Her italicization of the words *trying* and *rather* suggest both difficulty and something less than wholehearted enthusiasm on her part. Elizabeth's attempt to explain the absence of any further *Sketches*, brought forth only an unsatisfactory answer based on superstition: 'But I suppose we spoke of our plan near a dog-rose, for it never went any further'.<sup>22</sup>

It is not difficult to imagine William Gaskell feeling comfortable with the poetry of Crabbe, since he was deeply concerned about the worst aspects of life in Manchester. His involvement with officialdom is represented by his work on the Reports of the Ministry to the Poor, which began in 1833, and the Reports on the Manchester Domestic Mission.<sup>23</sup> But his concern for the poorest people in Manchester also found expression in his poetry. In 1838 an anthology of poems by Manchester poets was published, and it included two poems by William

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<sup>21</sup> 'The Old Cumberland Beggar: A Description', Wordsworth, *LB*, p.209; ll. 140-145).

<sup>22</sup> *Gaskell Letters*, p. 33.

<sup>23</sup> Reports of the Ministry to the Poor were inaugurated at Cross Street Chapel in 1833, five years after William Gaskell was appointed assistant minister at Cross St Chapel; see *William Gaskell 1805-1884: A Portrait* (Manchester: Manchester Literary and Philosophical Publications, 1984), pp. 134 and 26; hereafter Brill. For Reports on the Manchester Domestic Mission see Uglow, p. 141.



Gaskell, one of which is 'Death and Sleep', a melancholy poem, consisting of about sixty four-stress lines in rhyming couplets. The poem's subtitle states that it is 'Thrown into verse from Krummacher'.<sup>24</sup> In this poem death and sleep are delineated as two sources of comfort. Those who benefit from the angel of sleep include the sick and the poor. Through sleep, the former forget their pains and the latter forget 'their hard and anxious lot' (194. 27). The angel of death is portrayed as less welcome, but nonetheless, as a source of comfort, for Sleep says to his brother angel, 'Have we not both the same intent? | Are we not by one Father sent?' (194. 59).

A year later, in 1839, William Gaskell's *Temperance Rhymes* were published, and his dedication on the fly-leaf made his intention clear:

TO THE WORKING-MEN OF MANCHESTER  
 THESE RHYMES  
 ARE INSCRIBED:  
 IN THE HOPE  
 THAT THEY MAY ACT AS ANOTHER SMALL WEIGHT  
 ON THE RIGHT END OF THAT  
 LEVER  
 WHICH IS TO RAISE THEM IN THE SCALE OF  
 HUMANITY.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> *Manchester Poetry: With an Introductory Essay*, ed. by James Wheeler (London: Charles Tilt; Manchester: all booksellers, 1838), pp. 193-196 (193-195); hereafter Wheeler. Krummacher, a nineteenth-century German writer, had composed some prose called 'Death and Sleep' in German, in the form of a parable.

<sup>25</sup> The Revd William Gaskell, *Temperance Rhymes* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, 1839); hereafter Gaskell, *Rhymes*. The dedication, on page 3, is reproduced here as close as possible to the original, the font size varying according to the importance of the words.

William Gaskell's approach to temperance, or the lack of it, was such that he fully understood the attraction of alcohol, but also the tragic consequences that could follow an irresponsible relationship with strong drink. Both of these attitudes are illustrated in the following extract from 'The Demon's Friend', which again consists of rhyming couplets:

But his day had been hard; and, tottering by,  
 The fire from the Dragon blazed full on his eye;  
 Right tempting it looked; for a moment he stood, —  
 And I whispered 'A glass might do him much good.'  
 One led to another, for friends came in,  
 'And to drink when one's dry, why where's the sin?'

His wife she sits by the fire alone,  
 His children unkissed to their beds are gone;  
 And ere he reels home by the dawning light,  
 He shall pledge himself deep to return at night.

(Gaskell, *Rhymes*, 6.10-19)

What we see here is a representation of William Gaskell's concern for the poor, and an awareness of the temptations to which they were prey. We also see him drawing on earlier poetic forms, though adapting them to his own purpose. In both the extracts above we see the use of rhyming couplets, but not of heroic couplets. The heroic couplet, probably introduced to English poetry by Chaucer, and favoured by Augustan poets, including Dryden, Pope and Johnson, comprises

rhymed decasyllables, usually in iambic pentameters, and rhymed in pairs.<sup>26</sup> It was often used in relation to heroic, or historical subjects, an example of which is John Dryden's *Absalom and Achitophel* (1681). The examples of Crabbe's poetry given in the preceding pages here, show Crabbe to be an inheritor of the heroic couplet tradition, though he combined this form with unheroic subject matter. The poetry written by William Gaskell in 1838 and 1839, referred to here, shows a more complex inheritance. While the rhyme scheme constitutes couplets, the metrical arrangement, consisting of four-stress lines, is closer to that of the ballad.<sup>27</sup>

In examining the text of *Sketches*, it is not immediately easy to identify the individual contributions of William and Elizabeth, or even to assess the level of collaboration involved in the composition of this verse, published in 1837. While William wrote poetry which was published in his own lifetime, there is no evidence to show that Elizabeth had written poetry before collaborating with her husband, although there are many indications that she enjoyed reading it. Up to this time, her writing skills had found expression principally in the diary she had started in March 1835, and in her letters to friends and relations; the diary and letters demonstrating her facility for descriptive writing and expression of feeling. When Elizabeth and William worked on *Sketches*, they were in the very early stages of their marriage. Even the start of Elizabeth's solo writing career was a decade away in the future, but her husband was a professional man with all the

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<sup>26</sup> For this definition of the heroic couplet, I have drawn on the entry in *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, 3rd edn, ed. by J. A. Cuddon (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991; previously pub. 1977), pp.406-408.

<sup>27</sup> Commenting on the style of this poetry, Jenny Uglow notes that it resembles broadside ballads of the street (Uglow, p.114).

benefits of an extended formal education. In these circumstances, and given their mutual interest in literature, Elizabeth would have welcomed an opportunity to work with William on this project. The choice of subject matter could have been the result of negotiation, but as William was already giving lectures on the poetry of humble life it probably reflected his interest. But the choice of Mary as the central character is likely to have been Elizabeth's, for William's primary concerns were for the working men of Manchester, while the pastoral work done by Elizabeth, in support of her husband, would have brought her more intimately in contact with women like Mary. Given that the idea for this poem originated in William's mind, his wife's choice of a woman's life for the subject of the poem could have been at odds with his own aims, although he could have seen it as complementary to his poetry. But if Elizabeth needed support for her choice of subject matter she only had to refer to Crabbe, for his poetry contained an abundance of female characters, even if, in the main, they led pretty desperate lives.

For this reason, Crabbe could have been the starting point of *Sketches*, for both William and Elizabeth, but it is misleading to extend the comparison between the Gaskells' verse and Crabbe's by pointing to the use of rhyming couplets. Crabbe may well have been one of the few poets writing in the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century to foreground female characters from humble life in his work, but it hardly needs pointing out that he neither originated the use of rhyming couplets nor did he have any monopoly on this rhyme scheme. Crabbe's use of couplets links him, not only to his Augustan predecessors, Dryden, Pope

and Johnson, but to much earlier poets, extending back in time to Chaucer, all of whom, as we have seen, were close to William's heart. Moreover, while rhyming couplets were not a favourite form for the Romantic poets, they survived in the work of Oliver Goldsmith (1730-1774), a transitional poet whose work is seen to provide a link between the Augustan and Romantic ages. They also survived in an adapted form in the work of self-taught Victorian poets, including two of the best known, Ebenezer Elliott (1781-1849), and Samuel Bamford (1788-1872).<sup>28</sup> It is a rhyme scheme which lends itself to the fervour of radical poetry, especially when used in conjunction with the four-stress lines often favoured by William Gaskell, and, as exemplified in the following lines from Ebenezer Elliot's 'The Black Hole of Calcutta', first published in 1834:

Bread-tax'd weaver, all can see  
 What that tax hath done for thee  
 And thy children, vilely led,  
 Singing hymns for shameful bread,  
 Till stones of every street  
 Know their little naked feet.

(Maidment, 50-51. 50-55)

Samuel Bamford's 'Farewell to My Cottage', first written in 1817, reprinted in 1864, and as nostalgic in tone as the Gaskells' *Sketches*, also makes use of rhyming couplets, and four-stress lines, as the following extract shows:

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<sup>28</sup> Brian Maidment, *The Poorhouse Fugitives: Self-taught Poets and Poetry in Victorian Britain*, Fyfield edn (Manchester: Carcanet, 1992; 1st pub. 1987); hereafter Maidment. This is an anthology of poetry which includes work by Ebenezer Elliott, John Critchley Prince, Samuel Bamford and Charles Swain. Bamford and Swain were known to the Gaskells.

For bread must be earned, though my cot I resign,  
 Since what I enjoy shall with honour be mine;  
 So up to the great city I must depart,  
 With boding of mind and a pang at my heart.

(Maidment, 240-241. 17-20)

What we see here, and in William Gaskell's poetry quoted above, is the four-stress line of the ballad, combined with rhyming couplets, but not with the metrical arrangement of the heroic couplet. This does not, however, mean that the heroic couplet was not used by the self-taught poets.

In 1841 John Critchley Prince looked back to the heroic couplet and five stress line for his 'The Death of the Factory Child', a poem which, in subject matter, carries echoes of William Gaskell's 'Death and Sleep':

The wond'rous wizard, Sleep, had now unfurl'd  
 His drowsy pennons over half the world;  
 The widow's children to their beds were gone,  
 And left her calm, yet mournfully, alone —  
 Alone with him, the idol of her heart.  
 Whose sinless soul was yearning to depart;  
 She, mute at length, with sorrow and dismay,  
 Wept, o'er his shattered frame, the night away.

(Maidment, 114. 63-70)

The poetry quoted above represents just three examples of a substantial amount of poetry from the pens of self-taught men, who had first-hand experience of humble life, and who chose to express it, not just through the medium of poetry, but by harking back to the rhyming couplet. Of these three, however, only one, J. C. Prince, used the formal properties of the heroic couplet. In this long poem, from which the short extract above is taken, he uses the rhymed decasyllables, in iambic pentameters rhymed in pairs. The self-taught poets discussed here, and in *The Poorhouse Fugitives*, from where these examples are taken, often showed an awareness of the heroic couplet, either by reproducing it, as in the case of Prince, or by modifying it. It is, however, worth noting that, apart from *Sketches*, William Gaskell did not favour the heroic couplet of five-stress iambic pentameter, as Crabbe generally did. Most of William's poetry consisted of four stresses to the line in rhyming couplets. It is only in *Sketches* that we find a Gaskellian heroic couplet, and its presence here, we can only surmise, was to elevate the poem by giving it the same formal properties as those found in the most respected English poetry. Nonetheless, the Gaskells' use of rhyming couplets in *Sketches* does not preclude the possibility of other influences in this poem. To identify these influences, we need to look at other aspects of the Gaskells' poem.

Having decided on the form of versification for the composition of their verse, and the choice of a female character as the subject, either William or Elizabeth chose nostalgia for the mood of their verse. This immediately sets their work apart from Crabbe as he usually wrote as a witness or spectator writing in the present tense: 'The Year revolves, and I again explore | The simple Annals of my

Parish-poor' (l. 213. 1). The Gaskells, however, distanced themselves in time from the subject of their poem:

In childhood's days, I do remember me  
 Of one dark house behind an old elm-tree,  
 (Gaskell, *MB*, Ryburn, 397. 1-2)

But in the house of which I spake there dwelt  
 One by whom all the weight of smoke was felt.  
 (Gaskell, *MB*, Ryburn, 397. 8-9)

While Crabbe presented rural life for the poor as anything but appealing, the Gaskells invoked nostalgia to emphasize the attractive aspects of a simple country life: 'It was a pleasant place that early home!' (*MB*, Ryburn, 398. 44). Given that William and Elizabeth were acquainted with Crabbe's *The Parish Register* and *The Borough*, they would have noted his reluctance or inability to describe urban surroundings. In *The Parish Register*, he cannot even bring a row of farmworkers' cottages to life, since he relies too heavily on the abstract diction of Augustan poetry: 'And turn our view from dwellings simply neat, | To this infected Row, we term our Street' (l. 217. 168). When writing *The Borough*, Crabbe stated at the outset what he perceived to be an impossible task:

"DESCRIBE the Borough" — though our idle Tribe  
 May love Description, can we so describe,  
 That you shall fairly Streets and Buildings trace,  
 And all that gives distinction to a place?  
 This cannot be; yet, mov'd by your request,  
 A part I paint — let Fancy form the rest.



Cities and Towns, the various haunts of men,  
Require the pencil; they defy the pen.

(*Crabbe Works*, I. 360-361. 1-8)

For Crabbe, townscape could be drawn, but not described in words. Yet description of urban surroundings did not defy the pen, or pens, that composed the opening lines of *Sketches*: ‘Of one dark house behind an old elm-tree, | By gloomy streets surrounded’ (*MB*, Ryburn, 397. 2). This darkness and gloominess, so much more effective than Crabbe’s ‘infected Row’, is reinforced by ‘the weight of smoke [...] felt’ by the subject of the poem: Mary (*MB*, Ryburn, 397. 9). We sense Elizabeth Gaskell’s hand in these opening lines; she has taken a poetic form and a subject often used by Crabbe, but she has immediately challenged his approach. The rhyme scheme may have been William’s idea, but the powers of description are hers as she goes beyond Crabbe’s refusal to describe urban surroundings. Furthermore, Gaskell’s female character in this poem, far from being foolish, or betrayed, as Crabbe’s so often are, is ‘A single, not a lonely woman, sage | And thoughtful ever, yet most truly kind’ (*MB*, Ryburn, 397. 11). Mary is a portent of many of Elizabeth Gaskell’s fictional characters and, with few exceptions, in complete opposition to Crabbe’s representations of women alone in life.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> A rare exception to Crabbe’s catalogue of woeful women is his poem *Woman!*, in which he takes as subject the caring and sympathizing characteristics of women; it was inspired, not by Crabbe’s own observations, but by the experience of a traveller in Africa; see *Crabbe Works*, I. pp 320-321.

The writer, or writers, of *Sketches* continued to challenge Crabbe's approach by foregrounding the pleasing aspects of rural life, instead of focusing on the difficulties which too often led to debasement. The reader in 1837, as now, would know that the reality of life in the country included discomfort and hardship in addition to opportunities for the appreciation of nature. But for Crabbe, nature was often the cause of discomfort and hardship, rather than a source of pleasure:

I grant indeed that fields and flocks have charms,  
 For him that gazes or for him that farms;  
 But when amid such pleasing scenes I trace  
 The poor laborious natives of the place,  
 And see the mid-day sun, with fervid ray,  
 On their bare heads and dewy temples play; [...]  
 Then shall I dare these real ills to hide,  
 In tinsel trappings of poetic pride?

(*Crabbe Works*, I.158. 39-48)

For nature's sternest painter, this observation was no doubt true of the people he was describing, for they were 'cast by Fortune on a frowning coast, | Which neither groves nor happy vallies boast' (*Crabbe Works*, I. 158. 49).<sup>30</sup> In contrast to this harsh landscape, Elizabeth Gaskell's experience of rural life stemmed from her childhood in Cheshire and her schooldays in Warwickshire, two counties which were agriculturally more productive than the reclaimed marshlands of Suffolk. For her, Mary's countryside yielded 'blue forget-me-not' and to show that the land had long been fruitful, 'a gnarled hawthorn-tree' which, 'if you

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<sup>30</sup> The reference to 'the frowning coast' emphasizes the double hardship of Crabbe's agricultural labourers, as they are working on land that is only marginally productive, which made for extreme harshness of life in Aldborough, Suffolk, in Crabbe's lifetime.

passed in spring-time, you might see | The knotted trunk all coronal'd with flowers' (*MB*, Ryburn, 398; ll. 46, 48, 49). The use of nostalgia in the poem puts a gloss on Mary's reminiscence, making it possible to concentrate on the beauties of country life, virtually eliminating the hardships central to Crabbe's poetry.

The nostalgic mood of *Sketches* links this verse to one of Crabbe's predecessors who wrote on rural life, Oliver Goldsmith, and comparison with his *The Deserted Village* reveals some interesting similarities.<sup>31</sup> Not only are there formal properties common to both poems: heroic couplets and iambic pentameter; they both offer an idealized view of rural life. This view is realised by concentrating on the pleasing aspects of nature. It is easy to imagine Elizabeth Gaskell identifying with the opening descriptive lines of Goldsmith's poem: 'Sweet Auburn, loveliest village of the plain, | Where health and plenty cheered the labouring swain' (Goldsmith, 181. 1). This would be in keeping with her own observations of life in the Cheshire plain, a rich agricultural region in which prosperous, and therefore, attractive, villages and market towns could be found. For Goldsmith, there was comfort, prosperity and beauty in the village of Auburn: 'The sheltered cot, the cultivated farm, | The never failing brook, the busy mill' (Goldsmith, 181. 10). But in *Sketches*, Elizabeth Gaskell rejects the eighteenth-century diction of Goldsmith and brings the tumbling waters to life by appealing to our sense of sound: 'The brook went singing by' (*MB*, Ryburn, 398. 45). She develops the sensuality of Goldsmith's 'hawthorn bush, with seats beneath the shade, | For talking age and whispering lovers made' (Goldsmith, 181. 13), to the point where it appeals to

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<sup>31</sup> *Oliver Goldsmith: Poems and Plays*, ed. by Tom Davis (London: Dent, 1975), pp. 181-192; hereafter Goldsmith.

our sense of touch and smell, as Mary's hawthorn, which was situated 'in a nook' was one, 'That every breeze shook down in fragrant showers' (*MB*, Ryburn, 398. 51). We can imagine the touch and the scent of the blossom. For Goldsmith and for Elizabeth Gaskell, the comfort and shelter provided by 'the shade' or 'the nook', invokes scenes of youthful courtship and romantic love, which do not necessarily lead to Crabbe's unbridled passions and "shot-gun" weddings. If Crabbe's poetry is marked by photographic-realism, which repels the reader, then *The Deserted Village* and *Sketches* clearly create an idealised rural world, the passing of which the reader instinctively laments. As Robert Southey asserted in a letter to J. N. White, on 30th September 1808, Goldsmith and Crabbe both described actual things clearly and strikingly, but while the former threw sunshine over his pictures, amounting to a light and beauty not found in nature, the latter is equally untruthful as his pictures have a gloom not found in nature.<sup>32</sup>

The light and beauty found in *The Deserted Village* and *Sketches* provide a link between both of these poems and Romantic poetry, and, in particular, with Wordsworth. Goldsmith's lament for the decline, or destruction, of England's 'bold peasantry', can be compared to Wordsworth's lament, in 'The Last of the Flock', for the shepherd who is forced to sell all his sheep through circumstances largely beyond his control.<sup>33</sup> Goldsmith's peasants, of course, do not come to life as they are not presented as individual characters and we are left to guess at the feelings of those who, 'far departing, seek a kinder shore' (Goldsmith, 183. 73). For readers accustomed to this veiled approach to human emotion it must have

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<sup>32</sup> *Crabbe Heritage*, p. 293.

<sup>33</sup> Wordsworth, *LB*, pp. 78-81.

come as a surprise to read poetry in which the narrator had seen ‘A healthy man, a man full grown | Weep in the public roads alone’ (Wordsworth, *LB*, 78. 3). Nevertheless, both poets had a similar aim: an expression of regret for the passing of a rural way of life. For Goldsmith this was achieved through the more generalised ‘simple blessings of the lowly train’ (Goldsmith, 187. 252), while for Wordsworth it was through the individual suffering of a shepherd. Both poets sought to elevate, and give expression to, lowly lives. Goldsmith sought to ‘impart | An hour’s importance to the poor man’s heart’ (Goldsmith, 187. 240), as a means of foregrounding humble life, while Wordsworth brought to life a whole range of characters who would serve as examples of his argument that low and rustic life was the best source of essential passions of the human heart.

This brings us back to Mary and *Sketches*. Goldsmith’s poem is bound to preclude individual characters to whom the reader can relate, for he is describing a village that is deserted and he can only speculate where the former inhabitants have gone: ‘If to the city sped — What waits him there?’ (Goldsmith, 189. 309). There are many answers in poetry to this question. There is the well-known fate, in Wordsworth’s *Michael*, of Luke and his moral decline in the city.<sup>34</sup> In *Sketches* we have Gaskell’s Mary, whose experiences can be seen as a sequel to *The Deserted Village*. The narrator of *Sketches*, written in 1837, is looking back over two generations, since she initially refers to her own childhood days, perhaps twenty years earlier, which brings us to the middle of the second decade of the nineteenth century. It was then, in the narrator’s ‘childhood days’, that Mary had

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<sup>34</sup> For *Michael*, see Wordsworth, *LB*, pp. 226-240.

‘o’stepped the bound twixt youth and age’, placing her in her mid-forties when her mind went back to her childhood home, which could be about forty years earlier, and around the time when Goldsmith composed *The Deserted Village*, 1768-1770. If Mary was intended to be representative of Goldsmith’s villagers who ‘to the city sped’, then Elizabeth Gaskell, — and by now I think we may assume that Mary is Elizabeth’s creation, and not William’s — set out to portray the fate not of a shepherd, but a young girl forced to leave her rural home in order to find employment in a city.

For Goldsmith, the young woman who leaves her cottage for the city, must come to moral harm, for she is ‘Now lost to all; her friends, her virtue fled, | Near her betrayer’s door she lays her head’ (Goldsmith, 189. 331), and this aligns Goldsmith with Crabbe, in terms of moral vision. But for Elizabeth Gaskell, Mary, though single, is not a lonely woman, but

sage

And thoughtful ever, yet most truly kind:

Without the natural ties, she sought to bind

Hearts unto hers, with gentle, useful love.

(Gaskell, *MB*, Ryburn, 397. 11-14)

Mary had turned her single and childless state to advantage, by finding a positive role in a community, which, in turn, rewarded her for her acts of kindness: ‘And so she gained the affection, which she prized | From every living thing, howe’er despised’ (*MB*, Ryburn, 397.16). These last two lines align Mary, and her creator,

with Wordsworth's sentiments, in which 'man is dear to man'.<sup>35</sup> But Mary's imaginative life connects the reader to another of Wordsworth's poems, 'Poor Susan', in which a woman who has left the country for a life in London, imagines, at the sound of a thrush, that she is back in her rural home.<sup>36</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell's Mary may have originated in Goldsmith's village, but she has survived in the city, gained strength through service to others, and, finally, found tranquillity through the power of the imagination. Mary is not betrayed, like Goldsmith's young woman, nor is she exhorted to make any physical attempt to return to her country home; her return to her childhood is through an inward journey into her own mind. Elizabeth Gaskell may well have drawn on Goldsmith and Wordsworth for her part in *Sketches*, but the conclusion of the poem is her own.

This consideration of the form, subject matter, and mood of *Sketches* makes it easier to identify the aspects of the poem that reflect William's contribution and those that reflect Elizabeth's. As a poetry scholar, a lecturer on the poetry of humble life, and as a poet himself, William often chose to imitate earlier forms of rhyme schemes, in particular the use of the rhyming couplet. The extent of his relationship with the self-taught poets of Victorian Manchester, and in particular, those who went on to enjoy some publishing success, is unclear, since we do not know exactly who his students were. Whether or not Samuel Bamford or Charles Swain were ever members of William's poetry classes, is, I think, unknown, but they were both known to the Gaskells, especially Bamford.<sup>37</sup> Since we do not

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<sup>35</sup> 'The Old Cumberland Beggar', Wordsworth, *LB*, p.209; l. 140.

<sup>36</sup> Wordsworth, *LB*, p.170.

<sup>37</sup> See *Gaskell Letters* for Charles Swain (p.243) and Samuel Bamford (pp. 84, 92 and 94-95). Elizabeth Gaskell was on visiting terms with Bamford.

have a transcript of his lectures, we cannot know which verse forms they worked with, but the rhyming couplet was often used, or adapted, by self-taught poets, especially those who, in Brian Maidment's words, aspired 'to have a voice, on equal terms with all others, in the cultural and philosophical debates of the time'.<sup>38</sup> It is likely, therefore, that William chose this form of versification for *Sketches*, not just in a conscious attempt to imitate Crabbe, but to give the narrator of the poem a voice that would be equal to the great debates of the time. Having inherited this mantle of form from her husband, together with the subject of lowly life, Elizabeth then developed this joint project by introducing a female character who would be, not the narrator, but the subject of the verse. Drawing on a range of poets who would have been known to her, she took a situation described in Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village*, followed the imaginary fate of one of the characters who left the village for the city, presented this character as female, and gave her a dignity and a level of imagination that could be found in the poetry of Wordsworth, but not in Crabbe. Given that Elizabeth Gaskell had drawn from a range of poets in her collaboration with William in *Sketches*, it is clear that her personal leaning was towards writing that appealed to the human imagination and sensibilities, and that she preferred light to gloom. In the next part of this chapter I will examine ways in which she moved away from the limitations imposed by the constraints of collaboration and writing in verse, and ways in which she approached her first two short stories: *Libbie Marsh's Three Eras* and *The Sexton's Hero*.

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<sup>38</sup> Maidment, p. 15.



### *Libbie Marsh's Three Eras*

*Libbie Marsh's Three Eras* was published in *Howitt's Journal*, for June 1847, ten years after *Sketches Among the Poor: No.1.* came out in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, in January 1837.<sup>39</sup> The reasons for a decade's silence can only be speculated upon. During this time Elizabeth Gaskell continued to write in the hope of her work being published, principally articles in prose submitted to Blackwood, but they were not accepted.<sup>40</sup> As with her description of country customs, 'Clopton Hall' (1840) serves to illustrate the fact that Elizabeth Gaskell did not entirely abandon her ambition to write for publication during the ten year gap between the publication of *Sketches* in 1837 and *Libbie Marsh's Three Eras* in 1847.

Although *Libbie Marsh's Three Eras* is taken to be Elizabeth Gaskell's first written, as well as first published, short story, it is possible that she continued to write quite steadily between 1837 and 1847, but did not offer all of her work to a publisher until after the success of *Libbie Marsh's Three Eras*. As dates of publication are taken to be the main clues to chronology of composition, the stories will be studied in that order. Consideration will, however, be given to the possibility that Elizabeth hoarded up pieces of work and sent them off to

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<sup>39</sup> *Libbie Marsh's Three Eras* is in Elizabeth Gaskell, *A Dark Night's Work and Other Stories*, ed. by Suzanne Lewis (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp.167-193; hereafter Gaskell, *DNW* (or *DNW*).

<sup>40</sup> John Geoffrey Sharps, *Mrs Gaskell's Observation and Invention: A Study of Her Non-Biographic Works* (Fontwell: Linden Press, 1970), pp.25 and 33; hereafter Sharps. Sharps quotes from a letter by Elizabeth Gaskell, in March 1859, to John Blackwood, referring to articles sent to Blackwood, following the publication of *Sketches*, which were not published, probably because of their poor quality (p.25, fn.2). Sharps also discusses the first appearance of *Libbie Marsh's Three Eras* (p.33).

publishers at times when she thought they were most likely to be accepted. The ten years between 1837 and 1847, when she had work rejected by John Blackwood, probably taught her a great deal about such matters as editorial policy. If this is so, then she probably felt in 1847 that William Howitt would be sympathetic to her aims as they were then developing.

*Libbie Marsh's Three Eras* is sometimes seen purely as a tale with a moral purpose, an example of Mrs Gaskell using her pen for the public benefit. This view is taken because the moral tone of the story, in which neighbourly good deeds are done and drunkenness is denounced, is compatible with the editorial policy of *Howitt's Journal*. The Howitts held strong Quaker beliefs, but, like Elizabeth Gaskell, they were also admirers of Wordsworth's poetry, so a short story which showed the influence of Christian thinking, together with Wordsworthian sentiments, would be certain to find favour with them for inclusion in their magazine.<sup>41</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell's acquaintance with the poetry of Wordsworth is made evident by her references in *Libbie Marsh's Three Eras* to 'The Excursion' and 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality'. There are also quotations from, or allusions to, Coleridge, Keats, Shakespeare and the Bible. It is, however, the representation, from the very beginning of the story, of low, though perhaps not rustic, life that provides the strongest link between Wordsworth's avowed aims and this short story. This representation recalls one of Wordsworth's explanations for his choice of subject matter in *Lyrical Ballads*: 'Low and rustic

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<sup>41</sup>. Writing in 1831, following a meeting with Wordsworth, Mary Howitt stated that 'Wordsworth greatly pleased me. He is worthy of being the author of the 'Excursion', of 'Ruth', and those sweet poems so full of human sympathy. He is a kind man, full of strong feeling and sound judgement' (Howitt, *Autobiography*, p. 121).

life was generally chosen because in that situation the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity' (Wordsworth, *LB*, p.244).

Finding a suitable publishing outlet is one obvious reason why Elizabeth Gaskell became successful with her pen again, after a gap of ten years, but there are other factors not often discussed. There had been substantial changes to her own family structure. The indications are that she worked on *Sketches* during a time of extreme happiness and contentment during the summer of 1836, approximately six months before the poem was published in January 1837. Although she subsequently looked back with pleasure and pride on this small publishing success, any happiness derived from the venture at that time, in early 1837, would soon have been diminished by the death of her aunt, Hannah Lumb, since she had been the principal source of emotional support in Elizabeth's life.<sup>42</sup> Shortly before this sad loss occurred, her third daughter, Meta, was born. Five years later, in 1842, her fourth daughter, Florence, was born; and only two years after this, their son Willie was born, on 23rd October 1844. The birth of a healthy infant son must have been an event of great joy for the parents of four daughters, but once again, birth and happiness were to be followed all too soon by death and sorrow, this time greater than the loss of Hannah Lumb, since young Willie Gaskell died from scarlet fever, less than a year after his birth. This rapid succession of pregnancy, confinement, birth and death with its attendant extremes of pain, joy and grief,

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<sup>42</sup> See Uglow, p.101 for publication details of *Sketches*, and p.107 for a perceptive account of Hannah Lumb's fatal illness and death. See also Sharps, for Elizabeth Gaskell's reactions to the success of *Sketches* (p. 25, fn.2).

would have had a substantial impact on Elizabeth, both physical and emotional. While wishing to avoid viewing these events with the insights of twentieth-century medical knowledge, it is nevertheless likely that the physical and emotional experiences of these years contributed to the shaping of Elizabeth's sensibilities, for she had, by anyone's standards, by 1847, been through the mill. By the time she approached her first short story, she had become a mature woman, sadder and wiser, with experience of great personal loss, and, probably, increased anxiety about the likelihood of further personal loss. This is in contrast to the supremely happy mood of the summer of 1836 when, as a young wife and mother of one baby girl, she read and wrote poetry, in preparation for *Sketches*, in the sunny garden at Sandlebridge. There is, therefore, a sense in which the decade which spanned the years between 1836 and 1846 represented a watershed in the life of Elizabeth Gaskell. Although she claimed that no one knew how the death of her infant son had changed her, by the time she approached her first short story, she was, inevitably, a different person inwardly from the young woman who, in 1836, had written joyful letters about poetry to her sister-in-law.<sup>43</sup>

We are not certain if there were further attempts, however embryonic, at collaboration with her husband in writing for publication. She did, however, retain an interest in a subject that was close to William's heart, the poetry of humble life, for she chose for her first story, a place and set of characters as humble as possible, without representing the absolute hopelessness associated with slum life.

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<sup>43</sup> Writing to Anne Shaen about her deceased infant son, Willie, Elizabeth said: 'That wound will never heal on earth, although hardly any one knows how it has changed me' (*Gaskell Letters*, p. 57).

It is possible that she was drawn to this milieu for the same reason that Wordsworth claimed to be: that it provided a better soil for the development of the essential passions of the human heart.<sup>44</sup> She also chose, as Wordsworth often did, a very precise geographical location. Narrow courts such as the one described in *Libbie Marsh's Three Eras* are easily recognized on the 1849 Ordnance Survey Map of Piccadilly. Although there is no Albermarle Street on the map, Dean Street is clear enough, making the location almost as precise and as easily recognized as Wordsworth's Green-head Gill, although, clearly, it is less picturesque.<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless, we turn from the public way of Albermarle Street, in order to enter the court, and, just as Wordsworth reveals human drama behind the ordinary things that are taken for granted or even ignored, so Elizabeth Gaskell shows us the human drama of life in humble urban surroundings.

She shows, rather than tells, by writing under the cover of another resident of the court: 'there was a flitting in our neighbourhood'. The choice of a regional word "flitting" to delineate a removal and the pronoun "our" is a deliberate attempt to

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<sup>44</sup> Wordsworth, *LB*, p. 245, cited in Gill, *Wordsworth and Victorians*, p.121. Although the characters in *Libbie Marsh's Three Eras* are not rustic, they are relatively unsophisticated and probably had a rural upbringing.

<sup>45</sup> *Old Ordnance Survey Maps*, 1849, Sheet 29, Manchester (Piccadilly), (Gateshead: Alan Godfrey Maps, 1995). The reference to Dean Street suggests that the location of *Libbie Marsh's Three Eras* is the Ancoats district of Manchester. Dean Street is in the south side of Great Ancoats Street, and as her flitting is described as a move further out of town, the fictional Albermarle Street is probably representative of the north side of Great Ancoats Street. Apart from Little Ireland, Ancoats was the principal mill area of the City and it was characterised by the proliferation of narrow courts which consisted of working-class housing, and which were squeezed into the spaces left between the mills, factories, foundries and timber yards. The fact that these courts were so enclosed, with limited access from the main roads, together with the high density of housing within the courts, made them close-knit communities. As they were not thoroughfares, it would be rare for anyone, other than the people who lived there, and possibly visiting tradesmen, to enter the courts. For these reasons a small, narrow court would become a close community with its own customs, while quarrels would establish the personal allegiances that promoted the politics of the court as described by Elizabeth Gaskell.

present herself as an insider with intimate knowledge of the little community. Unlike Crabbe, she has no difficulty in describing this urban landscape: the high dead brick wall at the end of the court; the monotonous pattern of the dwellings; the child making mud-pies at the entrance to the court, suggesting the poor quality of the road surface; and the suffocating heat night and day which emphasizes the closeness of the court and the poor ventilation in the little houses. But the reader soon realizes that the author of this story is concerned about more than mere delineation. The scene and event may be commonplace, a young, poor, single woman changing her lodgings, but the author goes behind this ordinariness to reveal the inner lives of the main protagonists. This is achieved by foregrounding states of mind and feelings.

There is a sense in which Elizabeth is harking back to *Sketches* as she is once more in 'a gloomy street', but the short story form enables her to bring the street and its inhabitants to life. Libbie's feeling of desolation is demonstrated by the slowness and heaviness of her movements since a more hopeful or cheerful state of mind would be reflected by a brisker gait. So deep are her feelings of despair, that her mood remains unchanged after her arrival at her new lodgings. There is a level of trust within the community of the court, which is indicated by the Dixons leaving their front door key with a neighbour. The innate kindness of the neighbour is shown by the way in which she does much more than merely hand the key to Libbie: she unlocks the door, enters the house with the newcomer, and stirs up the dull grey ashes, so that they soon become a cheerful blaze. These simple but kindly actions remind us of Wordsworth's sentiment, admired by

Elizabeth Gaskell, in which 'man is dear to man'.<sup>46</sup> But Libbie's inner loneliness is so deep that she cannot communicate with the Dixons, their noise and chatter being a source of irritation to her, emphasizing her feelings of alienation and compelling her to leave their society in favour of the temporary privacy of the room upstairs, which she must eventually share with Anne Dixon.

It is at this point that Elizabeth Gaskell first introduces a quotation from one of the Romantic poets: 'the blue sky that bends over all'. This choice of words from Coleridge's *Christabel* is curious.<sup>47</sup> This is far from the poetry of humble life, for Christabel is the daughter of a wealthy baron. But the mood and feeling of this particular stanza is akin to that of Libbie Marsh. Like Libbie, Christabel 'sheds— | Large tears that leave the lashes bright!' (Coleridge, *Poems*, 196. 315). Both women are motherless and both seek comfort from supernatural sources; for Christabel,

this she knows, in joys and woes,  
That saints will aid if men will call:  
For the blue sky bends over all!  
(Coleridge, *Poems*, 196. 329-331)

This act of looking out of the window, up to the heavens, is not only in tune with Libbie's feeling of desolation, it keeps Libbie at the window long enough for her

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<sup>46</sup> Wordsworth, *LB*, p.209; l. 140.

<sup>47</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Complete Poems*, ed. by William Keach (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1997), pp. 187-205; hereafter Coleridge, *Poems*. It is not quite an exact quotation, but a clear allusion. The verse paragraph, from which the words are taken, is on page 196; the words quoted by Elizabeth Gaskell are in line 331, and appear on page 169 of *DNW*.

eye to drop downwards to the window on the opposite side of the court, moving the plot on to her essential act of kindness that develops the story.

As the reader is introduced to more of the characters who inhabit the court off Albermarle Street, we see that they are all very far removed from the world of Christabel; they are far more Wordsworthian than Coleridgean in their social station. The two main protagonists, Margaret Hall and Libbie Marsh, occupy the lowest possible status within the community of the court, for they are not merely tenants, but lodgers, occupying one room only within a dwelling that is rented by another tenant. They even have to share the room that they occupy: Mrs Hall with her son, and Libbie with Mr and Mrs Dixon's elder daughter. Furthermore, they are both single women: Margaret Hall is a widow and Libbie is a spinster with little prospect of marrying. Both women, however, are given the dignity of economic independence. Mrs Hall earns her living as a washerwoman and Libbie as a seamstress. Neither woman is presented as a victim of sexual betrayal, like so many of Crabbe's female characters, nor is either completely lacking in self-help, as is Wordsworth's Margaret in *The Excursion*. Gaskell had intimate knowledge of strong, single women from her circle of friends and relations, which promoted insights that enabled her to challenge the Wordsworthian and Crabbe-like notions of single women as abandoned victims, unable to shape their own lives.

In economic terms, Mrs Hall and Libbie do not occupy quite the lowest rung of the social ladder, for Franky Hall, as an invalid, is confined to his bed and cannot earn his keep in any material way. He can be viewed as a useless individual, in the



same way as Wordsworth's child in 'The Idiot Boy', except that Franky is given a more advanced power of speech than Johnny Foy. As with Johnny, Franky needs looking after, making him dependent on others, but, again, like Johnny, he is loved, gives purpose to his mother's life, and, furthermore, he shapes the plot of the tale.<sup>48</sup> The main difference between the two boys is that while Johnny Foy's disability is mental, limiting his speech to burring sounds, until the end of the poem when he utters a syntactically correct sentence, in which the meaning is nonsense because of the wrong choice of nouns and verbs ("The cocks did crow to-who, to-who, | And the sun did shine so cold"), Franky Hall's disability is physical. Although his ailment is not specified, we deduce from his emaciated condition, and his sleepless nights due to physical pain, that he is consumptive. But his speech shows no sign of mental defect, as demonstrated by the following words when he implores Libbie to allow him to take Peter, his caged bird, on the outing to Dunham:

He would like it, I know; for one thing, he'd miss me sadly, and chirrup for me all day long, he'd be so lonely. I could not be half so happy a-thinking on him, left alone here by himself. Then, Libbie, he's just like a Christian, so fond of flowers and green leaves, and them sort of things. He chirrups to me so when mother brings me a pennyworth of wallflowers to put round his cage (*DNW*, pp.177-178).

Franky Hall is as essential to the plot of *Libbie Marsh's Three Eras* as Johnny Foy is to 'The Idiot Boy', since both have intrinsic worth and both have power as

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<sup>48</sup> Gill, in *Wordsworth and the Victorians*, p. 122, argues that "The Old Cumberland Beggar", like 'The Idiot Boy', focuses on a useless human being in order to bring out both his intrinsic worth and his power as a social agent'. Towards the end of the second paragraph on this page, he maintains that 'The "more seeing-beauty spirit" is what shapes "The Old Cumberland Beggar", "Simon Lee", "The Idiot Boy", and [that] it is what shapes all of Gaskell's early work'.

social agents. Given her sense of alienation in the court, Franky is the one human being to whom Libbie can relate. He is the only person to whom she can make any overtures, without fear of rejection, and St Valentine's Day makes it possible for her to test the water by giving him, anonymously, the gift of a caged bird. This, along with the fact that he is the object of his mother's love, gives his life a value that cannot be measured in material terms. His participation in the Whitsun outing will make him the agent of moral and spiritual growth in the community of the court.

As the story unfolds we, as readers, see how Elizabeth Gaskell is using her favourite lines from 'The Old Cumberland Beggar' to shape the plot of the story:

No — man is dear to man: the poorest poor  
 Long for some moments in a weary life  
 When they can know and feel that they have been  
 Themselves the fathers and the dealers out  
 Of some small blessings, have been kind to such  
 As needed kindness, for this single cause,  
 That we have all of us one human heart.

(Wordsworth, *LB*, 209. 140-146)

Libbie is one of the poorest poor, and her life is weary, without parents, siblings or hope of children of her own, but her interest in a sick child is more than morbid curiosity, for through personal sacrifice and frugality, she becomes a dealer out, in her purchase of the bird and cage as a present for Franky, who, in

his suffering, needed a kindness more than anyone in the little community of the court.

In order to make her purchase Libbie must enter an unfamiliar environment, and Elizabeth Gaskell's observations about the barbers, who also kept singing-birds, demonstrate her understanding of the roundness of human nature. We learn that not only barbers, but Manchester weavers, who were often stubborn, silent and reserved, had retained their country-born knowledge of birds. The barber's 'little back room, used for private shaving of modest men' demonstrates an unexpected sensibility on the part of the barber, a wholly admirable quality.<sup>49</sup> Sensibility is crucial here for this barber's shop represents a theatre of crisis for Libbie Marsh. She must enter an unfamiliar environment and make the crucial transaction: a purchase that tests her resolve, for 'her heart sinks at the price'. Whatever kind of courage was required from Libbie, in order to enter the male preserve of the barber's shop and part with her hard-earned money, the gift of a caged bird to Franky concludes the first era of Libbie Marsh. But that is not all, for the purchase of the bird also advances the plot, since it breaks down the barrier of reserve between Libbie and Mrs Hall, making it possible for the two women to become friends. The gift becomes a blessing, which, although not divine in itself, is divine in purpose and effect. Libbie's only motive for making the gift was an entirely unselfish one, born of the desire to brighten Franky's life, and in this she enjoys more success than she might have expected, since the happiness which the gift brings to the boy also promotes feelings of tenderness on the part of Mrs Hall.

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<sup>49</sup> Gaskell, *DNW*, p. 173.

Where there had been desolation and despair, there is now charity and some degree of hopefulness.

Stephen Gill, in *Wordsworth and the Victorians*, asserts that all of Elizabeth Gaskell's 'finest tales and novels are "adventures of the heart"'.<sup>50</sup> Adventure, by definition, involves an element of risk, which for Libbie could have been hurt feelings, through rejection of her small blessings, or ridicule from her neighbours for extending the hand of friendship to Mrs Hall, who was known to be a scold, by arranging a Whitsuntide trip to Dunham, for the benefit of Franky and his mother. Libbie was prepared to take these risks, which demonstrated the strength of her desire to deal out a small blessing, but the excursion, on the canal to Dunham, involved physical hazards, which made the event an adventure in more sense than one. From the time in era two, when the journey from the court commenced, the story could have developed into a tragedy or even a tragicomedy with elements of melodrama. In reality, bank holiday outings are noted for bad weather, and canal trips offer scope for accidents including death by drowning. The fact that the weather remains ideal and the journey is altogether uneventful is evidence of Elizabeth Gaskell's intention to portray the inner journey of the heart, rather than the outward adventure of a physical journey. The Whitsun excursion is a vehicle for the development of the inner lives of its participants, whose thoughts and feelings will give importance to this event. This emphasis on interior drama, rather than external event, recalls another of Wordsworth's comments on his own poetry, given in the 1800 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*: 'the feeling therein

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<sup>50</sup>Gill, *Wordsworth and Victorians*, p. 128.

developed gives importance to the action and situation and not the action and situation to the feeling (Wordsworth, *LB*, p. 248).

The thoughts and feelings of Gaskell's characters are shown rather than told. The inherent goodwill of Libbie's neighbours is illustrated by the friendly teasing that takes place over the relative merits of Dunham and Alderley. The narrowness of the court and close proximity of the houses is demonstrated by the way in which a conversation could be conducted from one open window to another. When Libbie sets off with Franky and Mrs Hall, feelings are again shown, rather than described, by individual behaviour in the coach, which has been hired, mainly for the benefit of Franky, to take the three of them to the canal boat which is moored at Knott Mill. Far from seeking her own self-glorification, Libbie hides in a corner of the coach to escape notice and possible recognition by her employers, who might perhaps reduce her wages if they thought she could easily afford such a mode of transport. This is in contrast to the behaviour of Mrs Hall, who, feeling elevated by the luxury of coach travel, behaves rather like royalty, waving and nodding from the window to all onlookers.

At this stage of the holiday outing, Elizabeth Gaskell makes her second allusion to a poet of Romantic sensibility: 'the sweet hour of prime'. These words are chosen for two reasons. Firstly, they signify the way in which the happy holiday mood and lovely weather combined to promote feelings of sympathy in everyone towards Franky, even though his condition made him an extra responsibility. But the words also carry a portent of sadder times to come, for the boy is dying, and

his mother will soon be grieving, like Wordsworth's maternal figure in Book VI of *The Excursion*, from which the words are taken:<sup>51</sup>

There, by her innocent Baby's precious grave,  
 And on the very turf that roofs her own,  
 The Mother oft was seen to stand, or kneel  
 In the broad day, a weeping Magdalene.  
 Now she is not; the swelling turf reports  
 Of the fresh shower, but of poor Ellen's tears  
 Is silent; nor is any vestige left  
 Of the path worn by mournful tread of her  
 Who, at her heart's light bidding, once had moved  
 In virgin fearlessness, with step that seemed  
 Caught from the pressure of elastic turf  
 Upon the mountains gemmed with morning dew,  
 In the prime hour of sweetest scents and airs.

(Wordsworth, *Poems II*, 208. 811-823)

These lines remind us that Elizabeth was still grieving for the loss of her own infant son and they point to the sorrow that must follow all the happiness of this Whitsun outing. Sorrow, in *Libbie Marsh's Three Eras*, however, is deferred until after the Whitsun excursion, which is designed to promote a shared enjoyment of leisure and to bring out the best aspects of human nature. The dealing out of small blessings continues, as the driver of the coach lifts Franky out

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<sup>51</sup> William Wordsworth: *Poems, Volume II*, ed. by John O. Hayden (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977) pp. 185-221; hereafter Wordsworth, *Poems II*. The verse paragraph from which Elizabeth Gaskell's quotation is taken is on page 208, the words are in line 823. It is not an accurate quotation, but her use of inverted commas indicates an intention, on her part to quote, possibly from memory. The allusion appears on page 179 of *DNW*. Wordsworth's 'weeping Magdalene' does not find a place in Gaskell's vision, since Libbie Marsh is not associated with feelings of guilt.

‘with the tenderness of strength’; passengers on the boat make way for him and make sure that he has the best seat that is available, and one that is long enough for him to lie down on. The goodwill of the party continues as his fellow passengers carry him from the boat to the park, refusing all payment, although this could have provided an opportunity to supplement their modest wages.<sup>52</sup>

The happiness and goodwill of the picnic in the woods are represented almost like a dream sequence, prompting Elizabeth Gaskell to invoke an image from John Keats’s ‘Ode To A Nightingale’:<sup>53</sup>

Its [Dunham Park’s] scenery, too, which presents such a complete contrast to the whirl and turmoil of Manchester; so thoroughly woodland, with its ancestral trees (here and there lightning blanced); its “verdurous walls”; its grassy walks, leading far away into some glade, where you start at the rabbit rustling among the last year’s fern, and where the wood-pigeon’s call seems the only fitting and accordant sound (*DNW*, p.180).

For Keats, ‘verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways’ are a conduit through which light from heaven is transported, while for Elizabeth Gaskell, the ‘verdurous walls’ of the woodland provide a peace that is in contrast to the activities of Manchester. Again, the context of the quotation supports the mood and tone that is being described, for, in Keats’s poem, the poet is contrasting a

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<sup>52</sup> Gaskell, *DNW*, p. 179.

<sup>53</sup> John Keats, *The Complete Poems*, ed. by John Barnard, 2nd edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977) pp.346-348; hereafter Keats, *Poems*. The fourth verse of ‘To a Nightingale’ concludes with the line ‘Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways’ (p.347; l. 40). Gaskell’s allusion to Keats’s poem is on page 180 of *DNW*.

situation 'where men sit and hear each other groan; | Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last grey hairs', with a longed for place to which he can fly,

Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,  
 But on the viewless wings of Poesy,  
 Though the dull brain perplexes and retards.  
 Already with thee! tender is the night,  
 And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,  
 Clustered around by all her starry Fays;  
 But here there is no light,  
 Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown  
 Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways.

(Keats, *Poems*, 347. 32-40)

This contrast between two situations, one of which is undesirable and the other idyllic, is developed by Elizabeth Gaskell:

Depend upon it, this complete sylvan repose, this accessible quiet, this lapping the soul in green images of the country, forms the most complete contrast to a town's-person, and consequently has over such the greatest power to charm (*DNW*, p.180).

This is an aspect of the Romantic belief in the healing powers of nature, but Elizabeth Gaskell soon brings us down to earth again, as she reminds us of the human need for other kinds of sustenance, shown by the improvidence of those who had eaten their picnic food too soon. This small incident, which, with a different kind of writer, could have been inserted principally for the sake of humour, is a representation of Wordsworth's vision of human kindness and



generosity, since all members of the party who have food still uneaten contribute to a communal lunch for anyone who is still hungry.<sup>54</sup>

The focus of so much kindness continues to be Franky, and we are reminded sharply of his condition, when their neighbours, the Dixon family, arrive at the picnic scene late. Although the bad-feeling between Mrs Dixon and Mrs Hall is softened by 'kindly mother Nature's soothings', it is the sight of the fatally sick boy that prompts Mrs Dixon to make up the quarrel, but in keeping with the Dixon family's general lack of sensibility, Mr Dixon's approach is tactless and he must be reminded of Franky's dependant state by his wife.<sup>55</sup> But Dixon is innately kind-hearted as shown by his willingness to organise an impromptu hammock as a means of transport for the boy. For Elizabeth Gaskell, all the kindnesses that are enacted this day in Dunham Park have more than a transient value, for, when description of the activities gives way to authorial comment, we learn that 'the soul grew much on this day, and in these woods, and all consciously, as souls do grow'. The reader feels that this growth will not be reversed when the day is over.<sup>56</sup>

Shortly before leaving Dunham, a group of picnickers takes Franky on a makeshift hammock to a grassy knoll, from where they can all catch a glimpse of the cloud of smoke that indicates the presence of 'ugly, smoky Manchester'. This image of picnickers, looking back towards their homes in an industrial city, chimes with a

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<sup>54</sup> 'The Old Cumberland Beggar' in Wordsworth, *LB*, pp. 209-210; ll. 140-150).

<sup>55</sup> Gaskell, *DNW*, pp. 182-183.

<sup>56</sup> Gaskell, *DNW*, p. 183.

passage in Goethe's *Faust*, in which Faust says to his friend 'Turn and look back from this rising ground upon the town'.<sup>57</sup> Inevitably, the day must end, and the visitors to Dunham Park must return to their homes in the city 'where God had cast their lives' (*DNW*, p.183). For Franky, however, home will soon be elsewhere, in Heaven, "“which is our home”", and again Elizabeth Gaskell invokes lines by Wordsworth to frame and express her feelings about loss, and to prepare the reader for the impending narrative shift that will separate era two from era three: 'But trailing clouds of glory do we come | From God, who is our home'.<sup>58</sup>

Era two has been an adventure of the heart. During this episode there has been no external drama because it covered an outing during which nothing exceptional had happened. Without the presence of Franky, existing quarrels among the inhabitants of the court might have flared up again, but they did not, since the inclusion of the sick child in the party had the effect of bringing out the best side of human nature. This brings to mind an event recorded by Dorothy Wordsworth, in which the parents of a large family died on the fells near Grasmere, and the community worked together to provide a secure upbringing for the orphaned children. The whole notion of a suffering child uniting members of a community, even one as small as this, is Wordsworthian.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> I owe this reference to William Howitt, who cites it in *The Rural Life of England*, 1st edn, 2 vols (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1838) II, p.312.

<sup>58</sup> 'But trailing clouds of glory do we come | From God, who is our home'. This line is from *Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood*, in Wordsworth, *Poems I*, pp. 523-529. The quotation is on p. 525; ll. 64-65. See *DNW*, p.184, for Gaskell's allusion.

<sup>59</sup> Gill, *Wordsworth: A Life*, pp. 264-265. Stephen Gill gives an account of this tragedy and notes that Dorothy wrote, at her brother's urging, a moving account of the events, intending it for future publication, when it would serve 'as a memorial to a pastoral tragedy and communal compassion'.

Era three is, in part, a recreation of Elizabeth Gaskell's personal grief following the loss of her own infant son. Infant and child mortality rates were of course very high in the nineteenth century and earlier, and especially so during outbreaks of infectious diseases such as scarlet fever. Parents could not expect all of their offspring to survive infancy or childhood. Consequently, the funeral of a child, in a city as large as Manchester, would be a regular event, unremarked on except when described by an imaginative writer. The personal sorrow and grief of the occasion is evident from the way in which, 'slowly, slowly, along the streets, elbowed by life at every turn, the little funeral wound its quiet way'.<sup>60</sup> The slow progress of the cortege reflects the reluctance of the mourners to reach the cemetery, where the final good-bye must be made. But the insignificance of the event to passers-by, who were principally occupied with shopping and social calls, is beautifully illustrated by the way in which the cortège is 'elbowed by life at every turn'. Again Elizabeth Gaskell goes behind an ordinary, everyday event, to reveal the inner lives of the people involved and, in this instance, to contrast the personal experience of an event with the way in which the world at large sees it. It is rather like taking a magnifying glass to look at a small part of a large canvas, making the detail appear larger than the background.

The larger canvas never quite recedes, any more than Mrs Hall's grief at the loss of her child, or Libbie's sympathy for the bereaved mother, subsides. They interact with each other, and this reciprocation continues when the funeral party returns to the court, for a member of the Dixon family has already brought

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<sup>60</sup> Gaskell, *DNW*, p. 185.

worldly matters to the foreground, even while the funeral was taking place. This intrusion is almost obscene, forcing itself into the climax of Mrs Hall's grief, which, without Libbie's presence, would have been insupportable. This unlocking of 'the waters of the fountain', must surely strike any reader, who is familiar with Elizabeth Gaskell's personal sorrows, as a form of catharsis on the part of the writer.<sup>61</sup> Her own experience of loss and grief has been recreated through her fictional lives of humble people, a situation in which the essential passions of the heart could mature, and, ultimately, find a freer expression than was perhaps possible in her own social milieu. This exorcism of repressed emotion, achieved through the catharsis of writing the story, helped Elizabeth Gaskell to move on in her life even before she approached the writing of *Mary Barton*. The ten years during which she had been obliged to repress so much emotion, including feelings of loss, grief and desolation, were coming to a close.

Mrs Hall's outpouring of grief is not easily assuaged, and the writer offers the reader, through Libbie's actions, the words of Jesus Christ from The Gospel According to St John: 'Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. | In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you.' These words were originally uttered at the end of the Last Supper, in answer to Peter's declared wish to follow Christ and to lay down his life for him. It is, however, an ambiguous choice of Biblical quotation for a Unitarian believer, as Christ goes on to express, in verse ten, what seems to be a Trinitarian tenet: 'Believest thou not that I am in the

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<sup>61</sup> Gaskell, *DNW*, p. 187.

Father, and the Father in me?'.<sup>62</sup> Libbie Marsh, of course, does not have to be a Unitarian in order to be a Christian who is trying to bring comfort to the distraught Mrs Hall. Her efforts to do this, by pointing to an eternal life for Franky, continue to stand out in relief from the temporal affairs which preoccupy Anne Dixon, whose insensitivity is demonstrated by her choice of this moment to press Libbie into the office of bridesmaid for her wedding, which is to take place the following day.

One interpretation of these events is that the author is now using these earthly and slightly vulgar matters to limit the extent to which the reader is exposed to Mrs Hall's acute grief. It is also an opportunity for the writer to introduce another topic which had not hitherto played a part in the story. Alcohol had not been given a place on the excursion to Dunham, for its inclusion would have undermined the unique opportunity for spiritual growth, but, closer to reality, it had played a part in Libbie Marsh's life, and to an extent that is truly shocking, for we learn that her father had committed infanticide when under the influence of strong drink. This is the one time in the story when we sense William Gaskell's influence, as the brutality of a father assaulting an infant when drunk carries echoes of his *Temperance Rhymes*. Less violent, but nevertheless, mundane, matters of life continue to take precedence over Mrs Hall's grief, since, like the humble funeral procession, her raw-edged feelings are 'elbowed by life at every turn', as the need to earn a living forces her out washing the day after the funeral.

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<sup>62</sup> Libbie, in her attempt to comfort Mrs Hall, takes up a Bible which falls open at the fourteenth chapter of St John's Gospel; see *DNW*, p. 187. In choosing this quotation, with its reference to 'the "Father's house"' (verse two), Libbie is trying to suggest that Franky has gone to a better place. Although these words from verse two do not challenge Unitarian belief, the words of verse ten, in the same chapter, seem to be closer to Trinitarian belief.

The movement of the story now is away from sickness, sorrow and grief, and towards a resolution which must offer some kind of hope for the future. The journey of the heart is nearly at an end, and Libbie Marsh's mission of kindness, with its dealing out of blessings, has just one more gift to make. This time the gift is to Franky's mother, and it is to be the blessing of companionship, which will follow Libbie's decision to move in with Mrs Hall. Throughout all of these events, the Dixon family has remained largely unmoved. Their tactlessness, which had been evident at the picnic, is apparent again when Anne chooses an inappropriate moment to approach Libbie with problems about her wedding day. As a family, the Dixons have failed to develop their sensibilities, so they remain puzzled by Libbie's sensitivity to Mrs Hall's needs. Because she has had the imagination to meet these needs, through reaching out to Franky and his mother, Libbie has shed her personal desolation, and by accepting Libbie's acts of friendship, Mrs Hall has become a better person. The actions of the two women represent a Wordsworthian vision of humble life and human sympathy. With the sorrowing and grieving behind her, Mrs Hall can, with Libbie's help, move on in her life. Mrs Gaskell, too, with the aid of the catharsis provided by writing this story, could now move out of her personal darkness into the light.

The indications are that Elizabeth Gaskell had drawn sparingly on the work of her husband and of George Crabbe, and finding these sources to be of limited inspiration, she looked to other poets for a seeing-beauty spirit. For her contribution to *Sketches*, she looked back to Goldsmith and gave evidence of her

appreciation of Wordsworthian perceptions. The influence of other poets of a more seeing-beauty nature than Crabbe, but not discussed here, can, no doubt, be found in *Sketches*. When she approached her first short story, she drew more heavily from poets who had demonstrated what came to be known as a Romantic sensibility: Keats, Coleridge and Wordsworth. The journey of the heart that is revealed in *Libbie Marsh's Three Eras* aligns her very firmly with Romantic sensibility in at least two ways. There is the foregrounding of feeling, in which the inner life gives importance to the event, and there is the belief in the healing power of nature, which is seen as a necessary antidote to the materialism of life in an industrial city. The two main protagonists, Libbie and Mrs Hall, have undergone a profound change to their inner lives, even though their external circumstances remain the same. For, although they must continue to live in a dreary narrow court, they now feel able to care for each other.

Most of the other lives in the court will probably go on in the same old way; the Dixons will remain extrovert and cheerful and other neighbours will continue to relate to each other in a friendly and teasing manner. But any subsequent shared visit to Dunham will evoke the thoughts and feelings of the day that gave Franky Hall so much pleasure, shortly before he died. There is just one resident of the court off Albermarle Street whose inner development has not been considered, and that is the resident who has given us this account of events in her neighbourhood.

At the end of the story, the narrator presents herself as someone old enough to recall the year 1811, a time when Elizabeth Gaskell was only a year old. Elizabeth Gaskell was thirty-six when she wrote this story, but under the mantle of much greater years, she comments on Libbie's new found peace of mind, which she says is derived from the purpose she now has in life, for that purpose is a holy one. The completion of this story possibly clarified, in Elizabeth Gaskell's mind, her own purpose in life. There would be no more collaboration with her husband, no more serious attempts at writing verse. There would, instead, be novels and short stories which would, at times, draw on other writers for ideas on plotting, but which would continue to show, rather than tell, the ways in which thought and feeling shape events. One of these short stories, *The Sexton's Hero*, is the subject of the next section of this chapter.

### *The Sexton's Hero*

The editorial policy of William and Mary Howitt had apparently suited Elizabeth Gaskell, for she submitted further pieces of work to the Howitts for inclusion in their *Journal*.<sup>63</sup> In September 1847, just three months after the publication of *Libbie Marsh's Three Eras*, the Howitts published *The Sexton's Hero*.<sup>64</sup> As with

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<sup>63</sup> The full title of this magazine is *Howitt's Journal of Literature and Popular Progress*, ed. by William and Mary Howitt (London: William Lovett, 1847-1848); hereafter *Howitt's Journal*. Seventy-eight weekly numbers were published, from January 1st 1847 to June 24th 1848. They were subsequently available in three bound half-yearly volumes. Commenting on the short life of this venture, the Manchester poet, Ebenezer Elliott, wrote to the Howitts: 'Men engaged in a death-struggle for bread will pay for amusement when they will not for instruction. [...] If you were able and willing to fill the journal with fun, it would pay' (Howitt, *Autobiography*, p.190).

<sup>64</sup> *The Sexton's Hero* is in Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Moorland Cottage and Other Stories*, ed. by Suzanne Lewis (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 101-110; hereafter Gaskell, *MC*(or *MC*).



her first contribution to *Howitt's Journal*, Elizabeth again wrote under the pseudonym of 'Cotton Mather Mills'. It is not surprising that the Howitts accepted another short story from Elizabeth Gaskell so soon after the first, for she quickly demonstrated her versatility. Far from being another tale of humble life in an urban setting, *The Sexton's Hero* is set in a location that is both rural and coastal. While this coast does not wear a frown, in the manner of Crabbe's coastline, it does provide scope for physical danger and opportunities for acts of supreme physical courage. The drama which arises from this combination of danger and courage is juxtaposed with a discussion of relative moral values, and, in particular, the true nature of heroism. This discussion takes place between the primary narrator and his companion, Jeremy.

As Stephen Gill notes, the narrative structure of *The Sexton's Hero* shows the influence of *The Excursion*, Book I.<sup>65</sup> But in addition to the narrative framework, which is common to both Wordsworth's poem and Elizabeth Gaskell's story, and which is emphasized by Gill, in both compositions the primary narrator relates a tale told to him by a much older person. In *The Excursion*, the older person is 'a Man of reverend age', and in *The Sexton's Hero* he is one to whom the narrator's companion, Jeremy, 'bowed in deference to his white uncovered head'. The primary narrator, who is a young man, immediately establishes a reflective, holiday mood which arises from their relaxed situation in the shade of a sunny churchyard which overlooks 'the blue dazzle of Morecambe Bay'.<sup>66</sup> The language

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<sup>65</sup> Gill, *Wordsworth and Victorians*, pp. 130-132.

<sup>66</sup> The churchyard in question is probably that of St Peter's Church, in Heysham Village, as it is situated close to the cliff edge, affording excellent views across Morecambe Bay towards Grange-over-Sands.

of the narrator and his companion immediately establish their social background as one far removed from humble life: 'How would you then define a hero?' and 'My idea of a hero is one who acts up to the highest idea of duty he has been able to form, no matter at what sacrifice'. The abrupt intrusion by the third party, 'If I might make so bold, sir', makes clear the social division between the stranger and the two friends. We immediately learn that the stranger is the Sexton and that the two friends had ignored him because they had forgotten that he was there, working among the headstones. To reinforce the social inferiority of the Sexton, he reiterates the words 'If I might be so bold' while he waits 'leave to speak'. This relationship is, however, more subtle than the crude master-servant nexus, for Jeremy bows, 'in deference to his [the Sexton's] white, uncovered head'. Clearly, this is a situation in which age is to be associated with wisdom and will, like the friend of 'reverend age' in *The Excursion*, command respect.

The narrator's and Jeremy's conversation about the true nature of heroism has given the Sexton an opportunity to relate the events of a former acquaintance of his, Gilbert Dawson. Because the two younger people have time to spare, being on holiday, and because at least one of them, Jeremy, has shown respect to the old man, they listen to the Sexton's account of events which took place forty-five years earlier, placing the action of the story in the very early years of the nineteenth century.<sup>67</sup> To establish the reflective mood of this primary, or outer, narrative, Elizabeth Gaskell uses language that is consciously poetic:

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<sup>67</sup> A Sexton is an officer charged with care of church and churchyard, and often with duties of parish-clerk and gravedigger. The attribution of these duties to the old man suggests that he is a responsible person. The fact that he may have held the duties of parish-clerk indicates that he was literate. He is clearly being presented as a reliable narrator, whose story will be believed by his audience, which is made up of younger and socially superior listeners.

The afternoon sun shed down his glorious rays on the grassy churchyard, making the shadow, cast by the old yew-tree under which we sat, seem deeper and deeper by contrast. The everlasting hum of myriads of summer insects made luxurious lullaby (*MC*, p.101).

Stephen Gill rightly points us again to Wordsworth and the beginning of *The Excursion*, Book I, for a likely influence on Elizabeth Gaskell's descriptive writing in this story:<sup>68</sup>

'Twas summer, and the sun had mounted high:  
 Southward the landscape indistinctly glared  
 Through a pale steam; but all the northern downs,  
 In clearest air ascending, showed far off  
 A surface dappled o'er with shadows flung  
 From brooding clouds; shadows that lay in spots.

(Wordsworth, *Poems II*, 40. 1-6)

If there is a conscious, though veiled, allusion to these lines, it is, like the poetic allusions in *Libbie Marsh's Three Eras*, highly appropriate, but here the reference is more complex. Wordsworth's lines include images of a landscape blessed by the sun, but also 'dappled o'er with shadows | Flung from many a brooding cloud'. The narrator of *The Sexton's Hero* also notes the contrast between sun and shadow, and its effect on the ambience of the churchyard. But here, the purpose of the shadow, cast by the old yew-tree, is to provide welcome shade and shelter from the afternoon sun. The shade promotes the right conditions for the young

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<sup>68</sup> Gill, *Wordsworth and Victorians*, pp. 131 and 132.

men to listen to the Sexton's lengthy and detailed tale. The yew-tree becomes the backdrop and wings of the stage on which the narrative unfolds, drawing the reader into the action, and bringing to mind another of Wordsworth's poems: *Lines left upon a Seat in a Yew-tree which stands near the Lake of Esthwaite*.<sup>69</sup> In this poem the traveller is invited to rest and hear about 'one who own'd | No common soul'. The subject of the poem is, unlike Gilbert Dawson, an educated gentleman, but the poem is philosophical in tone and, like *The Sexton's Hero*, deals with notions of solitude and isolation. Assuming, as we must, that Elizabeth Gaskell had read this poem, it is likely that the concluding lines would have appealed to her:

O, be wiser thou!  
 Instructed that true knowledge leads to love,  
 True dignity abides with him alone  
 Who, in the silent hour of inward thought,  
 Can still suspect, and still revere himself,  
 In lowliness of heart.

(Wordsworth, *LB*, 40. 55-60)

The poem can, however, be read in more than one way, and in ways that are quite strikingly different from each other. There is a view that Wordsworth intended these lines to be a 'renunciation of the Godwinian view that man's vices are due to society rather than to the innate imperfection of human nature'.<sup>70</sup> If a renunciation was necessary, it was because Wordsworth's response to William Godwin had changed between 1795 when he composed *Adventures on Salisbury*

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<sup>69</sup> Wordsworth, *LB*, pp. 38-40.

<sup>70</sup> 'Notes to the poems' in Wordsworth, *LB*, p. 278.

*Plain* and the close of 1796 when he completed *The Borderers*, from one of admiration to one of disagreement, as he came to question Godwin's belief in the supremacy of reason.<sup>71</sup> Godwin had trained to be a Dissenting minister and had preached for several years to Dissenting congregations in Hertfordshire and Suffolk. His religious opinions had been heavily influenced by Sandemanianism and Socinianism.<sup>72</sup> Wordsworth's attack on Godwin was based on his criticism of Godwin's apparent arrogance and move towards atheism. Although the younger Wordsworth had responded favourably to Godwin's philosophy, this poem can be seen as evidence of his later rejection of Enlightenment thinking. In appealing for 'true knowledge' and 'true dignity', the poet is possibly questioning Godwin's definition of knowledge and dignity. When Godwin had stressed the importance of truth as a means of achieving social justice, Wordsworth did not disagree, but in the above lines the poet is asserting his own definition of truth, or at least his own interpretation of the right application of truth. The lines can be read as a call for the humility which he found lacking in Godwin's philosophy based on the supremacy of reason. In this poem, therefore, Wordsworth can be seen to be engaging in a complex philosophical argument, which makes his intention less than obvious, although he does appear in the closing lines to be opening up a debate on the nature of truth, knowledge and dignity, and the importance of the individual conscience. But if the poem was intended to pose questions, readers have not always supplied the answers. One way of responding to the poem is the way in which Charles Lamb reacted when Wordsworth read it to him in 1797.

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<sup>71</sup> Gill, *Wordsworth: A Life*, pp. 105-106.

<sup>72</sup> Ford, K. Brown, *The Life of William Godwin* (London and Toronto: Dent; New York: Dutton, 1926), pp. 10-16.

Following a family tragedy, in which his sister had killed his mother, he felt himself to be unfit for normal human society. Seeking a remedy for his feelings of isolation, he found great comfort in *Yew Tree Lines*.<sup>73</sup> Far from reading it as an intellectual challenge, he read it as a means of emotional and spiritual reassurance.

We cannot know just how Elizabeth Gaskell read this poem, but the closing lines certainly reflect Unitarian teaching on matters of the inner light, individuality, and the value of true knowledge. Although there is no evidence to show she read Godwin, some of his views would have chimed with her own, especially those on the right to private judgement. *Yew Tree Lines* certainly invites the reader to respond to some of Godwin's ideas, but while Elizabeth Gaskell might wish to engage in those ideas, it is also likely that her personal experience of life would lead her to read the poem as Lamb did, for as a practising Unitarian she too had known social exclusion. In *The Sexton's Hero*, she created a character, Gilbert Dawson, whose actions were governed by inward thought and reason, and who, as a consequence, was rejected by a society which subscribed to different ideals. *The Sexton's Hero* will, therefore, be discussed here as a testing of Godwinian/Dissenting beliefs.

Gilbert Dawson shows himself to be capable of sentimental attachment, for he is 'taken' with the girl who is also admired by the Sexton. But in a way that would win the approval of Godwin, he regulates these feelings of personal affection, by

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<sup>73</sup> Gill, *Wordsworth: A Life*, p. 123.

subordinating them to his belief in the wrongness of violence.<sup>74</sup> Although the community view his refusal to accept the Sexton's challenge as a form of weakness, he believes he is acting from a position of moral strength based on his reading of the scriptures. Godwin had argued that the character of man originated in external circumstances. Godwin's writing, because of its opacity, can lend itself to misinterpretation, and many readers, including Wordsworth, understood Godwin to mean that man's vices stemmed from society.<sup>75</sup> In *The Sexton's Hero* society is against Gilbert Dawson and on the side of the Sexton, who had been regarded as 'the cock of the village'. The prevailing values of this society favoured an aggressive stance in life, but Gilbert Dawson finds the inner strength to stand against these pressures. This strength is derived from his close reading of the gospel, which informs all of his reasoning, and which is the cornerstone of Unitarian teaching. Evidence of Dawson's Bible study is provided by his marks on the pages, made symbolically by a carpenter's pencil, which marks him out as an ideal Unitarian scholar finding true Christian teaching in the gospel. Dawson's reverence for the Bible is not, however, entirely representative of the community in which he lives, or even of his family, for his sister had discarded her brother's heavily annotated copy with some contempt. The vicar, representing the established church, and responsible for moral guidance in the community, had

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<sup>74</sup> When, in 1801, he defended his *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, 1793, Godwin argued that all forms of affection including personal attachment and patriotism should be regulated for the benefit of public good; see William Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice: With selections from Godwin's other writings*, abridged and ed. by K. Codell Carter (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), pp. 323-324, hereafter Godwin, *Enquiry*. Godwin had already argued that violence should be avoided whenever possible (Godwin, *Enquiry*, p. 139), and that individuals had the right of private judgement (Godwin, *Enquiry*, p. 90).

<sup>75</sup> Godwin, *Enquiry*, pp. 27-38 and 'Notes to the poems', Wordsworth, *LB*, p. 278.

ignored gospel teaching on matters of national aggression, by celebrating military victories without a thought for the loss of life involved in the conflict.

Through his rejection of contemporary values, and social pressures, Gilbert Dawson retreats from society and becomes a solitary figure, one that can be viewed, in retrospect, as a Romantic hero. Although Dawson steadfastly keeps to his pacifist stance, he does not do so in an arrogant way. The indications are that the loss of human company caused him great unhappiness, for he 'fell into a sad, careless way'. Just as Libbie Marsh's inner loneliness and despair had been demonstrated by her slow movements, so Gilbert Dawson's inner pain and anguish are shown by the way in which his gait changes from a brisk walk to a lingering step. In spite of his inner sufferings, however, Dawson continues to look his tormentor straight in the eye, demonstrating his determination and the sincerity of his beliefs.<sup>76</sup>

Although Dawson is pained by the way in which the community disdains him, his resolve does not weaken, and he continues to find strength in his reading of the gospel. He also draws support from his friendship with Jonas, the old clerk.<sup>77</sup> The nature of Jonas's work distances him from public opinion, making it relatively easy for him to befriend Dawson. It is through this friendship that the Sexton had learnt that Dawson's views were in agreement with gospel teaching, but not in accordance with the views of his vicar.

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<sup>76</sup> Gaskell, *MC*, p. 105.

<sup>77</sup> Jonas would have been the parish clerk and, possibly, responsible for other duties that were usually carried out by a Sexton. As the story unfolds, we learn that as a young man, Dawson worked as a carpenter. It seems likely, therefore, that the post of Sexton was reserved for a man of mature years.



Having taken a moral position that separates him from the majority of members of the community in which he lives, Dawson is forced to rely more and more on his own inner resources. This is the triumph of the inner light of Unitarian Protestantism and of Godwinism over institutional authority.<sup>78</sup> But while this position allows freedom of thought and action, it also invites danger because it separates Dawson from his fellow men. Unimpeded by public opinion, which might have included warnings for his own safety, he prepares to embark on his final act of heroism, at the very time that the Sexton was setting out, with his young wife, on the fatal crossing.

The crossing of Morecambe Bay involves serious risk and great physical danger, for it must be completed before the tide comes in. It is, therefore, a physical adventure and one in which Gilbert Dawson demonstrates his capacity for physical heroism without the use of violence. But the experience also changes the Sexton's opinion of Dawson, making it an adventure of the heart. The detailed description of the race against the tide illustrates the folly of human actions when pitted against the forces of nature. If arrogance is a quality to be attributed to any of the protagonists, it could certainly be ascribed to the Sexton on the night of the crossing. He knew they were late starting their return journey and tried to compensate for this delay by whipping the horse. Nature, in all her sublimity, has the last word, of course, as the incoming tide swallows up the shandry, initially occupied by the Sexton and his wife, but which Gilbert Dawson exchanges for his

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<sup>78</sup> Godwin asserted that 'the purest kind of obedience is, where an action flows from the independent conviction of our private judgement' (Godwin, *Enquiry*, p. 119).

own horse. The Sexton and his young wife survive the menace of the incoming tidal waves, but only at the cost of Gilbert Dawson's life. The pacifist has enacted the ultimate heroic sacrifice: he has laid down his life for others. But the people who benefited from his sacrifice were not his friends, but his enemies, making the moral of *The Sexton's Hero* essentially a Christian one.

The story could have been a simple didactic moral tale, about the importance of the individual conscience, and the true nature of heroism. One factor which makes it more than this is the use of the multiple narrative.<sup>79</sup> Gilbert Dawson has told the story to the two strangers because their conversation had reminded him of events which had taken place forty-five years earlier. Those events had shaped his life and continued to haunt him. His experience of the fatal crossing is recollected in a mood of extreme tranquillity, in a situation which stands in sharp contrast to the circumstances of the event that he is recalling. The reader knows that the Sexton has retained the interest of his listeners to the end of his tale, for Jeremy inquires about the fate of Letty, the Sexton's wife. When the two young people learn that she had died within two years of Gilbert Dawson's death, there is no more for them to know about the Sexton's tale. They leave the scene of the churchyard, their original beliefs on Christian heroism either confirmed or challenged. What they have learnt is the way in which events, which took place many years earlier, have shaped the heart and mind of the wise old gentleman to whom they had been listening. *The Sexton's Hero* reveals the journey of the Sexton's heart.

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<sup>79</sup> There are two principal narrative voices: the first is that of Jeremy's friend, the second is the Sexton's. There is also Jonas's narrative, which is related by the Sexton to the two young people.

*The Sexton's Hero* begins with a discussion on definitions of heroism: the relative merits of duty, sacrifice, prowess and militarism being considered. The Sexton's story reveals a moral heroism which precluded physical violence but did not preclude physical courage. Gilbert Dawson is not a conventional hero but he has demonstrated courage in two ways: he has challenged establishment thinking on matters of aggression; and he has saved the lives of other people by sacrificing his own life. The story has constituted a re-defining of heroism, taking as its starting point a defence of Godwinism and Unitarian Protestantism, without which Gilbert Dawson could not have been conceived. Read this way, Romantic heroism has its roots in Enlightenment thinking, which promoted the value of reason and independent thought, and which facilitated the growth of religious dissent. In this story Elizabeth Gaskell has explored aspects of Unitarian Protestant belief, giving weight to the value of reason and close reading of the gospel.

*The Sexton's Hero* prefigures Gaskell's later writing in a number of ways. She has created a character whose honourable actions were the product of 'an independent intellect', and this is a quality she would consider again in her more mature writing.<sup>80</sup> The role of the scriptures in personal salvation is also a subject she returned to. The value of reason as a motivating force is another theme that she examined more fully as she matured as a writer. All of these developments will be explored as this thesis progresses.

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<sup>80</sup> 'From the clear light of circumstances, flashed | Upon an independent Intellect' (*The Borderers* in Wordsworth, *Poems I*, p.214; ll. 1495-96).

## Chapter Four: Dickens and Wordsworth

*Lizzie Leigh, The Well of Pen-Morfa,  
The Heart of John Middleton, and The Moorland Cottage*

If *Howitt's Journal* had succeeded, instead of running for only eighteen months, Elizabeth Gaskell would, in all probability, have continued to write for this magazine. Even so, her third contribution, *Christmas Storms and Sunshine*, which appeared during the festive season, in the New Year's Day edition, is not of the same quality as her first two contributions to this journal, being principally a moral tale of Christian reconciliation, lightened by the use of humour. It will not, therefore, be discussed in detail here. The final number of *Howitt's Journal* appeared at the end of June 1848, and from that time until January 1850, the only outlets that Elizabeth could find for her short stories were *The Sunday School Penny Magazine* and *Sartain's Union Magazine*. Little is known about the editorial policy of these two journals, but it is possible that the stories which Elizabeth Gaskell sent to these papers had been written with the Howitts in mind, not expecting their journal to fail so soon; or they could have been written earlier still and kept back until a suitable outlet emerged.<sup>1</sup> For clearer evidence of editorial aims and objectives, it is necessary to move on to Charles Dickens's first weekly journal, *Household Words*, and Elizabeth Gaskell's contribution to this paper.

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<sup>1</sup> The quality of the stories written for these papers is also of an inferior quality and will not be discussed in this thesis. There is of course no proof that the Howitts would have published them, and, like *Christmas Storms and Sunshine*, they could have been written much earlier, during the years between *Sketches* and *Libbie Marsh's Three Eras*, a time when she was yet to find her form.

The launch of *Household Words* in March 1850 represented the fulfilment of a long-held ambition on the part of Charles Dickens. Writing to his friend John Forster, on September 24th 1849, Dickens said 'The old notion of the Periodical, which had been agitating itself in my mind for so long, I really think is at last gradually growing into form'.<sup>2</sup> By this time Dickens was well placed to embark on what would prove to be a remarkably successful journalistic venture.<sup>3</sup> His involvement in journalism dated from 1835 when he worked as a parliamentary reporter for a number of newspapers including the *True Sun* and the *Morning Chronicle*. His willingness to engage in the struggle for social justice had manifested itself during the time he worked for the *True Sun* when he played a prominent part in a strike of reporters.<sup>4</sup> Dickens's early career in journalism was helped by valuable family contacts in this field of employment: his

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<sup>2</sup> John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, ed. by J. W. T. Ley (London: Cecil Palmer, 1928), p.510, hereafter Forster, *Life of Dickens*. The full text of this letter is in *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, v: 1847-1849, ed. by Graham Storey, K. J. Fielding, and (assoc. ed.) Anthony Laude, Pilgrim edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), pp. 613, hereafter *Dickens Letters* v.

<sup>3</sup> *Household Words* appeared weekly for nine years until the spring of 1859 when Dickens took the decision to wind up *Household Words* and to replace it with his new journal, *All the Year Round*. He incorporated the name *Household Words* into the new journal. The original *Household Words* was auctioned on 16 May 1859. A successful bid on behalf of Dickens meant that the journal, both stock and copyright, became the property of Dickens, who subsequently sold the back stock to Chapman and Hall. For details of the winding up of *Household Words*, and the auction, see Robert L. Patten, *Charles Dickens and His Publishers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978; repr. California: University of California, 1991), pp. 268-270; hereafter Patten. In his biography of Charles Dickens, Edgar Johnson asserts that one hundred thousand copies of the first number of *Household Words* were reported to have been sold, although estimates for subsequent circulation are more modest, suggesting an average of 40,000 a week. He claims that *All the Year Round* is estimated to have sold up to 300,000 copies a week. For these assertions see Edgar Johnson, *Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph*, rev. edn (New York: Viking; London: Allen Lane, 1977; 1st pub. in 2 vols, London: Gollancz, 1953), pp. 360 and 478, hereafter Johnson, *Tragedy and Triumph*. Patten, however, questions these estimates on the sales of *Household Words*, arguing for a steady sale of around 38,500, a figure which is below that of other popular journals of the time, including *Reynold's Weekly Miscellany*, which is reported to have sold 200,000 copies a week (Patten, p. 242, including notes 19 and 20).

<sup>4</sup> Forster, *Life of Dickens*, p. 59.

father had worked as a parliamentary reporter and an uncle, John Henry Barrow, who worked on *The Times*, was able to make useful recommendations to influential journalists.<sup>5</sup> This solid background in journalism no doubt encouraged Dickens in his idea to start a paper of his own. Early attempts, including *Master Humphrey's Clock* (1840-1841) and the *Daily News* (1846), proved unsatisfactory, but the experience was not wasted when he approached the launch of *Household Words*.

When Dickens discussed his 'old notion' with Forster in September 1849, he demonstrated some very clear ideas which were no doubt the result of experience. Firstly, this new weekly paper was to be very modestly priced at either three-halfpence or, at the most, twopence, thus ensuring the maximum possible circulation. Secondly the balance between instruction and entertainment was to be right, so that the paper would reach all classes of readers and promote discussion on the most important social questions of the time. The entertaining aspect of the paper would comprise short stories by himself or other writers and, if possible, a little good poetry. The instructive part was to include historical material, and essays, reviews and letters. The ideological aims of this project were recorded by Forster: 'There was to be no mere utilitarian spirit; with all familiar things, but especially those repellent on the surface, something was to be connected that should be fanciful or kindly; and the hardest workers were to be taught that their lot is not necessarily excluded from the sympathies and graces of imagination'.<sup>6</sup> This focusing on the familiar and the

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<sup>5</sup> Forster, *Life of Dickens*, p. 59, and p. 66, fn.73.

<sup>6</sup> Forster, *Life of Dickens*, p. 512.

repellent recalls *Oliver Twist* (1837-1839), for when, in 1841, Dickens added a preface to this novel, defending it against charges of coarseness, he emphasized the importance of revealing the 'stern truth' of repellent situations, rather than putting a gloss on them.<sup>7</sup> His reference to 'stern truth' carries echoes of Byron's description of George Crabbe as 'nature's sternest painter', and *Oliver Twist* with its gratuitous brutality does suggest that Dickens had inherited some ideas from Crabbe.<sup>8</sup> In his Preface to the first edition of *Bleak House* (1853) Dickens emphasized his intention of revealing the truth regarding the Court of Chancery, but also stated that he has 'purposely dwelt upon the romantic side of familiar things'.<sup>9</sup> All of this suggests that at the time of formulating his artistic and journalistic ideas for *Household Words*, in 1849, there was a duality in Dickens's intentions. He knew the importance of revealing the unexpected as well as the stern truth. He was a successor to Crabbe in his representation of harsh social realism, but his Wordsworthian inheritance would also manifest itself in his awareness of the transforming power of the imagination, a power he continued to engage with throughout his writing career.

When the first number of *Household Words* was ready for publication Dickens felt sufficiently confident about his intentions to preface this number with 'A Preliminary Word', which is the clearest statement of his editorial policy. In the third paragraph

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<sup>7</sup> Charles Dickens, 'The Author's Preface to the Third Edition' (*Oliver Twist*, ed. by Kathleen Tillotson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), pp. lxi-lxv). *Oliver Twist* was first published in *Bentley's Miscellany*, between 1837 and 1839.

<sup>8</sup> Byron's comments on the poetry of George Crabbe are discussed in Chapter three of this thesis.

<sup>9</sup> Charles Dickens, 'Preface to the First Edition' (*Bleak House*, ed. by Norman Page (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), pp. 41-43). *Bleak House* was first published serially from March 1852 to September 1853 (Patten, p.419).

he indicates a shared sympathy with both Wordsworth and Elizabeth Gaskell, in so far as he too is recognizing the potential of common life as a subject of worthwhile literary endeavour, for he states that one of the aims of the paper is 'To show to all, that in all familiar things, even in those which are repellent on the surface, there is Romance enough, if we will find it out'.<sup>10</sup> This clearly carries echoes of one of Wordsworth's statements of intent in his Preface:

The principal object then which I proposed to myself in these Poems was to make the incidents of common life interesting by tracing in them, truly though not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature: chiefly as far as regards the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement (Wordsworth, *LB*, pp.244-245).

Dickens's sentiments also chime with Elizabeth Gaskell's, expressed in a letter to Mary Howitt in 1838: 'In short, the beauty and poetry of many of the common things and daily events of life in its humblest aspect does not seem to me sufficiently appreciated' (*Gaskell Letters*, p.33).

Wordsworth stated his intention in 1800, Elizabeth Gaskell echoed his sentiments thirty-eight years later, and, in 1850, here was Charles Dickens reiterating similar ideas. There is, however, a fundamental difference between Dickens's artistic intention and that of Elizabeth Gaskell. Both writers were indebted to Wordsworth, and to Crabbe, but Dickens's debt to Wordsworth stemmed principally from the

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<sup>10</sup> Charles Dickens, 'A Preliminary Word', *Household Words: A Weekly Journal*, 1 (1850) pp. 1-2; the quotation is on p.1.



acceptance, by the reading public, of Wordsworth's fictional characters, who were on the margins of, or even outside, society. As Stephen Gill asserts in *Wordsworth and the Victorians*, 'Dickens's wise fools and outcasts are prefigured in Wordsworth's vagrants and old beggars'.<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, however, did not compete with Dickens in the creation of outlandish characters. She took something else from Wordsworth: his belief in the importance and universality of feeling. Elizabeth Gaskell shared Charles Dickens's concern for social justice, but she penetrated the inner life of her fictional characters to an extent that Dickens rarely did.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, as a provincial writer, she was able to incorporate into her fiction, rural settings, which gave her the opportunity to draw on Romantic ideas about landscape, and, in particular, Wordsworth's alignment of nature with feeling and moral growth.

Nonetheless, in spite of their different approaches, Dickens's new journal *Household Words* represented a promising outlet for Elizabeth Gaskell's short story writing, for the two writers clearly had some common ground. Furthermore, she was not required to use a pseudonym, as Dickens kept all contributions to his journal anonymous, and this gave Elizabeth a level of artistic freedom which she valued.<sup>13</sup> Even so, Elizabeth Gaskell did not agree to write for Dickens without hesitation. Although Dickens approached her because he had admired *Mary Barton*, there is little evidence to show

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<sup>11</sup> Gill, *Wordsworth and Victorians*, p. 115.

<sup>12</sup> For an example of Gaskell's social concern, see *Gaskell Letters*, pp. 98-100.

<sup>13</sup> Writing in 1859, to George Smith, about a possible contribution to the *Cornhill Magazine*, Elizabeth Gaskell says, in praise of *Household Words*, 'No one knew that it was I that was saying this or that, so I felt to have free swing' (*Gaskell Letters*, p. 577). When Dickens first asked Elizabeth Gaskell to contribute to *Household Words*, he stated that no writer's name would be used (*Dickens Letters* VI, p. 22).

that this professional admiration was mutual, and there are indications that she gave careful consideration to the demands that were likely to be made on her time by making regular contributions to a weekly journal.<sup>14</sup> Her enjoyment of selected works by Dickens is indicated by a reference to *Pickwick Papers* in *Cranford* and her attempt to read two chapters of *Little Dorrit* over the shoulder of a fellow passenger on a bus journey from Altrincham to Knutsford.<sup>15</sup> It is, however, hard to find an expression of unreserved admiration for Dickens, either as a man or for his writing, and this is in contrast with her earlier enthusiasm for Wordsworth indicated by her letter to her sister-in-law, in which she says of the poet ‘my heart feels so full of him I only don’t know how to express my fullness without being too diffuse’.<sup>16</sup> But while she loved Wordsworth’s poetry, her personal knowledge of him as a man was limited to one brief meeting, whereas she would have to engage with Dickens on a business level over a sustained period of time, and she would have to accommodate his editorial demands. For these very reasons, perhaps, she remained cautious in her dealings with Dickens, regarding his praise as ‘soft sawdor’.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> In a letter to Elizabeth Gaskell in February 1850, Dickens deals positively with two of her objections: interruptions to her writing caused by her domestic life, and her tendency to detail (*Dickens Letters* VI, p.29).

<sup>15</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell described this attempt to read *Little Dorrit* in a letter to her daughters in 1855 (*Gaskell Letters*, p. 373).

<sup>16</sup> *Gaskell Letters*, p.7.

<sup>17</sup> In a letter to Elizabeth Gaskell on 21 December 1851, Dickens wrote ‘If you were not the most suspicious of women, always looking for soft sawdor in the purest metal of praise, I should call your paper delightful’ (*Dickens Letters* VI, 558).

In spite of this caution, Elizabeth Gaskell appreciated Dickens's prompt payments, and even on one occasion payment in advance.<sup>18</sup> From the very outset Dickens backed his verbal praise and encouragement with his banknotes, paying her well above the stated rate for her very first contribution to *Household Words*.<sup>19</sup> If Dickens had paid Gaskell strictly in line with the stated rate for *Lizzie Leigh*, she would have received little more than thirteen pounds, but the *Household Words* Office Book records a payment of twenty pounds for the three instalments which occupied a total of twenty-five and a half columns. Elizabeth Gaskell's contributions to Dickens's journal were nearly always substantially longer than other items in the same number, and this can have the effect of distorting the differences in payments. For example, in the extra Christmas number in 1852, Elizabeth Gaskell was paid ten pounds for *The Old Nurse's Story*, while other prose contributors all received less than six pounds, the lowest being as little as one pound and ten shillings. But a closer look at the records reveals substantial differences in column space, with Gaskell's story representing seventeen and a half columns against the two and a half columns that were rewarded with the smallest payment of one pound and ten shillings. But even allowing for these differences in quantity of material, Dickens's payments to Gaskell

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<sup>18</sup> During a stay in Heidelberg, Elizabeth Gaskell sent Dickens two stories for which he quickly sent a payment that included an advance on a third story to be written at her convenience (Uglow, p.453).

<sup>19</sup> The stated rate of payment for prose contributions was twenty-one shillings for a two column page, with a higher rate paid for the extra Christmas numbers. The rate for verse was not stated but was often twice the normal rate. Routine payments were handled by Wills, the sub-editor, and the stated rates were not always strictly followed (Anne Lohrli, *Household Words, A Weekly Journal, 1850-1859, Conducted by Charles Dickens: Table of Contents, List of Contributors and their Contributions based on The Household Words Office Book in the Morris L Parrish Collection of Victorian Novelists, Princeton University Library* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), p.21); hereafter Lohrli.

always erred on the generous side, as the following example illustrates. For *The Heart of John Middleton*, which Dickens greatly admired, and which represented eighteen and a quarter columns, Elizabeth Gaskell received ten pounds. In the following month, January 1851, William Howitt received seven pounds and seven shillings in exchange for his story, *Mrs Ranford's New Year's Dinner*, which occupied sixteen columns.<sup>20</sup> A quick exercise on the calculator reveals that, following the same formula for each writer, one was paid generously, while the other was squeezed. Was Elizabeth Gaskell ever conscious, one wonders, of the fact that she was, in a way, following in her father's footsteps by writing for a journal, and had she developed some business acumen as a result of her father's experience in this field? Had he lived to witness these activities, William Stevenson would have been proud of his daughter, not only for the quality of her writing but for the way in which her talents were being rewarded. He might even have been a little envious.

### *Lizzie Leigh*

The first item in the first number of *Household Words*, immediately following Dickens's Preliminary Word, is the first chapter of *Lizzie Leigh*.<sup>21</sup> It can be read merely as another 'Manchester Story', and, in particular, one which focuses on a social problem: that of a young woman who has fallen into prostitution following a

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<sup>20</sup> The payments quoted above are taken from Lohrli, pp. 58-59, 103-104 and 71-72.

<sup>21</sup> *Lizzie Leigh* was serialized in four parts, commencing on Saturday March 30th 1850 and concluding on April 27th 1850; it is in Elizabeth Gaskell, *Cousin Phillis and Other Tales*, ed. by Angus Easson (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 1-32; hereafter Gaskell, *CP* (or *CP*).

seduction and betrayal.<sup>22</sup> This interpretation is reinforced, not only by Dickens's involvement in the home for destitute girls, but by the fact that at the time in which he launched his journal, he had established his own reputation as a writer of harsh social realism, including that which is found in *Oliver Twist*.

From Dickens's point of view, *Lizzie Leigh* contains a moral in which the fallen can be raised up through the power of a mother's love. The story also focuses on the social condition of young people trying to survive in a city without family support. *Lizzie Leigh* has something in common with *Oliver Twist*, for she too is separated from her parents, falls into bad company in the city, and is ultimately restored to the surviving members of her family. Illegitimacy and prostitution also feature in both tales, but as themes, they are not central to the plot of *Lizzie Leigh*.

On one level, therefore, Elizabeth Gaskell's story, which features a girl called *Lizzie Leigh*, suited Dickens's stated aim of raising people up, for the girl ultimately experiences moral rehabilitation. But the title of *Lizzie Leigh* was Dickens's idea, and it directs the reader's attention excessively to *Lizzie's* trajectory, a reading which is unsatisfactory, for *Lizzie* is never fully realised as a character, since we do not meet her until we are near the end of the story, and even then she remains a shadowy or marginal figure. If, instead, *Lizzie* is perceived as a plot convenience, necessary for

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<sup>22</sup> Jenny Uglow notes that Elizabeth Gaskell 'is often described as "the Manchester novelist" *par excellence*', conceding that early works including 'Libbie Marsh's Three Eras' and 'Lizzie Leigh' deal with Manchester life graphically (Uglow, p. 85). John Chapple discusses 'Lizzie Leigh' as an example of prose fiction that dwells on urban guilt and misery (Chapple, *Early Years*, p. 432).

Mrs Leigh's trajectory, the story can be read as a family power struggle; one in which the older son tries to preserve the patriarchal power exercised by his late father, while his mother tries to assert her own free will. It is in the light of this interpretation that *Lizzie Leigh* will be discussed here, for it reveals the inner conflict of the main protagonist, who is not Lizzie, but Mrs Leigh, and, at the same time, illustrates ways in which Elizabeth Gaskell engaged with some of the ideas and images that figure in Wordsworth's writings.

The opening paragraphs of *Lizzie Leigh* contain some of the most emotionally charged writing to come from Elizabeth Gaskell's pen. Death is a common enough event, but its occurrence on the day which celebrates a birth, and, in particular, the birth of Christ, adds 'poignancy to sorrow'. Moreover this grief, which stems from the death of a loved one, is overlaid with more complex feelings. These feelings are associated with the apparent disappearance of a daughter, and with the resentment, on the part of Mrs Leigh, towards her husband's reaction to this latter event.

In the second main paragraph, Elizabeth Gaskell employs some of her most acute observation of human feeling, especially that which arises from close personal relationships. Mr and Mrs James Leigh had enjoyed twenty-two years of marital happiness, but it had been based on wifely submission, rather than mutual respect. This inequality had, in the long run, undermined the harmony of the relationship, for when each had taken a different view of the errant daughter, the lack of mutual

support had made this difference of opinion insupportable. Reconciliation came too late, for this could not happen until Mr Leigh voiced his forgiveness for his daughter, and this he held back until he felt the time had come when he must make peace with his creator. Mr Leigh's death, therefore, not only marked the end of married life for Mrs Leigh, it brought to a close three years of estrangement, during which time 'the old landmarks of wifely duty and affection' had been torn up. This tearing up of landmarks had so changed Mrs Leigh's feelings towards her husband, that she had spent three years in an emotional wilderness. These years, which had been stained by feelings of resentment and isolation, had served as a prelude to widowhood, for Mr Leigh's deathbed forgiveness of their daughter, welcome though it was, did not allow time for new landmarks to be constructed. It served, instead, to add to the complexity of Mrs Leigh's feelings towards her deceased husband, by filling her with remorse for her own past intransigence, which had stemmed from the maternal bond between herself and her daughter.<sup>23</sup>

Mrs Leigh's decision to leave her home, in the hills above Rochdale, is fuelled by these strong emotions. With no husband to restrain her, she is fired by her desire to find her daughter, in the nearby city of Manchester, although the forces of reason would have pointed to the odds that were stacked against the success of such a mission. There is so little to go on, for letters to Lizzie have been returned, that success can only be the outcome of coincidence. The reliance on coincidence, in

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<sup>23</sup> Gaskell, *CP*, pp. 1-2.

*Lizzie Leigh*, could, in the hands of a lesser writer than Elizabeth Gaskell, have produced a story of inferior quality, one quickly read and soon forgotten.

*Lizzie Leigh*, however, is more than the story of a mother's quest for her lost daughter. It is a study of a woman's determination to take control of her own life following the death of her husband. The success of the quest, therefore, is dependant on Mrs Leigh's assertion of her own will. The circumstances of Lizzie can be traced, not only to observation of real life in a city such as Manchester, but to fictional counterparts in the poetry of Crabbe and Wordsworth. As noted in the previous chapter of this thesis, Crabbe's poetry abounds with female characters who have been involved in calamitous extra-marital relationships. Wordsworth, too, made use of this particular personal tragedy for some of his most powerful poetry. Lizzie's situation in Manchester, and her estrangement from her paternalistic home in the Lancashire countryside, can be linked to Wordsworth's *Poor Susan*, for Susan, like Lizzie, is given the status of outcast:<sup>24</sup>

Poor Outcast! return — to receive thee once more  
 The house of thy Father will open its door,  
 And thou once again, in thy plain russet gown,  
 May'st hear the thrush sing from a tree of its own.

(Wordsworth, *LB*, 170. 17-20)

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<sup>24</sup> The final verse of *Poor Susan* only appeared in 1800, three years after the poem's first publication, and was later cancelled following a remark by Charles Lamb that the term 'outcast' suggested moral laxity ('Notes to the Poems', Wordsworth, *LB*, p. 302). There is no indication that it was Wordsworth's intention to suggest a 'fallen' state for the subject of the poem, but many readers would interpret it that way. We cannot know if the version of the poem read by Elizabeth Gaskell included these lines.



Lizzie, of course, does not return to her father's house. Her homecoming, at the end of the story, is not to the family farm, but to a secluded cottage which she shares with her mother. This homecoming warrants close consideration for it represents an unusual treatment of a theme common in Victorian fiction. In Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist*, and in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth*, the mother dies and the child lives on. In George Eliot's *Adam Bede*, the child is killed and the mother transported to Australia, from where she fails to return alive. Much later, Thomas Hardy, in *Tess of the D'urbervilles*, kills off both the mother and child before the novel is concluded. In none of these instances is there an opportunity for the unmarried mother to find lasting restoration with members of her family, or with society, for the transgressing woman must be disposed of. In *Lizzie Leigh*, Lizzie pays for her transgression through the death of her child, but her own life is spared. She must then come to terms, not so much with her transgression, but with her sense of loss following the death of her child. Lizzie's survival also completes the matriarchal resolution of the story in which Mrs Leigh sets up home with her daughter.

Lizzie's illegitimate child, whose death in the story is enacted with an element of melodrama, must be buried in the hills, some distance away from the grave of the family patriarch. The child's burial place, in a Quaker graveyard noted for its simplicity and isolation, is in contrast with Mr Leigh's grave; for he had been buried in the parish churchyard at Milnrow, indicating his allegiance to the Church of England. The choice of burial place for the child is significant on two counts. Firstly,

while a minister of the parish church might have been unwilling to inter an illegitimate child in his churchyard, there is no suggestion in the story that this was the case. There is, instead, the implication that the 'stern grandfather' would not have welcomed such an arrangement, although this seems contradictory, since his last words before dying had been those of forgiveness towards his daughter. If the author of *Lizzie Leigh* had wanted to complete the cycle of forgiveness and reconciliation, the interment of the illegitimate child next to her pious grandfather would have been entirely appropriate, adding substance to Mr Leigh's words of forgiveness. But Elizabeth Gaskell has reasons of her own for choosing a more modest site for the burial of Mrs Leigh's granddaughter. Our search for these reasons takes us again to Wordsworth, and in particular, to *The Thorn*.<sup>25</sup>

In this poem, Wordsworth takes an unremarkable location, one that is furnished only with rather dreary natural features: 'an aged thorn' and a 'little muddy pond [...] three feet long, and two feet wide'.<sup>26</sup> There is clearly nothing about this place to attract the attention of the passer-by, but the poet reveals an intense personal drama that is associated with this spot. First of all, we learn of a 'beauteous heap, a hill of moss | Just half a foot in height' (Wordsworth, *LB*, 71. 36), which suggests an infant's grave, and which is close to the muddy pond, beside which the woman often sits weeping.<sup>27</sup> Secondly, as the narrative unfolds, we learn that the woman, Martha

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<sup>25</sup> Wordsworth, *LB*, pp. 70-78.

<sup>26</sup> Wordsworth, *LB*, p. 70; l. 6, and p. 71; ll. 30 and 33.

<sup>27</sup> In the ensuing verse of *The Thorn*, the poet states that 'this heap of earth o'grown with moss | Which close beside the thorn you see, | [...] Is like an infant's grave in size' (Wordsworth, *LB*, p.71; ll. 49-52).

Ray, was, as a young girl, deserted by the young man to whom she was betrothed, and whose child she was carrying. The circumstances surrounding Lizzie Leigh's betrayal are not explained, but Lizzie's trajectory concludes in the same way as Martha Ray's, for both women bury their child on a lonely hillside and both make frequent tearful visits to the burial place. Martha Ray's rather stylized lamentation: "Oh misery! oh misery! | O woe is me! oh misery!" finds a softer echo in Lizzie's expression of grief and remorse, for she, more modestly, 'sits by a little grave and weeps bitterly'.<sup>28</sup>

Wordsworth's representation of sexual betrayal and illegitimacy in *The Thorn* is a cruel one, since the father of the child is delineated as a young man entirely without principle, betrothed to two young women simultaneously. Neither is the mother an innocent figure, for there is the hint of infanticide in the narrator's account of Martha Ray's personal history; an account that is derived, not from fact, but from speculation and local gossip:

Some say, if to the pond you go,  
 And fix on it a steady view,  
 The shadow of a babe you trace,  
 A baby and a baby's face,  
 And that it looks at you.

(Wordsworth, *LB*, 77. 225-229)

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<sup>28</sup> Martha Ray's lamentation concludes stanzas six, seven and twenty-three, in Wordsworth, *LB*, pp.72 and 78. Lizzie Leigh's expression of grief is in *CP*, p.32.

As so often with Wordsworth's female characters, Martha Ray is totally unable to deal with personal misfortune. Her fate is more than social exclusion; it is one of mental instability to the point of insanity; one in which she can do no more than revisit her child's burial place and reiterate her lament: "Oh misery! oh misery! | O woe is me! oh misery!". This image of a middle-aged woman spending days and nights, in all weathers on a 'dreary mountain-top', talking to herself in a thoroughly demented manner, is discomfiting since it brings us face to face with something we cannot deal with: evidence of a deranged mind. It is an image of the sublime: a deranged woman fruitlessly looking for solace on a bleak mountain top, 'When the blue day-light's in the skies, | And when the whirlwind's on the hill'.<sup>29</sup>

As touched on in Chapter One, the sublime is a representation of terror. It can provide the reader with pleasant fascination when the terror is not experienced first hand. During his walking tour of the Alps, Wordsworth consciously sought direct experience of the sublime in high mountainous regions and he subsequently used images of sublimity in some of his poetry. In *The Thorn*, the reader recognizes Martha Ray's fearful mental derangement and total despair without necessarily having to experience directly her suffering. Martha Ray's behaviour is particularly disconcerting because it is witnessed on a mountain top, and not in a situation where she is being cared for. Although the sublimity that Wordsworth found in the isolation and grandeur of high mountainous regions is associated in this poem with a woman, it

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<sup>29</sup> Wordsworth, *LB*, p. 72; l. 72.

is more often associated with masculinity, because of its inherent qualities of greatness and ruggedness, while its antithesis, beauty, is associated with smallness and therefore femininity.<sup>30</sup> Sublimity is represented in *The Thorn* in a number of ways. There is the bleak landscape in which the thorn is situated and where Martha Ray recites her lament:<sup>31</sup>

High on a mountain's highest ridge  
 Where oft the stormy winter gale  
 Cuts like a scythe, while through the clouds  
 It sweeps from vale to vale.

(Wordsworth, *LB*, 70. 23-26)

There is also the unexpectedness of the solitary and deranged woman. But there is the lament itself which is evidence of her mental suffering and which serves as a reminder of divine punishment. These factors constitute the terror which underpins the sublimity experienced by the reader of the poem.

This sublimity does not, however, represent the 'seeing-beauty spirit' sought by Elizabeth Gaskell, and neither will it do for her as a resolution to her story of

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<sup>30</sup> Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. by Adam Phillips (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 103, 113, and 119; hereafter Burke.

<sup>31</sup> *The Thorn* has its origins in a walk taken by Dorothy and William Wordsworth and Basil Montagu junior on 19 March 1798. They walked to the hill-tops, in the Quantock hills, on a very cold and bleak day (*Journals of Dorothy Wordsworth*, 2nd edn ed. by Mary Moorman, with an Introduction by Helen Darbishire (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1983; repr. from 1973 text) p. 10).

maternal suffering. Lizzie Leigh must suffer, but not in total isolation, for she learns to serve the local community through her own acts of kindness. Through these actions, she gains the respect of her neighbours and the company of their children, on whom she can bestow her own maternal affections. The final scene, in which Lizzie takes a child to the sunny burial place in the uplands, where the youngster makes daisy chains, and Lizzie weeps at the grave side, is not one of sublimity, but one of beauty. Although this scene is suffused with tears of regret, it is also lightened by the actions of Lizzie's young companion. Moreover, unlike Martha Ray, Lizzie has been restored, not merely to human society, but, to her family, for she is reunited with her mother.

This restoration, however, would not have been possible if Mrs Leigh had not asserted her own free will in the face of opposition from her son. Without her mother's persistence, Lizzie would never have been found, let alone morally reclaimed and restored to her native place. In *Libbie Marsh's Three Eras*, Elizabeth Gaskell created fictional female characters who are alone in the world, but, nevertheless, take control of their lives and work out their own destiny. In *Lizzie Leigh*, she created a female character who had been subservient to patriarchal forces, but who found the maternal bond with her daughter so strong that she could distance herself emotionally from her husband's influence, and challenge her older son's attempt to preserve the patriarchal rule that had been the custom at Upclose Farm. The abruptness of Mrs Leigh's decision to let Upclose Farm and find a temporary

home in Manchester, so abrupt that it is made on the day of her husband's funeral, indicates the strength of her determination to find her daughter in the nearby city. Any delay would have allowed time for second thoughts on her part, or have given her sons time to make other arrangements for her. The suddenness of Mrs Leigh's decision takes her sons by surprise. They have difficulty relating to her emotional turmoil, for they lack the language of feeling.<sup>32</sup> In his confusion, Will, the older son, tries to reassert patriarchal rule, tackling his mother head on: 'Mother! what's this about going to Manchester?' (*CP*, p.5). When he realises the strength of his mother's determination, Will settles for a compromise in which he and his younger brother will accompany their mother to Manchester, but her feelings remain only dimly understood. The move from the farm in Rochdale to a temporary home in Manchester involves a significant culture shift; for in the city they have neither garden nor livestock to attend, no open moorland view to enjoy, and, perhaps most traumatic of all, no home-produced food, for they must purchase all that they need to eat. This cultural dislocation is compounded by the loneliness of city life, yet Mrs Leigh is less troubled than her sons because she has a new purpose in her life: that of searching for her lost daughter.

The sequence of coincidences that leads to the discovery of Lizzie is carefully chosen. In a lesser writer, Will Leigh could have met Mr Palmer in a public house and learnt directly from him that his daughter, Susan, was caring for an abandoned baby. But

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<sup>32</sup> 'They did not speak as they walked, for they were only in the habit of talking about facts, and hardly knew the more sophisticated language applied to the description of feelings.' (*CP*, p. 4).

Elizabeth Gaskell, while avoiding so crude a coincidence, also seizes the opportunity to illustrate the force of Wordsworth's vision of human kindness. Although Will Leigh, as a morally upright young man, does not approve of the causes of Mr Palmer's unsteady gait, he has enough human sympathy, and respect for old age, to escort the inebriated old gentleman home. It is this act of kindness on the part of Will that sets in motion the chain of events which culminates in the rescue of Lizzie, and the restoration of the lost daughter to her family. But before Mrs Leigh can be reunited with her daughter, she must free herself from the patriarchal power which her older son is trying to preserve.

Will Leigh holds fast to his late father's uncompromising view of Lizzie's disappearance. It is implied, though never stated explicitly, that Lizzie has fallen into a life of immorality, in order to support her illegitimate child. Will uses his own intransigence to exert power over his mother, believing that he is morally superior. He has also taken a fancy to the daughter of Mr Palmer, the old gentleman he helped home, but, although he makes allowances for an old man's indulgence, he remains acutely embarrassed by the circumstances of his sister. He believes that if Susan Palmer learns the truth, she will reject his proposal of marriage. Mrs Leigh is fully aware of her son's attitude to his sister and his feelings for Susan Palmer, but she is now driven by her own natural feelings towards her newly discovered grandchild, whose identity has been proved by the parcel of frocks the little girl had been supplied with. One of these garments had been made from an adult dress bought jointly by Mrs



Leigh and her daughter during happier times in Rochdale. It was this evocation of past times, when mother and daughter had been together, that forged the bond between Mrs Leigh and her granddaughter, strengthening her determination to be reunited with her daughter. She cannot, however, achieve her aim without involving her older son, Will, for he has fallen in love with the young woman who is caring for Lizzie's baby. Aware of this sensitive issue, she approaches Will, with the news of her granddaughter's whereabouts, cautiously, rather than abruptly. She chooses her time carefully, waiting until Tom, the younger boy, has gone to bed, leaving her alone with Will. She then addresses herself to her older son in a tactile manner: the double action of kissing him on the forehead, and of placing her hand on his shoulder, making her aware of his nervous reaction to the news that she has been to see Susan Palmer, the object of Will's affection. During the ensuing conversation, Mrs Leigh has to win a moral argument, for she must convince her son of the rightness of forgiveness and reconciliation. The strength of her conviction gives her the courage to challenge the very nature of the relationship between her son and herself, and in so doing she changes the balance of power that was inherent in that relationship:

She stood, no longer, as the meek, imploring, gentle mother, but firm and dignified, as if the interpreter of God's will. Her manner was so unusual and solemn, that it overcame all Will's pride and stubbornness. He rose softly while she was speaking, and bent his head as if in reverence at her words, and the solemn injunction which they conveyed. When she had spoken, he said in so subdued a voice that she was almost surprised at the sound, 'Mother, I will' (*CP*, p.22).

This conversation marks the end of patriarchal rule in the Leigh family, and makes possible the resolution of the story. Although Will takes up residence at the family farm, his governance will be different from that of his father, for his experience in Manchester has taught him to respect the views of others and to be sympathetic towards human frailty. These are lessons which he has learnt, not from his father, but from his mother, the girl he would marry, and from his sister, whose actions he had formerly despised. Mrs Leigh, with her new found confidence, derived from her independence of thought, is able to move on in her life, choosing to live apart from Upclose Farm with its memories of patriarchal rule. The story begins with her emotional turmoil, but it ends with her peace of mind. Upclose Farm remains sublime in its wild moorland situation, but the secluded cottage in the hollow, which is now home to Mrs Leigh and Lizzie, symbolizes, in its beauty, the new landmark of independent thought, which Mrs Leigh has constructed for herself, in place of those old landmarks of submission and duty. In this story we have seen Elizabeth Gaskell drawing on aspects of Romanticism and transforming them to underpin her ideas about the potential for matriarchal strength and solidarity.

### *The Well of Pen-Morfa*

The theme of sexual betrayal continued to be popular in nineteenth-century fiction. Among mid-nineteenth-century novelists, Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot incorporated studies of unmarried mothers into full-length novels. As already noted,

Dickens was willing to include betrayed women, and unmarried mothers, as members of the class he wished to 'raise up'. Not surprisingly, then, *The Well of Pen-Morfa*, ostensibly a story of a broken engagement, found favour with Dickens, appearing in *Household Words*, in November 1850, eight months after the publication of *Lizzie Leigh*.<sup>33</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell's reputation as a writer was clearly secure with Dickens by this time, for he wrote on October 6th, 'I need not say that I read it with avidity as soon as I knew it was yours, and that I shall be delighted to have it'.<sup>34</sup> This high praise was, however, soon to be moderated by his misgivings about the frequency with which accidents befell her fictional characters. Commenting to W. H. Wills, his sub-editor, in December 1850, he remarked that the accident to Nelly, in *The Heart of John Middleton*, would remind readers of 'the girl who fell down at the well, and the child who tumbled down stairs'.<sup>35</sup> This concern of Dickens serves to remind us of ways in which nineteenth-century readers would respond to the tale, and that this response might be quite different from that of today's readers.

The accident to Nelly will be considered later in this chapter, in the section on *The Heart of John Middleton*. With regard to Nest Gwynn's fall at the well, most readers today recognize this, like the infant's tumble downstairs, as a plot convenience: a means by which the action is moved forward. The infant's fatal fall is a convenient way of writing out a character who has become superfluous to the main argument of the story, and Nest's accident is a way of bringing about a change so profound that

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<sup>33</sup> *The Well of Pen-Morfa* is in Gaskell, *MC*, pp.123-143.

<sup>34</sup> *Dickens Letters*, VI, 188.

<sup>35</sup> *Dickens Letters*, VI, 231.

the young man's love for her will be severely tested. We now look for a more significant meaning beyond the linear narrative of cause and effect. Plurality of meaning can be released through a variety of ways, one of which is through deeper insights into the author's emotional life. In the case of Elizabeth Gaskell, this insight has been fostered by the availability of her letters, many of which throw light on her innermost thoughts and feelings. When confiding in a letter to a friend about her ongoing grief following the death of her young son, she reveals to the reader, not only the depth of her emotional suffering, but also the extent to which she keeps it hidden: 'That wound will never heal on earth, although hardly any one knows how it has changed me'.<sup>36</sup> Today's readers are, therefore, more privileged than Dickens's readers. While *The Well of Pen-Morfa* can still be read as a moral tale about the shallowness of a young man's love, compared to the devotion of a mother for her daughter, it can also be seen as an emotional site on which the author recreates, either consciously or unconsciously, some of her own emotional history. I propose to argue here, that this recreation is achieved through the use of geographical setting, the theme of betrayal, and by foregrounding three distinct emotional states in the life of the heroine of the story, which find parallels in Elizabeth Gaskell's own emotional experience.

For the setting of this story, Elizabeth Gaskell chose a location famous then and now for its outstanding natural beauty. The naturalness of this landscape is characterised

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<sup>36</sup> *Gaskell Letters*, p. 57; written in 1848, three years after Willie's death in 1845. For reference to this tragedy see also *Gaskell Further Letters*, p. 36.

by its wildness and remoteness. Flanked to the north by the mountains of Snowdonia, and to the south by the turbulent waters of Tremadog Bay, Pen-Morfa is located in a truly Romantic landscape. Not surprisingly, this region was favoured by landscape painters whose work came to be associated with Romanticism. J. M. W. Turner's paintings of Criccieth Castle and Harlech Castle, the remains of which still stand guard over Tremadog Bay, are believed to have originated in his tour of North Wales in 1798.<sup>37</sup> For Elizabeth Gaskell, this region developed associations with extreme states of thought and feeling. Immediately after leaving school in 1827, she spent a carefree six-week holiday in North Wales, principally in the village of Aber, close to the Menai Straits, but also at her Uncle Sam's house, Plas Penrhyn, near the town of Portmadog and the village of Pen-Morfa. Five years later, on her honeymoon, she visited the same region, travelling southwards from Aber through the wild Llanberis pass, the village of Beddgelert, and the Aber Glaslyn Pass, concluding the journey at Plas Penrhyn, a few miles outside Portmadog. These early visits to the eastern fringe of the Lleyn Peninsula were occasions of extreme happiness, but a subsequent visit to the same region in 1845 saw the time of Elizabeth's greatest sorrow, when her infant son, Willie, died from Scarlet Fever at Portmadog, a place she had hitherto associated with feelings of carefree joy.<sup>38</sup> Pen-Morfa, the village so close to Portmadog, and to Uncle Sam's house in the Vale of Festinniog, would seem to be a painful choice to Elizabeth Gaskell, for the setting of a short story, but it is through the evocation of

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<sup>37</sup> These paintings were completed in 1835, but were probably sketched in 1798.

<sup>38</sup> Gérin, pp. 29-30; 49-50; and 72-73. For Sam Holland's purchase of Plas Penrhyn, and Elizabeth Stevenson's visits to the house, see Chapple, *Early Years*, pp 306-307.

her own previous emotional experiences that she represents the joy and anguish of Nest Gwynn.

The basic theme of careless love, a broken engagement and its consequences, is unremarkable in itself. For Elizabeth Gaskell, however, it is what lies behind the bare facts that makes a story. To find the scene of Nest Gwynn's drama, we must, again, turn our steps from the public way, for 'Of a hundred travellers who spend a night at Trê-Madoc, in North Wales, there is not one, perhaps, who goes to the neighbouring village of Pen-Morfa'.<sup>39</sup> The first chapter of *The Well of Pen-Morfa* sets out the three most significant stages in Nest Gwynn's adult life, all of which take place in this hidden situation. Each of these stages represents a state of feeling, each stage leading inevitably onto the next stage. Furthermore, for each of these stages in Nest Gwynn's life, a parallel can be found in Elizabeth Gaskell's life, and, in particular, during the times she spent in North Wales.

We first meet Nest when she is a very young woman and exceptionally beautiful. This is a beauty that incorporates more than a pretty face, however, for she is blest with a vivacious personality and physical grace. Devoted to her widowed mother, who, in turn, loves her, Nest enjoys a carefree passage from girlhood to young womanhood. This inner happiness manifests itself in high spirits, though not selfishness, for she is capable of kindness and sympathy towards others. She is, quite simply, a happy,

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<sup>39</sup> The narrator emphasises the isolation of Pen-Morfa by saying it stands on a disused road (*MC*, p.123).

carefree girl, pleased with her appearance and confident in her ability to attract other people: 'old and young, both men and women' (*MC*, p.126). This description of Nest could equally be applied to Elizabeth Stevenson, when, aged seventeen, she spent her first extended holiday with her Holland relatives in North Wales.

Nest Gwynn's attractiveness is, however, a mixed blessing, for we learn that other people do not always judge her rightly, mistaking her vivacity for inconstancy. But worse than this, it is for superficial reasons that Edward Williams asks Nest Gwyn to be his wife. The nature of his proposal precludes any possibility of Williams loving Nest for her true self; the indications being that he wanted her principally for her outward appearance, and, possibly, because she was coveted by other young men. So much has been made of Nest's beauty, that, almost inevitably, it leads to the second stage in her young life: a betrothal to a well-to-do, but shallow, young man.

This betrothal is not preceded by any kind of courtship. It is, instead, based on a promise made during a casual meeting between Nest and Williams at the local well, where it was Nest's custom to go for water. The fact that they have entered into so serious an agreement so lightly, suggests an element of impetuosity in both parties. For Nest there is the attraction of a young man who can apparently offer her financial security. For Edward Williams, Nest can be no more than an attractive acquisition, ornamental but well versed in the ways of country life: able to carry a pail of water on her head. The meeting at the well is significant on two counts. It provides Nest with

the opportunity to display to Williams, not only her natural beauty, but also her dexterity with the pail, demonstrating her suitability for the role of farmer's wife. The encounter also gives Williams the chance to show off his greyhounds, the possession of which is evidence of his superior social position. The boisterous behaviour of the dogs causes the laboriously filled pail of water to spill, and the refilling provides the extra time needed for Williams to make his proposal of marriage.

The betrothal between Nest Gwynn and Edward Williams represents the second stage of Nest's life as a young adult. Nest enters into a period of even greater happiness, which although destined to be short-lived is more intense than any she has known before, for she 'danced and sang more than ever' (*MC*, p.127). This happiness is different from the kind she has already experienced, for it is based on anticipation of pleasures still to come. It is the time of her burgeoning sexual awareness, for she emerges from her daydreams with a 'scarlet blush' (*MC*, p.127). For the author, Elizabeth Gaskell, this Romantic landscape was the setting for her own sexual awakening, for it was here, on her second extended visit to North Wales, that she spent her honeymoon with William Gaskell. Like Nest Gwynn at the time of her betrothal, she was then young, in love, on the threshold of married life, but still without cares or responsibilities, and unacquainted with grief. For Elizabeth, this time represented an apex of personal happiness, to be surpassed only by the birth of her children.



The problem with any kind of peak, however, is that it must be followed by a slide or drop downhill, whether it is a physical journey or a journey of the heart. Nest's third stage in her adult life is precipitated by a sudden tragedy. Although the reader has been prepared for Nest's tumble at the well, because of the description of the steps leading to it, and because of the frostiness of the morning, Nest is unprepared for the hazard in store because she is familiar with the journey to the well. She is overconfident because it is part of her regular daily routine. The injury which Nest sustains at the Well of Pen-Morfa marks the end of her happiness, as abruptly as the death of young Willie Gaskell at Portmadog in 1845, marked the end of Elizabeth Gaskell's serenity. For Nest, life could never be the same again, because the severity of her physical injury, together with the absence of adequate medical treatment, would leave her permanently crippled. For Elizabeth Gaskell, following the sudden loss of her beloved infant son, during her third protracted stay in this part of Wales, life would go on as before, with regard to outward appearances, but inwardly, she would never be the same again. When she wrote to her friend, Anne Shaen, 'That wound will never heal on earth, although hardly any one knows how it has changed me', she made it clear that she could never again be the person she was before the death of her son, Willie.<sup>40</sup> Elizabeth's stay in Portmadog, in 1845, became a watershed in her emotional life. Any subsequent visit to this part of North Wales would be marred by evocation of the acute distress which accompanied the death of her son, in a place formerly associated with great happiness.

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<sup>40</sup> *Gaskell Letters*, p. 57.

For Nest Gwynn, the injury to her hip is followed not only by acute physical pain, but by betrayal by the young man to whom she had been betrothed. It is this betrayal that brings about changes to Nest's inner life. This is the wound that never heals for her, although she learns to adapt to her physical limitations, carrying out some of her former household tasks, and even managing to descend the steps to the well once more.

Edward Williams's response to Nest's physical injury is not an emotional one. There is no evidence of pity, or even feelings of loss on his part. His decision to terminate the relationship is made for purely pragmatic reasons. He wanted a wife; he had thought that the attractive and physically agile Nest would be suitable, but the consequences of her accident made her unsuitable, in his view, for the role of farmer's wife. He made these decisions in the same dispassionate way in which he would select livestock for his farm. He was a man of business, not of sentiment, and did not, therefore, feel emotionally tied to Nest.

Edward Williams's reaction to Nest's changed circumstances is in keeping with the way in which he is presented to the reader. While Eleanor and Nest Gwynn represent a peasant economy, in which a subsistence living is derived from the land, Williams,

although not a substantial capitalist farmer, is above Nest in fortune and demonstrates links with the world of commerce.<sup>41</sup> On the fateful frosty morning, when Nest made her way to the Well, Williams had business to transact at the inn of Pen-Morfa. He is known to have interests in the larger towns outside Pen-Morfa, for Eleanor is able to invent plausible stories about him being summoned to Caernarfon assizes or to Harlech Cattle Market. When Eleanor goes to see Williams about his relationship with Nest, we learn that he is a dairy farmer, and that he keeps a horse, for he has learnt of Nest's progress when buying horse-medicine at the local surgery. It is his ambition and entrepreneurial skill that has made him what he is: a farmer, and not a peasant. He is in the vanguard of change, while Eleanor Gwynn is rooted in the old ways of Pen-Morfa, a village that has changed very little since the fifteenth century.<sup>42</sup> At the time in which the story takes place, Williams represents modern enlightened man, while Eleanor represents a much older way of life, with different ways of thinking and feeling. If Williams had married Nest, the marriage would have signified a uniting of the old with the new, and the acquisition of the Gwynn smallholding would have strengthened Williams's position in the community. Because of her youth, and her love for Edward Williams, Nest would have adapted herself to his forward-looking ways. Eleanor, rooted more deeply than her daughter in the old

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<sup>41</sup> The author states that at the time in which these events took place, a lifetime ago, large capitalists had not yet come to this region (*MC*, p. 125). 'A lifetime' suggests the beginning of the nineteenth century, and Williams was perhaps on a par with the yeoman farmers of England, building up his assets through judicious marriage and extension of land ownership.

<sup>42</sup> The narrator doubts that any new cottages had been built in the village for the past hundred years, and notes that some of the cottages in Pen-Morfa have dates 'which tell of the fifteenth century' (*MC*, p. 123).

ways, and motivated solely by her love for Nest, cares only for her daughter's feelings, so there can be little empathy between her and Williams.

During the crucial conversation between Eleanor and Williams, when she questions him about the nature of her daughter's betrothal, Williams appeals to Eleanor's good sense, but shows himself to be incapable of appreciating the depth of either Eleanor's or Nest's feelings in the matter of a broken engagement. From a purely practical point of view, his reason for breaking off the engagement is hard to fault, for he has 'a deal of cattle; and the farm makes heavy work, as much as an able healthy woman can do' (*MC*, p.131). He had wanted Nest to be his wife for practical reasons, and not because he genuinely cared for her. Eleanor is the only contributor to this conversation who can talk about feeling; only she can say what Williams should have known, but was incapable of recognizing: 'Though her [Nest's] body may be crippled, her poor heart is the same—alas!—and full of love for you' (*MC*, p.131).

Nest's reactions to Williams's desertion are in line with her mother's, for she too is governed by her feelings and not by cold reason. But Eleanor misjudges her daughter's state of mind dreadfully when she tells her that Williams wishes to break off the engagement. She tries to explain the situation in the language of reason, saying that Nest's 'disabled frame was a disqualification for ever becoming a farmer's wife' (*MC*, p.134). Language such as this, used in the context of Nest's betrothal,

and subsequent betrayal, implying, as it does, that the role of farmer's wife precludes any notion of sentimental attachment, fails to provide Nest with any comfort. Nest had been in love, and remained so, but now she must face the fact that such a concept was beyond Edward Williams's emotional experience. Reason alone had governed Williams's decision, but for Nest, cold reason was inadequate; it could only make her bitter, for she 'turned away from cold reason; she revolted from her mother; she revolted from the world. She bound her sorrow tight up in her breast, to corrode and fester there' (*MC*, p.134).

When, without undue delay, Williams finds a suitable wife, Nest's sense of betrayal is complete. Her feelings are numbed and she wishes she had died when she still had the 'feeling heart' of a girl (*MC*, p.135). Nest then enters into an era in which she turns away from all consolation, even to the extent of rejecting her mother's love. For Eleanor, who had tried to support her daughter in her trial, this rejection is too much and it undermines her Christian faith. Eleanor had made a fundamental mistake, the consequences of which harmed the relationship between herself and her daughter, and eventually damaged her own faith in God. The mistake had been to use the language of reason to console her daughter's wounded heart. The lives of Eleanor and Nest reach a nadir before any human help can touch them: Eleanor must face death without her faith, and Nest must face life without her mother. For Eleanor, comfort is provided by an itinerant Methodist preacher, David Hughes, whose travels and wide

experience of human suffering link him to The Wanderer in *The Excursion*, Book I.<sup>43</sup> David Hughes is significant on two counts. Firstly, we see Elizabeth Gaskell drawing on a Wordsworthian idea: a man using his personal experience of life to help someone who is facing an emotional and spiritual crisis. But we also see her, as we often do, not only drawing on, but adapting such an idea to bring it closer to her own personal vision.

Wordsworth's Wanderer lacks any particular religious affiliation, for he represents the poet's pantheistic vision, in which God is in everything, and is most clearly manifested in the natural world about us:

Early had he learned  
To reverence the volume that displays  
The mystery, the life which cannot die;  
But in the mountains did he *feel* his faith.

(Wordsworth, *Poems II*, 46. 223-226)

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<sup>43</sup> Of David Hughes, the author says 'His rambles and travels were of use to him. They extended his knowledge of the circumstances in which men are sometimes placed, and enlarged his sympathy with the tried and tempted' (*MC*, p.136). Of The Wanderer, Wordsworth says 'He wandered far; much did he see of men, | Their manners, their enjoyments, and pursuits, | Their passions and their feelings; chiefly those | Essential and eternal in the heart' (Wordsworth, *Poems II*, p. 50; ll. 341-344).

For Elizabeth Gaskell, however, the liberality of this vision would make it too close to heathen worship. Her spiritual guide must represent a specific form of Christian teaching, non-conformist, but with more warmth than that which she would expect to find in a Unitarian. Hughes would not have reached Eleanor solely through philosophical argument. Neither could he have reached her through an appeal based principally on cold reason. He reaches her through his understanding of the human heart, but as a disciple of John Wesley, he also draws on the scriptures for words of comfort. By relating Eleanor's turmoil to Christ's Passion, he makes Eleanor face up to suffering, and to the mystery surrounding it, rather than the reason for it.

Eleanor dies at peace with God and with the world: 'her last word a blessing' (*MC*, p.137). Nest, however, is not yet ready for the infinite love of God, for she must, first of all, learn to love her fellow creatures. It is in the conversation between Nest and David Hughes, about the nature of love, that we are made to understand both the extent and the nature of change that Nest has undergone. The outward change, brought about by her injury at the well, is nothing compared to the inner change that has taken place, following Williams's rejection of her love. His desertion changed her more than anyone could know. There is, however, a way forward for Nest, the one recommended by Hughes: it is the way of selfless love, caring for one who is more troubled than herself. This altruistic love, which Nest develops for Mary, the local madwoman, paves the way for Nest's spiritual salvation and peace of mind, in which she is able to recollect, in tranquillity, the physical and emotional pains of her youth.

Nest's restoration is made complete when she feels able to revisit the well, where Williams plighted his troth, and where she sustained the injury which set in motion all the changes in her life: her broken engagement and her altered feelings, both to her mother and to God. It is here, at the well, that the adventures of her heart come full circle, and she dies, if not high-spirited as she was in her youth, then at least 'calm and placid' (*MC*, pp.142-143).

*The Well of Pen-Morfa* has been much more than a simple tale of a pretty and vain country girl, whose heart is broken by a false lover. It has been the journey of Nest Gwynn's heart, for her inner suffering has been greater than her physical pain. Her injury, and subsequent lameness, cause the breakdown of her relationship with Williams, but do not, in themselves, cause her feelings towards her mother and God to change. It is the nature of Williams's desertion, and the inadequacy of reason, as a source of comfort, which bring about the changes to Nest's inner life. There is, however, a further significance to the story of Nest Gwynn, for it can be read as a paradigm of Elizabeth Gaskell's young womanhood. We have noted the parallels between the three main stages in Nest Gwynn's life and Elizabeth Gaskell's associations with this part of Wales, for it was here that both women experienced carefree youthful happiness, love and sexual awakening, and sudden tragedy. Nest Gwynn's suffering had been made worse by her mother's failed attempt to use the language of reason as a means of explanation and comfort. Following the sudden death of her infant son, in Portmadog, Elizabeth Gaskell would have turned to her



faith and to William Gaskell, as her husband, but also as a representative of her religious belief as proclaimed in the Unitarian church. But the solid reasoning, which is at the heart of Unitarianism, was not equal to the task of healing her broken heart. When she said of her loss, 'no one knows how it has changed me', it was a fundamental alteration to which she was referring; one that came from the very depths of her consciousness: her religious faith. Although there is no evidence to show that she became agnostic, or that she left off worshipping in the Unitarian church, her experience of deep personal loss and the failure of cold reason to sustain her, finds a substitute in Nest's reaction to loss and betrayal. This means that in *The Well of Pen-Morfa*, Elizabeth Gaskell has gone beyond the Wordsworthian adventure of the heart, by expressing, through this story, her own individual experience of young womanhood, with its highest peaks of happiness, and its deepest troughs of emotional pain, which can be made worse by inappropriate words of comfort. It is this use of subjectivity which characterizes *The Well of Pen-Morfa* as a work of Romantic sensibility and which shows an important stage in her development as a Romantic writer.

To conclude this discussion of *The Well of Pen-Morfa*, it is necessary to offer an evaluation of the overall achievement of the story. In this thesis I have noted ways in which the poet George Crabbe treated the subject of love and betrayal. I have also noted Elizabeth Gaskell's willingness and ability to explore the inner lives of her characters. The foregrounding of thought and feeling in *The Well of Pen-Morfa* is

revealed in a number of ways. Firstly, we have followed Nest Gwynn's feelings through all three stages of her emotional life. And crucially we recognize that Nest's emotional wounds are such that they cannot be healed through the language of cold reason. Secondly, Eleanor's faith, which has been severely tested, can only be restored through the emotional approach of the Methodist preacher, for she can accept mystery when rational explanation fails. There is, however, a third way in which the faculty of feeling is given importance in this story, and that is through the feelings of the reader. Even though we understand Edward Williams's reasons for ending his relationship with Nest, following her fall at the well, we feel that his action is wrong. Furthermore, our feelings of disapproval are intensified when Williams very soon marries another girl. Williams is not presented as a villain, and therefore he is not punished within the context of the story, but neither does he invoke in the reader feelings of admiration. We merely feel that he is emotionally shallow and that his actions are in some way reprehensible. It is through our feelings that we judge him and this centrality of feeling is essentially a Romantic idea. While it is the feelings of Nest and Eleanor that give importance to the events and situations in this story, it is our emotional response to the story that gives it its greatest significance.

Nineteenth-century readers, who had found Crabbe's depiction of rural life and rustic relationships too harsh, could empathize with the characters in Gaskell's story because it gives readers access to the emotional lives of two of the main protagonists. Furthermore, although there is no severe punishment for Edward Williams, there is

the ultimate moral victory for Nest as she regains control of her life and devotes it to the care of one who continues to suffer. While Williams is blessed with business acumen and the faculty of reason, he is denied, by the author, the blessing of moral strength. In this story moral strength is aligned with the capacity to feel deeply, and in particular with the deep feelings of Nest. This association of moral strength with feeling serves to legitimize the supremacy of feeling, as presented in the story, suggesting that those who feel deeply are capable of moral superiority.

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The story's strength today still rests on this dichotomy of feeling versus reason, with Nest's ultimate moral victory as the resolution. But as privileged readers today we also recognize the parallels that link the structure of the story with events that shaped the author's emotional life. This means that although Gaskell's own life is not overtly evoked in the story, the story is charged by her emotional experiences in that part of Wales where the action of the story takes place. We may now judge, as earlier readers could not, that it is Gaskell's personal experiences of joy, loss, and perhaps a temporary spiritual emptiness, together with her own imagination, that transformed a simple tale of a pretty and vulnerable girl into something much more perceptive, and therefore, more powerful. We may also, therefore, catch a glimpse of one stage in the growth of the artist's mind.

*The Heart of John Middleton*

*The Heart of John Middleton*, as the title suggests, is an account of a man's inner life.<sup>44</sup> The title, apt as it is, was again supplied by Charles Dickens, and not by Elizabeth Gaskell.<sup>45</sup> The story focuses, not only on the heart, but on the soul of John Middleton, for it concerns a man's spiritual aspirations and his struggle between the forces of good and evil. The power and vigour of the story were commented on by Dickens.<sup>46</sup> These qualities stem from the author's sustained foregrounding of John Middleton's thoughts and feelings as he struggles against the injustices of his life, and the obstacles to his assimilation into Christian society and communion with God. Written in the first person singular, the author adopting the persona of a male narrator, the narrative provides direct access to the thoughts and feelings of the eponymous hero John Middleton, who, as a mature man, recollects in tranquillity the events of his earlier life and the thoughts and feelings to which these events gave rise.

Dickens's favourable response to this story was more than mere flattery for a writer with whom he hoped to continue a good working relationship. In his letter, written to Elizabeth Gaskell on 17 December 1850, he comments on the 'extraordinary power' of the story, which he says is 'worked out with a vigor and truthfulness that very very

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<sup>44</sup> Gaskell, *MC*, pp. 145-165.

<sup>45</sup> For more information about Dickens's choice of title, see *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, VI: 1850-1852 ed. by Graham Storey, Kathleen Tillotson and Nina Burgis, Pilgrim Edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 238; hereafter *Dickens Letters* VI.

<sup>46</sup> *Dickens Letters* VI, p.238. I owe this reference to Suzanne Lewis (Gaskell, *MC*, p. xviii).

few people could reach'. The impact of the story was considerable for he 'sat thinking about it for some time'.<sup>47</sup> This response suggests that he was confronted with something quite new and that the story was different from Elizabeth Gaskell's previous contributions to *Household Words*. It was not another Manchester story, nor was it another tale of betrayal or false love that he was looking at. What moved him, in all likelihood, was the faithful representation of a man's inner life.

John Middleton's inner life and his struggle between forces of good and evil are represented to the reader in three ways. The first way is through the Biblical texts selected by Elizabeth Gaskell for John Middleton to turn to for guidance in times of crisis. The second way is through his attempts to communicate with God through prayer and worship. But these conventional means of seeking salvation are underpinned by aspects of Romanticism, including his relationship with nature, especially in times of great emotional or spiritual difficulty. The story will be discussed here as one in which John Middleton's moral progress is achieved through an intertwining of religious ideas and practices with aspects of Romanticism. It is a text in which we may recognize the influence of the author's Unitarian Protestant education and her Romantic inheritance.

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<sup>47</sup> *Dickens Letters* VI, p. 238.

Elizabeth Gaskell's religious education is made manifest by her wide knowledge of the Scriptures. The first Biblical text referred to in this story is taken from Genesis 16. 12, and this is associated with John Middleton's early experience of reading the Bible (*MC*, p.146). This text, which describes Ishmael, the wild man who is at odds with his brethren, is appropriate for it fits John Middleton's circumstances. The reader, whom Elizabeth Gaskell would expect to be familiar with the Bible, would recognize John Middleton's condition without further intervention from the author. The next three Biblical allusions belong to the time when John Middleton is obsessed with revenge for the actions of Dick Jackson, the man who had exercised power at the mill and who had hurled the fatal stone at Nelly. To illustrate the strength of this obsession, Elizabeth Gaskell directs the reader to Gehenna and II Kings 23. 10, with its images of fire and Hell (*MC*, p.154).<sup>48</sup> This horrifying image of suffering and torture is followed by a reference to the New Testament: John 18. 10, in which Simon Peter uses his sword to protect Jesus. John Middleton turns to this text for justification for physical violence (*MC*, p.154). Still in a mood for revenge, John Middleton returns to the Old Testament to read about God's vengeance (*MC*, p.154).<sup>49</sup> This text convinces John Middleton that God will punish his enemy, and he moves on to a new phase of life, in which his infant daughter is born, and he acquires a good reputation as a steady worker.

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<sup>48</sup> Gehenna is located in the Valley of Hinnom, outside Jerusalem (*MC*, p. 303, note for p. 154).

<sup>49</sup> The editor directs the reader to the Flood described in Genesis 6. 5-9 and 17 (*MC*, p. 303, note for p.154).

This new-found contentment is, however, threatened by circumstances beyond his control, and his resolve to live as a Christian is tested when he is dismissed from legitimate employment (*MC*, p.155). Faced with a starving wife and baby, he is tempted to return to his earlier unregenerate ways, in which poaching was a regular activity. This crisis in his life is illustrated with three references to the Bible. The first is John Middleton's statement that his 'right hand had not forgot its cunning', which is a clear allusion to Psalms 137. 5: 'If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget my cunning'. But this temptation to revert to wild and sinful ways is thwarted by an incident which finds clear parallels with the New Testament, for when he is on the road, not to Damascus, but to the meeting-place with the poachers, he meets a man who turns him away from sinfulness (*MC*, p.155).<sup>50</sup> This saviour is not, however, a member of the Christian community, but a poacher who recognizes in John Middleton a fundamental change of attitude. This change is illustrated by John Middleton's wish to 'cling to the hem of His garment' (*MC*, p.156).<sup>51</sup> The difficulty of completing this change is signified by reference to the parable of Jesus with the publicans and sinners. John Middleton could only find help from a sinner, a fact that troubles him, but he is comforted by the knowledge that Jesus was willing to dine with publicans and sinners with the object of bringing them to repentance.<sup>52</sup> Although this incident, on the road to the meeting-place, enables John Middleton to turn away from temptation, his feelings remain complex, for although he says that he longs for

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<sup>50</sup> The generosity of Jonah, the poacher, can also be read as an example of Gaskell drawing on Wordsworth's vision of human charity, 'the one human heart', discussed in earlier chapters of this thesis.

<sup>51</sup> The editor directs the reader to Matthew 9. 20-22; and 14. 36 (*MC*, p. 304, note to p.156).

<sup>52</sup> The editor directs the reader to Matthew 9. 9-13 (*MC*, p.304, note to p. 156).

the second coming of Christ, it is to the Old Testament that he turns for guidance, looking again for examples of revenge.<sup>53</sup> Biblical tales of revenge lend support to his longing for the annihilation of his own personal enemy, for he sees himself as a conquering leader of people. This text, with its images of aggression, is an inappropriate choice for Christmas Day reading, but the juxtaposing of a Christian festival with John Middleton's sense of injustice reflects the turmoil of his thoughts and feelings more powerfully and graphically than any authorial comment could achieve.

There are four remaining Biblical allusions and they belong to the final stage of John Middleton's spiritual journey, the time when he is given one last chance to turn away from ideas of vengeance and towards Christian forgiveness. The reappearance of Dick Jackson on a stormy winter's night is signalled by John Middleton's reference to the 'Prince of the Air' (*MC*, p.161), which is a clear reference to St Paul's 'prince of the power of the air'.<sup>54</sup> The sight of a destitute Dick Jackson begging for mercy and hospitality almost completes John Middleton's spiritual journey for it provides him with an opportunity to practice Christian forgiveness. But the duality of his thoughts and feelings are again illustrated by Biblical allusions. His reference to the 'lordly dish' (*MC*, p.161) prepares the Biblically alert reader for the act of revenge that

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<sup>53</sup> For images of bondage and revenge, the editor directs the reader to Exodus 1. 14; and to I Samuel 15.33 (*MC*, p.304, note to p.156).

<sup>54</sup> The editor directs the reader to Ephesians 2.2 (*MC*, pp.304-5, note to p.161).



would be expected to follow.<sup>55</sup> John Middleton does not take revenge into his own hands but tries to bring a representative of the law to deal with his old enemy. His failure to achieve this is a result of physical obstacles, but the rightness of this failure, in Christian terms, is signified by the final Biblical allusion in the story. These words, which are spoken by his young daughter, but which really come from her dying mother, allude to the promise of eternal life: 'There is a God in heaven; and in His house are many mansions' (*MC*, p.163).<sup>56</sup>

All of these references to the Bible have been carefully chosen by a writer who knew the Scriptures intimately. They have not, however, been chosen for didactic reasons but to bring out, without authorial intervention, the fluxes and refluxes of John Middleton's spiritual journey, by lending strength and depth to the sustained first person narrative. This journey, however, has also been sustained by prayer and worship, acts which do not come easily to John Middleton, although he feels them to be necessary. There are three main instances of John Middleton attempting to communicate with God by these means. The first belongs to the second phase of his journey, when he has self-knowledge and is obsessed with hatred and revenge for Dick Jackson, whom he sees as an obstacle to his assimilation into honest society.

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<sup>55</sup> The editor directs the reader to Judges 5. 25 (*MC*, p.305, note to p.161). Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, welcomes an enemy into her tent, providing him with milk and butter in a 'lordly dish'. This act of hospitality is, however, followed by an act of physical violence (Judges 5.26).

<sup>56</sup> This is a clear allusion to St John 14. 2: 'In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you'; noted by the editor (*MC*, p.305, note to p.163).

This prayer, the first in his life, is not enacted inside a consecrated Christian building but 'underneath the silent stars, kneeling by the old abbey walls' (*MC*, p.150). The old abbey signifies the pre-industrial way of life in Sawley, also represented by Eleanor and Nelly Hadfield, and the awareness of the silent stars suggests a Romantic communion with nature that is more effective than any communion with a Christian God. Wanting his enemy out of his way, he prays for the power of revenge, but a prayer such as this to a Christian God cannot succeed. The second attempt at formal prayer and worship is equally doomed. It takes place on Christmas Day, inside a church, and at the behest of his wife Nelly. This time the experience is a failure because of the presence of Dick Jackson, whose apparent prosperity is in contrast to John Middleton's privation. To John Middleton, this first experience of church attendance has been no more than a confrontation with hypocrisy, one which has left him 'full of malice and uncharitableness' (*MC*, p.158). The third significant representation of John Middleton's attempt at prayer and worship is the hill-side preaching which he attends with a fellow-workman. There are two main reasons why this is significant. The first is that as a means of public worship it is closer to the primitive form of Christian worship sought by non-conformist Protestants, who believed that early Christianity was spared the corrupting influence of later priestcraft. The second reason for its importance is that, to John Middleton in his spiritual journey, it combines three elements: religious preaching, communal prayer and worship, and an awareness of the significance of natural surroundings, for on this occasion John Middleton sees the sky as God's great dome. His earlier prayers under

the stars could not succeed for he needed another voice in addition to his own; his visit to the parish church could not succeed because of its associations with hypocrisy. But on the hill-side, the experience of unsophisticated preaching and worship, supported by the power of nature, forms a catalyst for change in John Middleton's consciousness.

This experience brings John Middleton closer to the completion of his spiritual journey. Recalling this time he says: 'Henceforward, my life was changed' (*MC*, p.160). But this change did not eliminate his desire for vengeance, so his spiritual journey must remain incomplete until he can accept the need for Christian forgiveness. Elizabeth Gaskell's artistic vision is such that this completion needs more than Bible reading, prayer and worship, vital though these elements are. John Middleton's spiritual journey must end as it began, and it could not have begun without a chance meeting with the child who was to become his wife. The first meeting with young Nelly Hadfield is overtly symbolic. The child balancing the pitcher of water on her head as she crosses the bridge over the brook symbolizes John Middleton's attempts to make a transfer from evil to goodness in his life. But there is more than religious symbolism here, for Nelly's isolated life with her grandmother, and her affinity with nature, links her to the Wordsworthian child in the Lucy poems:

She dwelt among th'untrodden ways  
Beside the springs of Dove,  
A Maid whom there were none to praise

And very few to love.

(Wordsworth, *LB*, 154. 1-4)

John Middleton's desire to emulate the innocent child's goodness, and to be worthy of her regard, is the first catalyst for the spiritual change that he longs for in his life. Without this motivation he would not have learnt to read the Bible. Neither would he have acquired the self-knowledge necessary for moral progress. As a Wordsworthian figure, Lucy is the first Romantic image in the story used to underpin the non-conformist Protestant reliance on scripture-reading as a means to salvation. The second example is John Middleton's act of prayer outside the abbey walls. This is his first attempt at prayer and it could have been enacted privately within the walls of his cottage, but Elizabeth Gaskell draws on her Romantic inheritance again to produce an image of communion with nature to support a man's spiritual quest. This communion with nature continues when, following the failed attempt at prayer in church on Christmas Day, John Middleton finds peace of mind in the isolation and wildness of his new home on the eastern side of Pendle Hill where 'wild winds came down and whistled round our house many a day when all was still below' (*MC*, p.158). The happiness which John Middleton finds in these surroundings is not yet one which stems from a true Christian faith, for he must still learn to love his enemy. The opportunity for him to learn this lesson of forgiveness is signalled, not only by the Biblical allusion to the 'Prince of the Air' (*MC*, p.161), but, through reference to the forces of nature. One of the most powerful passages in the story is one which

draws heavily on the ambience created by untamed natural forces. Using language that is redolent of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, Elizabeth Gaskell creates a scene of elemental force:

The wind came sweeping down from the hill-top in great beats, like the pulses of heaven; and, during the pauses, while I listened for the coming roar, I felt the earth shiver beneath me. The rain beat against windows and doors, and sobbed for entrance (*MC*, p.161).

This is the apocalyptic setting for John Middleton's ultimate moral test, for the stranger who seeks shelter from the storm in his cottage is none other than his arch enemy, Dick Jackson, who is now an escaped convict seeking help. John Middleton's resolve to fetch a constable from nearby Padiham, to secure Jackson's arrest, is, however, undermined by the effects of natural forces and by the reappearance of the Wordsworthian child-figure. Using elements of the supernatural, bordering on the Gothic, Elizabeth Gaskell creates a scene of extraordinary descriptive power, in which John Middleton rejects once and for all the desire for vengeance in favour of the Christian ethic of forgiveness. What makes this scene so memorable is the way in which his final spiritual struggle is reflected in the movements in the stratosphere above, in which the black sky of doom gives way to a clear moon-lit sky. This atmospheric change does not proceed smoothly, for, like John Middleton's change of heart, it involves a struggle; one in which the moon emerges weary from a fight in the heavens, only slowly gaining dominion over the sky:

The storm was ceasing, and, instead of the black sky of doom that I had seen when I last looked forth, the moon was come out, wan and pale, as if wearied with the fight in the heavens, and her white light fell ghostly and calm on many a well-known object. Now and then, a dark torn cloud was blown across her home in the sky; but they grew fewer and fewer, and at last she shone out steady and clear (*MC*, p.163).

The natural forces which prevent John Middleton from enacting his revenge, are those of heavy rain and high winds, which have combined to sweep away from the brook, the bridge which he must cross to find the quickest way to Padiham and a constable. The scene evokes memories of his first meeting with Nelly, but the child-figure who confronts him on this occasion, compelling him to turn away from vengeance, is his young daughter, aptly called Grace. Elizabeth Gaskell has created a situation in which, if God has reached out to a wavering heart, he has done so through nature and the innocence of a child, by-passing the formalities of organized religion. The relationship of nature with religion had already been explored in some Romantic landscape paintings, in which there are representations of secular communion with nature, sometimes juxtaposed with icons of Christian worship.<sup>57</sup> John Middleton's anger at finding the bridge gone, is immediately softened by the sudden appearance of his little barefoot daughter bearing her mother's message of Christian mercy and eternal life. He has no choice but to return with his child to the

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<sup>57</sup> See, for example, Friedrich's *The Cross in the Mountains* (1807-1808) and his *Morning in the Riesengebirge* (1810-1811). Both paintings are reproduced in Honour, pp.27 and 31. In 1807 Wordsworth published *Poems in Two Volumes*.

cottage, where, for the sake of his wife's Christian faith and love, he finds it in his heart to forgive his enemy, thus ridding himself of the burden of a hating heart. John Middleton, in his quest for moral regeneration, has been blessed with the sensibility, and imagination, to respond with passion to Christ's message of love and reconciliation, when he could not be reached through formalized church worship.<sup>58</sup>

John Middleton's forgiveness of his old enemy completes his moral rehabilitation. His journey of the heart, and soul, has taken him from an unregenerate state, in which he was capable only of hatred, to one of assimilation into the Christian faith, which enabled him to love and forgive even his greatest enemy. Through this inner journey, the reader has followed the fluxes and refluxes of John Middleton's mind and heart, as he has recollected, in his mature years of tranquillity, his past thoughts and feelings.

The death of Nelly, though it seemed hard to Dickens, keeps her image true to Wordsworth's Lucy in two ways.<sup>59</sup> Firstly, in the short poem entitled 'Song', Lucy is

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<sup>58</sup> See Honour, pp. 286-288, for a discussion of the religious views of the Romantics, especially the poet William Blake, who rejected organized religion, partly because of its denial of the importance of the imagination.

<sup>59</sup> In a letter to Mrs Gaskell, on 17 December, 1850, Dickens explained that he felt the death of John Middleton's wife was an 'unnecessary infliction of pain upon the reader, not justified by the necessities of the story'. In a further letter to Mrs Gaskell, dated 20 December, 1850, he indicates that he had succeeded in persuading her to change the ending, but only after 20,000 copies of the original text had been printed, by which time it was too late to incorporate any change (*Dickens Letters* VI, pp. 238 and 243). The fact that Mrs Gaskell did show a willingness to change the ending, is perhaps surprising, but indicates the extent to which she was prepared to negotiate some aspects of her writing with her publisher. Dickens' remarks quoted in this footnote suggest that he was not aware of the intertextuality of *The Heart of John Middleton* and Wordsworth's Lucy poems. An incident such as this suggests that Elizabeth Gaskell had, at times, an artistic intention of which Dickens was unaware, and this could explain her rather dismissive attitude towards him.

not well known, but when she dies she leaves one person bereft: 'But she is in her Grave, and Oh! | The difference to me' (Wordsworth, *LB*, 154. 11). Secondly, in 'Three years she grew in sun and shower', Lucy's spirit, like Nelly's, survives inextricably bound up with nature:

She died and left to me  
 This heath, this calm and quiet scene,  
 The memory of what has been,  
 And never more will be.

(Wordsworth, *LB*, 199. 39-42)

In her representation of the deepest feelings and aspirations of mankind, Elizabeth Gaskell has sought out, not only the lowly and insignificant, but an unregenerate soul. By allowing her character to speak for himself, without any intrusive authorial voice, she has given the reader direct access to the very depths of his consciousness. This takes her beyond Wordsworth's approach, for he rarely allows his characters to speak freely without some intervention from himself as omniscient narrator.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, by engaging in the dichotomy between the old pre-industrial world, represented by Nelly, and the new brutal world, of the factory system and Dick Jackson, she has looked at the opposing forces of human imagination and social reality. Nelly knew John Middleton in his unregenerate state, but had the imagination to see the possibility of his redemption. John Middleton's ultimate salvation is a triumph of the

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<sup>60</sup> An obvious example of this is 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill', in which Gill's uncharitable act is described by the poet, but not accounted for in the words of Harry Gill (Wordsworth, *LB*, pp. 54-58).



imagination. Dick Jackson's insensitivity, fostered in his working environment, leads him ultimately to law-breaking, conviction, and the status of fugitive, dependent on his former victim for charity.

Elizabeth Gaskell has drawn heavily on Wordsworth for this story: the narrator has recollected in tranquillity the strong emotions of his younger days; the innocent child, redolent of Lucy, lives in obscurity, but is a vital force in the life of the narrator. There is also the narrative self-awareness expressed in the first Book of 'The Recluse', which could serve as an epitaph to John Middleton's story:

And I am conscious of affecting thoughts  
 And dear remembrances, whose presence soothes  
 Or elevates the Mind, intent to weigh  
 The good and evil of our mortal state.

(Wordsworth, *Poems II*, 37. 6-9)

There is, however, wider evidence than this of Elizabeth Gaskell's Romantic inheritance. There is the sustained foregrounding of human feeling. She has drawn on ideas of nature as a source of spiritual healing and, therefore, as a means by which communion with a Christian God may be reached. Through her creation of Nelly, she has demonstrated her belief in the transforming power of the imagination. It is doubtful that *The Heart of John Middleton* would have moved Charles Dickens in the way that it did, if the story's creator had not drawn as deeply as she did on her

Romantic inheritance, for it is this that gives the story the power and vigour commented on by its first publisher.

### *The Moorland Cottage*

This is the fourth story of significance that Elizabeth Gaskell published in 1850.<sup>61</sup> Her publisher, on this occasion, was Edward Chapman, of Chapman and Hall, the publishing house responsible for *Mary Barton*. Edward Chapman had joined forces with William Hall in 1830 to set up a bookselling business, and within a few years the two young men had branched out into publishing. The partnership published work by some of the most successful nineteenth-century writers, including William Harrison Ainsworth, Thomas Carlyle, Charles Kingsley, William Makepeace Thackeray, Anthony Trollope, Elizabeth Gaskell and, of course, Charles Dickens. The early success of the firm stemmed from the individual skills of each partner, for Hall brought to the venture business acumen, while Chapman took care of the literary side of the work. As time passed, however, the partnership owed its continued success more and more to Edward Chapman's literary adviser, John Forster. The astuteness of Forster's literary judgement can be demonstrated by the fact that his advice was clearly a factor in Chapman and Hall's decision to publish *Mary Barton* in 1848, after the book had been rejected by other publishers. By this time Forster had been with

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<sup>61</sup> 'Martha Preston' was also published in 1850 for *Sartain's Union Magazine*, but it was reworked in 1855 for *Household Words*, in which it appeared as 'Half a Life-time Ago'. This second version will be discussed later in this thesis. *The Moorland Cottage* is in Gaskell, *MC*, pp. 3-100.

the company for more than ten years, becoming increasingly influential in the literary world, with personal acquaintances that included Charles Dickens, Thomas Carlyle, Maria Edgeworth and Walter Savage Landor, all of whom read and applauded *Mary Barton*.<sup>62</sup>

The literary world represented by Chapman and Hall and John Forster was one that welcomed Elizabeth Gaskell, but it was also one of fluctuating loyalties. The names Chapman, Hall, Forster, and Dickens are inextricably linked, for Forster became one of Dickens's closest friends, and Chapman and Hall one of his principal publishing houses. There was, however, a serious quarrel between Dickens and Chapman and Hall in 1844, which took fifteen years to heal. During these years Bradbury and Evans published a substantial amount of Dickens's work, becoming printers and publishers for *Household Words* from its inception in 1850 to its closure in 1859, when Dickens quarrelled with them and returned to Chapman and Hall. While the quarrel with Chapman and Hall was a consequence of deteriorating business relations, the quarrel with Bradbury and Evans was associated with events of a more personal nature. Wishing to make public his reason for leaving his wife, he had composed a public statement which was printed in *Household Words*, and sent to other papers for publication. It was Bradbury and Evans's refusal to print the article in *Punch*, that

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<sup>62</sup> Arthur Waugh, *A Hundred Years of Publishing: Being the Story of Chapman and Hall, Ltd* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1930), pp. 3-5; 27-29; and 84-85; hereafter Waugh. For detailed response to *Mary Barton*, from the above mentioned writers and others, see *Elizabeth Gaskell: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Angus Easson (London and New York: Routledge, 1991); hereafter *Gaskell Heritage*.

angered Dickens and caused him to sever business relations with them and to return to Chapman and Hall.<sup>63</sup>

It was during the time that Dickens was with Bradbury and Evans that Elizabeth Gaskell was approached by Edward Chapman for a Christmas Story. For indications of Chapman and Hall's editorial policy it might be helpful to consider their very first publishing venture, *Chat of the Week*, which was intended to be a weekly compendium of topics of public interest. The first number came out on June 5th 1830, priced sixpence. The printed announcement which advertised this new paper emphasizes the range of subjects to be covered; they were intended to appeal to town and country tastes, local and world-wide. There is, however, no suggestion of an agenda for social reform.<sup>64</sup> In 1830 Chapman and Hall also took over the publication of *The Christian Register*, an annual news-sheet which recorded religious meetings held in the Metropolis for the promotion of Christianity and education.<sup>65</sup> Not surprisingly then, when Edward Chapman asked Elizabeth Gaskell for a Christmas story, he sought one that would recommend the Christian virtues of benevolence and charity. Since Elizabeth Gaskell was never one to write to a formula, a request such as this was inevitably irksome so her. Writing to Lady Kay-Shuttleworth, in September 1850, she declared that she could not write about virtues to order, and

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<sup>63</sup> Waugh, pp. 54-68 and 111-115.

<sup>64</sup> Waugh, p. 10. A reproduction of the announcement is included between pages 10 and 11.

<sup>65</sup> Waugh, pp. 10-11. A reproduction of this advertisement appears between pages 10 and 11.

cloaked her true artistic intention by saying that her contribution to Chapman would be merely a country love-story.<sup>66</sup>

Benevolence and charity do feature in the actions of some of her characters in *The Moorland Cottage*, but the story is far from being a simple moral tale in which Christian virtues reign supreme. As a love story, it charts the development of a young girl's consciousness and the effect that she has on the feelings and actions of those with whom she comes in contact. This development takes place within a framework of family and social relationships. Most of the action takes place within one quite small, and carefully defined region, bounded by the small town of Combehurst at one extreme and Mrs Browne's dwelling at the other. The principal means by which Maggie's feelings are traced and revealed are those of association with very precise places located within this region.

As a person, Elizabeth Gaskell knew the strength of association between particular places and states of feeling. Writing as an adult to Mary Howitt, in an undated letter, she records periods of unhappiness which she experienced as a child during visits to her father's household in Chelsea, and the emotional comfort which she derived from watching the River Thames flow by.<sup>67</sup> In adult life, however, experience taught her to associate particular places with feelings other than those of sadness, and exceptional

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<sup>66</sup> In this letter to Lady Kay-Shuttleworth, dated September 25th, 1850, Elizabeth Gaskell says 'Mr Chapman asked me to write a Xmas Story, "recommending benevolence, charity, etc", to which I agreed, why I cannot think now, for it was very foolish indeed. However I could not write about virtues to order, so it is simply a little country love-story called Rosemary' (*Gaskell Letters*, p. 132).

<sup>67</sup> *Gaskell Letters*, pp. 797-798.

happiness was always associated in her mind with the city of Rome. Writing to friends with whom she had stayed when visiting Rome, she stated 'It was in those charming Roman days that my life, at any rate, culminated. I shall never be so happy again. I don't think I was ever so happy before'.<sup>68</sup> So strong were these associations of place with feeling that, as discussed in the section of this Chapter on *The Well of Pen-Morfa*, a particular place could become, in her writing, an emotional site. *The Moorland Cottage* will be discussed here as a story in which ideas of place were consciously used to delineate emotional sites, and states of feeling.

Firstly, place establishes the dichotomy between Mrs Browne's cottage dwelling in the secluded dell and Mr Buxton's elegant townhouse, which is situated on the main street in the nearby town of Combehurst. The cottage, in its rural beauty, is essentially a matriarchal establishment, home to the widowed Mrs Browne, her servant Nancy, daughter Maggie, and the youthful Edward. The townhouse, however, is essentially patriarchal, for Mrs Buxton is an invalid whose life will end before the story is complete and Erminia is a guest in the house; consequently, Mr Buxton and his son Frank are the most significant occupants. Mr Buxton's house is associated with social status, for his position in the town is surpassed only by the rector's, while Mrs Browne's cottage, as befitting a curate's widow, remains obscure in its rural isolation. The geographical space between these two dwellings is neutral ground, crossed at various times by each of the main protagonists. It can be a place

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<sup>68</sup> *Gaskell Letters*, pp. 476-477.

for sad farewell, such as Edward's departure, a casual meeting, like the one between Maggie and Frank, or it can be a place for confrontation, such as the one between Maggie and Mr Buxton.

In spite of the matriarchal nature of Mrs Browne's cottage, it is here that her daughter, Maggie, suffers some of her deepest emotional pain. Maggie's painful growth to adulthood can be seen to be punctuated by Wordsworthian 'spots of time': incidents which are crucial to her inner development and which are associated with a particular place. The first of these incidents is the one in which she spills the jug of water as she tries to carry it from the well into the cottage. Her brother, Edward, had already denigrated her by saying that because he was a boy, his time was of more consequence than hers, and that his education was more important. Having established his superiority over his meek sister, his unjust scolding over the spilled water undermines Maggie's already fragile self-confidence. The incident has made her see herself as clumsy and this belief is endorsed by her mother's attitude towards her. Maggie's early self-perception is derived from the way in which her brother and her mother regard her. As her mother concentrates her affection on her son, and as Edward takes advantage of his sister, Maggie's self-esteem fails to find the right conditions at home for normal development.

The well which serves Mrs Browne's cottage, and which like any well can be viewed as a symbol of fertility for there can be no life without water, develops happier and

perhaps more appropriate associations later on in Maggie's life. When she blossoms into a more confident young woman, the well and the act of filling the brown jug with water acquire a much happier signification, for it is the occasion of Frank's passionate proposal of marriage. This proposal is not told to the reader, but implied in the narrative by the actions and reactions of the two young people, and by the general ambience of the situation. Although the reader is denied knowledge of the actual words which constitute the proposal, the scene is imbued with the necessary secrecy, sensuality and passion: Maggie trembling and blushing while the precious water bubbles over the pitcher, unnoticed either by the young people or by any one else.

Mrs Browne's well has associations with extreme states of feeling, including those of childhood dejection and of youthful joy. But most of the time that Maggie is growing up, she receives more encouragement and kindness in the Buxton household at Combehurst than in her own home. This dichotomy, however, is not a simple one of complete happiness in one place and total unhappiness in the other, for even in the generally more favourable ambience of Combehurst there are painful lessons to be learned. Early on in the story, when Mrs Browne takes her two children to visit their father's grave, we see Combehurst Churchyard as a place of false feeling. Mrs Browne's feelings, as demonstrated at her husband's grave, are carefully analysed: the genuine feelings of true sorrow are extracted from the more showy display of grief which is put on to fulfil the expectations of casual observers. The falsity of this prolonged act of mourning is not lost on the two children, who feel that they are



expected to cry when they are no longer grieving over the death of their father. This early recognition of the difference between true and false feeling marks Maggie out as a child of unusual sensibility, and prepares the reader for the way in which she develops into an adolescent. Edward's even franker remarks, which make it clear he is glad about the death of his father, prepare the reader for the way in which he turns out as a young man. We are not surprised to read that by the time Maggie is sixteen, she is able to perceive her brother's unsuitability for the ministry, 'Not by any process of thought, but by something more like a correct feeling' (*MC*, p.32).

The unpleasantness of Frank's nature and Maggie's emotional response to it is demonstrated by another spot of time, when the Browne children and the Buxton children are playing on the swing in Mr Buxton's garden at Combehurst. Maggie's willingness to give up her place on the swing for her brother confirms in the reader's mind the extent to which Maggie is dominated by her brother. The action surprises Erminia, and Frank is so appalled by Edward's behaviour that he refuses to cooperate, leaving Maggie to push her brother rather ineffectively, so that the boy jumps off abruptly and his sister sustains an injury to her face and a tear to her dress. This incident, small in itself, has revealed to the Buxton children the tyrannical side of Edward's nature; instead of being the hero of the day, as he wished to appear, Edward has become the villain. Maggie's torn dress provides a turning point in the story, since the need for thread to mend the garment leads to her introduction to the immensely kind and sensitive Mrs Buxton. For Maggie, the kindness she receives

from the Buxton family marks the beginning of an increase in her self-confidence. The Buxton household comes to stand for affection and kindness, while Mrs Browne's cottage, even after Edward's departure for school, fails to provide Maggie with any maternal warmth.

The neutral ground consisting of field and common, which lies between Combehurst and Mrs Browne's cottage, must be crossed by Maggie if she is to accept Mrs Buxton's invitations to tea. It is central to the structure of the story, for it is the only means by which contact can be maintained between the two households. It is also in a spot somewhere on this common that Maggie bids her brother farewell when he leaves home for school. Her feelings of sadness and impending loneliness threaten to engulf her, but they are soon changed to feelings of delight by the kindness of Frank Buxton, who arrives on the scene with a pony for Maggie to ride and a newspaper for Mrs Browne to read. The pony-rides which follow this incident provide Frank Buxton with the opportunity to discover a hidden side to Maggie's nature. Her former timidity in the presence of her brother is replaced with confidence which stems from her affinity with the animal and from the freedom she feels in the absence of her brother's domineering behaviour. Here, the neutral ground of field and common is the site of burgeoning romantic love between the two young people; a love that finds fulfilment at the well when Frank proposes to Maggie.

On another occasion, however, the same place is the scene of heroic confrontation, when Maggie begs Mr Buxton to show mercy on her brother Edward. This dialogue between Maggie and the man who has the power, not only to turn her brother into a convict, but also to drive a wedge between her and her fiancé, combines elements of Romanticism with Chapman's demand for benevolence and charity. It is also the final turning point of the story, after which Edward is released from the threat of criminal proceedings. To comply with Chapman's demand, Mr Buxton must be persuaded to drop criminal proceedings against Edward, but without demanding from Maggie any sacrifice that involves giving up her future with Frank. This is clearly a daunting task, for Mr Buxton has hitherto shown total intransigence on both of these matters. His ambitions for his son's future have precluded any acceptance of marriage with a socially inferior girl; he is now under pressure from his agent to prosecute Edward on the grounds of fraud; and the prospect of Edward as a brother-in-law for his son compounds his determination to prevent the marriage at all costs.

If Maggie had attempted to confront Mr Buxton in his home at Combehurst, or in her mother's cottage, the outcome would probably have been different, for Mr Buxton could have refused to admit Maggie, and any meeting in Mrs Browne's cottage would have been coloured by the presence of Edward. Astutely aware of these pitfalls, Gaskell ensures that this crucial meeting takes place on the quiet road that crosses the common between Mrs Browne's cottage and Combehurst. At the start of the conversation, there is little hope of compromise, for Maggie is adamant and Mr

Buxton is coldly unsympathetic. Maggie's plea for mercy succeeds through two elements of Romanticism: the supernatural forces of nature, especially those derived from the invisible medium of wind, and the power of evocation. Maggie had spent time in the company of Mrs Buxton before she died and she had caught some of her inflexions of speech. The combination of mysterious sounds of nature and Maggie's voice bring back to Mr Buxton memories of his wife's gentleness. Remembering how she would have wanted him to deal with the situation, he agrees to drop criminal proceedings and to help Edward to leave the country as a free man. He also agrees to respect his son's choice of bride. In one short episode, Gaskell has incorporated editorial demands for benevolence and charity; her own desire for a love story; and, a partial resolution to the wider drama which is still to be drawn to a conclusion.

There is, in this story, another place of significance. During the years that Maggie is growing up her questioning mind and loneliness cause her to form an attachment to a particular place that becomes very special to her, somewhere where she can gather her thoughts and find refuge from her mother's unkindness. This place, on the moors behind her mother's cottage, is identified by a solitary landmark: an old thorn tree. Maggie's repeated visits to this spot are always associated with particular states of feeling, which bring to mind Wordsworth's poem, 'The Thorn'. A thorn tree is not an obvious symbol of comfort, which itself suggests that the author is influenced by Wordsworth's poem. But however great the influence, there is no slavish copying of the poet's use of the thorn. As discussed earlier in this chapter, Wordsworth's thorn

bush carries images of sublimity, because of Martha Ray's fearsome behaviour, but for Elizabeth Gaskell, Maggie's knotted thorn tree is a shrine for quiet meditation. Maggie has nothing in common with Martha Ray as far as personal history is concerned. What Elizabeth Gaskell has taken from Wordsworth is the idea of feeling giving importance to action and situation, especially a situation which is otherwise quite unremarkable. In *The Moorland Cottage*, she has taken a very precise location and, through repeated visits to this place by her fictional character, she has imbued this spot with particular states of feeling. Maggie's first visit to the thorn tree follows her brother's departure from home for school, an event which leaves a gap in the structure of family relationships in the cottage. Edward's absence from the family home makes life easier for Maggie on one level, for she is free from his tyranny, but his absence also adds to her loneliness, which was already considerable, and which is now threatening to engulf her. It is in this mood of introspection and reverie that she visits the thorn tree, the first visit recorded in the story, but not the first in her life, for the narrator implies that the thorn tree is already a favourite haunt for Maggie in times of sadness. Maggie's visits to the thorn tree never fail to provide her with comfort. Even when her engagement to Frank Buxton is opposed by Mr Buxton, a time of great emotional trauma, she comes down from the thorn tree in a calmer frame of mind. The thorn-tree also marks the place where Frank chooses to share his family worries with Maggie, when he learns that his father has been defrauded. It is Maggie's refuge when she is torn between filial loyalty to her brother and love for her fiancé. The frequency of these visits to the thorn tree and the emotional importance

attached to them suggests something very different from Wordsworth's use of the thorn as a place for Martha Ray's lament. Gaskell's thorn, like Wordsworth's, is situated in an isolated spot, and like Martha Ray, Maggie sits close to it; in fact she sits under the branches to seek protection from the sun or rain. But unlike Martha Ray, the real focus of attention for Maggie is the vast moorland space, where, as a child she looks up to the sky for God's throne, and later on, where she tries to communicate with God or discuss original sin with Frank. The spirituality of this landscape touches Maggie in a particular way. It is not a way that she could identify or describe, but we recognize it as the Romantic perception of nature as a means of communicating with a power greater than ourselves. Given the difficulties facing Maggie, the plot allows for three possibilities. She could persuade Frank to agree to a clandestine marriage, or she could give him up. The third and most uncertain way is the one that she follows, for she chooses to bide her time. During one of her meditations at the Thorn, Maggie considers all of Mr Buxton's reasons for opposing the marriage, empathising with him but concluding that true love defies rationality: 'I cannot understand: I love'.<sup>69</sup> Maggie's final tryst with the Thorn tree is one in which she is forced back into the depth of her own emotional and spiritual reserves. On this occasion, when she is expected to choose between her own future with Frank, and her brother's escape from justice, she is denied the comfort and inspiration of the

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<sup>69</sup> Gaskell quotes four lines from Alfred Tennyson, *In Memoriam* (1850). These lines can be found in *The Poems of Tennyson in Three Volumes*, 2nd edn incorporating the Trinity College Manuscripts, ed. by Christopher Ricks (Harlow: Longman, 1987), II, p.417; ll. 33-36. The inclusion of this quotation in a story published the same year as the poem, which appeared anonymously, suggests that Gaskell was following newly published poetry very closely. The quotation is on page 53 of *MC*.

sublime landscape, for all is shrouded in mist. But she does not miss the customary view of far-off hills, for she is totally preoccupied with her own inner self, from where she must find the resolve to see her through the crisis, in spite of her brother's repeated attempts at emotional blackmail. Maggie finds the inner resources that she needs, and develops her moral courage, for she refuses to comply with Edward's devious and deceitful plan of persuading her to put her signature to a letter written under duress. It is from this point onwards that Maggie's courage gains momentum, culminating in her heroic and successful confrontation with Mr Buxton.

Elizabeth Gaskell's thorn tree has not been like Wordsworth's, a stage for melodramatic action. Instead, it marks a site of emotional refuge. Nonetheless, her use of landscape clearly links this story to Romanticism, and in particular to the poetry of Wordsworth, and there are other aspects of the story which suggest that she was consciously drawing on her favourite poet. There are clear parallels between Maggie's brother in *The Moorland Cottage* and Wordsworth's Luke in *Michael*, for both young men succumb to moral corruption and leave, or attempt to leave, their homeland. Edward, however, is no mirror image of Luke. His childhood behaviour prepares the reader for his ultimate downfall in a way that Luke's does not. Family life at Green-head Gill is idealized by Wordsworth, but the Browne family is so far from being perfect as to be virtually dysfunctional: a single, and very biased, parent; an emotionally abused daughter; and a son who is patently lacking appropriate moral guidance. The creation of Edward is an early example of Gaskell's engagement with

unworthiness, for he is a young man who behaves in a selfish and unheroic way. As a child, Edward has suffered from too much maternal indulgence and a lack of fatherly discipline, a situation that has allowed him to routinely bully his sister. In mitigation, however, Edward's abusive behaviour is shown to be part of his own search for a masculine identity, as demonstrated by his treatment of Maggie's superior knowledge of ballast as a means of making his boat steady in the water. This resentment of female knowledge and, therefore, power, persists as he responds to his mother's request that he should return to the house to meet Mr Buxton, by striving to make his obedience as unnoticeable as possible, sauntering up the slope in a casual manner, hands in pockets. In this short scene we catch a glimpse of a boy who is rejecting all aspects of female authority but, at the same time, lacking an appropriate male role model who might demonstrate how a young man could behave towards women without losing face. The reasons for Edward's bad behaviour are made clear to the perceptive reader, but they are not understood by other characters in the story. Consequently, he makes himself disliked where Maggie wins affection and admiration.

Maggie's successful confrontation with Mr Buxton could have led to a complete resolution, with Maggie and Frank watching Edward depart for a new life in America, while Mrs Browne made arrangements for their wedding. Maggie's offer to accompany her brother to America seems unnecessary, and the fire on board ship confirms the superfluity of this action, by taking Edward's life. The death of Edward



seems unnecessary to the plot, for he might have made good in America and ultimately returned home, a worthy brother-in-law to Frank. Elizabeth Gaskell's reasons for including the fire, and Maggie's abortive attempt to accompany her brother to America, remain unclear, but it is an uncharitable way of disposing of a displeasing character. His final action in attempting to save his own life makes him truly incorrigible, and an unlikely son for the gentle, though misguided, Mrs Browne. Unworthy behaviour, especially in a son who comes from an otherwise morally sound family, is, however, a subject to which Gaskell would return, most notably in *The Crooked Branch*, and the disposal of Edward, over the side of the ship, was perhaps meant as a concession to Chapman's request for a Christmas Story. Although it is a harsh ending to a young man's life, the action serves to eliminate a thoroughly unpleasant character from a story which, because of its seasonal appearance, needed to have a happy ending, with some evidence of poetic justice.

The author's concluding words on Mrs Browne are curious: 'she prizes her dead son more than a thousand living daughters'. It is not clear if she is condemning Mrs Browne for this cruel attitude, or if she is empathising with her. In either case it is a subjective approach, appealing to the reader for sympathy with a mother who mourns the loss of her son even if, as in this case, he has turned out to be morally worthless.

*The Moorland Cottage* charts the inner life and moral growth of the main protagonist, Maggie. If it lacks the sustained power of *The Heart of John Middleton*,

which also follows the development of an inner life, it is principally because the third person narrative cannot provide continuous access to Maggie's consciousness. It is, nevertheless, a powerful study of the dynamics of family relationships. Maggie grows from a self-doubting child to a confident adult in a way that is similar to Mrs Leigh's growth in *Lizzie Leigh*. In each case it is the power of love that promotes independent thought and action. *The Moorland Cottage* has embodied the journey of the heart, in this instance Maggie's heart, and this is what makes the story compelling.

This chapter has focused on four of Elizabeth Gaskell's short stories, each of which has shown aspects of Romanticism. We have seen the foregrounding of feeling, the importance of the imagination, the use of nature as an image of sublimity; and in each story a particular Wordsworthian association has been noted. There is, however, no evidence to show that these qualities were sought either by Charles Dickens or Edward Chapman, when they invited Gaskell to write for them. In fact, the available evidence indicates that both editors principally wanted stories with a moral purpose. Dickens expressed vague ideas about raising his readers' moral, and, possibly, material aspirations, and Chapman hoped to promote ideas of benevolence and charity in the hearts and minds of his readers. Objectives such as these are not necessarily at odds with the Romantic sensibility, but, in the hands of a less imaginative writer than Elizabeth Gaskell, they could constitute fiction which fails to rise above the level of a political or moral tract. William Howitt was the only one of

Gaskell's publishers whom we know with certainty to have been in sympathy with Wordsworth's representation of the Romantic sensibility, which made him her ideal publisher. Yet Gaskell clearly found a way of satisfying the editorial demands of two of her subsequent publishers, while incorporating distinct elements of Romanticism. Chapter Five will consider ways in which she broadened her range of subject matter, and ways in which she looked beyond Wordsworth to other Romantic poets for inspiration.

## Chapter Five: Three Cumbrian Tales

### *The Old Nurse's Story, The Cumberland Sheep-Shearers, and Half a Life-time Ago*

In Chapter Four we saw how Elizabeth Gaskell moved away from the relatively small-scale circulation of William Howitt's journal, to the much wider circulation that was made possible by Charles Dickens and Chapman and Hall. The texts in Chapter Four have all shown the influence of Wordsworth. This influence has been demonstrated by the way in which the principal characters have all been drawn from a rustic background, and the fact that they have occupied a fairly low social status: subsistence farmers like the Leighs and Gwynns, a rural factory hand such as John Middleton, or a curate's widow like Mrs Browne. Landscape and the forces of nature have also been used in a Wordsworthian way. The thorn tree in particular, which features in *Lizzie Leigh* and in *The Moorland Cottage*, indicates Elizabeth Gaskell's awareness of the way in which Wordsworth would take an unremarkable natural feature and make it a site for strong human emotion. The stories were also united by the way in which they consistently foregrounded feeling, making the feeling give importance to the action and situation. We have seen Mrs Leigh's struggle for emotional independence, Nest Gwynn's repressed emotional suffering, John Middleton's struggle for spiritual development, and Maggie Browne's search for emotional maturity. There is, however, no indication that Elizabeth Gaskell ever changed her approach to suit an individual publisher. As discussed in Chapter Four of this thesis, her response to Chapman's request for a Christmas story "recommending benevolence, charity, etc", indicated her

unwillingness to write to a commission.<sup>1</sup> Her only concession to Chapman when writing *The Moorland Cottage*, was to write for a particular market: the market for Christmas stories.

In Chapter Five I intend to discuss a further selection of stories, still in chronological order of publication. These three stories are set in the region now known as Cumbria, formerly Cumberland and Westmoreland. This location suggests a strong Wordsworthian influence. Nonetheless, while this influence is present, I hope to demonstrate ways in which Elizabeth Gaskell was by this time engaging with a wider range of Romantic poets. In this chapter her Romantic inheritance will be discussed through the influence of a range of Romantic poets that include, not only Wordsworth, but also Coleridge, Goethe, and William Blake. The unifying factor of the texts continues to be the foregrounding of feeling, and its relationship with reason.

### *The Old Nurse's Story*

During the first week of November 1852 Charles Dickens received from Elizabeth Gaskell what he described as a 'ghost story'.<sup>2</sup> His first impression of this story was that it was 'long'.<sup>3</sup> Within a day or two of receiving it, Dickens wrote to Elizabeth Gaskell, on 6 November, full of praise for the story, but with suggestions for amendments. It was, he said, a 'very fine ghost story indeed.

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<sup>1</sup> *Gaskell Letters*, p. 132.

<sup>2</sup> *The Old Nurse's Story*, in Gaskell, *CP*, pp.35-56.

<sup>3</sup> *Dickens Letters*, vi, 798.

Nobly told, and wonderfully managed'. His principal reservation, apart from the story's length, concerned its ending, for he believed that this would be stronger 'if they all heard the noises - but *only the child* saw the spectral figures, except that they all see the phantom child'.<sup>4</sup> He held to this view until the time, on 4 December, when he was ready to include the story in the special Christmas number of *Household Words*. Elizabeth Gaskell held equally to her view and a compromise was reached, with a 'New Ending'; though one in which all the characters in the final scene still see all the spectres.<sup>5</sup> The exact nature of this compromise, and the way in which the 'New Ending' differed from the original remain unclear, since no manuscript has survived. We can, however, deduce that Elizabeth Gaskell's only concession was that she allowed Rosamund to see the ghost child first so that she could identify her and explain who she was to the adults looking on. But on the principal point of difference Gaskell would not budge: Dickens did not want the adult members of the household to see the adult spectres, but Gaskell insisted that this is exactly what should happen. Possible reasons for her intransigence on this point will be discussed later in this section.

For several reasons *The Old Nurse's Story* represents something of a landmark in Elizabeth Gaskell's output of short stories. Firstly, it represents a move from the relatively humble setting, in either town or rural life, that characterizes her previous short stories, and into the gentrified milieu of a grand manor house. The only character whose social status can be described as humble is the nurse herself, and, as the narrator, her principal function is to provide a link between two

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<sup>4</sup> *Dickens Letters*, VI, 799-800.

<sup>5</sup> *Dickens Letters*, VI, 812 and 815.

social milieus. Secondly, Elizabeth Gaskell was responding to a request for a particular kind of story: not necessarily a Christmas story, but a contribution to a 'Round of Stories by the Christmas Fire', for this was to be the title of Dickens's special Christmas number of *Household Words*. Dickens's idea of a story for the Christmas market was, however, quite different from Chapman's, for he did not, as Chapman did, look for any particular moral qualities. His vision was for a collection of short stories, none of which even had to refer to Christmas, but which could be enjoyed at a family gathering, each story being read by a different member of the assembled group, according to the title of the story. Although there is no extant letter from Dickens to Elizabeth Gaskell inviting her to write for the Christmas number, his letter to another contributor, the Revd James White, dated 19 October 1852, makes his editorial intentions clear. This letter, in which Dickens asks the Revd James White for a story, also suggests that he was inviting established contributors to *Household Words* to make a contribution to this extra Christmas number.<sup>6</sup> Anne Lohrli's book, derived from the *Household Words* office records, shows that all the contributors to the extra Christmas number in 1852 had proved their worth to Dickens by their previous contributions to his journal.<sup>7</sup> All of the stories published in Dickens's 'Round of Stories by the Christmas Fire' purport to be personal accounts of a particular experience, including 'The Grandfather's Story', 'The Charwoman's Story' and 'The Deaf Playmate's Story'. Contributions appeared anonymously, but the authors of the three stories mentioned above are now known to be, respectively, the Revd James

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<sup>6</sup> *Dickens Letters*, vi, 780-781.

<sup>7</sup> See Lohrli, pp. 103-104, for details of contributions to this number, and Lohrli's biographical index (pp.200-481) for details of previous contributions to *Household Words*.

White, Edmund Saul Dixon, and Harriet Martineau. The only constraint imposed on the contributors to this anthology was one that governed the fictional narrator, and to fit into this pattern Gaskell chose as her narrator an old nurse. 'The Old Nurse's Story' appears in Dickens's list of proposed titles in his letter to the Revd James White, and if we assume that this was a circular letter, then it follows that Elizabeth Gaskell chose this title from the list that was offered to her. Gaskell's story, of seventeen-and-a-half columns, is by far the longest contribution to this Christmas number. The second longest, written by Charles Dickens himself, runs to nine columns, and the shortest, by Edmund Saul Dixon, runs to two-and-a-half columns. There are ten contributions in total, two of them in verse, but the only factor that unites them, apart from the titles, is the element of mystery and suspense which is present in all the tales and verses. *The Old Nurse's Story* is, however, the only item to include spectres that are in any way visible. The only other ghost to be included in this round of stories is the one in *The Charwoman's Story*, but he is not seen by anyone and his existence is suggested only by the sound of footsteps which cannot otherwise be accounted for. *The Old Nurse's Story* stands head and shoulders above the other contributions, not just because of its greater length, but because of its greater effect on the sensibilities of the reader and the listening audience. But although Dickens referred to the tale as a ghost story, this may not have been exactly how Gaskell viewed it.

This was the year in which Elizabeth Gaskell completed her second novel, *Ruth*, and by the time she sent the manuscript of this novel to her publishers in December of that year, she had, for some months, been anticipating the hostile



reaction that the book would draw from some sections of the reading public.<sup>8</sup> If we consider the date of Dickens's letter to the Revd James White, 19 October, 1852, we may safely assume that *The Old Nurse's Story* was conceived during the time that Elizabeth Gaskell was completing *Ruth*. The story reflects some of the issues that she addressed in this novel, and in particular, the fate of the transgressing woman. But while *Ruth* looks at the relationship of the transgressor with society, *The Old Nurse's Story* focuses on the close family relationships that are absent from Ruth's life. Moreover, while Ruth's transgression is to give birth to an illegitimate child, Maude Furnivall's transgression is a secret marriage without the consent of her father. Clearly, these notions of patriarchal power, whether in society or in the family, together with female transgression, were at the forefront of Elizabeth Gaskell's mind when she approached the story that was destined for the Christmas number of *Household Words*. Because of the seasonal aspect of its first appearance, *The Old Nurse's Story* can be read simply as a ghost story, and is sometimes referred to as such.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, a closer consideration reveals additional qualities that make it an excellent example of nineteenth-century Gothic prose fiction. The ghosts in the story are those of the dead Lord Furnivall, his transgressing daughter, and her child. It is because the dead return in the form of phantoms, defying rational explanation, that the story can be read simply as a ghost story. The usual purpose of a ghost story is to promote feelings of terror, but within the secure atmosphere of the family fireside. The unexplained mysteries of the Furnivall manor-house make Gaskell's story suitable for Dickens's

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<sup>8</sup> *Ruth* was first published in January 1853, in three volumes, by Chapman and Hall (Sharps, p.147), the publishing house responsible for *The Moorland Cottage* and *Mary Barton*.

<sup>9</sup> Easson, *Elizabeth Gaskell*, p.219.

Christmas number of *Household Words* because the house is inhabited by recognizable human beings: members of one family and their servants. Although the house is isolated it is not deserted, but lived in. While the story itself does not offer a rational explanation for the supernatural events, the reader may be comforted or reassured by the homely and down-to-earth narrator: the old nurse herself. Like Nelly Dean in *Wuthering Heights*, the old nurse mediates between the uncanny nature of the story and the familiar nature of the fireside where the story is intended to be read. But ghost stories are a special category of the Gothic, for phantoms do not always feature in Gothic prose or in Gothic poetry.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, a Gothic text usually incorporates certain elements, apart from the supernatural, which are not necessarily present in a ghost story. There is a certain amount of overlap between the conventions of the Gothic and those of the ghost story, but it is as a Gothic text, rather than a ghost story, that *The Old Nurse's Story* will be discussed here.

Gothic elements in *The Old Nurse's Story* include the representation of domestic space, for within this space are other Gothic ingredients: mysterious passages, secret rooms, and a partially concealed portrait. These features contribute to an atmosphere of secrecy and mystery, which is compounded by the sound of organ music which can only be explained in supernatural terms, while the discovery of the broken interior of the organ, which belies its smart external appearance, symbolizes the decay of the Furnivall household. Other supernatural events

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<sup>10</sup> For a detailed discussion of the Ghost Story as a sub-genre of Gothic fiction, see Julia Briggs, 'The Ghost Story', in *A Companion to the Gothic*, ed. by David Punter (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 122-131.

include the appearance of spectres outside the house and within, but unlike most ghost stories, one of the phantoms that appears in the final scene is that of a living character, Miss Furnivall. The phantom, in the guise of Miss Furnivall as a beautiful young woman, stands next to the living, but aged, Miss Furnivall. As discussed in an earlier paragraph, Elizabeth Gaskell also departed from Dickens's perception of the conventional ghost story by having all the characters see all of the spectres, instead of revealing them solely to Rosamund, as Dickens had advised. Another factor which makes the text more than a ghost story is the interplay between the internal domestic space and the external landscape, for this natural world is itself typically Gothic: mountainous, desolate, inhospitable and threatening, representing the natural sublime. The prevailing atmosphere, indoors and outdoors, is consistently uncanny, or *unheimlich*: unfamiliar or weird. The tragic events in the story stem from an act of transgression on the part of a daughter and from the actions of the patriarch who, in a typically Gothic manner, has attempted to exercise unreasonable levels of power to the point of cruelty. All of the actions are motivated by strong feelings: the pride of Lord Furnivall, the passionate love of Maude Furnivall for the visiting musician, and the jealousy of her sister. The young Rosamund is in danger of being lured to her death by her feelings of compassion for the child outside in the snow.

Elizabeth Gaskell's relationship with Gothic modes of writing can be traced back to 1838 when she drew William Howitt's attention to her youthful visit to Clopton Hall, an old manor house near Stratford-on-Avon, which she visited as a schoolgirl. This visit had made such a deep impression on her imagination that she

was able, many years later, to draw on personal recollection to write her descriptive essay on Clopton Hall for inclusion in William Howitt's *Visits to Remarkable Places*.<sup>11</sup> 'Clopton Hall' with its mysterious passages, winding staircases and unexplained events, is rightly identified by Jenny Uglow as a prototype of Gaskell's subsequent contribution to Gothic prose fiction.<sup>12</sup> Such fascination, especially among women, with Gothic terror was not unusual. Charlotte Brontë delighted in telling terrifying tales to her school-friends late at night in the dormitory at school, and Mary Howitt participated in the exchange of 'frightening and wild stories' when entertaining guests at Heidelberg.<sup>13</sup> Charlotte Brontë, of course, went on to include Gothic elements in her first successful novel, *Jane Eyre*. The entrapment of Bertha Mason, Jane Eyre's flight from Rochester, and the ambience of Gaskell's Clopton Hall all find echoes in the Female Gothic plot, which can be quite distinctive, serving to illustrate female fears and anxieties at a particular time in history.<sup>14</sup> Escape is usually enacted along endless dark passages, through concealed entrances, and, when out of doors, across a barren and hostile landscape. The flight is usually from a male who is perceived to be a tyrant, or in the case of Rochester, a threat to a maiden's virtue.

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<sup>11</sup> Howitt, *Visits*, pp. 135-139. For an account of the history of this descriptive essay, and details of its publication, see Sharps, pp. 29-31.

<sup>12</sup> Uglow, p. 120.

<sup>13</sup> For an account of Charlotte Brontë's late-night story-telling, see Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, ed. by Angus Easson (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 84-85; hereafter Easson, *Gaskell's Life of Charlotte Brontë*. For Mary Howitt's story-telling in Heidelberg, see *Gaskell Letters*, p. 44.

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of the Female Gothic, see Alison Milbank's contribution to *The Handbook to Gothic Literature*, ed. by Marie Mulvey-Roberts (Basingstoke and London: MacMillan, 1998), pp.53-57; hereafter Mulvey-Roberts. For an example of the Female Gothic novel, see Radcliffe, *Sicilian Romance*.

As discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, Gothic modes of writing are central to Romanticism. They came to prominence at the time when Enlightenment thinking gave way to Romanticism. All Gothic works, including written texts, music and visual art, can be seen as an attempt to explain what the Enlightenment left unexplained. They are a reflection of the fears and anxieties that were produced by Enlightenment rationalism.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, a Gothic text can be a vehicle for the exploration of extreme states of feeling.

The centrality of Gothic writing to Romanticism can be demonstrated by the fact that early exponents of Gothic prose fiction, Ann Radcliffe and Matthew Gregory Lewis, were writing during the 1790s, the decade when Coleridge and Wordsworth each began to publish poetry; it was the decade during which the two poets met each other and collaborated on *Lyrical Ballads*. But neither of these novel-writers originated Gothic writing, for they were able to draw on earlier exponents of this art: Horace Walpole, who published *The Castle of Otranto* in 1765, and William Beckford, who published *Vathek* in 1787. Walpole, who claimed that *Otranto* was inspired by a dream, introduced the Gothic novel in the middle of the eighteenth century, a time when poets of Sensibility, like Thomas Gray, William Cowper and Oliver Goldsmith, were preparing the way for the Romantic revolution in poetry that would be led by Wordsworth and Coleridge. Mary Shelley (née Godwin) carried the Gothic novel forward into the nineteenth century by publishing *Frankenstein* in 1818.<sup>16</sup> This novel, however, in

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<sup>15</sup> For further discussion on the relationship between the Gothic and the Enlightenment, see also Fred Botting, *Gothic* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 22-23.

<sup>16</sup> For these three novels, *The Castle of Otranto*, *Vathek* and *Frankenstein*, see *Three Gothic Novels*, ed. by Peter Fairclough with an Introductory Essay by Mario Praz (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968; repr. 1982).

its plotting and themes, shows a departure from the conventions of the eighteenth-century Gothic novel, and late-twentieth-century feminist readings reveal the text as one that exemplifies female Romanticism, and as one that stands as a 'birth myth'.<sup>17</sup> *Frankenstein* can certainly be read as a text that embodies the author's procreational concerns.

The early Romantic poets were aware of the upsurge of Gothic writing. Coleridge, during his career as a journalist, read and reviewed a range of Gothic novels that included Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Lewis's *The Monk*, and Mary Robinson's *Hubert de Sevrac*.<sup>18</sup> Of all the Romantic poets Coleridge is the one whose work draws most heavily on Gothic images. *The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere* (1798) contains many of the mysterious, supernatural, and uncanny elements that are associated with the Gothic. The same may be said of *Kubla Khan* (1797), while *Christabel* (1797-1800), contains all the elements of Gothic writing: aristocratic and patriarchal power, a remote castle, the transgressing female, and the natural sublime of the surrounding landscape.<sup>19</sup> While Wordsworth decried the public taste for 'stupid and sickly German tragedies', he too drew on Gothic images for some of his greatest poetry. Anne Williams, in *Art of Darkness*, notes the Gothicism of Wordsworth's 'ministry of fear' in Book I of *The Prelude*, and his choice of diction in *Tintern Abbey*: 'The

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<sup>17</sup> Anne Williams, *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 177-178; hereafter Williams.

<sup>18</sup> *Coleridge's Miscellaneous Criticism*, ed. by Thomas Middleton Raysor (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936; repr. 1969), pp. 355-382.

<sup>19</sup> Coleridge, *Poems: The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere* (1798) is on pages 147-167, *Kubla Khan: Or, A Vision in a Dream* is on pages 249-252, and *Christabel* is on pages 187-205. All references to *Christabel* are from these pages in Coleridge, *Poems*; short quotations will be followed by opening line numbers, but page numbers may not be given again.

mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood'.<sup>20</sup> Later Romantic poets also used Gothic images in their work: one only has to think of Keats's pale warriors and elfin grot in his ballad 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' (1819), Byron's allusion to the vampire in 'The Giaour' (1813), or the natural sublime of Shelley's *Mont Blanc* (1816) and *Alastor* (1815), with its reference to 'midnight's tingling silentness'.<sup>21</sup>

The ongoing influence of Gothic modes of writing can probably be discerned most clearly in prose fiction. Elizabeth Gaskell turned to the Gothic for several of her short stories, but she was not the only mid-nineteenth-century writer to employ Gothic elements in her work. Charles Dickens frequently used Gothic elements to promote feelings of repulsion or fear in the reader: the decay of Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations*, the terror inspired by Pip's confrontation with Magwitch in the same novel, and the eeriness of the London fog in *Bleak House*. In the late nineteenth century Robert Louis Stevenson drew on the Gothic for *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) and Bram Stoker did the same for *Dracula* (1897). In the twentieth century, Gothic fiction was revived by the American writer Howard Phillips Lovecraft (1890-1937), and used to great effect by the British writer Angela Carter (1940-1992). Other British twentieth-century writers who have written in the Gothic mode include M. R. James (1862-1936), Daphne du Maurier (1907-1989), Mervyn Peake (1911-1968), and John Fowles (1926- ).

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<sup>20</sup> Wordsworth's use of Gothic imagery is discussed in detail by Williams on page 258, fn. 9.

<sup>21</sup> For Keats's poetry see Keats, *Poems*; 'La Belle Dame sans Merci' is on pages 334-336. For Shelley's poetry see Shelley, *Poems*, selected by Isabel Quigly (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1956), *Mont Blanc* is on pages 74-78, and *Alastor* is on pages 48-70.

The history of the Gothic suggests that it emerged in response to the cultural shifts that gave rise to Romanticism, principally dissatisfaction with Enlightenment thinking. It continued through the social changes of the early nineteenth century against which Romantic poets reacted: industrialisation and the decline of rural communities. But it retained a following even as Romanticism, *per se*, gave way to other forms of artistic expression. The re-emergence of Gothic modes of fiction in the twentieth century suggests that it continued to deal with themes and subjects that were not dealt with elsewhere. But while the Romantic poets used Gothic imagery and diction, they did not necessarily incorporate the themes or motifs of the Gothic novel into their poetry. The Gothic novel frequently buttresses the theme of transgression with motifs of imprisonment and flight. These elements are so common as to make the Gothic novel almost formulaic, but the Romantic poets drew on Gothic images in a more selective way.

I now wish to argue that when Elizabeth Gaskell sat down to write *The Old Nurse's Story*, it was not the Gothic novel of Walpole, Lewis, Beckford, or Radcliffe that she drew on, but the Gothic imagery of Coleridge, and in particular, his poem *Christabel*. The most obvious ways in which this short story differs from earlier Gothic prose fiction are geographical setting and historical timing. Walpole's novel is set in Italy during the time of the Crusades, Lewis chose Spain, Beckford used an Oriental setting, and Radcliffe set at least two of her gothic novels in Sicily. Major characteristics of the eighteenth-century Gothic novel are exotic locations and/or action that is set back in time. In contrast to this, for her first Gothic short story, Elizabeth Gaskell chose as a setting the north west region



of England and, in particular, Cumberland. In the 1850s, when the story was first published, neither Cumberland nor Westmoreland were as accessible as they are now, since the railway system was in its infancy and road travel more restricted. This meant that there was a limited sense of otherness about the region, but not to the same extent as there was about Spain, Italy, Sicily or the Orient. Furthermore, the time in which the action takes place cannot be very far before the time when the story was published, for the narrator refers to the time when she was a girl in the village-school. As this type of education was not available before the nineteenth century, this reference makes the narration concurrent with the time in which the story was first published.

Other differences include those of plotting. Beckford's and Lewis's plots include the excesses of incest and rape. Walpole's plot focuses on a titled family whose claims to their ancestral home are challenged. He includes elements of the Female Gothic plot: entrapment of a young woman within a castle that is riddled with subterranean passages and vaults, and her escape made through an underground passage that links the vaults to a church. In *The Old Nurse's Story* there is no hint of incest or rape, nor are there any challenges to home ownership. Neither is there a flight or pursuit, for the father's attempt to control the actions of his daughter had failed. Maude Furnivall had defied convention and her father's wishes by marrying, in secret, the unsuitable foreign musician.<sup>22</sup> There is, of course, no

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<sup>22</sup> Uglow, pp. 306-307, states that in *The Old Nurse's Story*, Gaskell treats the themes of unmarried sex and illegitimacy, but the text of *Old Nurse's Story* makes it clear that Maude Furnivall and the foreign musician were secretly married and that she became a wife as well as a mother (CP, pp.50-51). The transgression stems from the secrecy of Maude Furnivall's marriage, but the fact that she was legally married, and did not therefore produce an illegitimate child, makes her father's punishment excessively severe.

evidence to suggest that Elizabeth Gaskell had read Beckford or Lewis, indeed it would be surprising if she had, although the Order of the Poor Clares, which forms the basis of one of Gaskell's later stories, *The Poor Clare*, also features in Lewis's *The Monk*.<sup>23</sup> There are, however, indications that she had the opportunity to read Horace Walpole.<sup>24</sup> There are no reasons why she would not have read Radcliffe; if Jane Austen's young ladies in *Northanger Abbey* were allowed to read *The Mysteries of Udolpho* then we can safely assume that Ann Radcliffe would have been permitted reading in the Holland family circle. Nevertheless, these are not the sources of *The Old Nurse's Story*.

Having established that there is little textual evidence that Elizabeth Gaskell drew on the eighteenth-century Gothic novel for *The Old Nurse's Story*, we may profitably turn our attention to the Romantic poets who, as discussed above, were attracted to Gothic ideas. We know with certainty that Elizabeth Gaskell knew and enjoyed reading the poetry of Coleridge, for he is one of the poets whose work she refers to in her letter from Sandlebridge in May 1836 to her sister-in-law Elizabeth Gaskell.<sup>25</sup> We also know that she knew *Christabel* because of her allusion to this poem in *Libbie Marsh's Three Eras* and in *Mary Barton*.<sup>26</sup> If she wanted to write a story that was more than a ghost story, one with strong Gothic elements, but one that was set in a location that combined the familiar with the

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<sup>23</sup> *The Poor Clare* is in Elizabeth Gaskell, *My Lady Ludlow and Other Stories*, ed. with an Introduction by Edgar Wright (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1989) pp.271-333; hereafter Gaskell, *MLL* (or *MLL*). *The Poor Clare* was first published in December 1856, in *Household Words*, and will be discussed in Chapter Six of this thesis.

<sup>24</sup> Uglow, p. 42, asserts that Horace Walpole featured in Elizabeth Stevenson's early reading.

<sup>25</sup> *Gaskell Letters*, p. 7.

<sup>26</sup> Gaskell, *DNW*, p.169, and *MB*, Ryburn, p.229.

sublime, but not with the exotic, she could not have done better than turn to Coleridge's *Christabel* as a source of inspiration.

Like *The Old Nurse's Story*, this poem is set in Cumberland: matin bells are heard from 'Bratha Head to Wyndermere' (*Christabel*, 344). The patriarch in *Christabel* is an English baron, and in *The Old Nurse's Story* the patriarch is a titled English gentleman. Lord Furnivall's home is not a castle as the Baron's is, but it is a very stately manor house large enough to incorporate wings, a grand hall and a broad gallery. Both homes occupy a secluded site and both signify patriarchal power. There is, furthermore, in both texts an absence of matriarchal power, for Christabel has been motherless since birth, and Rosamund was both motherless and fatherless by the time she was five years old. Christabel has her father's love for protection during the day-time but during her night-wanderings this is absent. Rosamund has only her maid for regular supervision and, like Christabel, she escapes protection to wander alone outside. The spectre of the weeping woman, whom Rosamund meets at the holly trees, does not fulfil the same kind of role in the text as Geraldine, but like Geraldine she represents the supernatural, and, in particular, a supernatural female. Furthermore in each of the texts the old trees, which are outside but not far away from the family home, mark the site of danger whether for Christabel or for Rosamund.

If Gaskell was preoccupied with ideas of female transgression in December 1852, she would certainly have found a parallel in *Christabel*. Geraldine, of course, is not presented as an unmarried mother or as a disobedient daughter. She is usually

seen as a woman of supernatural powers, a witch, a lamia, or a vampire. Other interpretations have suggested that she is Christabel's shadow, or alter ego: from the time that Christabel meets Geraldine at the oak tree the stranger shadows Christabel, even to the extent of following her into her bed, where she 'lay down by the maiden's side! - | And in her arms the maid she took' (262). Geraldine exercises a malevolent power over Christine: 'Oh shield her! shield sweet Christabel!' (254). The transgression here is twofold, for in addition to Geraldine's supernatural powers ("In the touch of this bosom there worketh a spell" (267) ) there is Christabel's acknowledged sin: "'Sure I have sinned!" said Christabel' (381). Supernatural powers are also accorded to the little girl who threatens Rosamund's life in *The Old Nurse's Story*, for she is the ghost of the child who had been turned out into the snow with her transgressing mother, but she threatens Rosamund in a way that is more directly physical than the way in which Geraldine threatens Christabel, for she tries to lure her victim onto the fells where she will surely die from exposure. Nevertheless, Rosamund, like Christabel, comes under the spell of a female with supernatural powers, and in each case the external landscape is the source from which the supernatural female power emerges. In *Christabel* this power succeeds in entering the internal domestic space of the victim, while in *The Old Nurse's Story*, until the very end of the tale, the power remains a threat from outside the victim's domestic space.

In *Christabel* and in *The Old Nurse's Story*, the natural world initially represents freedom in a non-threatening way. Christabel goes into the wood on an April night to pray for 'the weal of her lover that's far away' (*Christabel*, 30), and

unwittingly brings evil or danger home with her in the form of Geraldine. In *The Old Nurse's Story*, Rosamund is initially taken onto the fells for recreation: she and her maid run races, but the new path and the old holly-trees signify the danger that lurks on the hill by the east side of the house. In both texts it is the natural world, and specifically the site of an old tree, or trees, that is witness to a fateful meeting. This external landscape, with its freedom and danger, is in contrast with the internal domestic space that represents patriarchal power and protection for Christabel and for Maude Furnivall.

The similarities between *The Old Nurse's Story* and *Christabel* are strong enough to indicate that Elizabeth Gaskell knew Coleridge's poem well. There is, however, no intention to argue here that she set out to imitate another artist's work. Nevertheless, intertextuality of Gothic prose and Gothic poetry was not unusual. It is noticeable, for example, that certain passages of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* recall some of the images in Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere*: the sea voyage, and mysterious sightings, while the relationship between Walton and Frankenstein parallels the one between the Mariner and the Wedding guest.<sup>27</sup> Aware of the problems of intertextualities at the time of composing *Christabel*, Coleridge pre-empted charges of imitation in his Preface to this poem:

'Tis mine and it is likewise yours;  
 But an if this will not do;  
 Let it be mine, good friend! for I

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<sup>27</sup>In her essay on Mary Shelley (Mulvey-Roberts, pp. 210-216), Marie Mulvey-Roberts asserts that 'the composition of *Frankenstein* incorporates a monstrous patch-work of intertextuality' (pp.214-215). More specifically, Anne Williams explores the connection between *Frankenstein* and *The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere* (Williams, p. 4).

Am the poorer of the two.

(Coleridge, *Poems*, p.187)

This statement in verse was necessary because *Christabel*, which was written in 1797 and in 1800, was known in manuscript by a number of people before it was finally published in 1816.<sup>28</sup> Gothic images were shared by Romantic poets and they crossed the boundaries of prose fiction and poetry, for they are central to the Romantic imagination that made all forms of Gothic art possible.

I would now like to offer an evaluation of Elizabeth Gaskell's achievement in *The Old Nurse's Story*, and then discuss her reasons for choosing to write in the Gothic mode at this particular time. *The Old Nurse's Story* is still a powerful tale and of all the contributions to Dickens's 1852 Christmas number of *Household Words*, it is the one that is in greatest demand today and the one which is most readily accessible.<sup>29</sup> In order to evaluate Gaskell's achievement in this story I now wish to argue that the power of the story is derived from *Christabel*, and, crucially, in three principal ways: the use of surprise, of mystery, and of ambience. In *Christabel* the reader is surprised, as Christabel herself is, by the sudden appearance of Geraldine, apparently abandoned, unsuitably dressed and at the mercy of the elements. In *The Old Nurse's Story*, the surprise stems from the equally sudden appearance of the spectral child, again unsuitably dressed and at

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<sup>28</sup> The first part of *Christabel* was written in 1797, at Stowey, and the second part in 1800 at Keswick. It was not published until 1816 when it appeared in a pamphlet with *Kubla Khan*, and *The Pains of Sleep*. For further details of the history of *Christabel* see Coleridge's Preface to the poem in Coleridge, *Poems*, p. 187, and the notes to the poem on pages 505-507. On page 507 there is reference to a comment in Coleridge's *Table Talk* (1833) which indicates that the poet viewed *Christabel* as unfinished even after publication.

<sup>29</sup> *The Old Nurse's Story* appears in anthologies of Gaskell's Gothic short stories as well as the edition referred to in this thesis.

the mercy of the elements. Mystery surrounds the nature of these two beings. Although we are given the identity of Geraldine (she is the daughter of Lord Roland de Vaux of Tryermaine) we cannot know what she is since Christabel's experience of her is different from Sir Leoline's. All the reader knows for certain is that Geraldine has powers which are both supernatural and malevolent. In *The Old Nurse's Story*, the narrator's understanding of the history and nature of the spectral child is uncertain for it is derived from kitchen gossip, which itself has its source in a tale heard from old neighbours. Rosamund's sighting of the spectral child incites unaccountable fear in the hearts of the other members of the household, but it is not until the end of the story that her full significance is revealed to the narrator and reader alike. The power of *The Old Nurse's Story* also stems from the prevailing ambience which is often produced by the natural elements, elements which also underpin the power of *Christabel*. The midnight setting and the chill of the night are central to the mystery and surprise of Christabel's meeting with Geraldine. It is totally unexpected that two women should meet outdoors in such circumstances, but it is these very circumstances that are the cause of the events that follow, since the abandoned lady must be given shelter and warmth for the night. In *The Old Nurse's Story* events move inexorably towards a climax, the power of which is heightened by the prevailing natural elements. But this climax cannot take place at midnight since it depends on all members of the household still being up and about, and not asleep as Sir Leoline is in *Christabel*. Aware of this difficulty, and also aware of the importance of the natural elements, Elizabeth Gaskell substitutes for the middle of the night in *Christabel*, the year's midnight, for it is one afternoon not long before Christmas

Day that the narrator is confronted with the spectral child and one evening shortly after New Year's Day that the drama reaches its ultimate climax and conclusion.<sup>30</sup>

By making this substitution Gaskell reproduces the cold and darkness of *Christabel*, but introduces the daytime and evening hours that are needed for the adult members of the household to be awake and still active.

These three sources of power, effective though they are, would not on their own produce a Gothic tale of enduring appeal. The overriding terror and power of the story are derived from the relationship between the patriarch and his daughter, and I wish to argue that this too has its source in *Christabel*. In Coleridge's poem Sir Leoline cannot see or know Geraldine as his daughter does because of the spell that Christabel is under. For this reason Sir Leoline's feelings are divided between the demands of loyalty to a friend with whom he had formerly quarrelled, and the demands of paternal affection for his daughter, who needs his protection. Since he cannot know the true nature of Geraldine, even the dying words of Christabel's mother can only add to his dilemma for

Within the Baron's heart and brain  
 If thoughts, like these, had any share,  
 They only swelled his rage and pain,  
 And did but work confusion there.  
 His heart was cleft with pain and rage,  
 His cheeks they quivered, his eyes were wild,  
 Dishonoured thus in his old age;

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<sup>30</sup> On the occasion of the final confrontation with the spectres, the nurse takes Rosamund out of her bed, but the old ladies are still in the drawing room working at their tapestry which suggests that the time was evening but not late at night (*CP*, p. 53).



Dishonoured by his only child,  
 And all his hospitality  
 To the wong'd daughter of his friend  
 By more than woman's jealousy  
 Brought thus to a disgraceful end.

(Coleridge, *Poems*, 204. 636-647)

The tragedy for Sir Leoline and his daughter arises from Sir Leoline's inability to share his daughter's knowledge of his guest. Had he witnessed all the events of the night, he would, in all probability, have reacted differently. This absence of knowledge on the part of Sir Leoline brings me back to *The Old Nurse's Story* and Elizabeth Gaskell's dispute with Dickens about its ending. It is possible that she did not find the time to incorporate his suggested changes, or that she refused to make them because she resented this level of editorial interference. There could, however, be another and quite different reason for her refusal to concede to all his suggestions in this matter. I would suggest that when Elizabeth Gaskell read *Christabel* she was disturbed by Sir Leoline's reaction to his daughter's request, as shown in the lines quoted above. Recognizing that his dilemma and apparent insensitivity to his daughter stemmed from his ignorance of the true nature of Geraldine, she held to her view that in *The Old Nurse's Story* there must be no such ignorance of the true nature of people and/or situations. For this reason she insisted that all of the characters present, and not just Rosamund, must see for themselves the drama enacted by Lord Furnivall and his daughters, together with the consequences for the innocent child. If Dickens had had his way and only Rosamund had seen the adult spectres then the narrator and other adults

would only have learnt of the horrific acts of cruelty from the words of the child, Rosamund. Since the child might not be regarded as a reliable witness to the events, this would have weakened the potency of the ending. In her intransigence, Elizabeth Gaskell knew what she wanted and for her the terror was highlighted, and not weakened, by the fact that all members of the household saw all of the spectres. She sought the complete openness and shared knowledge of evil that was absent in *Christabel*. The punishment inflicted by Lord Furnivall on his daughter and her child amounted to an act of cruelty because of its severity. For Elizabeth Gaskell, injustice and cruelty were to be witnessed by all and not solely by one person.

A further parallel between *Christabel* and *The Old Nurse's Story* arises from the nature of the father-daughter relationship. In each case this relationship breaks down, and in each text this breakdown is a source of terror. In *Christabel* Sir Leoline must surely risk losing his daughter's love and trust by failing to recognize her grave concerns about Geraldine, and in *The Old Nurse's Story* Lord Furnivall not only alienates his daughter, he also causes her death through the severity of his punishment. Coleridge's poem and Gaskell's story each focus on a weakness in a father-daughter relationship, and in each case the weakness has its roots in the sin of pride on the part of the father, and in the daughter's attempt to leave the protection of the patriarchal home. For Sir Leoline it is the pride of worldly matters that gives rise to his dilemma: his wish to display lavish hospitality and all the pomp that was to accompany his messenger's arrival at Sir Roland's castle, as indicated by his instructions to his bard: 'Go thou, with music

sweet and loud, | And take two steeds with trappings proud' (485). For Lord Furnivall, pride again stems from worldly considerations, he was 'eaten up with pride' and hoped for a more socially advantageous match than the one made by his elder daughter to a foreign musician. As a counter-balance to this pride each of the daughters makes a bid for independence. Christabel leaves the protection of her home in order to pray for her absent lover, but meets with evil. Maude Furnivall turns away from paternal protection in search of love but her lover proves to be false, so she too meets with misfortune. In each of these patriarchal households a strain is imposed on the relationship between the father and the daughter, but in *The Old Nurse's Story*, the strain is stretched to breaking point as the patriarch develops into a tyrant, demanding total obedience of a kind that leads to tragedy. Patriarchal pride, together with surprise, mystery and ambience constitute the power of Coleridge's poem and Gaskell's story. These constituents are frequently found in Gothic prose and poetry and I would now like to turn to a consideration of Gaskell's reasons for writing in this mode.

The kind of patriarchal power that is demonstrated in *The Old Nurse's Story* has implications beyond family structures since the family can be a paradigm for society, and, in consequence, a patriarchal family can represent a patriarchal society. As I have argued earlier in this section, Gaskell approached *The Old Nurse's Story* when she feared the consequences of the publication of her novel *Ruth*. The heroine of this novel transgresses the law of the father by offending the norms of the patriarchal society in which she lives. In writing *Ruth* Gaskell knew that she too was a transgressor, for she was transgressing boundaries of social and

artistic decorum, since Ruth's circumstances would be considered by many to represent 'an unfit subject for fiction'.<sup>31</sup> There is, therefore, a parallel between Elizabeth Gaskell's relationship with *Ruth* and Maude Furnivall's relationship with her child who was born, not out of wedlock, but from a marriage that transgressed convention and patriarchal authority. Gaskell's main fear in the closing months of 1852 was likely to have been that she, like Maud Furnivall, would be cast out, not by an individual patriarch, but by the same patriarchal society that punished Ruth.<sup>32</sup> Her second fear was that her artistic progeny, like Maude Furnivall's unwisely begotten child, might represent a threat to young people, and, therefore, by implication, to future generations. She was aware of the possible dangers of *Ruth*, for she made it clear that she would only allow her daughter to read the book under adult supervision.<sup>33</sup> As Maude Furnivall's child returns as a spectre to lure the motherless Rosamund into physical danger, so might *Ruth* lure an unguarded child into moral danger. During the time that immediately preceded the publication of *Ruth*, Elizabeth Gaskell was afraid that she would be rejected by society and by friends. She was also concerned about the effect of the book on young people. But there was no straightforward way of dealing with these concerns. She had spoken out and she knew that she would have to live with the consequences, whatever they were to be. Writing in the Gothic mode enabled her to work through these fears, for her Gothic text embodies transgression, severe punishment and the visiting of the transgression

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<sup>31</sup> *Gaskell Letters*, p. 220.

<sup>32</sup> While she was still working on *Ruth*, Elizabeth Gaskell expressed her fears about the likely reaction to the finished work, in a letter dated October 1852, to Eliza Fox (*Gaskell Letters*, p.205). As the publication of *Ruth* drew nearer she expressed her fears in greater detail, in a letter to Anne Robson, written in early January, 1853 (*Gaskell Letters*, pp. 220-221).

onto a future generation. Moreover, when her fears for *Ruth* were greatest, she may have recalled her favourite lines from *Christabel*.<sup>34</sup> Perhaps she drew strength from these lines, or perhaps the lines drew her back to the poem which would provide her with the Gothic imagery that is present in *The Old Nurse's Story*, and the power that makes her tale so compelling and so enduring.

*The Old Nurse's Story* can still be enjoyed simply as a ghost story, as it probably was in December 1852. But with our greater appreciation of the Gothic, and our knowledge of Elizabeth Gaskell's inner life, as expressed in her letters to friends and relations, we can now read the story as an example of nineteenth-century Gothic prose fiction, and one that reflected the author's current fears and anxieties. While the first reading is entertaining, the second one is more rewarding. This second reading demonstrates Elizabeth Gaskell's first major engagement with one particular strand of Romanticism: Gothic prose fiction. It also points us to a likely source for this Gothic tale, a Gothic poem of great power by one of the most distinguished and enduring poets of the High Romantic period: Samuel Taylor Coleridge. It is, furthermore, a poem that focuses on aspects of patriarchy that Gaskell explored in her own story. Gaskell's reasons for choosing the Gothic mode of writing at this time included her need to work through her own fears of patriarchal punishment, as discussed above, and in order to do this she needed a form of writing that would accommodate extreme states of feeling. Her achievement is the production of a very fine piece of Gothic prose

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<sup>33</sup> In the letter to Anne Robson, written in early January 1853, Elizabeth Gaskell says that *Ruth* is 'not a book for young people, unless read with someone older (I mean to read it with MA some quiet time or other;)' (*Gaskell Letters*, p. 221).

<sup>34</sup> Coleridge, *Poems*, pp.187-205; ll. 330-331.

writing. As a Gothic short story it has arguably not been surpassed even by Gaskell herself, although she returned to the Gothic mode in December 1856 with *The Poor Clare*, and in January 1861 with *The Grey Woman*.

### *Cumberland Sheep-Shearers*

This story was first published on 22 January 1853 in *Household Words*.<sup>35</sup> In plot and tone it stands in stark contrast to *The Old Nurse's Story*, and although it was first published in 1853, we cannot know with certainty when it was first written. It shows certain similarities with Elizabeth Gaskell's first short story, *Libbie Marsh's Three Eras*, for both tales involve a physical journey, and in each case the excursion is largely uneventful, but the emotional experiences give significance to the story. A further similarity is the use of literary quotations or allusions. In each story these are numerous and always appropriate. Furthermore, while in both instances a wide range of poets is drawn on, it is the Romantic poets who are predominant and, in particular, Wordsworth, Coleridge and Goethe. The principal difference is that of social milieu, for the first story is set in an urban environment while the second is set in a rural situation, and while the characters in the first story are wage-earners, those of the later text are independent statesmen farmers. *Cumberland Sheep-Shearers* does, therefore, indicate a moving away from the representation of humble life that characterizes the earlier stories by Gaskell, but at the same time it suggests a return to the tone and mood of the first

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<sup>35</sup> Now in Gaskell, *DNW*, pp. 233-247.

story. It is possible that she felt the need for this kind of retreat as an antidote to the strong emotions of *Ruth* and *The Old Nurse's Story*.

Elizabeth Gaskell's Romantic inheritance, as revealed in *Cumberland Sheep-Shearers*, will be discussed here in two ways. The first way will be an examination of her choice and use of literary quotations and allusions in the text. The second way will be through a consideration of the 'sentiment of feeling' and the means by which this sentiment is demonstrated in the text.<sup>36</sup>

The literary quotations and allusions in *Cumberland Sheep-Shearers* are prolific, but the author does not include them solely to demonstrate her literary knowledge, although we as observant readers do recognize this knowledge. They are all chosen with care and each one has its own particular function in the text. The first literary allusion is to Andrew Marvell's poem 'The Garden', written in the seventeenth century.<sup>37</sup> The editor of the anthology, from which this text is taken, claims, on page 171, that Marvell was admired in the nineteenth century for his delight in nature and skill in natural description. Although his poetry pre-dates that of the Romantics by a century and a half, the aspects of his work that so pleased nineteenth-century readers, delight in nature and powers of description, clearly have something in common with the poetry of Wordsworth, and it is not difficult to see why this particular poem would have an impact on Elizabeth Gaskell. 'The Garden' lays no claims to the simple diction proclaimed by

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<sup>36</sup> For a discourse on representations of the sentiment of feeling, see Angus Easson, 'The Sentiment of Feeling: Emotions and Objects in Elizabeth Gaskell', *Gaskell Society Journal*, 4 (1990), pp. 64-78; hereafter *GSJ*.

<sup>37</sup> Andrew Marvell, 'The Garden', in *Eight Metaphysical Poets*, ed. by Jack Dalglish (London: Heinemann, 1961, repr. 1980), pp. 111-113.

Wordsworth, but the tone is both contemplative and sensuous, perhaps reminiscent of the Hollands' garden at Sandlebridge: 'Society is all but rude, | To this delicious Solitude' (15), and 'The Luscious Clusters of the Vine | Upon my Mouth do crush their Wine' (35). The line to which Elizabeth Gaskell alludes in *Cumberland Sheep-Shearers*, 'Annihilating all that's made | To a green Thought in a green Shade' (47), signals a withdrawal from the material world into the world of contemplative thought, and she uses her allusive quotation, 'we came to a part of the highway where it wound between copses sufficiently high to make a green gloom in a green shade' to mark the narrator's passage from the bustling ambience of the town into the rural solitude of the fells which overlook the lake.<sup>38</sup> This allusion to Marvell's poem helps the reader to make the necessary imaginative adjustment as both the scene and the pace of the story change.

There is, quite soon in the narrative, a further change in tone, this time one that is only temporary. As the party of adults and children tackle the steeper part of the ascent to the hill-farm they become short of breath, but to introduce light relief into what might otherwise be too onerous a challenge, the narrator introduces a humorous note: 'When our breath failed us during that steep ascent, we had one invariable dodge by which we hoped to escape the "fat and scant of breath" quotation; we turned round and admired the lovely views' (*DNW*, p.234). These words quoted from *Hamlet* (v. ii. 282), uttered by the Queen during the duel between her son and Laertes, introduce the right note of humour into the story, as the party struggles with the ascent and the heat. Most readers would appreciate

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<sup>38</sup> Gaskell, *DNW*, p. 234.



the humour of this quotation, without necessarily knowing the context of impending tragedy, from which the line is taken.

The visit to the sheep-farm focuses on two principal activities: the sheep-shearing and the preparation of food. It is these two activities that are faithfully described in detail. The preparation of food for the farmworkers and visitors is a monumental task that takes time and the efforts of 'six comely matrons' (*DNW*, p.236). It is while the food is being prepared that the narrator and her party are led to the back of the farm to observe the farming activities. The focal point of the farm's back yard, where the sheep-shearing takes place, is the sycamore tree, for it is here in the shade provided by the tree's foliage, that conversation can take place in comfort. It is this conversation between elderly farmers, and between the narrator and one particular farmer, that yields the vital information which the narrator weaves into the text. The sycamore tree is, therefore, essential to the structure of the story, and it reminds the narrator of the opening lines in Coleridge's poem, 'Inscription for a Fountain on a Heath': 'This sycamore, oft musical with bees,- | Such tents the Patriarchs loved' (Coleridge, *Poems*, 293. 1).<sup>39</sup>

Inscription poems were popular in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and were favoured by Wordsworth and Coleridge. If we include his *Lines left upon a Seat in a Yew-Tree*, Wordsworth composed at least nine poems in this vein, and Coleridge composed three, one of which is a re-working of a

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<sup>39</sup> For Gaskell's allusion to these lines is see *DNW*, p.237.

Wordsworth Inscription poem.<sup>40</sup> All of these Inscription poems have a calming effect on the reader, promoting a mood of repose and rest and offering the promise of spiritual refreshment. They help to create a mood of contemplation that is in contrast with the affairs of everyday life. In *The Sexton's Hero*, Gaskell drew on the sentiment expressed in the opening lines of Wordsworth's *Lines Left upon a Seat in a Yew-Tree*, 'Nay, Traveller! rest', to arrest the attention of the fictional characters and the reader alike, drawing all in to the shade of the tree where conversation can be enjoyed. Although Coleridge composed fewer Inscription poems than Wordsworth, his are arguably more powerful, principally because of the sheer sensuousness of the language. There is a sentiment of a personal nature attributed to his *Inscription for a Fountain on a Heath*, for a transcript of the poem by Sara Hutchinson, Dorothy Wordsworth's sister-in-law and close friend of Coleridge, appears in Sara Hutchinson's commonplace book with revisions by the poet himself.<sup>41</sup> The summer of 1801 was a time of personal crisis for Coleridge, for he was separated from his wife and during a visit to the Lake District he allowed his feelings of affection for Sara Hutchinson, whom he had known since the autumn of 1799, to deepen. Not surprisingly, therefore, the mood of the poem is, like 'The Garden', sensuous: 'Here twilight is and coolness: here is moss, | A soft seat, and a deep and ample shade' (Coleridge, *Poems*, 294.13). But these words, through their suggestion of physical comfort, also

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<sup>40</sup> *Inscription for a Seat by a Roadside, Half Way up a Steep Hill, Facing the South* was composed probably between November 1796 and June 1797, but not published until October 1800 when it appeared in *The Morning Post* with variants attributed to Coleridge. The poem appears in Wordsworth, *Poems I*, 243-244, and in Coleridge, *Poems*, pp. 289-290. For the history of this poem see Wordsworth, *Poems I*, p. 940, and Coleridge, *Poems*, p.547.

<sup>41</sup> The introductory note to Coleridge's *Inscription for a Fountain on a Heath*, states that it was first published in the *Morning Post* for 24 September 1801, and reprinted in the *Poetical Register*, in which it appeared several times between 1802 and 1834. The same note refers to the transcript of the poem (Coleridge, *Poems*, p. 549).

suggest an opportunity for prolonged private thought, the kind that would be needed to consider, and perhaps resolve, a personal crisis.

Elizabeth Gaskell had ample opportunity to become well acquainted with the poem since it was included in *Poetical Works*, which was published in three volumes in 1828, and it appeared in the *Poetical Register* as late as 1834. These dates suggest that it is likely to have been one of the poems by Coleridge that she worked on in the parlour of the Hollands' farmhouse in the summer of 1836. The poem clearly made a deep impression on her and remained a favourite, for she made it central to the structure of *Cumberland Sheep-Shearers*. The sycamore tree in this story is the spot where the patriarchal farmers gather, but it also provides comfort and shade for the weary traveller, who has survived the steep ascent to the farm, and who must still face the long walk home. The poem also illustrates the way in which the visit to the Sheep-Shearing is a pilgrimage for the narrator and her family, for the tree marks the site of spiritual refreshment as well as physical comfort.

To highlight the spiritual aspect of the sheep-shearing, Elizabeth Gaskell quotes from the same Psalm as the one she referred to in *Libbie Marsh's Three Eras*: 'Both young men, and maidens; old men, and children' (Psalm 148.12). This quotation takes us back to the earlier short story and the excursion to Dunham Woods which had also been a kind of pilgrimage. The two stories are linked by the way in which the author makes a connection between religion and nature. The Lord is praised for his creation but the praise is enacted, as it is also in *The Heart*

of *John Middleton*, in natural surroundings rather than in a consecrated building. This is a recurring theme in Elizabeth Gaskell's fiction, and one that was central to the Romantics' approach to religion.

Although the sheep-shearing is described in detail, there is another important activity that is closely observed: the preparation and consumption of food. The food is plentiful and varied and the meal is a social occasion as well as a means of sustenance. Elizabeth Gaskell quite often focuses closely on mealtimes in her fiction. In *Mary Barton*, she describes the items which Mrs Barton sends Mary out to buy: the fresh eggs, Cumberland ham, fresh bread, and milk, all items bought without hesitation because paid employment is at that time plentiful.<sup>42</sup> In *Libbie Marsh's Three Eras*, we are offered a similar scene, one in which Mrs Dixon sends her daughter out to buy eggs to add to the cream, ham, and fresh bread. There is a hint of disapproval on the part of the author here, for she has Libbie wondering at the extravagance of such food, an extravagance that is explained by the narrator as the consequence of poor working conditions which have killed the appetite for simpler food.<sup>43</sup> In *Company Manners*, Elizabeth Gaskell compares English modes of entertaining with those in Paris, noting that in England the food, which she describes in detail, is abundant and its consumption the principal activity, while in the Paris salons, although the food is plentiful, it is the conversation and socializing that is important.<sup>44</sup> In these three texts the food is described in detail and in at least two there is an element of moral judgement,

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<sup>42</sup> *MB*, Ryburn, p. 42.

<sup>43</sup> Gaskell, *DNW*, p. 169.

<sup>44</sup> *Company Manners*, in Elizabeth Gaskell, *Ruth and Other Tales, &c*, Knutsford edn (London: Smith, Elder, 1906), pp. 491-513. *Company Manners* was first published in *Household Words* in 1854.

either on the extravagance of a factory worker's household, or on the very limited ideas of an English hostess. In her representation of the feast in *Cumberland Sheep-Shearers*, Gaskell goes beyond description and avoids moral judgement to bring out the emotional experience of the narrator and her children. This part of the story begins as naturalistic description of the food and other refreshments: cakes, bread-and-butter, cheese, and a special blend of green and black tea. But two of the items on offer are not to the taste of the visiting party: the strong tea and the local sweet butter.<sup>45</sup> Although these items could simply have been left untouched, or politely refused, they are reluctantly eaten, an act that gives rise to a discomfort that contributes to the emotional experience of the day. The children's distaste is shown by their 'piteous eyes and trembling lips' (*DNW*, p.241), as they struggle to observe the convention of good manners by trying to swallow what they so disliked. The narrator, observing her children's dilemma, is forced into stealth in order to save her children from further discomfort and to spare the feelings of her hostess. This little drama illustrates perfectly the awkwardness of a situation in which the expectations of hostess and visitor are incompatible. In a novel of manners the drama might be expected to do no more than point to the difference between town and country tastes in food, but here it also illustrates the relationship between the sensitive mother and her well-brought up children. The reader knows that future recollections of this outing will always be associated, in the minds of the children, with feelings of nausea but also of

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<sup>45</sup> Sweet butter is conventional dairy butter but with the added ingredients of rum and sugar; it is so described in *Cumberland Sheep-Shearers* (*DNW*, p. 241), and in Elizabeth Gaskell, 'Martha Preston' *Sartain's Union Magazine*, 6 (1850), 133-138 (p.138); hereafter *SUM*.

gratitude to their caring mother, while the maternal narrator will be guiltily reminded of her own furtive behaviour.

Given that food preparation is an essential part of the day's activity, for the shearers and their families must be fed, most of the action inevitably takes place in either the kitchen or in the back yard, which accommodates additional cooking facilities as well as providing space for the shearing. But the narrator observes more than sheep-shearing and food preparation: she senses a love interest between two young farming folk, and reveals this interest as one thread in the tapestry of farming life. This love interest is very different in tone from the passionate and injudicious love that features in *The Old Nurse's Story*. As a conception of young love it is also very different from Crabbe's portrayal of rural romance, for it is not a hasty or improvident passion. Neither is it quite an arranged marriage that is in the offing, but it is a highly practical arrangement and one that is fostered by the parents of the two young people. Although this can strike the reader as unwarranted parental interference, the narrator intervenes to reveal the caring side of the girl's mother by the way in which she is shown to bestow affection on an orphan child. This brief incident in which Isabel's mother embraces the child, and in which we learn something of the child's history, suspends the forward narrative to reveal something of the inner life of the older woman. Her heart is in the right place, and we recognize the fact that she merely wants the best for her daughter. To convey the feelings of the two young people caught up in the match-making exercise, an even greater delicacy of touch is required on the part of the author. Isabel's resistance is indicated by the way in

which she avoids the company of her pursuing lover in favour of the crowd of older women gathered round the boiler in the yard. To convey the feelings of the young man, who is putting up far less resistance to the match, the author introduces into the scene an activity which may remind the reader of a scene from Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*.<sup>46</sup> This is the moment in Goethe's novel when Werther, who has just been warned about the beauty and charm of the young lady he is about to meet, first sets his eyes on the unobtainable Charlotte. Like Isabel, Charlotte is engaged in domestic activity, for she is surrounded by children, and crucially she is cutting slices of bread for the children's supper. Isabel only pretends to be cutting bread and butter, to avoid the attentions of Tom, but in spite of this, and although there is no direct reference on the part of the author to *Werther*, this action mirrors the one in Goethe's novel of feeling. In both texts the sentiment of feeling has been attached to food, and in particular, that most basic of foods: bread. This feeling has nothing to do with the palate, or simple enjoyment of the food, it is instead an association of another kind of feeling: romantic love and all its implications, and this has given the bread an added value, over and above its nutritional worth. There is no doubt that Elizabeth Gaskell knew Goethe's novel, for she refers to it explicitly and to great effect in *Sylvia's Lovers* to draw a parallel between Werther's feelings for Charlotte and Philip's feelings for Sylvia. Furthermore, it is the image of Charlotte cutting bread and butter, and Sylvia's reaction to this, that she singles out for special attention.<sup>47</sup> In *Cumberland Sheep-Shearers*, and in *Sylvia's Lovers*,

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<sup>46</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, trans. by Michael Hulse from Goethe's revised 1787 text (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989), pp. 37-38; hereafter Goethe, *Werther*.

<sup>47</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, *Sylvia's Lovers*, The Knutsford Edition (London: Smith, Elder, 1906), pp.260-261. *Sylvia's Lovers* was first published, by Smith, Elder, in 1863.

Gaskell draws on Goethe to illustrate the painful hidden feelings of young love by associating a particular, though common, activity with these feelings. In that most everyday of activities, cutting bread, it is the feeling that has given importance to the action.

These allusions to *Werther* help us to identify Gaskell's reaction to this most contentious of novels. The book provoked controversy from its first appearance in Germany in 1774. It captured the public imagination to such an extent that visual representations of the young Werther appeared in the form of drawings and engravings on everyday objects, and young men who could afford to do so copied Werther's mode of dress. Imitation of this kind is harmless enough, but an increase in suicide among young people was also attributed to the book. Werther's act of suicide was the aspect of the novel that caused the most controversy. In Germany, the older generation of Enlightenment writers expressed dismay at this act of what they perceived to be irrationalism. The younger 'Storm and Stress' generation of writers, however, admired the work for its emotional truthfulness. In England the novel's appearance filled a gap in the market for imaginative literature. Major eighteenth-century novelists, such as Fielding, Smollett, and Richardson, were all dead when *Werther* first appeared. Goldsmith and Gray, who had helped to pave the way for Romantic poetry, were also dead, and William Wordsworth was not yet a schoolboy. But eighteenth-century novelists and poets of sensibility had promoted a favourable reception for *Werther*, for readers were accustomed to the epistolary novel and to poetic representations of sensibility. So although the act of suicide provoked



controversy, the foregrounding of feeling made the book popular. English writers as diverse as Charlotte Smith and George Crabbe responded to *Werther*, though both Smith and Crabbe attributed an additional sentiment to *Werther*, one that does not appear in the novel, for in their own poetry they have Charlotte mourning over Werther's grave. Smith specialized in the composition of elegiac sonnets and the following lines illustrate her own response to *Werther*:

Make there my tomb; beneath the lime-trees shade,  
 Where grass and flowers in wild luxuriance wave;  
 Let no memorial mark where I am laid,  
 Or point to common eyes the lover's grave!  
 But oft at twilight morn, or closing day,  
 The faithful friend, with fault'ring step shall glide,  
 Tributes of fond regret by stealth to pay,  
 And sigh o'er the unhappy suicide.  
 And sometimes, when the Sun with parting rays  
 Gilds the long grass that hides my silent bed,  
 The tears shall tremble in my CHARLOTTE's eyes;  
 Dear, precious drops! — they shall embalm the dead;  
 Yes! CHARLOTTE o'er the mournful spot shall weep,  
 Where her poor WERTER — and his sorrows sleep.<sup>48</sup>

The opening lines of this sonnet bring to mind the closing lines of another, but much later, novel of doomed love: Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, in which the narrator, after reaching the three head-stones on the moor, says he 'watched the moths fluttering among the heath and harebells'. Images of graveside weeping, one of which was also incorporated by Crabbe into *The Parish Register*

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<sup>48</sup> These lines are reproduced in Goethe, *Werther*, pp. 14-15.

(‘And Charlotte here, bewails her lover dead’), represented the extremity of sentimental reaction to the novel. These examples of extreme reaction suggest ways in which the strong feelings of *Werther* entered into the collective consciousness of readers and developed a momentum of their own. This kind of reaction, however, has its roots in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, and was supplanted in the mid-nineteenth century by a more cynical reaction as illustrated by Thackeray’s parody, composed in the same year as *Cumberland Sheep-Shearers*:<sup>49</sup>

Werther had a love for Charlotte,  
 Such as words could never utter,  
 Would you know how first he met her?  
 She was cutting bread and butter.

Charlotte was a married lady,  
 And a moral man was Werther,  
 And for all the wealth of Indies  
 Would do nothing that might hurt her.

So he sighed and pined and ogled,  
 And his passion boiled and bubbled;  
 Till he blew his silly brains out,  
 And no more was by them troubled.

Charlotte, having seen his body  
 Borne before her on a shutter,  
 Like a well conducted person  
 Went on cutting bread and butter.

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<sup>49</sup> This poem by Thackeray is reproduced in Goethe, *Werther*, p. 137.

Elizabeth Gaskell's own response to *Werther* shows her to be neither excessively sentimental nor in any way cynical. While she would, in all probability, have deplored the act of suicide, and while, unlike Charlotte Smith and others, she did not attribute more to the novel than Goethe intended, she did recognize the strength of feeling that is expressed in *Werther*. In *Sylvia's Lovers* she also demonstrated the possible danger of unbridled feeling for, in the case of Philip, it leads to behaviour which, though not suicidal, is still cowardly because it is less than honest. It is Philip's dishonesty over Kinraid's capture by the press-gangs that leads to the ultimate tragedy of his own death and to Sylvia's isolation. In *Cumberland Sheep-Shearers* Gaskell takes a young man, Tom, who is attracted to the world of domesticity represented by Isabel, as Werther is to Charlotte's world. Gaskell also recognizes Tom's relationship to the society in which he must find his future happiness. Tom has not been rejected by another social group, as Werther had been but, like Werther, he must find a niche for himself and this niche must be within the context of the agricultural community. To find a mature place in this society he must accept a certain degree of pragmatism, for his aim can only be achieved through a judicious marriage. Nonetheless, his 'woe-begone' face in response to Isabel's avoidance of his company indicates that far from being resentful about the marriage arrangements, he views Isabel as his heart's desire. Gaskell shows here that she recognizes the needs of pragmatism, but also the powerful inner feelings of the participants of this romantic drama.

To return the reader's attention to the main purpose of the day, the sheep-shearing, the narrator turns away from the great steaming boilers, and the female domestic activities, to return to the sycamore tree where, in the comfort of its shade, she engages one of the patriarchal farmers in conversation about the business of sheep-farming. This is a conscious move away from the world of 'comely matrons' and matchmaking to the space that is principally occupied by the menfolk, for the narrator is entering the world of male conversation about trade and, in particular, the price of wool. To bridge this gap between the two spheres, and to illustrate the seasonal nature and rhythm of sheep-farming, the author refers to a shepherd's calendar: 'And so the Shepherd's Calendar works round to yeaning time again!' (*DNW*, p.246). The explanatory notes, on page 322, state that this is an allusion either to Edmund Spenser's pastoral poem, *The Shepheardes Calendar* (1579) or 'more probably' to John Clare's poem, first published during the Romantic period in 1827. It is, however, more likely that Elizabeth Gaskell had in mind Spenser's poem, since Clare's poetry was out of print during her adult lifetime. However, in either case the notion of a shepherd's calendar serves to remind the narrator of the seasons and the inevitable return of lambing time. But while these thoughts promote images of idealised rural life, as expressed in the lines of Wordsworth and quoted here by Elizabeth Gaskell: 'In that fair clime, the lonely herdsman, stretched | On the soft grass through half the summer's day' (*The Excursion* IV, 851), the farmer's complaint of falling wool prices due to Australian imports signals a change in tone. Market forces herald uncertainty, and it is on a note of uncertainty that the tale ends. There is no

closure to this story for when the reader closes the pages nothing has been decided.

This story could have been no more than a detailed account of one day in the life of a farming community. It has, however, been far more than that. The narrator has taken the reader on an excursion, and one that has been more than merely physical. Through the judicious use of literary allusions the narrator has suggested the changes in ambience, from town to country, and from farm-yard bustle to the canopied contemplation under the sycamore tree. Literary allusions have provided images of a rural idyll, but also of seasonal change. We have caught a glimpse of the tender feelings between the two young people and the maternal side to a woman's character, belying her apparently casual attitude towards her daughter's future happiness. The narrator's innermost concerns for her children, concerns that could not be voiced to her hostess for fear of giving offence, have also been revealed. By drawing on her Romantic inheritance through the poetry she loved, and through the sentiment of feeling that is central to Romanticism, Elizabeth Gaskell transformed what could have been solely naturalistic description, bordering on documentary text, into a story that reveals in a subtle way the fluxes and refluxes of human feeling and response, thus giving added value to all of the activities and observations of the day's excursion. As with *Libbie Marsh's Three Eras*, the outing in *Cumberland Sheep-Shearers* has been more than a physical adventure for the participants: it has been an emotional education, for participants and readers alike.

### *Half a Life-Time Ago*

This story was first published in three parts in *Household Words* in October 1855.<sup>50</sup> This was the year in which Elizabeth Gaskell completed her third full-length novel, *North and South*, which Dickens also published serially in *Household Words*. *Half a Life-Time Ago* is a re-working of the earlier *Martha Preston*, which had been published in *Sartain's Union Magazine* in 1850.<sup>51</sup> While it is not the main purpose of this discussion to give a detailed account of the differences between the two versions, it will be necessary to bear in mind the principal differences. Both stories claim to have a factual basis, but they were written for different markets since *Sartain's Union Magazine* was an American journal and *Household Words* was published in London with a British readership in mind.<sup>52</sup> Five and a half years elapsed between the appearance of *Martha Preston* and the appearance of *Half a Life-Time Ago*, and the later text shows the benefit of greater experience in a greater maturity of writing. During those years Elizabeth Gaskell published a dozen short stories, and five articles. She also published her second full-length novel, *Ruth*, and started her third novel, *North and South*. Clearly, this amount of successful writing had the effect of increasing her skill as a writer, but given the fact that she was a very sociable person with a wide range of friends and acquaintances, she also increased her experience of life during these years. Furthermore, as her circle of acquaintances included many

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<sup>50</sup> Now in Gaskell, *CP*, pp. 59-102.

<sup>51</sup> By the author of "Mary Barton", 'Martha Preston', *SUM*, 6, pp. 133-138.

<sup>52</sup> For a discussion of the connection between *Martha Preston* and *Half a Life-Time Ago*, and the factual basis of the main events in both stories, see Sharps, pp. 243-244. Of further interest is the fact that although *Household Words* was published in America, this was done principally to avoid piracy.

people of a literary background, her cultural education was broadened during this time through discussion and through access to books, many of which she would have read on recommendation. I would argue, therefore, that her wider experience of life and increased knowledge of literature were important factors in the transformation of *Martha Preston* to *Half a Life-Time Ago*. This transformation involves significant changes to the narrative method and to the plot of the story. The narrator of the earlier story concentrates on giving a descriptive account of events, which she has learnt from another source, but the narrator of the later story succeeds in penetrating the inner lives of the characters, which gives the story greater emotional power. In each story, the principal characters are the same in number, although the names are changed, so that Martha Preston becomes Susan Dixon and William Hawkshaw becomes Michael Hurst. The young brother, initially John Preston, becomes Will Dixon. But there is an additional supporting character in *Half a Life-Time Ago*: Peggy, the loyal household servant. With regard to the plot, events which are referred to only briefly in the earlier story are examined more fully in the later story. One such event is the death of the mother, which in *Martha Preston* is given less significance than the death of the father. In the earlier story it is the father who charges his daughter to take care of her brother, while in *Half a Life-Time Ago*, it is the mother who extracts this promise from the daughter. Another event which is treated differently is the heroine's rescue mission on the fells one winter night. In *Martha Preston*, it is the child of Martha's former lover who is lost and saved, but in *Half a Life-Time Ago* it is the former lover himself who is lost, and fatally so. Consequently, while Martha Preston finds comfort through her relationship

with the child she has rescued, and subsequently provides him and his wife with their first marital home, Susan Dixon immediately takes on the responsibility of providing a home and sustenance for Michael Hurst's widow and children. The most important difference, however, is the one that stems from the role of the young man, William Hawkshaw in *Martha Preston*, and Michael Hurst in *Half a Life-Time Ago*. Not only is the young man's character revealed more fully in the later story, but more significantly, his character and his actions shape the plot of *Half a Life-Time Ago* and it is the nature of this shaping that makes the later story stand out as a text that is significantly different from the earlier story. To sum up, it seems fair to say that *Martha Preston* contains the germ of *Half a Life-Time Ago* and this germ consists of the principal characters and the main events. Principal events which are common to both texts are the death of the parents, the mental deterioration of the young brother, and the young man's decision to end his relationship with the daughter of this household. In the later story these events are treated differently and given greater significance. In order to achieve these differences, and to reveal their significance, the characters are explored more fully.

The geographical location of *Half a Life-Time Ago* suggests in the reader's mind a return to Wordsworth country and to Wordsworthian ideas. We are in Cumberland again and in the same part of that county as *Cumberland Sheep-Shearers*: central Cumberland bordered by Keswick and Derwent Water to the north, and Ambleside and the Langdale fells to the south.<sup>53</sup> The Dixon family in

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<sup>53</sup> In *Martha Preston*, the narrator describes a view of 'Wordsworth's favourite Loughrigg tarn; the "Speculum Diannæ"', which she passes on her way to Martha Preston's cottage (*SUM*, 6,



*Half a Life-Time Ago* are of the same social status as the sheep-shearers, for they are substantial statesmen farmers, as opposed to subsistence farmers. The Dixons could even be one of the families that attended the sheep-shearing event on the hill-farm overlooking Derwent Water, since sheep-shearing, like Christmas, represents one of the few opportunities for socialising (CP, p.61). Other aspects of *Half a Life-Time Ago* that suggest a Wordsworthian influence include Willie Dixon's mental affliction following his illness, for this is reminiscent of Johnny Foy's condition in *The Idiot Boy*. There are also echoes of Wordsworth's *Michael* because of the importance of inherited farmland, and because of the isolated situation of Green-head Gill and of the Dixon farm: both properties can be reached only by turning from the public way. It is also likely that Elizabeth Gaskell drew on Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* for *Half a Life-Time Ago*, for it is the essential passions of the human heart that are central to this story. While this is the case with all of her best writing, these passions are presented in a particularly concentrated way in this text. Here, Gaskell explores the passion of human love in four of its guises. The first is love between mother and daughter, a bond which sets in motion all the ensuing events and actions of the story. The second is the protective love of the older sister for the younger and weaker brother, a bond that stems partly from the promise made by the daughter to her dying mother. The third kind of love is the conventional romantic love between a young man and woman, based on physical attraction and companionship. The fourth kind is that between two women who are not bound by any kind of blood relationship. The first example of this kind of love is that

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p.133). In *Half a Life-Time Ago*, the Dixon farmstead is located on the Oxenfell road, between Skelwith and Coniston (CP, p. 59).

which Peggy, the servant, shows to Susan Dixon, and the second example is the unexpected and entirely Christian love which Susan bestows on Michael Hurst's widow at the conclusion of the story. In addition to these essential passions, we see the influence of Wordsworth's Preface in the way in which feeling gives importance to the action and situation, most notably the incident in which Susan works off her feelings of hurt and anger by making clap-bread late at night in the farm-kitchen. Furthermore, it is the Wordsworthian fluxes and refluxes of emotion that provide the central interest in the story: the journey and adventure of Susan Dixon's heart, while the external landscape remains unchanged, apart from the effect of the seasons. The means by which these fluxes and refluxes are revealed will be considered and discussed later in this section. But before moving on to this aspect of the story, it is worth considering other kinds of intertextuality that are present here, over and above the influence of Wordsworth.

The first kind of intertextuality that becomes apparent in a close reading of *Half a Life-Time Ago* is the relationship between this story and certain other short stories written earlier by Elizabeth Gaskell. Recalling *The Well of Pen-Morfa*, the geographical location is quite different, but we see plot similarities, since in each case there is a young man who is driven by a desire for material goods and material improvement in life; the young man breaks off an engagement when the circumstances of the girl, whom he had intended to marry, change for the worse; and the young woman is left to come to terms with a life of spinsterhood and feelings of rejection. To complete the plot similarity, Susan Dixon, like Nest Gwynn, finds solace by looking after another woman, one less fortunate than

herself. We even begin to notice certain structural similarities between some of Gaskell's short stories: Libbie Marsh's life is divided into three eras; Nest Gwynn's life, as discussed in Chapter Four of this thesis, falls into three distinct emotional phases. In *Half a Life-Time Ago*, chapter four closes with words that prepare the reader for the conclusion: 'But there was a third act in the drama of her life'. The first two acts had included the time before typhus devastated the Dixon family, and the time during which Susan came to terms with her brother's disability. To return to plot similarities, and in particular the way in which the characters of the young men are revealed, we cannot fail to see that Susan Dixon's sweetheart, like Nest Gwynn's, has sound practical reasons for ending the relationship. It is rare for a young man to be expected to marry a girl who has responsibility for a mentally deranged brother, or to take a severely disabled young woman as a farming wife. But in the later and more mature story, *Half a Life-Time Ago*, Gaskell develops the plot to ascribe greater moral strength to the rejected girl, for Susan Dixon's character develops in a way that Nest Gwynn's does not; and a greater moral decline to the perpetrator of rejection, for Michael Hurst ultimately degenerates in a way that Edward Williams does not. I intend to argue here that Gaskell ascribes moral strength to Susan's emotional attachment, derived from her promise to her dying mother, and moral weakness to Michael's hard reasoning and materialism. This brings me to the third and final example of intertextuality in *Half a Life-Time Ago*: the possible influence of William Blake and *The Book of Urizen* (1794).<sup>54</sup> I intend to examine here the possibility that

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<sup>54</sup> For *The Book of Urizen* see William Blake, *The Complete Poems*, ed. by Alicia Ostriker (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), pp. 242-258, together with notes on pp. 913-918; hereafter Blake, *Poems*. For Gaskell's references to Blake's manuscripts see *Gaskell Letters*, pp. 389 and 398.

Elizabeth Gaskell drew on some of Blake's ideas when she wrote *Half a Life-Time Ago*. To the best of my knowledge this is a completely new idea and not derived from, or influenced by, any existing literary criticism. There are difficulties in pursuing my argument, but I believe there are ways of overcoming them. These difficulties, and my approach to them, will be discussed in the ensuing paragraphs.

During most of Elizabeth Gaskell's lifetime Blake was not well known at all, but he was best known for his visual art. Very little of his writing was available in printed form and there were very few, if any, critical reviews of his poetry. Blake printed, bound, and sold some of his works himself, but in very small numbers. Substantial quantities of his writing remained in manuscript throughout the nineteenth century. It was not until 1863, when Alexander Gilchrist published his *Life of William Blake, 'Pictor Ignotus'* that Blake became widely known as both a poet and an engraver.<sup>55</sup> So although Blake's literary output ran roughly parallel with that of Wordsworth and Coleridge, his work remained less accessible than that of the other major Romantic poets. It is unlikely that William or Elizabeth Gaskell would have been able to borrow, purchase, or receive as a gift, a copy of Blake's poetry, and neither would they have read reviews of his writings in the journals which they regularly consulted, the *Edinburgh Review* and the *Quarterly Review*. This, however, does not mean that they would have been unaware of Blake's reputation as a visual artist, or as a writer of poetry, for in April 1834, the *Edinburgh Review* included a review of Allan Cunningham's *The Lives of the*

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<sup>55</sup> Alexander Gilchrist, *Life of William Blake: 'Pictor Ignotus'*, 2 vols (London and Cambridge: Macmillan, 1863); hereafter Gilchrist. I owe this reference to *William Blake: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by G. E. Bentley Jr (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), p.10; hereafter *Blake Heritage*.

*most Eminent British Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* (1830).<sup>56</sup> This monumental work was probably the most significant means by which readers such as the Gaskells would have learnt something of Blake's poetry. The entire series of *Lives* by Cunningham was very popular, and volume II was so well received that a second edition came out within the first year of publication. Volume II includes chapters on Benjamin West, James Barry, William Blake, John Opie, George Morland, Edward Bird and Henry Fuseli, in that order. The longest chapter, consisting of eighty-two pages, is devoted to the life and work of the Irish-born artist James Barry. The shortest chapter, consisting of seventeen pages, is devoted to the life and work of another painter, Edward Bird. The chapter on William Blake consists of thirty-seven pages, making this the third longest chapter in the book. From the beginning of his chapter on Blake, Cunningham makes it clear that he intends writing about Blake as an artist and as a poet, and, commenting on Blake's skill in uniting poetry and painting in his compositions, he argues that Blake is a poet of some distinction. He does, however, in his second edition of volume II, differentiate between Blake's ambitious visionary verse and his more readily understood pastoral poetry:

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<sup>56</sup> Allan Cunningham, *The Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, 6 vols (London: Murray, 1830-1833), hereafter Cunningham. The chapter on William Blake is on pages 142-179 in vol II of the first edition, and on pages 143-188 in vol II of the expanded second edition (1830). Cunningham's work was reviewed by T H Lister in *Edinburgh Review*, 119 (1834); Lister's comments on Blake are on pp. 53 and 64. All six volumes of Cunningham are recorded in the Catalogue of the Portico Library Manchester (Manchester: Harrison, 1845), p. 118, and in the Catalogue of the Portico Library, Manchester (Manchester: Cave and Sever, 1856), p.189. The Portico Library's Minute Book records the decision to order volumes one and two of Cunningham on 6 August 1829. It is volume two that includes a chapter on Blake. This item is also recorded in the Minute Book as having been received. All six volumes of Cunningham are still held in the Portico Library.

He wrought much and slept little, and has left volumes of verse, amounting, it is said, to nearly an hundred, prepared for the press. If they are as wild and mystical as the poetry of his *Urizen*, they are as well in manuscript — if they are as natural and touching as many of his songs of *Innocence*, a judicious selection might be safely published.<sup>57</sup>

Blake's *Songs of Innocence* were composed between 1784 and 1790. The subject matter and simple diction of these verses brings to mind some of Wordsworth's poetry, especially the poems found in *Lyrical Ballads*. Not surprisingly, therefore, when Wordsworth was introduced to a selection of Blake's poetry, through B. H. Malkin's *A Father's Memoirs of his Child* (1806), in which a selection of Blake's shorter poems was reprinted, he copied these poems into his commonplace book. On the basis of this selection, Wordsworth told Henry Crabb Robinson that he considered Blake's poetry to be superior to Byron's or Scott's.<sup>58</sup>

The following lines from 'The Shepherd' in *Songs of Innocence* illustrate possible reasons for Wordsworth's praise:

How sweet is the Shepherds sweet lot,  
 From the morn to the evening he strays:  
 He shall follow his sheep all the day  
 And his tongue shall be filled with praise.

(Blake, *Poems*, 105. 1-4)

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<sup>57</sup> A comprehensive selection of Cunningham's comments on Blake is included in *Blake Heritage*, pp. 170-198; the quotation given above is on page 198. The quotation is taken from Cunningham, 2nd ed. II, p.188. Since the second edition includes additional material, not available in the first edition, the paragraph referred to in this footnote is not included in the first edition, which is the one found in the Portico Library.

<sup>58</sup> *Blake Heritage*, p. 47.

From the observer's point of view at least, there is little, if any, falsehood of description here. But 'The Shepherd', Wordsworthian though it may seem to us, is not one of Blake's poems that found particular favour with Wordsworth. More surprisingly, it was 'Laughing Song' in *Songs of Innocence*, from which the following extract is taken, that found a place in Wordsworth's commonplace book:<sup>59</sup>

When the green woods laugh, with the voice of joy  
And the dimpling stream runs laughing by,  
When the air does laugh with our merry wit,  
And the green hill laughs with the noise of it.

(Blake, *Poems*, 109. 1-4)

These lines, because of their reliance on personification as a means of poetic effect, are not ones that we would expect to be favoured by Wordsworth, for he had stated an aversion to this kind of language in his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*.<sup>60</sup> Nevertheless, we can see that the ultimate sentiment of this poem, a celebration of the simple joys of nature, would almost inevitably win praise from Wordsworth.

Cunningham includes a study of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* in his chapter on Blake, and given that Elizabeth Gaskell was acquainted with Cunningham's work, it is easy to imagine that she too would have been drawn to Blake's poetic depictions of rural life. Cunningham's praise is not restricted to *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, for he finds much to admire in 'To the

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<sup>59</sup> *Blake Heritage*, p. 47.

<sup>60</sup> Wordsworth explains that while he does not wish to censure 'personifications of abstract ideas', such language is, in his view, incompatible with the 'very language of men', and, therefore, unsuitable for his poetry in *Lyrical Ballads* (Wordsworth, *LB*, p. 250).

Muses' and the longer dramatic poem of *King Edward the Third*, both of which were published in 1783 as part of *Poetical Sketches*. Cunningham reproduces the whole of 'To the Muses' and twenty-five lines from *King Edward the Third*. Commenting on Blake's address to the Muses, he asserts that this is a common theme, but one that is sung here in 'no common manner', and when commenting on *King Edward the Third*, he selects for special praise, the 'deep melody and poetic thought'. Cunningham also expresses admiration for 'The Tyger', which, as part of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, was issued in 1794.<sup>61</sup> When discussing this poem, he selects for special praise the poem's 'living images'. 'The Tyger' is of course one of Blake's *Songs of Experience* but Cunningham also reproduces, in its entirety, the 'Introduction' to *Songs of Innocence*. This poem consists of five verses but it should suffice to reproduce just the first verse here:

Piping down the valleys wild  
 Piping songs of pleasant glee  
 On a cloud I saw a child.  
 And he laughing said to me.

(Blake, *Poems*, 104. 1-4)

Cunningham reproduces this poem as part of his discussion of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, a work which he praises for its originality and naturalness. He praises the 'Introduction' to *Songs of Innocence* for the sweetness of the verses.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> *Poetical Sketches* was printed for Blake by John Flaxman and the Rev. A. S. Mathew in 1783, but not publicly distributed. *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* were issued as a combined volume in 1794, the same year in which *Europe* and *The Book of Urizen* were engraved ('Table of Dates', Blake, *Poems*, pp. 11 and 12).

<sup>62</sup> For Cunningham's extracts from *Poetical Sketches* and from *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, see Cunningham, 1st ed. II. 144-146 and 150.



So much for *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, and their qualities of naturalness as well as originality. But Cunningham's book also introduced readers to some of Blake's 'wild and mystical' ideas, and in particular to *The Book of Urizen*. On this poem Cunningham's views were firm from the outset, for he wrote in the first edition to volume II, 'If there be mystery in the meaning of the Gates of Paradise, his succeeding performance, by name URIZEN, has the merit or the fault of surpassing all human comprehension'.<sup>63</sup> An assertion as unequivocal as this would be almost certain to promote interest in the work, especially in the minds of those who, like Elizabeth Gaskell, were willing to engage in challenging ideas. Not surprisingly, then, in his *Introduction to Blake: The Critical Heritage*, G. E. Bentley Jr asserts that *Urizen* was one of the few books by Blake to be discussed in the poet's lifetime.<sup>64</sup> Such discussion would have been fairly limited to a small circle of literary people, but significantly this group included a friend of Elizabeth Gaskell's: Richard Monckton Milnes. Other members of this circle were Henry Crabb Robinson, Walter Savage Landor, Wordsworth, and of course, the author, poet, and biographer, Allan Cunningham. Monckton Milnes, however, is likely to have been the main link between Elizabeth Gaskell and *The Book of Urizen*, for two reasons. The first reason is that in January 1852, Monckton Milnes bought an item from a book sale at Sotheby's for which he paid £8.15s. The item was *Urizen*.<sup>65</sup> But this was not an isolated incident of Milnes buying a Blake, on the contrary, Milnes built up a substantial collection of Blake's works. The size and scope of this collection is best

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<sup>63</sup> Cunningham, 1st ed. II. 153-154.

<sup>64</sup> *Blake Heritage*, p. 6.

<sup>65</sup> *Blake Heritage*, p. 252.

illustrated by the fact that in 1903, eighteen years after his father's death, Milnes's son sold eighteen lots of Blake's works which had formerly been in the possession of his father. Bidders had plenty to choose from, for the lots included not only water colour drawings, engravings and pulls of woodcuts, but also several editions of Blake's books. Milnes was clearly an enthusiast of Blake's work and, furthermore, he was willing to share his enthusiasm and knowledge, for he took the Victorian poet Algernon Swinburne under his wing as a willing student. Milnes's tuition was so effective that Swinburne subsequently wrote an important critique on Blake, *William Blake: A Critical Essay* (1868).<sup>66</sup> Swinburne was not the first person to come to Blake through Milnes, for as early as 1838 Milnes wrote to Aubrey de Vere referring to Tennyson, Carlyle, and Froude, and then asking his correspondent if he had seen any of Blake's poetry. Milnes goes on to say in this letter that he is thinking of publishing a selection of Blake's poems, which will 'astonish those who are astoundable by anything of this kind'.<sup>67</sup> Clearly, Milnes was one of the few people during the pre-Gilchrist days to have a sound knowledge and real appreciation of a poet whose reputation was still to be made, and this brings us to the second reason for a link between Elizabeth Gaskell and Blake: Elizabeth Gaskell's good fortune in knowing Monckton Milnes personally. In response to an invitation from Milnes, she joined him and other guests for breakfast at his house in May 1849, and she maintained a friendship

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<sup>66</sup> This essay originated as an article on Gilchrist's *Life*. For an account of this essay and for an account of Milnes's influence on Swinburne see James Pope-Hennessy, *Monckton Milnes: The Flight of Youth, 1851-1885* (London: Constable, 1951), pp. 151-152. For an assessment of the merits of Swinburne's essay, and of other nineteenth-century critiques of Blake, see *Blake Heritage*, p. 19.

<sup>67</sup> T. Wemyss Reid, *The Life, Letters and Friendships of Richard Monckton Milnes, First Lord Houghton*, 2 vols (London, Paris & Melbourne: Cassell, 1890), I. 220-221.

with him and his wife throughout the remainder of her lifetime.<sup>68</sup> The indications are that through this friendship with Monckton Milnes, Elizabeth Gaskell would have had the opportunity to learn more about Blake and in particular, the 'wild and mystical' poetry of works such as *The Book of Urizen*. The informality of the relationship between Elizabeth Gaskell and Monckton Milnes can be seen by the manner in which she wrote to him in May 1856. In this letter she refers to arrangements made previously, and to an earlier visit, and asks if she might bring her daughter Meta to see some of Monckton Milnes's works by Blake.<sup>69</sup> While this request is likely to have referred to Blake's engravings, her interest in the painter's writings is suggested by her reference, in July of the same year, to the Blake manuscripts which, she says, Mr Milnes had lately given her to read.<sup>70</sup> If Elizabeth Gaskell had wanted to know more about Blake, more than she had learnt from Cunningham, she could not have turned to a better person than Richard Monckton Milnes. But however crucial this link was with the wild and mystical poet, it was not the only one, for Elizabeth Gaskell also knew the poet Walter Savage Landor, and exchanged letters with him. It is believed that John Forster made the initial introduction, as he was a close friend of Landor's, and subsequently his biographer, as well as being known to Elizabeth and William Gaskell through Chapman and Hall. In a letter postmarked 1854, written to Elizabeth Gaskell, Landor expressed an interest in William Gaskell's lectures on the Lancashire dialect.<sup>71</sup> Landor's interest in Blake's writings was recorded by the

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<sup>68</sup> For an account of this occasion in May 1849 see *Gaskell Letters*, pp. 827-828. A dozen letters from Gaskell to Milnes are included in *Gaskell Letters*. A further four letters from Gaskell to Milnes are included in *Gaskell Further Letters*.

<sup>69</sup> *Gaskell Letters*, p. 389.

<sup>70</sup> *Gaskell Letters*, p. 398.

<sup>71</sup> Waller, 'Letters to Gaskell'. This reference to Landor, and his correspondence with Elizabeth Gaskell, is on pages 129 (misprinted in the Bulletin as 192) to 132. Reference to 'The Death of

diarist Crabb Robinson and by the eminent editor and biographer John Forster. Early nineteenth-century breakfast parties were clearly regarded as suitable occasions for informed literary conversation, and Crabb Robinson recorded in his diary entry for 20 May 1838 one such occasion at his home, when Landor and Milnes were present, and Blake was the main subject of conversation, with Landor arguing that Blake was the greatest of poets. This was no idle talk on the part of Landor, for John Forster gives an account, in his biography of Landor, of an occasion in a Bristol book shop when Landor picked up some of Blake's writings, expressed a wish to collect more, and stated that, in his view, Blake was Wordsworth's prototype.<sup>72</sup> It may be surmised, therefore, that although Elizabeth Gaskell, like most other people at that time, did not have access to the entire text of *The Book of Urizen*, she could have heard Blake's ideas discussed, since she knew people who were at the forefront of Blake appreciation. Her initial interest in Blake might well have been confined to his engravings, but this interest in his visual art soon led her to a selection of his manuscripts. We do not find direct quotations from Blake in her short stories, in the way that we find quotations from other poets, but this is explained by the fact that the texts of Blake's poetry were not so easily consulted as the texts of other poets. Nonetheless, she was aware of Blake's writings as well as his visual art and she had the opportunity to take on board some of his ideas, including those expressed in *The Book of Urizen*.

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Blake', in correspondence between Landor and Elizabeth Gaskell can be misleading as this is the title of Landor's verse drama on the naval hero Robert Blake.

<sup>72</sup> For Crabb Robinson's diary entry and Forster's account of the incident in Bristol, see *Blake Heritage*, pp. 47-48. Forster's account is also in John Forster, *Walter Savage Landor: A Biography* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1895), p.375.

Blake produced seven copies of *The Book of Urizen*, each one containing from twenty-four to twenty-eight of his own illustrations. It is not difficult to see why any discussion of this poem would have intrigued Elizabeth Gaskell, for the poem is Blake's own version of the Book of Genesis, and it contains many allusions to the texts of the Old Testament. In Blake's version of Genesis, the Creation and the Fall are one event, though one that occurs in stages, each stage showing unity lapsing into duality, and spiritual energy lapsing into material passivity. Urizen is a God of Reason, who separates himself from other Eternals and falls into Chaos. Of Urizen, the poet says 'a shadow of horror is risen | In Eternity! Unknown, unprolific!' (Blake, *Poems*, 242. 8). Blake's Eternity before the Fall is disrupted by Urizen, who sets his own agenda, one that includes the suppression of passion within himself. His attempt to impose his principles on the Eternals is defeated and Urizen is rejected by the Eternals and confined to Chaos. Los, the God of Imagination, attempts to save Urizen from Chaos by creating a physical body for him, but after a seventh age had passed, 'In terrors Los shrunk from his task: | His great hammer fell from his hand' (Blake, *Poems*, 250. 20). After the passing of more ages, Los divides into male and female, the first female for Blake being created from blood rather than a rib. This first female is greeted with wonder, awe, fear and astonishment, and named Pity. After the passing of more ages Urizen explores his dens which signify the world of Materialism. There are here strong echoes of Milton, since Urizen's exploration parallels the journey of Satan through Chaos, in *Paradise Lost* II. Blake's Creation and Fall are now complete: mankind is enclosed in the Tent of Science and the Net of Religion, and human

history begins.<sup>73</sup> The *Book of Urizen* is prefatory to Blake's subsequent epic poem, *Vala, or the Four Zoas*, in which *Urizen* (Man's Reason) is represented as one of Man's four divided Zoas, the other three being *Luvah* (his Passion), *Tharmas* (his Sensation), and *Urthona* (his Instinct). In this epic poem the Fall of Man is seen to be the result of conflict between Reason and Passion. Blake's idiosyncratic version of the Creation and the Fall would almost certainly have interested Elizabeth Gaskell as a non-conformist Christian, and any work that presented a dialogue between reason and feeling would have interested her as an imaginative writer. There are, however, wider implications in this poetry which reflect the tension between the challenge of the Enlightenment and the reaction of Romanticism.<sup>74</sup> While it is important to remember that there is no evidence to suggest that Gaskell knew the text of *Urizen* or of *The Four Zoas* intimately, the indications are that she had the opportunity to pick up some of Blake's ideas when she was in discussion with those who did know the work, and this places her at the very centre of concurrent intellectual debate. Given that the Romantic period, as such, is said to have ended in the 1830s, Enlightenment thinking could have reasserted itself and become the dominant mental quality, but this did not happen for the Victorian age is said to have been dominated by the Romantic influence, with its stress on feeling.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> This brief summary of *The Book of Urizen* is based on the text of the poem in Blake, *Poems*, pp. 242-258 and the editor's notes on pp. 913-918.

<sup>74</sup> *The Four Zoas* is in Blake, *Poems*, pp. 273-478; the editor's notes are on pp. 921-956. On page 928, note 12, the editor suggests a further implication: a political allegory of *The Four Zoas* in which *Urizen* is England and *Luvah* is France.

<sup>75</sup> Easson, *Elizabeth Gaskell*, p.22. See also comments of the French critic, Emile Montégut, *GSSJ*, 4, (1990), (p. 64).

Having established the possibility that Elizabeth Gaskell absorbed some of Blake's ideas, and in particular those that he expressed in *The Book of Urizen*, I now wish to discuss *Half a Life-Time Ago* as a story which incorporates *Urizenic* notions of separation, descent into chaos, and confrontation between passion and reason, passion in this context meaning emotion.<sup>76</sup> In *Half a Life-Time Ago*, there is one event that is cataclysmic and which sets in motion the ensuing drama: this event is the death of Margaret Dixon, who develops a fatal inflammation following a neglected cold. Before Mrs Dixon's death Yew Nook had been something of an Eden, a farmhouse where the virtues of independence, justice, tolerance and contentment reigned supreme. It was where the youthful Susan Dixon had grown up, and where the hearth had been 'bright as she, with family love and youthful hope and mirth' (*CP*, p.60). During Mrs Dixon's lifetime family problems were contained: she accommodated her husband's occasional lapses from sobriety, she made allowances for her young son's deficiencies, and most important of all, she mediated between her retarded young son and her daughter's impatient young man. These enduring qualities, together with the farmstead's isolated moorland situation, and the inherited ownership, gave the Dixon's farm a quality of permanency that is akin to eternity. After Mrs Dixon's death Yew Nook is no longer a paradise: it becomes instead a battleground where Reason and Passion fight for supremacy. This death signifies a separation which involves not only the loss of one person but the loss of stability for the household.

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<sup>76</sup> I have coined the term *Urizenic* to refer to ideas that are represented in Blake's *Book of Urizen*.

The Passion (or emotion), that bids for supremacy at Yew Nook, stems from the promise that Susan Dixon made to her dying mother regarding the care of Willie Dixon, for she vowed 'within herself to be as a mother to him' (*CP*, p.64). The Reason that vies with this Passion stems from Michael Hurst's desire for material gain through the acquisition of Dixons' farm. This confrontation between Passion and Reason is heightened when an outbreak of typhus kills Susan's father and leaves young Willie weakened to the point of imbecility, although he is now heir to the farm. Only by having Willie certified for admission to the local lunatic asylum can Michael gain access to the property he desires to own, for with Willie certified as insane, ownership of Yew Nook passes to Susan, and Michael hopes to become Susan's husband.

Michael's avowed reasons for wanting to place Willie in the care of the asylum are hard to fault: he is acting on medical advice and believes that the boy will be kept happy in institutional care. His real reasons are that he sees the boy as an encumbrance and an obstacle to his ownership, through marriage, of the Dixons' property. None of these reasons are in themselves reprehensible, for the boy's condition can only worsen, making him an increasing burden on his sister, and an unsuitable owner of the farm. But Michael's reasoning, sound as it may be, is not accompanied by moral integrity. It is the way in which Michael proceeds to fulfil his aims that indicates his moral weakness and which prepares the reader for his ultimate descent into moral degeneracy. From the start, we see Michael as an insensitive bully; this is something that Mrs Dixon has noticed and, as she lies on her deathbed, draws Susan's attention to: 'He vexes Michael at times, and



Michael has struck him before now' (*CP*, p.64). The reader witnesses one of these occasions when Michael abuses the boy for mishandling the fire, and then walks out ignoring Susan's injured feelings and leaving the fire to turn to ashes on a November night. Michael's visit with the boy to the Doctor in Kendal is accompanied by deceit, for he had told Susan that he was taking Willie for a ride to Ambleside where he had business to attend to. His artfulness reaches new heights when he takes his older sister with him to Yew Nook to argue his case for him. Brother and sister together make up for their lack of delicacy of feeling by force of argument, stressing the practical difficulties of caring for a mentally defective young man at home. But reason alone, or when accompanied by greed, is no match for Susan's moral and emotional integrity, as she abides by the promise she made to her deceased mother.

While Michael's reasoning is motivated by his desire for property, Susan is driven by a passion that can best be described as the sentiment of attachment. She remains attached to the promise she made to her mother, and to her consanguine affection for her younger and dependant brother. Such sentiments as these cannot be countered by reasoned argument, for they are supported by a moral strength that is lacking in Michael's motivation. Even with the backing of his sister, Michael inevitably faces defeat and embarks on his personal road to financial ruin, moral degeneration and, ultimately, to chaos. Susan's sentiment of attachment is strong from the time of her mother's death and never wavers even when she is faced with difficult choices. After Michael abuses Willie for playing with the fire, Susan must choose between forgiving her lover for his cruelty and

comforting her young brother. This is a true dilemma, for 'it seemed like treachery to her poor boy, like faithlessness to her dead mother, to turn to her lover while the tears which he had caused to flow were yet unwiped on Will's cheeks' (*CP*, pp.66-67). She cannot obey her conscience and keep her lover, and after comforting Willie she returns to the empty farm-kitchen, and to the dead fire which symbolizes the impending demise of Michael's love for her. Memories of her mother's death and the promise that was made at that time are never far from Susan's mind, for even when the ill-fated engagement is agreed between herself and Michael, Susan succumbs to weeping when she is reminded of her mother. All material aspects of this union are favourable: a farm is available for the young couple, and farm-stock and household furnishings are to be provided; but Susan's promise to her dying mother remains omnipresent and the reader is not surprised when she refuses to have her brother committed to the asylum. Willie's need for care and her own need for Michael's love continue to tear her emotional life apart and this is illustrated by her reaction to the news that her lover has been seen with another young lady, Nelly Hebthwaite. Her pain at hearing of this ultimate threat to her future happiness with Michael is exacerbated by the sight of her idiot-brother, as he is the principal reason for the break-up of the relationship. But instead of being tempted to renege on her promise, Susan's resolve is strengthened, the more especially when Willie, with great poignancy, tries to comfort his sister with the toy windmill bought for him by Michael on the day of the visit to the Doctor in Kendal. From this point on, Susan's passion and moral strength increase in power culminating in the defeat of her lover's wiles as he makes his final bid for Susan as a wife and as an heiress. Susan's ejection of her

lover and his sister from her home is not the result of any cooling of ardour on her part, for she retains her desire to see him once more. But this furtive visit to the Langdale farm-house where Michael is lodging is not motivated by reason; it is instead an emotional gratification which she herself, and the reader, recognizes as 'her last burst of unreasonableness' (*CP*, p.90). Pure reason, however, can never be what drives Susan, although this does not mean that she is in any way weak-minded, a fact that is shown by the way in which she rejects the amorous advances of the young fortune-hunting farmer's son. An attempt to flatter her succeeds only in arousing her anger. >

While Susan's life continues to be governed by passion and moral strength, Michael's life takes a downward turn. His cold solid reasoning that had caused him to reject Susan, because of what he saw as an encumbrance, was not accompanied by moral strength. Through his fecklessness he takes to drink, his farm fails to prosper, three of his children sicken and die, and his home becomes as disorderly as himself. Like Blake's Urizen, Michael descends into chaos. But he is not the only one to suffer, for Susan too has suffered and her emotional wounds are reflected in her appearance: her face becomes marked with lines and wrinkles while she is still a young woman. This mutual suffering finds a parallel in *The Book of Urizen*, for when Imagination is separated from Reason, Los, the power of Imagination, suffers wounds to the same extent as Urizen: 'Los wept howling around the dark Demon: [...] | Urizen was rent from his side' (Blake, *Poems*, 246. 43). The notion of separation causing mutual suffering is something that Gaskell takes from Blake and incorporates into *Half a Life-Time Ago*.

Parallels between *Half a Life-Time Ago* and *The Book of Urizen* continue with the events that lead up to Michael's death, and with the resolution to the story. In Chapter Eight of the poem, Urizen, having been given a body by Los, sets out to explore his material world:

Urizen explor'd his dens  
 Mountain, moor, & wilderness,  
 With a globe of fire lighting his journey  
 A fearful journey, annoy'd  
 By cruel enormities: forms  
 Of life on his forsaken mountains.

(Blake, *Poems*, 255. 46-51)

It is in the mountain, moor and wilderness that Michael tries to make his fearful and final journey home, only to perish in the freezing cold of a November night on a forsaken mountain. But Michael's untimely death does not bring any kind of moral gratification to Susan: she feels only regret that circumstances had conspired to separate her from the man she had loved.

As already noted, the ending of *Half a Life-Time Ago* recalls that of *The Well of Pen-Morfa*, for in both cases the woman who had formerly been disappointed in love ends her life caring for another woman. But in the later story the woman who benefits from this care is someone who forms a connection with the earlier disappointment, for it is Michael's widow, together with Michael's children, who becomes the object of Susan's care and attention. Susan cannot be reunited with

her former lover on this earth but, by providing a home for Nelly Hebthwaite and the children she bore Michael, she is uniting herself with Michael's issue, and this is as close as she can get to complete unity. If this resolution is read as one that is informed with Christian ideas of forgiveness and charity, then Susan's act can be seen as one that is motivated by pity. This pity is for a young woman who has suffered through her husband's fecklessness and for children who need more care and attention than their mother can provide. But Pity has a role in *The Book of Urizen*, for

He [Los] saw Urizen deadly black,  
In his chains bound, & Pity began,

In anguish dividing & dividing  
For pity divides the soul.

(Blake, *Poems*, 251. 50-53)

Here, Los is dividing into male (strong and active) and female (weak and passive). Susan Dixon's gender identity has throughout the story been obscure for she has shown female nurturing characteristics through her devotion to her brother; but from the time of her girlhood she had shown male characteristics too: she was 'a spirited companion to her father; more of a man in her (as he often said) than her delicate little brother ever would have' (*CP*, p.62). This description of Susan early in the story prepares the reader for later developments. Firstly, she has to summon the kind of physical strength that is normally associated with the male in order to rescue the unconscious Michael and drag him home. Secondly, in taking Michael Hurst's widow and children to Yew Nook, she takes on the role of Michael

himself, for she becomes the male provider and protector. Nevertheless, it is her pity that makes the resolution possible, and in *The Book of Urizen*, Pity is the name given to the first female after Los has divided himself. Throughout the story Susan Dixon demonstrates both male and female characteristics, and for Blake's mythology she represents in turn, the male Los (God of Imagination), Luvah (Prince of Love and Man's Passions), and Pity (the first female). But it is through taking on the male role of provider and protector that 'the latter days of Susan Dixon's life were better than the former' (*CP*, p.102), and in Blakean mythology this role is associated with masculine strength and activity, as opposed to female weakness and passivity. Nonetheless, the resolution of the story depends on the reuniting of the divided Los, for it is the Pity of the female half of Los that brings Michael's widow and children to Yew Nook, and the remaining male part of Los that confirms Susan's resolution, by providing for the objects of her pity.

The overriding conflict in *Half a Life-Time Ago* has been one between reason, represented by Michael; and passion, represented by Susan. The tragic events in the story have stemmed from the failure to unite these opposing forces, for this failure has resulted in the permanent separation of Susan and Michael. In *The Book of Urizen*, the tragedy as represented by the Fall, is also the result of unity breaking down into duality. For Michael, separation from Susan has led to chaos because he could not live solely for reason and materiality; he needed the imagination and passion that only Susan could provide. For Urizen, his separation from the Eternals leads to chaos because he too has fought the fire of passion within himself. The parallels between *Half a Life-Time Ago* and *The Book of*

*Urizen* are, therefore, clear enough to suggest quite strongly that Elizabeth Gaskell was acquainted with Blakean mythology as expressed in this poem and that she incorporated these ideas into *Half a Life-Time Ago*. The discussion, at the start of this section, on the differences between *Martha Preston* and *Half a Life-Time Ago* suggest that it was during the five years between the composition of these two stories that Gaskell acquired an appreciation, or a deeper appreciation, of Blake's ideas. As *Martha Preston* had been published only in an American journal, it was possible for her to return to the script and use it as a basis for a story that could be made richer through the influence of Blakean mythology.

It has to be noted that most nineteenth-century readers would not have had access to the text of *The Book of Urizen*, and would not, therefore, have read *Half a Life-Time Ago* in this way. It would have been read as a tale with a moral and one which was possibly derived from an account of events that were related to Elizabeth Gaskell when she was on holiday in the Lakes. Any identification of Gaskell's Romantic inheritance would have focused on the influence of Wordsworth, because of the geographical situation, and because of the essential passions of members of the Dixon family. But a reading such as this, valid though it is, marginalizes the role of Michael, his separation from Susan and the Dixon farmhouse, and the disintegration of his life as he falls into chaos. It is a reading that is more suitable for *Martha Preston*, but one which does not do full justice to *Half a Life-Time Ago*. The purpose of this thesis is to offer fresh interpretations of Elizabeth Gaskell's short stories, and one way of doing this is by referring to

material that was not readily available in her own lifetime. Today we have unlimited access to the poetry of William Blake, and by looking at the texts with which Elizabeth Gaskell could have had some acquaintance, however limited, it is possible to offer fresh insights into *Half a Life-Time Ago*. This is not to deny the influence of Wordsworth on *Half a Life-Time Ago*, but to include, in a study of intertextualities, the additional likely influence of William Blake.

In this chapter I have discussed three short stories by Elizabeth Gaskell, each of which has foregrounded feeling, by which I mean the inner lives of the fictional characters. It is this emphasis on feeling, together with the regional location, that unites this selection of texts. The foregrounding of feeling and the regional location indicate Gaskell's Romantic inheritance, but while the location recalls Wordsworth, it does not tie any of these texts exclusively to him. These three texts have shown that Gaskell's Romanticism was becoming less dependent on Wordsworth, for although his influence can still be seen, it is an influence that is gradually receding into the background as Gaskell's engagement with other Romantic artists becomes more evident. Chapter Six will focus on a further selection of Elizabeth Gaskell's short stories, and this selection will include texts in which the action is set beyond the shores of the United Kingdom.



## Chapter Six: A Darker Vision

### *The Poor Clare, The Grey Woman, Lois the Witch, and The Crooked Branch*

In this chapter I intend to look at a cluster of stories which suggest that, during the final decade of her life, Gaskell developed a darker vision of humanity. These stories were first published between 1856 and 1861, from the time when Elizabeth Gaskell was forty-six to the time when she was fifty-one. For most people today this time would represent some of the middle years of life. For Elizabeth Gaskell it was a time that represented a major part of the closing years of her life, although she would not have been conscious of that fact. The tone of this selection of stories suggests that there was no longer a place in her imaginative life for a sunlit garden alive with the innocuous sound of birds and insects. Moreover, where we formerly had youthful slackness of character, or patriarchal pride, we now find downright ill-will and a deliberate intention to inflict suffering. The stories to be discussed here are *The Poor Clare* (1856), *Lois the Witch* (1859), *The Crooked Branch* (1859) and *The Grey Woman* (1861). In these texts there is an overriding presence of human malevolence, from which there appears to be no escape for the main protagonists. Ultimate happiness proves to be elusive, which means that ideas of reconciliation, which are characteristic of Gaskell's earlier work, are absent here.

Gaskell's engagement with Romanticism will be explored here by considering these four stories in relation to a more disturbing side of Romanticism, represented by the

poetry of George Crabbe, Wordsworth's *The Borderers*, William Godwin's *Caleb Williams* and certain aspects of the Gothic imagination. In Chapter Three of this thesis I noted Gaskell's comments on Crabbe's poetry at the time when she was collaborating with her husband on the poetry of humble life. At that time, she was a young wife and mother in her twenties, and her admiration for Crabbe was tempered by her desire for a 'more seeing-beauty spirit'.<sup>1</sup> It is, however, possible, that during her mature years, Gaskell's reservations about Crabbe were modified, or even relinquished, as her own perception of life changed. Wordsworth's *The Borderers*, believed to have been written in response to Godwin's *Political Justice*, was first published in 1842.<sup>2</sup> Given Gaskell's stated admiration for Wordsworth we may assume that she knew this poem, as it was included in volume seven of Wordsworth's collected *Poems* (1842). Godwin's *Caleb Williams* was first published in 1794.<sup>3</sup> Although there is no positive evidence to show that Gaskell read this book, there is equally no reason to suppose that she would not have had some acquaintance with it, as it was widely read during the time when she was young.<sup>4</sup> Gaskell's engagement with the Gothic is widely recognized. Her early contribution to *Howitt's Journal*, in

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<sup>1</sup> *Gaskell Letters*, p.33.

<sup>2</sup> See Don Locke, *A Fantasy of Reason: The Life and Thought of William Godwin* (London, Boston and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), p.90, for a discussion of the relationship between *Political Justice* and *The Borderers*. Locke argues that if *The Borderers* is a repudiation of Godwinism it shows an incomplete understanding, on the part of Wordsworth, of Godwin's moral theories. *Political Justice* was first published in 1793.

<sup>3</sup> William Godwin, *Things As They Are, or the Adventures of Caleb Williams* (London: Crosby, 1794); ed. by David McCracken under the more familiar title *Caleb Williams* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1970; reissued 1998).

<sup>4</sup> Amy Cruse produces evidence to show that *Caleb Williams* was one of many books read and praised in London in 1812 (Cruse, p.211). It is, therefore, likely that this title found a place on her father's bookshelves, or in the homes of other members of Elizabeth Stevenson's extended family. It is also worth noting that a copy of *Caleb Williams* is recorded in the Portico Library catalogue for 1845.

which she describes a visit to Clopton Hall, includes descriptive writing that owes much to Gothic techniques and, as discussed in Chapter Five of this thesis, the Gothic imagination informs *The Old Nurse's Story*. In the selection of stories to be discussed in this chapter, Gothic themes of female entrapment will be seen to be all-pervasive.

Before discussing individual texts I would like to consider some of the possible reasons for the emergence and development of Gaskell's darker vision. Writing in *The Gaskell Society Journal* in 1999, Margaret Lesser traces this aspect of Gaskell's writing to 1853.<sup>5</sup> This was the year when Gaskell first visited Haworth in response to an invitation from Charlotte Brontë. This visit and its impact on Gaskell are vividly conveyed in a long descriptive letter, probably sent to John Forster.<sup>6</sup> There is no doubt that life at Haworth, and at the Parsonage in particular, struck Gaskell as being very strange, but this was a brief visit of only four days and it does not, in itself, account for Gaskell's increased interest in what Lesser terms 'unworthiness'. The importance of this visit is the fact that it marked the beginning of Gaskell's relationship with the Brontë family, paving the way for her deeper involvement in Brontë affairs through her research for *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, first published in 1857.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Margaret Lesser, 'Madame Mohl and Mrs Gaskell', *GSJ* 13 (1999), 36-53 (p.48).

<sup>6</sup> *Gaskell Further Letters*, pp.99-104. The editors have prefixed the addressee, John Forster, with a question mark, which suggests that there is some doubt about the intended recipient of this letter.

<sup>7</sup> Easson, *Gaskell's Life of Charlotte Brontë*.

*The Life of Charlotte Brontë* represents a watershed in Elizabeth Gaskell's writing for several reasons. With regard to her full-length works, her novels with a purpose (*Mary Barton*, *Ruth* and *North and South*) all pre-date *The Life*. Her first full-length novel after completing *The Life* was *Sylvia's Lovers* (1863), which is an historical tragedy, but one that focuses on what might be termed 'affairs of the heart'.<sup>8</sup> One of the most intriguing aspects of this work is the dual dedication: one to her husband, William Gaskell, and one, in the American edition, to her friend in America, Charles Eliot Norton. But before meeting Norton in Rome in the spring of 1857, Gaskell would endure one of the most stressful periods of her life. The writing of *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* introduced Elizabeth Gaskell to completely new and, in many cases, disturbing experiences. With regard to geographical situation, she had already found the parsonage at Haworth austere and the surrounding countryside oppressive. But her research into Charlotte's life brought her into contact with emotional situations that were probably new to her and which would have disturbed her. One of these emotional situations involved Charlotte herself, and the other involved her brother Branwell. It was of course Gaskell's handling of Branwell's situation with Mrs Robinson (née Lydia Gisborne and subsequently Lady Scott), that led to the threatened lawsuit and which contributed to the necessity of rewriting *The Life*.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *Sylvia's Lovers* possibly originated in a visit to Whitby in the winter of 1859 (Sharps, *Observation and Invention*, p.373).

<sup>9</sup> Mrs Robinson's maiden name, Gisborne, is spelled the same way as Gisborne in *The Poor Clare*. This could well be a coincidence, but it could also suggest a link in Gaskell's mind between the apparent wickedness of Branwell's seducer and the wicked nature of Gisborne's act of shooting the dog. In both instances it was a Gisborne who set in motion a chain of unfortunate events.

One of the difficulties that faced Elizabeth Gaskell when writing *The Life* was her desire to present Charlotte Brontë to the general reader in a sympathetic light, although she was herself dismayed by some aspects of her friend's imaginative and emotional life. In *The Romantic Impulse in Victorian Fiction*, Donald Stone argues that in her *Life*, Elizabeth Gaskell tried to eliminate all traits of Romanticism from Charlotte's character. The alleged coarseness and wildness of Charlotte's writing were attributed to outside factors. These were the means by which Gaskell tried to present Charlotte Brontë as a submissive and dutiful young woman.<sup>10</sup> Most significant, however, are Gaskell's comments on the Brontë Angrian tales to which she refers in a letter to her publisher, George Smith. The letter is dated 25 July 1856. Describing a successful visit to Haworth, she gives an account of a packet of manuscripts that include the Angrian tales written by the young Charlotte in collaboration with her brother Branwell. Of these juvenile writings Gaskell says, 'They give one the idea of creative power carried to the verge of insanity', and in the next sentence she links these writings to some by William Blake: 'Just lately Mr M Milnes gave me some MS. of Blake's, the painter's, to read, — & the two MSS (his & C.B's) are curiously alike'.<sup>11</sup> These two comments would suggest that Gaskell was startled by Charlotte's youthful imaginative gifts, and that while Gaskell took what she needed from Blake, it seems likely that she was also in awe of the imaginative power of his work. Gaskell may well have been surprised by Charlotte's manuscripts but, as is well known, a much bigger surprise was in store for her, when

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<sup>10</sup> Donald D. Stone, *The Romantic Impulse in Victorian Fiction* (Cambridge MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1980), p.140; hereafter Stone.

<sup>11</sup> *Gaskell Letters*, p. 398.

she found evidence that pointed to an emotional involvement with Constantin Heger. While this evidence does not suggest that anything improper occurred between Charlotte and Heger in Brussels, Gaskell was sufficiently perceptive to suspect an infatuation on the part of Charlotte, albeit one that was not reciprocated by Heger.<sup>12</sup> This infatuation is perfectly understandable, and almost inevitable, since Charlotte was young, far from home, lonely, and thrown a great deal into the company of Heger. Nonetheless, this situation was an unfortunate one for Charlotte, for she upset herself a great deal by allowing her heart to rule her head.<sup>13</sup> The nature of her letters to Heger, following her departure from Brussels, also caused distress in the Heger household, annoying Heger himself, and upsetting his wife. It is generally agreed today that Gaskell diverted attention away from this episode of Charlotte's life by foregrounding Charlotte's role in the Parsonage as a dutiful daughter and as a long-suffering sister to Branwell. Elizabeth Gaskell's delicacy of feeling, together with her desire to protect her friend, was such that judicious editing of Charlotte's letters took place, in order to preserve her reputation as a young woman whose life was beyond reproach. In a letter to George Smith, dated 26 December 1856, Gaskell makes it clear that although she has herself had access to letters that contained private or personal material, she did not intend to include such material in *The Life*.<sup>14</sup> It is, however, likely that the insights into human feeling developed during this time were

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<sup>12</sup> For an account of Charlotte Brontë's feelings for Heger, and for an account of Elizabeth Gaskell's interpretation of this situation, see Easson, Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, p. 504, note to p.171.

<sup>13</sup> For additional analysis of Charlotte Brontë's emotional attachment to Heger see Lyndall Gordon, *Charlotte Brontë: A Passionate Life* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1994), pp. 113-122.

<sup>14</sup> *Gaskell Letters*, p. 429.

not quickly forgotten by Gaskell, either as a woman or as a writer, for she had seen the dangerous paths down which passionate feeling could stray.

The most dangerous of these paths was the one followed by Branwell when he became involved in something more than an infatuation with his employer's wife, Mrs Robinson. In a letter written to George Smith on 2 October 1856, Elizabeth Gaskell made it clear that she shared Patrick Brontë's view of Mrs Robinson as Branwell's seducer.<sup>15</sup> This was a very serious charge indeed, suggesting behaviour on the part of Mrs Robinson which, if true, was truly reprehensible and even despicable. This situation would have dismayed Gaskell more than Charlotte's infatuation for Heger, for the indications were that Mrs Robinson had amused herself by encouraging and even manipulating the less experienced Branwell. The entire experience of researching and writing *The Life* brought Elizabeth Gaskell into contact with a darker side of life than the one to which she was accustomed. Although she had witnessed urban misery in Manchester she had viewed individual human behaviour as principally heroic and capable of Wordsworthian acts of kindness. Through her research into Charlotte Brontë's life she found, instead, examples of behaviour that were, in turn, foolish, unwise, irresponsible and reprehensible. It may be concluded that the time between the summer of 1855 and the winter of 1856 represented, not what is now termed a mid-life crisis, but a turning point for Elizabeth Gaskell, for it was during this time that she learned a great deal about human feeling and behaviour that was

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<sup>15</sup> *Gaskell Letters*, p. 418. For Patrick Brontë's view of Mrs Robinson as Branwell's 'diabolical seducer', see Easson, *Gaskell's Life of Charlotte Brontë*, p. 520.

quite new to her, and this knowledge could have contributed to the darker vision that is apparent in some of her later writing.

Following the completion of *The Life* there were other factors that had an impact on Gaskell's consciousness.<sup>16</sup> In July 1857, a few months after the publication of the first and second editions, Meta Gaskell became engaged to Captain Hill, taking a step that disconcerted her mother and, ultimately, produced disillusionment for herself.<sup>17</sup> The termination of this engagement, on the part of Meta, was a source of relief to the Gaskell family, and the entire episode appears to have been a disturbing one, partly because of Hill's character defects, and partly because of Meta's initial error of judgement. One of the people to whom Elizabeth Gaskell confided her feelings about the engagement, and its termination, was Charles Eliot Norton, the young American she met in Rome during the spring of 1857, while, unknown to her, trouble was brewing at home following the publication of *The Life*.<sup>18</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell's friendship with Charles Norton was significant on a number of counts. As an art historian he broadened her cultural horizons; as a humanitarian he shared her social concerns, especially regarding the need, on the part of industrial workers, for quality

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<sup>16</sup> Gaskell completed *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* in February 1857. The first edition appeared in two volumes in March 1857 and, due to demand, a second edition appeared in two volumes the following month; the third edition, containing the author's revisions, appeared in two volumes late August 1857 (Angus Easson, 'Note on the Text', Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, pp.xxv-xxvii).

<sup>17</sup> *Gaskell Letters*, pp. 461 and 506.

<sup>18</sup> Norton was first introduced to Gaskell in 1850 in London. This initial meeting is recorded in a letter written by Norton on 5 June 1855 (*Letters of Mrs Gaskell and Charles Eliot Norton: 1855-1865*, ed. by Jane Whitehill (London: Oxford University Press, 1932, repr. Hildesheim and New York: Georg Olms, 1973), pp. 1-2; hereafter Whitehill). This early meeting made a more lasting impression on Norton than on Gaskell, and the friendship between the two developed from the time when they renewed their acquaintance in Rome, during the summer of 1855.



low-cost housing. As an American, with a permanent home in North America, he was able to enlighten Gaskell about American affairs, including the events that led to the American Civil War (1861-1865). While there is no intention to argue here that Elizabeth Gaskell was 'in love' with Charles Norton, the relationship did represent an adventure of the heart for her. Evidence of Gaskell's increasingly complex consciousness can be found in the intensity of her letters to Norton. These letters indicate that her husband, William Gaskell, was no longer the only male adult in whom she could confide, or to whom she could turn for advice and guidance.

Norton was not Gaskell's only friend who lived overseas. Between 1854 and 1865, Gaskell made numerous visits to the Paris home of Madame Mohl (née Clarke).<sup>19</sup> Madame Mohl introduced Elizabeth Gaskell to the society of Parisian salons: notabilities, academics, artists and writers. This experience no doubt helped to broaden Gaskell's cultural horizons, but Madame Mohl provided another kind of education, one that stemmed from her own complex personality in which the extremes of generosity and meanness could be found. Many experiences encountered by Gaskell during the eighteen-fifties combined to provide her with a more complex perception of humanity. This trend was not reversed during the remainder of her life. By the summer of 1863, even her faith in the value of philanthropy had been shaken by the unscrupulous behaviour of some of the people in Manchester who abused the provision of relief during the cotton famine.<sup>20</sup> From the mid-eighteen-fifties onwards,

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<sup>19</sup> For an account of Elizabeth Gaskell's friendship with Madame Mohl (née Clarke), see *GSJ*, 13 (1999), 36-53, and Lesser's *Clarkey: A Portrait in Letters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

<sup>20</sup> Whitehill, pp. 107-108.

old certainties were repeatedly challenged, and her altered perception is reflected in the subject matter, delineation of character, and narrative strategies in the group of tales discussed here.

With regard to the arrangement of texts under discussion, there will be a slight departure from the method adopted in earlier chapters. These stories, all published within a five-year period, will not be discussed in strict chronological order of publication. They will, instead, be grouped according to generic features. *The Poor Clare* will be followed by *The Grey Woman*, because these texts are primarily sensational tales containing supernatural elements and/or Gothic techniques. After discussing the two sensational tales I shall turn to the two texts which are based on factual accounts known to Gaskell: *Lois the Witch* and *The Crooked Branch*. Although Gothic elements can be found in these two, they are essentially written in the realist mode, inviting the reader to believe what is set out in the story.

### *The Poor Clare*

*The Poor Clare* first appeared in *Household Words*, in three instalments from 13 December to 27 December, in 1856.<sup>21</sup> There is evidence to suggest that the story had been started during the previous year, and that Dickens had hoped it would be ready for December 1855.<sup>22</sup> It seems reasonably certain that the central idea of this story

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<sup>21</sup> Now in Gaskell, *MLL*, pp. 271-333.

<sup>22</sup> Sharps, p. 249, including fn. 3.

originated in a Paris salon in February 1855, when a Monsieur Bonette told Elizabeth Gaskell about a mysterious girl who was haunted by a fiendish double. Gaskell gives an account of this conversation in a letter written to Lady Hatherton, in February 1857.<sup>23</sup> The tone of this letter is reminiscent of Gaskell's earlier account of her time with the Howitts in Heidelberg in 1841, for she says that her hostess in Paris, Lady Elgin, 'delighted in wild stories'.<sup>24</sup> The atmosphere of both occasions clearly promoted a taste for tales of the supernatural, and a willingness on the part of the listeners to suspend disbelief. In her letter to Lady Hatherton Gaskell also refers to the origin of both the conclusion and the title of the story, for she says that she heard about the Poor Clares from a female acquaintance in Antwerp 'this year'.<sup>25</sup> From this evidence it may be concluded that almost two years elapsed from the time when Gaskell first heard about a fiendish double to the time when *The Poor Clare* was published by Dickens. The composition of this story was possibly disrupted by the writing of *The Life*, the longer work for Smith taking precedence over a short story promised to Dickens. This means that Gaskell had time to reflect on the basic idea of a fiendish double, before incorporating it into her own work, the secondary imagination dissolving and diffusing what the mind had received.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> *Gaskell Further Letters*, pp. 168-169.

<sup>24</sup> *Gaskell Letters*, p. 44. In the 1841 letter to Elizabeth Holland, Elizabeth Gaskell described time spent with the Howitts in Heidelberg when 'we all told the most frightening & wild stories we had ever heard'.

<sup>25</sup> *Gaskell Further Letters*, p. 169. As *The Poor Clare* was published in December 1856, 1856 must be the year when Gaskell heard about the Poor Clares, and not 1857 which is the year attributed to the letter in question.

<sup>26</sup> For a discussion of Coleridge's theory of imagination and fancy, see Basil Willey, *Nineteenth Century Studies: Coleridge to Matthew Arnold* (London: Chatto and Windus; Toronto: Clarke Irwin, 1968; 1st pub. 1949), pp. 10-26; hereafter Willey. The distinction between primary and secondary imagination is discussed on p.14.

*The Poor Clare* in many ways reflects Gaskell's taste for the sensational and her ability to incorporate Gothic techniques into her own work, as demonstrated by her descriptive essay on Clopton Hall, published in *Howitt's Journal* in 1840, and by the chilling *Old Nurse's Story*, published in *Household Words* in 1852 and discussed in Chapter Five of this thesis. What is new about *The Poor Clare* is the way in which extreme emotion in a female is held responsible for long-term suffering. Bridget is a character who is driven entirely by emotion to achieve her goals. She is shown to be capable of love and loyalty, but also of anger and malevolence. It is when Bridget is provoked beyond her limits of emotional endurance that she commits the act which betrays her own integrity and maternal affections.

Bridget's trajectory, in which her act of malevolence is the turning point of the plot, is set within polarities of social class and religion, and these polarities are crucial to our understanding of Bridget's inner life. Without this understanding, Bridget's response to Gisborne would appear to be groundless. Through these polarities we see the social structures against which Bridget's emotional life develops. There are the opposing forces of two strands of Christianity: Roman Catholic and Protestant, the former representing emotion and superstition, the latter representing reason. Social class is also represented in such a way as to show polarity. Bridget is of the servant class but had married, with unhappy consequences, to one above her rank. Her daughter repeats this pattern by leaving her post as a lady's maid in Europe to marry

a titled Englishman who subsequently deserts her. The narrator's social background enables him to provide a link between these two social classes, for, as an attorney, his task is to find the rightful inheritor of estates in Ireland. Significantly, the narrator's religious background is Protestant: his father was an Anglican clergyman and his uncle, who brought him up, was a Puritan. The supernatural nature of witchcraft and the power to curse is, therefore, associated with the Catholic faith and the Irish serving class, while the investigation is conducted by a representative of the English Protestant gentry. English gentry might not have been quite the ruling class, but, nonetheless, they had considerably more power than the serving class. There is quite clearly a social polarity here, with a representative of the influential gentry on one side, and a member of the apparently powerless serving class on the other. The narrative point of view in this story is that of the Protestant gentry.

Bridget Fitzgerald had throughout her life been socially disadvantaged. Her attempts to escape from poverty had failed. Although she had married a man who was above her in social rank his untimely death had left her poorer than she had been before marriage. Doomed to a life of servitude, as a lady's maid, she looked for influence and power wherever she could find it. Emotional support in her widowed state is derived from her only daughter, Mary. The proposed departure of her daughter, for employment on the Continent, brings so much grief to Bridget that her neighbours said she aged ten years during the course of two months. In the absence of her daughter, Bridget derives comfort from two sources: the picture of the Virgin, her

heart pierced with arrows, and the spaniel which had been her daughter's pet and which was now pining for his absent mistress. Bridget and the dog both fret for Mary, sharing their grief together. Significantly, the dog is brought to Bridget by the Catholic Mrs Starkey and the picture is brought to her by the Catholic Squire. Sentiment of feeling is, therefore, strong in both of these objects. The picture is more than a religious icon, it is a token of esteem from her employer and something that binds her symbolically to the class of people represented by the Squire. The spaniel forms an emotional tie with the Starkeys, as well as providing a substitute object of her affection in the absence of her daughter. The death of the Squire and his wife leave Bridget in an emotional wilderness, although she has financial security. As a Roman Catholic serving woman in a predominantly Protestant England, she is in a socially isolated position, and this is made worse by the fact that she had not been altogether trusted by the other servants at the Hall.

Following the cessation of her daughter's letters from overseas, Bridget finds herself in the same kind of position that Mrs Leigh found herself in *Lizzie Leigh*. She is driven by a desire to find her daughter. But where a person whose actions are governed by reason would doubt the likely success of such a mission, Bridget, like Mrs Leigh, uses her new-found financial freedom to search for her daughter. Instead of relying on reason, Bridget relies on faith and instinct. The failure of this mission to find her lost daughter is central to Bridget's emotional development. The reputation that Bridget had acquired before she went away, as a woman of strong will and

passionate feelings, lived on during her absence and protected her cottage against intruders who, recalling her nature, feared the consequences of offending her. Her return reinforces these fears, for her appearance and manner have changed for the worse. This change, however, although physical in its manifestation, is not the result of physical events. True to the essence of Romanticism, the changes are the result of emotional suffering and, in particular, disappointment in not finding her daughter. Her sole companion in her long travels had been Mary's spaniel: it was he who shared her disappointment and sorrow. So strong was the bond between Bridget and the dog, that when the pet was ill during the journey, the groom who successfully treated him was rewarded, not only with thanks, but also with blessings that apparently carried supernatural powers. The bond between Bridget and the spaniel exceeded that which normally exists between mistress and dog, since it represented her love for her lost daughter, and her affection for her deceased employer, Squire Starkey. On returning to her cottage on the Starkey estate, defeated in her mission to find her daughter, Bridget's emotions are out of control. A more inappropriate time for provocation could not arise, yet Gisborne chooses this moment to shoot Bridget's dog. It is at this juncture, the turning point of the story, that we are given, most acutely, Bridget's emotional response within the context of the prevailing social structures.

The nature of this confrontation between Bridget and Gisborne recalls Wordsworth's *Borderers*, and in particular the words of Oswald:

Action is transitory, - a step, a blow,

The motion of a muscle - this way or that -  
 'Tis done, and in the after vacancy  
 We wonder at ourselves like men betrayed:  
 Suffering is permanent, obscure and dark,  
 And shares the nature of infinity.

(Wordsworth, *Poems I*, 215.1539-44)

Although the poem from which the above lines are taken was first published in 1842, Wordsworth completed the manuscript as early as 1797, in response to his experience of Revolutionary France. The poem is a study of human nature, sin and crime, with Oswald as the central character. It is through the words and actions of Oswald that Wordsworth investigates the apparently motiveless aspect of some human ill-deeds. Oswald is a cynic and completely amoral, a challenge to Godwin's proclaimed belief in the perfectibility of human nature. Nonetheless, he is given all the best lines in this verse drama and the words quoted above transcend the context of *The Borderers*, for they serve as a warning against impetuous action.

Gisborne and Bridget share responsibility for setting in motion a chain of events which are unforeseen at the time, but which lead to suffering. At the time of confrontation both parties have endured a personal disappointment: Gisborne has had a poor day's shooting, and Bridget has failed to find her daughter. Gisborne betrays his own innate rationality by shooting the dog and Bridget betrays her Christian faith by cursing her antagonist. In a few fleeting moments long-term suffering is imposed on an innocent victim.



Both protagonists in the dispute suffer and this shared suffering is achieved by making the ultimate victim of the curse Gisborne's daughter, Lucy, who turns out to be Bridget's grandchild. Bridget must see her grand-daughter suffer rejection and social ostracization through the presence of her Double, which is both spectral and demonic, and which is visible to all. But even this is not sufficient punishment, for Bridget must find that she cannot remove the curse as easily as she inflicted it. Bridget's struggle for her own redemption, and the removal of the curse, could have been attained as soon as she recognized the true identity of the victim of her action. As readers, we might expect to find Bridget confessing her sin to a priest, asking for forgiveness and then receiving absolution, which, in turn, could lead to the lifting of the curse. But for Gaskell, Bridget's act of malevolence is so great that salvation can only be secured through further suffering. Only through the privations endured with the Poor Clares, and through her act of saving the life of her sworn enemy, Mr Gisborne, can Bridget be granted absolution. Only then can the curse be lifted, the manifestation of which is the disappearance of Lucy's Double. The nature of the curse, and in particular its resistance to all attempts to remove it, carries a reminder of another Romantic text: Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* and, in particular, the curse put on Jupiter by Prometheus. As with Bridget, Prometheus arrives at a position where he wishes to recall the curse, but he finds that the consequences of his act are not easily changed.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> There is no intention here to produce evidence that Elizabeth Gaskell had read *Prometheus Unbound*. Nonetheless, Shelley's poetry was known to William Gaskell (Uglow, pp.146-147). It is,

When we consider the actions of Bridget and Mr Gisborne and the fate that is accorded to each of these characters, we are inclined to think that Elizabeth Gaskell has been uncharacteristically unjust towards Bridget. While there is reprieve for Gisborne, through the removal of his daughter's demonic double and the saving of his life, Bridget must forfeit her life to make these things possible. The implications of Bridget's sacrifice are significant and, therefore, worth considering. Bridget has been presented as a woman of exceptionally strong feeling. Given that she represents passion, and in particular female passion, then annihilation of female passion is the price to be paid for the removal of the spectral and demonic double that haunts Lucy. In *Doubles*, Karl Miller discusses the Romantic preoccupation with the fictional double or *doppelgänger*.<sup>28</sup> Examples of the Romantic double can be found in Mary Shelley's story of Frankenstein and his monster, and in James Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, first published in 1824.<sup>29</sup> In the late-nineteenth century, R. L. Stevenson explored the idea with *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), and in the early twentieth century, Conrad did the same with *The Secret Sharer* (1910). In *The Poor Clare*, Lucy's double is a maternal endowment, the legacy of her grandmother's impetuous and malevolent action. The death of Bridget, and the annihilation of female passion which she represented, frees Lucy from the double, but, as a resolution to the

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therefore, possible that Elizabeth was acquainted with the main themes in Shelley's poem and that she drew on these themes for *The Poor Clare*.

<sup>28</sup> Karl Miller, *Doubles: Studies in Literary History* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1985). For the Romantic relationship with ideas of human duality, see especially Chapter Two, pp.21-38.

<sup>29</sup> James Hogg, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, ed. by John Carey (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995; reissued 1999).

story, it suggests that Gaskell has developed a more cautious attitude to the power of emotion. Instead of associating feeling with moral strength, as she had done in many of her earlier stories, she has reached a position from which she can recognize the dangerous consequences of uncontrolled feeling.

In his introduction to *The Romantic Impulse*, Donald Stone asserts that many Victorian novelists, including Elizabeth Gaskell, retained a lifelong ambivalence towards Romanticism, and to the Romantic idols of their childhood.<sup>30</sup> Although he supports this assertion with examples and possible explanations, his view, like most views, leaves room for argument. It is hard to see, for example, that Gaskell showed any real ambivalence towards Romanticism in her later writing since she continued to foreground feeling and the imagination. I would like to argue here that *The Poor Clare* shows development rather than ambivalence. As I have already tried to demonstrate, Bridget's act of malevolence had its origins in emotional excess. But while this situation suggests a warning against unbridled feeling it is not a denial of feeling. The creation of Bridget, together with the consequences of her actions, suggests a new awareness, on the part of the author, of the possible dangers of the emotional life, in certain situations. This awareness is one aspect of Gaskell's altered perception discussed in the introduction to this chapter.

### *The Grey Woman*

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<sup>30</sup> Stone, p. 11.

*The Grey Woman* was first published by Charles Dickens in *All the Year Round* in three parts in January 1861.<sup>31</sup> There is the possibility that this story had been considered by Dickens for his Christmas number in 1860, but that it was thought to be too long for that purpose.<sup>32</sup> What is fairly certain is that the story had its origins in material which Elizabeth Gaskell personally gathered during her visits to Germany, either in 1841, 1858, or 1860. If the story originated in the 1841 visit to Germany, the bare facts could have been acquired in the company of the Howitts during an exchange of 'frightening & wild stories' which, in spite of their fearful nature, Gaskell apparently enjoyed.<sup>33</sup> This is an example of Gaskell drawing on a personal experience for the germ of a story. But when we move into the fictional world of *The Grey Woman*, we need to treat the source of the story as it is given here with extreme caution. Firstly, there is the unlikelihood of the miller's willingness to part with so valuable a document as the manuscript, especially as he wishes to have it returned to him. Secondly, the use of an old manuscript, as the source for a tale of terror, is a useful Gothic technique, as it helps to distance the reader from the terror while, at the same time, giving the events credibility. We may safely conclude, therefore, that the manuscript in *The Grey Woman*, is entirely a narrative convenience.

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<sup>31</sup> *All the Year Round: A Weekly Journal, Conducted by Charles Dickens, With Which Is Incorporated 'Household Words'*. By March 1859, this journal had superseded *Household Words*. *The Grey Woman* is now in Gaskell, *DNW*, pp.249-303.

<sup>32</sup> Sharps, p. 335.

<sup>33</sup> Sharps, p. 335, and *Gaskell Letters*, p. 44.

This story represents Gaskell's most direct engagement with the Gothic and, in particular, the female Gothic. As discussed in Chapters One and Five of this thesis, all aspects of the Gothic imagination were dominant features of the Romantic period. The female Gothic developed in response to fears that were specifically female, and to the Romantic engagement with psychoanalytical approaches to such fears. A recurring figure in the female Gothic is the persecuted young woman who is entrapped by a male tyrant in a labyrinthine castle. When escape is attempted, as it usually is, the escape is made through subterranean passageways and across a bleak landscape with the male tyrant in pursuit. Explanations for the popularity of this kind of fiction usually fall into two categories: the political and the psychoanalytical. Political readings focus on the conception of domestic space becoming a prison under capitalism and the kind of social relations thought necessary for the maintenance of a capitalist society. Psychoanalytical readings frequently interpret the female Gothic as a means by which a daughter might struggle for psychic individuation.<sup>34</sup> There is no intention here to engage in this particular psychoanalytical approach to *The Grey Woman*, but consideration will be given to the political situation against which the events of this story are enacted and the way in which psychology of character plays a part in the story.

The female victim, Anna Scherer, first meets the tyrant, Tourelle, in 1789, the year that witnessed the start of the French Revolution. She is held captive during a time of

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<sup>34</sup> For a full discussion of the female Gothic, from which the above comments are taken, see Alison Millbank's contribution to Mulvey-Roberts, pp. 53-57.

political and social upheaval and the isolation of the chateau and its immediate environment protects Tourelle and his band of robbers from any law enforcement agency that might operate at that time. The situation, therefore, is not unlike the one chosen by Wordsworth for *The Borderers*, in which the absence of established law and government enables the agents to act on impulse.<sup>35</sup> These are the circumstances in which Tourelle and his accomplices pursue their ruthless programme of robbery and violence. This political element of the story is one not always found in the Gothic plot, which more frequently turns on claims to the ownership of property, but it underpins the situation in which Anna finds herself to be so helpless.

Anna's helplessness is central to the development of the plot in this story. I propose to argue that Gaskell responds to the female Gothic here by using it as a means of exploring the causes of a power structure, represented here by a male tyrant on the one hand and his powerless female victim on the other. Anna's situation is presented to us through her own words recorded in the manuscript given to the principal narrator. This means that any judgements on Anna's character are her own and not the narrator's. Such judgements are, however, made retrospectively. It is through Anna's retrospective narrative that we learn something of the situation in which she found herself as a young woman and the ways in which she responded to it.

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<sup>35</sup> For these comments by Wordsworth on *The Borderers*, see Wordsworth, *Poems I*, p.938.

The power structures are represented here as characteristic of eighteenth-century European society and of eighteenth-century family life. Anna's father, as the local miller, represents patriarchal power in the community and in the family. For young women like Anna, the best chance of a secure future is through marriage, which means leaving the security of the family home and embarking on an uncertain future with a comparative stranger. It is only when family life becomes less comfortable for Anna that she allows herself to be drawn into a relationship with Tourelle. This discomfort is brought about through her older brother's marriage to a young woman who desires to have complete control over the miller's household, a desire which is supported by the principle of primogeniture. The relationship between Babette and Anna is the first of many power relationships that determine the direction of Anna's life, and which reveal the passivity of Anna's nature. Anna's inability to take control of her own life is shown by the way in which her prolonged visit to a former school friend, Sophie Rupprecht, is settled for her by other members of her family. Moreover, while her father and brother care enough to make enquiries about the suitability of the Rupprecht family, her sister-in-law's only concern is to have Anna out of the way so that she can increase her own control of the household. Anna has allowed herself to be manipulated through her own inherent timidity and passivity. Writing in 'Statesman, Dwarf and Weaver: Wordsworth and Nineteenth-Century Narrative', in 1986, Angus Easson noted that one of the characteristics of Victorian fiction, as opposed to its predecessors, is the shift 'from a dominant plot structure, strongly influenced by the stage and its particular conventions, as the controlling

organization of the work, to a stress upon feeling and the psychology of character'.<sup>36</sup>

In *The Grey Woman*, we can see how the psychology of Anna's character underpins the main events of the story and how it controls the overall organization of the work. Her timidity is no match for Tourelle's malevolent power.

It is in the unfamiliar environment of her friend's home in Karlsruhe, when she is feeling particularly insecure, that Anna first meets Tourelle. In this situation, her feelings of insecurity combine with her innate passivity in such a way that she finds herself unable to resist Tourelle's advances. Looking back on this time of her life, Anna is able to see that she was again easily manipulated into agreeing to a course of action that was not of her own choice. With the greater self-knowledge that comes from experience of life Anna is, later on, able to write in a letter to her daughter, 'I had got into a net through my own timidity and weakness, and I did not see how to get out of it' (*DNW*, p.260). It is through Anna's passivity that Tourelle wins her hand in marriage and gains complete power over her after she becomes his wife. While this power ultimately reveals itself as one that is malevolent, it initially presents itself as mere charm with a hint of seductiveness. This dual nature of Tourelle's personality is an example of the unstable boundaries with which Gothic writing often concerns itself. His facial characteristics and his manners are described by Anna as effeminate, yet she also describes him as handsome, an appellation usually associated with masculinity. Moreover, in spite of his effeminate features he becomes father to

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<sup>36</sup> Easson, 'Statesman, Dwarf and Weaver' in *The Nineteenth-Century British Novel*, p.18.



Anna's child. His malevolence is revealed, not only by his treatment of Anna, but by his actions as leader of the Chauffeurs. In this role he carries out acts of torture, robbery and murder.

The prevailing social structures as represented here are such that, as a French wife in the closing years of the eighteenth century, Anna has only limited legal rights and few opportunities for expressions of free-will. This repression is compounded by the physical isolation of her marital home. Anna's arrival at the chateau across the Vosges mountains is reminiscent of the old nurse's first sighting of the manor house in *The Old Nurse's Story*, for in each case the building that is to be home is in an isolated position, and in each case one wing of the building carries special significance: for the Cumbrian manor house it is the east wing, and for Tourelle's chateau it is the recently erected wing connected to the main building by intricate passages. There are, however, fundamental differences between the position of Anna and the position of the old nurse. Anna is held captive at the chateau until she flees to save her life, but the nurse in *The Old Nurse's Story* occupies the position of trusted family servant, with the right to terminate her service at any time she chooses. At one point of her narrative she considers doing this and taking the child in her charge with her, without perceiving any obstacles to this course of action. Moreover, there is no suggestion that the nurse was at any time in danger of losing her own life; on the contrary, her narrative suggests that she relished her experiences at the manor house. It is this shift, from a Gothic environment that is fundamentally benign to one that

contains a consistent threat to human life, that marks the change in Gaskell's vision of humanity.

Given the nature of Anna's character, with its timidity and passivity, and the power relationship in which she finds herself, there does not appear to be much hope for her survival. She must either undergo an extraordinary character change or else she will need help. Help is of course provided by the appointment of Amante as a waiting-maid, for it is Amante who shows the initiative and moral courage needed to effect an escape from the chateau. This situation reflects the tradition of the servant helping the master, notably Sancho Panza in *Don Quixote* and Sam Weller in *Pickwick Papers*, but here it is a female servant who is taking control, a further example of Gothic blurring of boundaries. It is Amante's courage and inventiveness that saves Anna's life and which for a while saves Amante's own life. Amante's nature stands in stark contrast to Anna's, for where Anna is timid and cowardly, Amante is bold, authoritative and daring. But for Anna to survive she must again enter into a power relationship for she must do all that Amante expects of her. The physical disguise that is devised by Amante, and adopted by the two women, is so effective that they pass as man and wife, earning a living as travelling tailors.

The flight of the two women and the relentless pursuit of Tourelle recall the plots of earlier Gothic fiction, including Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1765) and Radcliffe's *A Sicilian Romance* (1790). But the supernatural elements present in *The*

*Castle of Otranto* (the bleeding nose of a statue, for example) are absent from *The Grey Woman*. Also absent from Gaskell's tale is any kind of ultimate happiness for the heroine. For Walpole, Isabella finds happiness with Theodore and, for Radcliffe, Julia survives her trials to find joy in her union with Hippolitus. This joyous resolution is underlined by Radcliffe's authorial insistence that the characters' earlier suffering had served a moral purpose. But for Gaskell's heroine there can be no final happiness or just reward, only a succession of reprieves from danger and misery. The first reprieve is provided by Amante's strength and inventiveness, but even these qualities, which make Anna's survival possible, cannot protect Amante from the vengeance of the Chauffeurs. Anna's second reprieve from danger is represented by Dr Voss, the doctor who cares for Anna during her confinement and who tends the dying Amante. But he too dies during Anna's lifetime, leaving her without care and protection. I would suggest, therefore, that Anna's ultimate fate has less in common with the Gothic heroines of Walpole and Radcliffe than with the hero of a different novel from the Romantic age, *Caleb Williams* (1794). Like Anna, Caleb must endure relentless pursuit and incarceration. He is also, like Anna, frustrated by every attempt to secure freedom and justice. In Godwin's original manuscript he loses his mind during his final imprisonment. Even in the modified final version, in which Caleb's persecutor confesses his guilt, Caleb, like Anna, is denied ultimate peace of mind. As noted earlier in this section, the Gothic novel is open to psychoanalytical readings, but it does not in itself always reveal the psychology of the fictional characters. In 'Statesman, Dwarf and Weaver' Angus Easson notes that while the Gothic novel

played a part in psychological development and stress on feeling this was done better by Wordsworth and other Romantics.<sup>37</sup> We see the truth of this statement when we consider *Caleb Williams* and *The Grey Woman*, for these texts offer a psychological penetration of character that is absent in most Gothic novels. To read, for example, of the trials and sufferings of Radcliffe's characters, only to be told at the end of the novel that their distress 'served only to heighten by contrast the happiness of the present period' is to be denied psychological realism.<sup>38</sup> Much more realistic in terms of understanding the character's inner life is the permanently changed appearance of Anna, a change that signifies the emotional and mental trauma from which she cannot recover. For Anna there can be no return to normality and no attainment of happiness. The memory of her persecutor haunts her like a hand reaching out from the grave, especially when she learns that her own daughter's lover is the son of one of Tourelle's victims, the victim whose dead body was hidden under the table, when she herself hid from her husband and his accomplices.

In *The Grey Woman* Gaskell has engaged with elements of the female Gothic but she has drawn on wider aspects of Romanticism to reveal the inner life of her heroine: her innate timidity and the psychological scars which she must bear to the end of her life. The darker vision of Gaskell's later years is evident here in three principal ways. Firstly, she has demonstrated the danger of feminine passivity in a situation where the powerless are confronted by the powerful. Secondly, she has delineated the depths of

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<sup>37</sup> Easson, 'Statesman, Dwarf and Weaver' in *The Nineteenth-Century British Novel*, p.19.

<sup>38</sup> Radcliffe, *Sicilian Romance*, pp. 198-199.

depravity to which humans can descend when they become too powerful and when this power goes unchallenged. Finally, she has depicted, through Anna's changed appearance, evidence of the lasting psychological damage that can be caused by prolonged terror.

### *Lois The Witch*

During 1859 Charles Dickens published two of Elizabeth Gaskell's stories in *All the Year Round*. They were *Lois the Witch*, which ran from 8 October to 22 October, and *The Ghost in the Garden Room* (reprinted as *The Crooked Branch*), included in the Extra Christmas Number of 1859.<sup>39</sup> Although Gothic elements are present in these two tales, they do not govern the plots, each of which represents a domestic tragedy. In each case, moreover, Gaskell took facts which had their source in either a written record, or a reliable verbal source. The first of these stories to be published, and the next to be discussed here, is *Lois the Witch*. It is one of the longest of Elizabeth Gaskell's short stories, and almost as long as two of her novellas.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> *The Ghost in the Garden Room* was reprinted as *The Crooked Branch* in Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell, *Right at Last, and Other Tales* (London: Sampson, Low, 1860), pp. 241-318 (Sharps, p.325, fn. 2). *Lois the Witch* is now in Gaskell, *CP*, pp. 105-193.

<sup>40</sup> It is not easy to make a comparison in terms of column inches since detailed records for *All the Year Round* in line with those for *Household Words* have been lost. A comparison can be made in terms of page numbers by referring to the World's Classics editions of Gaskell's short stories. This method of comparison shows that *Lois the Witch*, at eighty-eight pages, is at least twice as long as most other Gaskell short stories and almost as long as two of her novellas, since *Cousin Phillis* runs to ninety-five pages and *The Moorland Cottage* runs to ninety-seven pages.

Aspects of *Lois the Witch* that are representative of Gaskell's darker vision include subject matter and characterization. The subject of witchcraft in itself is sombre enough, but the witch trials of Salem were subsequently recognized as a particularly shameful episode in Western history. If this situation were not bad enough, Gaskell creates a fictional character who, while little more than a girl, faces all the power of corporate prejudice and who, in spite of her innocence, loses her life in a situation where no one can help her. Lois's isolation and alienation are total, and unprecedented in Gaskell's fiction. Nowhere else, in Gaskell's writing, do we find a female character with the odds so heavily stacked against her nor do we find one who is quite so friendless. For an equal level of social isolation and hostility we would have to look at Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* and the situation in which Lucy Snowe finds herself, except that she does not, like Lois, have to die.

It is understood that before writing *Lois the Witch* Elizabeth Gaskell engaged herself in some thorough research, and that her principal source was the Revd Charles W. Upham's *Lectures on Witchcraft*, published in 1831.<sup>41</sup> What is less certain is just when she learned about the events in Salem. The fact that she incorporated the name of Cotton Mather, into her own pseudonym, Cotton Mather Mills, as early as 1847,

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<sup>41</sup> Charles Wentworth Upham, *Lectures on Witchcraft, Comprising a History of the Delusion in Salem, in 1692* (Boston: Carter, Hendee and Babcock, 1831). Upham was a Unitarian minister. Gaskell scholars who have themselves consulted Upham's book are in agreement that Elizabeth Gaskell must have read this work (Easson, *Elizabeth Gaskell*, p. 215, and Sharps, p. 316). There is, however, uncertainty as to where Gaskell located a copy of Upham's book. It is possible that she visited the British Museum Library in London, or she might have used a copy belonging to one of her many friends and acquaintances. For current reference, a copy is held at Birmingham University Library, and at the British Library.

suggests that she knew something about the Revd Cotton Mather long before the publication of *Lois the Witch*. It is not certain when Gaskell started to write this story, but the date of its publication and, therefore, probable completion, places it firmly in the phase of her writing career represented by all the stories discussed in this chapter. Just what drew her to the subject of witchcraft is unclear. She had referred to the Lancashire witch trials as early as 1850 in *The Heart of John Middleton*, and, as already noted, alleged witchcraft plays a part in *The Poor Clare* (1856). But it was not until the end of this decade that she took, as the central plot of her own story, a situation in which innocent people were convicted, tried, and executed for crimes of witchcraft.

Although Gaskell researched the subject before writing this story, *Lois the Witch* is more than a faithful reproduction of documented events. The narrator offers the reader a nineteenth-century perspective on seventeenth-century events, and this perspective is informed with a cultural inheritance that includes Unitarian rationality and the Romantic stress on feeling and psychology of character. To put the phenomenon of witch trials and executions in their correct historical perspective, Gaskell weaves into the early part of the narrative the incident in Warwickshire when Lois witnesses the execution of an English witch, an experience that haunts her during her time in America. Reference to Matthew Hopkinson also serves to remind the reader of the European origins of witch trials. The religious background to the Salem witch trials is also set out, showing religious dissent in the form of Puritanism

to be closely allied with witch hunts. Given the Puritan ancestry of Gaskell's own religion, Unitarianism, we would expect to find that this was an uncomfortable area for her to work in. We need to bear in mind, however, that Unitarians had always stressed rationality, so they would have rejected witch trials. This emphasis on rationality separated Unitarians from their Puritan ancestors. We should also remember that, by the time she approached the composition of this story, uncertainties had permeated Gaskell's perception of human experience. *Lois the Witch* provided her with an opportunity to examine some of these uncertainties and possibly come to terms with them.

To explore the circumstances surrounding this contentious event, Gaskell, as the omniscient narrator, uses elements of Romanticism, including representation of feeling, a psychological approach to mental disturbance, the power of the natural sublime and aspects of the Gothic imagination. As Angus Easson has pointed out, the narrator speaks with the voice of nineteenth-century Romanticism and not with the voice of eighteenth-century rationalism.<sup>42</sup>

The voice of Romanticism is in evidence when we first meet Lois Barclay, for she is depicted as a truly solitary figure, an orphan in a strange country and without any permanent friends, for the gentleman who is escorting her, Captain Holderness, is soon to return to England leaving her with strangers in New England. Like a

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<sup>42</sup> Easson, *Elizabeth Gaskell*, p. 215.



Wordsworthian Solitary, she is alone, yet, like many of Wordsworth's Solitaries, she is given a personal history which is offered to the reader through her own recollection. Through this recollection we learn that Lois is not herself of a passionate nature, although she has, to her own surprise, aroused strong feelings in others, even to the extent of causing dissent between a father and his son. Her quiet amiable temperament is demonstrated early on by her willingness to give up her bed for visitors: a sacrifice that means she must share a bed with the old family servant on such occasions. Lois's amiable and entirely reasonable nature comes to the fore again when, following the death of both her parents, the son of the local miller declares his love for her. Recognizing the seriousness of family opposition to such a match, and wishing to avoid being the cause of a serious quarrel between her admirer and his father, Lois unprotestingly honours her mother's dying wish for her to join her uncle's family in America, leaving the way open for her admirer to find a different wife.

Lois's solitariness is central to the plot development. Not only is she an orphan, but she has been cast out from her homeland, and separated from the one person, Hugh Lucy, who loved her and who would have tried to help her if he could have been with her. To consolidate her solitary situation, Lois finds that, because of religious differences, she is treated with suspicion by members of the New England community. This alienation is so profound that, in spite of her best efforts, she is unable to combat the hostility that surrounds her presence in the Hickson household.

It is through this very solitariness that Lois's trajectory reaches its conclusion, with no one able to rescue her from false conviction and execution.

Gaskell remains faithful to the recorded events in Salem by reproducing the girls' hysterical behaviour, the presence of Cotton Mather, and the executions. These are the means by which she writes what is fundamentally a realistic text. But a purely naturalistic account of these events would not offer any insights into the causes of the prejudice and hysteria that led to the executions. To offer such insights, Gaskell takes an imaginative leap, which takes her from her own situation in nineteenth-century England, into the consciousness of a late-seventeenth-century community that perceived itself to be threatened by Satanic forces. By doing this, Gaskell succeeds in revealing the feelings and mental processes of the people who were so hostile to Lois.

The first member of the Hickson household to greet Lois is her cousin Manasseh, whose apparent religious zeal is soon revealed as a cloak for a deeply disturbed mind and a repressed emotional life. The religious zeal is suggested by his constant Bible study, an activity that occupies him when Lois and her companion arrive at his parents' home. His repressed emotional life is indicated by the way in which he responds to the arrival of his attractive young cousin. His nervousness is indicated by the way in which he rises from his seat with an unusually quick motion. His uncertainty is suggested by the way in which he resorts to a quasi-religious argument to persuade his cold-mannered mother to be more welcoming to the girl who is a

stranger and in need of hospitality. His repressed feelings are such that he can only look at Lois in a furtive manner, although this interest in itself foreshadows the passion which is later revealed. When Manasseh does declare his feelings he feels obliged to justify his courtship of Lois, and his proposal of marriage, by claiming divine intervention, which has operated through visions, in which he has been exhorted to "Marry Lois" (*CP*, p.137). This need to underpin romantic love with religious argument stands in stark contrast to Hugh Lucy's more spontaneous declaration of love, in which he had told Lois 'in one great burst of love, of his passionate attachment' (*CP*, p.108). Manasseh's unnatural alignment of romantic love with religious fanaticism, and in particular his claims of divine intervention, are a clear indication of his psychological instability. Gaskell has given us a character who is so repressed that he fears his own natural instincts and capacity for love to such an extent that he cannot enter into a normal relationship. This instability perverts his relationship with Lois and is the cause of his incoherent ravings at the meeting house, when Lois is unjustly accused of witchcraft.

Irrational fear and repressed sexuality pervade the Hickson family and the wider Salem community, and stand in contrast to the freshness and unspoilt naturalness of Lois's personality. Grace Hickson's repression is signified during her first meeting with Lois by her unnaturally deep voice, which is almost as masculine as her son's, and by the way in which her relationship with her husband is based on duty rather than love. The cold and unwelcoming way in which she receives Lois is a denial of

her own maternal role in the household and a suppression of her nurturing instincts. Repression such as this impoverishes her emotional life leaving space only for irrational fear. This is principally fear of the stranger and, in particular, fear and distrust of anyone whose religious beliefs and customs differ from her own. This combination of fear and prejudice fuels her animosity towards her unwelcome guest, reaching an apogee when she learns of her son's proposal of marriage to Lois. So unwelcome is this situation that Mrs Hickson can only deal with it by resorting to a belief in evil spirits as an explanation. As she pursues her argument of Satanic intervention, the only voice to challenge her is that of Lois herself, as she tries to extricate herself from an entanglement that is not of her own making. So completely has Gaskell entered into the hearts and minds of the Hicksons, that she produces a terrifying and inexorable consistency of behaviour from each member of the family. Only Lois can provide a discourse that a nineteenth-century reader would recognize as reasonable. Lois's protestation, 'I love you well as a cousin, but a wife of yours I can never be' (*CP*, p.147), would be at home in a novel set in the nineteenth century. It is almost as though Molly Gibson has inadvertently taken a journey on a time-machine into an age and a situation that is governed by thought processes entirely different from her own. So great is the division between the two ways of thinking that the lone voice cannot make any impact on collective thinking.

The sexual repression apparent in Mrs Hickson's behaviour manifests itself in the behaviour of her daughters. Faith's emotional life is governed by her desire for the

former minister of Salem and so strong are her feelings that they drive her into a state of animosity towards Mr Nolan's rival, Mr Tappau. Faith's repressed desire for Mr Nolan is also indicated by her hysterical outburst in the confined space of the keeping room when the pastor conducts prayers for the assembled members of the household. This hysterical outburst is the first sign that Faith has a share of the instability already displayed by other members of the Hickson family. Once again a relationship between Lois and a member of the Hickson family is poisoned by hysteria. Faith's emotional instability is demonstrated further by the way in which she misinterprets Lois's actions when the well-meaning English girl asks Mr Nolan to leave the house after the prayers, and when she delivers Faith's letter to Mr Nolan, an action that provokes a tactile greeting from the pastor. In this situation Lois shares the dilemma of Caleb Williams, for which ever way she turns, however hard she tries to be co-operative, her actions are misinterpreted and a false reputation is constructed. Gaskell plots Lois's trajectory in such a way that we see a classic case of victimization, yet, as the narrator, she is sparing with judgement.

This victimization is made complete by the youngest member of the Hickson family, not old enough to experience sexual jealousy, but, nonetheless, jealous of any attention bestowed on either her sister or her cousin. The narrator introduces Prudence as a giddy girl, whose skittish behaviour in front of Lois and Captain Holderness is calculated to command attention, though not necessarily approval. It soon becomes clear, however, that this desire for attention is accompanied by feelings

of malice. Such emotional instability is shown by the way in which Prudence reacts to Lois's well-intentioned attempt to raise Faith's depressed spirits, with an account of Hallow-e'en customs practised in England. Prudence's reaction to Lois's account of Hallow-e'en is extreme in its manifestation of terror, but the malicious side of her nature comes to the fore when she seizes the opportunity to be the centre of attention by 'assuming more alarm than she felt, from the pleasure she received at perceiving herself the centre of attention' (*CP*, p.132). False though Prudence's feelings are here, her manifestation of fear disturbs her mother, both physically and emotionally, and contributes to the death of her father. Such is the power of hysteria; but this incident in the girls' bedroom is but preparation for the greater harm caused by Prudence later on. Her desire for, and enjoyment of, attention finds a much greater and more dangerous opportunity for fulfilment when, in the Salem meeting-house packed to suffocation, the celebrated and much respected Dr Cotton Mather legitimizes the prevailing hysteria by the way in which he addresses the congregation. Giving a first-hand account of behaviour he believes to be the product of witchcraft, he provides Prudence with the ideal opportunity to claim that she has been bewitched by Lois. Prudence's earlier attempts to attribute witchcraft to Lois for her chilling account of Hallow-e'en customs were but a rehearsal for this public accusation. Giving full vent to her desire for attention, and to her wholly unreasonable desire to impeach Lois, she imitates all the symptoms of a genuine convulsion to support her accusation. As a natural exhibitionist, Prudence succeeds in accusing the innocent Lois of witchcraft. It is the open accusation of Prudence that brings Lois to trial, but

the accusation gains strength from what amounts to collusion between other members of the community, for Mrs Hickson 'yielded to the notion herself, and encouraged it in others, that Lois Barclay had bewitched both Manasseh and Prudence' (*CP*, p.177). The seeds of hostility, born of prejudice and fear, have developed into a collective desire to take a human life. This collective desire is made believable by the way in which Gaskell has revealed the consciousness of each member of the Hickson family, a consciousness that is perceived by a modern readership to be unstable, but which was real and true at the time.

Gaskell's representation of feeling is not limited to members of the Hickson family. This household is revealed as a microcosm of the wider Salem community where fear and distrust of the unfamiliar is endemic. Fear of the local Indians runs high although there is no tangible evidence of any threat from that quarter. The only way in which this particular fear can be lessened is by employing Indian women as domestic servants. This is an attempt to subjugate the native race, but the presence of an Indian servant in the Hickson household highlights religious differences, as indicated by Nattee's unfamiliarity with the Lord's Prayer. When she relates tales of evil practices carried out by members of her race she exaggerates the levels of violence and cruelty that find a place in Indian rituals. This gives the servant an opportunity to exercise power over her masters through the incitement of fear, which in turn promotes the sense of otherness felt by the Puritans towards her race. The Indians who remain outside the community, living in the forests, are feared not because of any tangible

threat, but principally because of their strangeness. Fear such as this, shared by the Hickson household and the wider Salem community, feeds on itself, to the extent that unexplained incidents take on unnecessary and inappropriate importance.

One such event is Mr Tappau's account of mysterious sounds that resemble those made by a body that is dragged across the floor. This event is not accounted for, and neither can his account of broken crockery be explained by members of his household. But while stories such as these make Lois afraid, she is able to control her fear, and reacts as a modern reader would react to these events. When she is told about a neighbour whose horse has suddenly died, she immediately finds a rational explanation. Instead of connecting the death of the horse to the unexplained events, as her cousins might, she suggests that the beast might have died from natural causes. In contrast with Lois's pursuit of reasoned explanations, Manasseh feeds on tales that have the potential to promote terror. This physically strong young man succumbs to the dominance of his emotional life which is governed by a religious mania that is underpinned by a fear of Satan. Gaskell skilfully promotes an ambience which, because of its natural elements, contributes to this climate of fear. Drawing on aspects of Gothic writing, she describes dark winter evenings, dimly-lit rooms, creaking passages, and unexplained thuds in the dead of night. The natural sublime, which promotes feelings of terror in the reader, is represented by white mists approaching the windows in strange shapes. Through this kind of imagery we begin to enter imaginatively into the emotional lives of the people of Salem in the late-



seventeenth century. When the family huddle together in silent fear we see how individual emotion, running high, has bound this family together. Against this corporate brand of uncontrolled emotion, Lois and her power of reason stand little chance of survival. Interpolating as the narrator, Gaskell offers her own diagnosis of the situation in Salem: the hysteria that finally grips the community represents the 'corruption of the imagination' (*CP*, p.152). Gaskell has represented the people of Salem as being victims of their own imaginative and emotional lives, and this is not the same as saying they were innately wicked or malicious. As the hysteria rises to its apex in the meeting house, the assembled people genuinely believe that they are facing an enemy, a Satanic foe that must be defeated. So powerful is this belief that even the rational Lois begins to doubt herself. As noted earlier in this section, Gaskell narrates this story, not with the voice of eighteenth-century rationalism but with the voice of nineteenth-century Romanticism. She does not, therefore, directly condemn the people of Salem, but by speaking of the 'corruption of the imagination', she is, as a nineteenth-century Romanticist, laying a serious charge against the belief system that underpinned the lives of the Puritans in Salem. For nineteenth-century Romanticists, the imagination was regarded as the highest human faculty. For Coleridge, the Imagination was endowed with divine qualities as it involved the poet's entire soul in a creative act.<sup>43</sup> By entering imaginatively into the lives of the people of seventeenth-century Salem, Gaskell has given us an impartial account of this episode, showing it as it was but without overtly condemning the behaviour.

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<sup>43</sup> Willey, pp. 23-24.

Gaskell's resolution to the story, in which Lois's lover and one true friend, Hugh Lucy, promises to pray for the forgiveness of the repentant judge who ordered the executions, reflects her innate Christian belief in the moral rightness of forgiveness. But her charge of a corrupted imagination reflects her feeling, as a Romanticist, that the prevailing belief system in Salem was seriously at fault, for the way in which it reacted with the human imagination. For Gaskell, as a Romanticist, the imagination was sacred, and any corruption of this faculty could only lead to what she recognized as harm.

### *The Crooked Branch*

Just two months after the publication of *Lois the Witch*, *The Crooked Branch* made its first appearance in December 1859, in the extra Christmas number of *All the Year Round*.<sup>44</sup> This first appearance carried the title of *The Ghost in the Garden Room*, a title which made Gaskell's story fit in with Dickens's scheme for a Christmas number entitled *The Haunted House*, and which suggested ideas of a haunting.<sup>45</sup> *The Crooked Branch* is one of the bleakest of Elizabeth Gaskell's tales, for the malevolence that is present here is that of a son towards his own parents who had always shown him love. Nonetheless, the story is based on facts that were given to Gaskell, not in a sensational way, as the germ of *The Poor Clare* was given to her, but by two

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<sup>44</sup> *The Crooked Branch* is now in Gaskell, *CP*, pp. 195-238.

<sup>45</sup> The story was later reprinted as *The Crooked Branch*, in *Right at Last, and Other Tales* (1860) pp. 241-318 (Sharps, p.325, fn. 2).

members of the legal profession during a conversation which took place in 1849, ten years before the story was published. From this source Elizabeth Gaskell learnt of the court trial in which a young man had been tried for offences similar to those committed by Benjamin Huntroyd. Although she drew on this non-fictional account for her story she did not find the facts entertaining, for she said of this crime in a letter to George Smith, 'The story itself is *true*, more's the pity'.<sup>46</sup> Gaskell's reaction, as demonstrated in these words, stands in sharp contrast to her stated reaction to the wild stories heard at Lady Elgin's home in Paris and at the social gathering in Heidelberg with the Howitts.<sup>47</sup> The reliability of the source for *The Crooked Branch* aligns it generically with *Lois the Witch*, and separates it from *The Grey Woman* and *The Poor Clare*, each of which has its origin in 'wild stories', designed primarily to provide sensational entertainment. The lapse of ten years, between acquisition of basic facts and publication, is significant, suggesting that the bare facts were too unpalatable for the younger Elizabeth Gaskell. The darker vision of Gaskell's later years was needed for the transformation of these particular facts into a Christmas story.

The trial that gave rise to this story would have been one in which the young man was tried for specific offences, but Elizabeth Gaskell goes beyond these known facts to trace the development of a young man's character and the way in which this character has interacted with those around him. By doing this, she goes beyond the

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<sup>46</sup> *Gaskell Letters*, p. 596.

<sup>47</sup> *Gaskell Further Letters*, pp. 168-169, and *Gaskell Letters*, p. 44.

behaviour that is criminal to reveal a deeply flawed character who consistently causes great suffering to those who love him. Benjamin Huntroyd's acts of malevolence are unmitigated and without provocation. He represents a study of unworthiness in the extreme. In order to reveal Benjamin's character, and the suffering of those who love him, Gaskell draws on her Romantic inheritance in two principal ways. There is, firstly, the foregrounding of the inner lives of each member of the family, without which we would be unable to share fully in the suffering. It is, therefore, this foregrounding of feeling that gives the story its power, as this is the means by which the narrator engages our sympathies. Secondly, for plot and characterization, Gaskell draws on more than the known facts of a legal case, for her story recalls poetry by two poets of the Romantic age: Wordsworth and Crabbe.

*The Crooked Branch* is frequently compared to Wordsworth's *Michael* because of plot similarities: the only son born to older parents, the departure of the son for life in the city, and the importance of land ownership. There are, however, important differences between the two texts. In *Michael*, Luke is consciously sacrificed for the sake of the land, for he is, to all intents and purposes, sent away to the city, whereas, in *The Crooked Branch*, Benjamin himself rejects farming life in favour of a commercial career in London. In *Michael*, Luke's inner life is not disclosed and he is written out of the script in a manner that is quite peremptory. His misdemeanours remain unknown and he does not return to bring public shame on his parents. Gaskell gives us a young man who, far from being corrupted by the external forces of city

life, is bad from his childhood, responding negatively to influences at school, in spite of the security of his life at home. For Wordsworth it is the growth of Michael's inner life and his relationship to nature that is the subject of his poem. Only in *The Crooked Branch* are we given interior change in all the main characters. Wordsworth gives the reader only limited access to the inner life of Michael's wife, but Gaskell makes Hester's inner suffering central to the story. Given Gaskell's admiration for Wordsworth and her enjoyment of his poetry, we may be confident that she knew *Michael*. What links *The Crooked Branch* most strongly with Wordsworth's poem is the emphasis placed on the age of Nathan and Hester when Benjamin was born: 'Well! It were hard to thwart th'child of our old age, and we waitin' so long for to have 'un' (*CP*, p.201). These words recall strongly a similar sentiment expressed in *Michael*: 'but to Michael's heart | This Son of his old age was yet more dear-' (Wordsworth, *LB*, 230. 149). What separates the two texts is the way in which Gaskell penetrates, to a greater degree than Wordsworth does, the inner lives of all the main characters, for this is more easily done in a short story than in a poem, even one as long as *Michael*. *The Crooked Branch* is much more than a re-working of Wordsworth's poem, although the presence of this work cannot be denied. There are, however, other quite different literary influences present here, less obvious than those of Wordsworth's *Michael*, yet still discernible, and worth noting. Gaskell's revelation of Benjamin's character is such that we detect from an early age a degree of cynicism where we would normally expect to find youthful optimism and idealism. Cynicism such as this brings to mind two sources: the amoral character of Oswald in

Wordsworth's *The Borderers* and the poetry of George Crabbe. It is Benjamin's apparent callousness that brings to mind the 'independent intellect' of Oswald in *The Borderers*. It is the challenge to the idyllic nature of the Huntroyds' situation that reminds us of Crabbe's poetry. As noted earlier in this chapter, *The Borderers* and much of Crabbe's poetry reflect the more disturbing side of the Romantic imagination, and I now wish to discuss *The Crooked Branch* as a reflection of this particular aspect of Romanticism.

*The Borderers* can be read as an allegory of the French Revolution, and as such it can be seen to convey Burke's suspicion of modern radical intellectualism. The character of Oswald is an unfavourable portrait of a self-reliant modern individualist.<sup>48</sup> Writing in his preface to *The Borderers*, Wordsworth himself spoke of supposing 'a young man of great intellectual powers, yet without any solid principles of genuine benevolence'.<sup>49</sup> It has been claimed that in *The Borderers* Wordsworth was defining himself against Godwin, and that this verse drama was intended as a cautionary tale which showed how Godwinian reason may be put to bad uses and that intuition may be the better guide.<sup>50</sup> In *The Crooked Branch* we certainly have, in the character of Benjamin Huntroyd, a young man of intellectual powers, one who appears to lack solid principles of genuine benevolence. We also have here a cautionary tale about misuse of intellect and powers of reason.

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<sup>48</sup> Butler, pp. 64-65 and 87.

<sup>49</sup> Cited in Marilyn Gaull, *English Romanticism: The Human Context* (New York and London: Norton, 1988), pp.102-103.

<sup>50</sup> Jonathan Wordsworth, *Visionary Gleam: Forty books from the Romantic Period* (Poole and New York: Woodstock, 1996; 1st pub. 1993), pp.57-59; hereafter Wordsworth, *Visionary Gleam*.

Early in his boyhood Benjamin demonstrates his deceitfulness and wilfulness, for he is less than honest with his parents about his experience of bad ways at school and yet, in spite of the laxity of the establishment, he manages to acquire enough learning to be admitted as an articled clerk. He has, in short, learnt to play the system. He has also acquired enough self-knowledge to know that he does not want a farming career for himself. His contempt for such a life is demonstrated by his description of a farmer like his father as a 'mere clodhopper' (*CP*, p.198). Such contempt is increasingly accompanied by duplicity as demonstrated by Benjamin's insincere attentions to his cousin Bessy. But a much more significant indication of Benjamin's heartless nature and his future actions is his rejection of the home-made shirts and his willingness to take his mother's meagre savings to buy more fashionable ready-made garments in the near-by town. This insensitivity on Benjamin's part is highlighted by the way in which the home-made shirts had been lovingly prepared for him: the home-spun thread, and the careful bleaching of the linen on the summer grass. Most poignant of all, however, are Hester's clumsy attempts to hand-stitch the shirts in spite of failing eyesight, and Bessy's secret and silent re-stitching in the middle of the night. Benjamin does not have the imagination to appreciate the loving care that has gone into the making of his shirts. His lack of either imagination, sympathy, or perception makes him an anti-Romantic figure, yet his adherence to his own standards of behaviour, reprehensible as they are, make him something of a Byronic

figure. It is his rejection of his parents' moral values that ultimately leads him to perdition, and their love for him, strong and enduring as it is, cannot save him.

The values that Benjamin rejects are those which are represented by his parents' simple rural life, a life that is enjoyed by an independent farmer of modest means. Incidents of daily life are those concerned with looking after livestock, managing a dairy, and keeping careful control over domestic finances. Regular savings in a stocking, supplemented by occasional deposits of larger sums of money in the local bank, provide the framework for financial prudence and planning for the future. Nathan and Hester Huntroyd had not married as a result of a passionate or even romantic relationship. It was a marriage rooted in the practicalities of farming life: the need, on the part of Nathan, for a wife who could help him on the farm, and the desire on the part of Hester, to exchange the constraints of life in domestic service for the greater freedom of running her own home and managing her husband's dairy.

Benjamin's intellectual powers find better opportunities for development in London than in his home town and it is during his sojourn in London that he becomes a fully-fledged self-reliant modern individualist. The emotional gulf that develops between parents and son is shown by the way in which Benjamin's heart hardens during his stay in London, and by the way in which his absence from home accelerates the ageing process of his parents. It is, however, during his visit to the farm that we see just how wide this gulf has become. Nathan's pride in his farm and his hope for its



future within the family is demonstrated by the way in which he shows his son round, drawing Benjamin's attention to his dairy produce and Bessy's skill with the animals. During this conversation Elizabeth Gaskell uses language skilfully to emphasize the increasing gulf between father and son. Nathan, speaking from the heart and without affectation, talks in his native dialect: 'Hech! but our Bessy's a cleaver canny wench!' (*CP*, p.207). Benjamin, making no attempt to bridge the linguistic gap between himself and his father, consistently uses the more sophisticated language of the law, even though he knows this will either baffle or offend his father. For Benjamin, the law is not merely a hard way to make a living: it is a 'precarious livelihood'. His sentences are peppered with legal jargon, for instead of saying 'you don't understand, Father', he must say 'You don't quite apprehend me, father'. Communication between country father and sophisticated son breaks down when the jargon becomes incomprehensible to Nathan. Nathan's response to his son's reference to an 'equivalent' illustrates, without authorial comment, the unbridgeable gulf that now exists between father and son: "An equivalent," said Nathan his voice had dropped down an octave. "And what may that be? There's always some meaning in grand words, I take it, though I'm not book-larned enough to find it out". Nathan's struggle with Benjamin's mode of communication reaches a nadir when, as a father, his bafflement is replaced with offence at being addressed by his son in an unaccustomed and unnatural manner: "'Sir'—whatten for dost thou 'sir' me? Is them your manners?'"<sup>51</sup> This play on words, which emphasizes the cultural gap between

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<sup>51</sup> For the full text of this very significant conversation between Nathan and Benjamin, see Gaskell, *CP*, pp. 207-210.

homely language and the language of officialdom, prepares the reader for the incident which marks the end of all hope for reconciliation between father and son, and which justifies the supernatural element of the original title of the story, *The Ghost in the Garden Room*. Benjamin's disregard for the feelings of those who loved him is shown by his failure to provide a forwarding address, an omission that leads to the return of Nathan's letters, bearing the stamp of the Dead Letter Office. This incident also points to the total lack of either feeling or imagination in official language, for any allusion to death can only strike terror in the heart of a parent who has lost contact with a son. For Nathan, his son is now dead, and any future appearance of Benjamin can only seem like the haunting implied in the original title. His reluctance to accept this fact fully, and his unwillingness to share it with his wife, is, however, shown by the ambiguous way in which he wears mourning crepe: wide enough to be noticed by the clear-sighted, but too narrow to be seen by his sight-impaired wife.

Nathan's belief in his son's demise, however reluctant that belief might be, marks the end of any hope for a renewed relationship between father and son. To all intents and purposes Benjamin is dead, as a son at least, for he will only appear again as a felon who commits a criminal act against his parents. Benjamin's final act of malevolence is the culmination of a life that has been characterized by an absence of moral standards, and by an absence of any principles of benevolence. This lack of morality and of benevolence has even extended to an absence of normal consanguineous feeling towards either his mother, father, or cousin. He has used his powers of intellect and

reason to advance himself in the world, but not to improve his relationship with his family. He has been driven, like Oswald in *The Borderers*, by unworthy motives. But while Oswald's objective is the murder of a father-figure, Herbert, who, if understood in allegorical terms represents the *ancient régime*, he does not set out to injure his own flesh and blood. For this reason, Benjamin is even more cynical and unworthy than Wordsworth's villain.

It is not easy to find another fictional character who is as base as Benjamin. Although Gaskell drew on the facts of a legal case for this story, she might have written a tale in which she set out to explain the actions of such a young man. This could have been done by creating a situation in which the son was presented as a victim of parental injustice, one who was finally provoked into committing a criminal act. But instead of offering the reader mitigating circumstances, she has created a character who has known unlimited parental love and support. There is, therefore, no explanation for Benjamin's behaviour and the story represents a vision that is bleak in the extreme. To find so hopeless a view of human nature elsewhere in literature we might profitably turn to the vision of George Crabbe, as expressed in his poetry. Crabbe's view of human nature was such that country life brought out the worst in people, rather than the best. Faced with limited employment opportunities, Crabbe's heroines frequently seduced their young men, forcing them into improvident marriages. Professional people including doctors and lawyers were, for Crabbe, likely to be cynical or corrupt. There is no intention here to produce an example of attempted

matricide in Crabbe's poetry, but Crabbe's view of human nature was consistently pessimistic, his characters invariably operating from base motives. As a young woman Gaskell had admired certain aspects of Crabbe, his social inclusivity, and his realism, but she had found the seeing-beauty spirit to be wanting. The story of Hester and Nathan Huntroyd is a story of humble life in the sense that their circumstances, though not dire, are modest. Their fate is so harsh it could easily find a place in Crabbe's work, for it challenges the notion of rural happiness. For Gaskell, however, a situation as bleak as the Huntroyds' must be relieved by the seeing-beauty spirit, and this is shown in two ways: the reaction of Bessy, when she discovers the identity of the intruder in the farmhouse, and the reactions of the barrister and the judge to the obvious distress of Nathan and Hester during the trial.

If Bessy had acted strictly according to the letter of the law, she would have kept her intruder locked in the closet until the constable arrived to make a formal arrest. In aiding Benjamin's escape she was, strictly speaking, acting against the interests of justice. But Bessy's first concern is not the judiciary system, but the finer feelings of her aunt and uncle. This is not the first instance in Gaskell's fiction in which a wrong is justified by the fact that the intention is to help one who needs help. In *North and South* Margaret's lie to save her brother is condoned. In *Ruth*, similarly, Mr Benson's lie to help Ruth is condoned, as it gives an otherwise lost soul the chance to start a new life. This condoning of a lie is an aspect of Gaskell's Romantic inheritance in which feeling and intuition lead us to a higher truth. So it is with Bessy, for she

knows that the detention of Benjamin in his father's house and his appearance in the ensuing trial would break her aunt's and uncle's hearts. Her conspiracy is condoned for the sake of a higher truth: the feelings and the good of others.

In spite of Bessy's efforts the law must still run its course and Nathan and Hester are obliged to appear as witnesses at the trial. It is here that we see the demands of the judiciary system collide most poignantly with the need for respect for individual feelings. This scene has been criticised for its reliance on melodramatic effects.<sup>52</sup> But such criticism detracts from the author's true intention. The counsel for the defence and the judge, seeing Nathan's age and distressed state, are torn between their judicial discipline and their sympathy for the old man who is called as a witness. The barrister looks at the judge 'almost apologetically' and the judge, an old man himself as Nathan is, tries to conceal his true feelings as he hides his quivering mouth behind his hand. This conflict between the demands of the law and the recognition of a need for compassion reaches its apogee when Benjamin's mother takes the stand, for she had recognized Benjamin's voice on the night of the burglary. At this stage of the trial the desire on the part of the judiciary to be compassionate almost defeats the demands of the law, for the counsel apologizes a second time and the judge is now so deeply troubled, as indicated by his quivering face, that he is unable to reply in words. Nevertheless the questioning must continue and the court and reader alike learn the terrible truth about the night when Benjamin made his final visit to Nab-end Farm.

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<sup>52</sup> Sharps, p. 326.

When asked what was said by the escaped intruder, referred to in court as the third person, Hester's anguish reaches its extremity and she cannot utter the words that will confirm her son's guilt. Only Nathan can provide the incriminating evidence, for only he can tell the court that it was Benjamin who gave the order for his mother to be restrained by the throat. But in his anger Nathan points out another kind of judgement: the higher judgement of God who, he hopes, will pass judgement on the means by which the legal facts were extracted from a felon's innocent mother. In this collision of two worlds, the world of the law and the world of human feeling, the law had to be seen to triumph. Gaskell's judiciary does not resemble Crabbe's 'drowsy bench'. For Gaskell, the law is represented here by men who are honourable and conscientious. Yet their integrity does not preclude sympathy for the innocent parents. Human sensibility is represented by the judge's quivering face, evidence of his imagination and sympathy in spite of his legal training and in spite of his numerous years in the service of the law. The seeing-beauty spirit present in the courtroom, and in Bessy's actions, helps to sweeten the bitter pill of this family tragedy. Yet we are left with the suffering and loss that is the fate of Hester and Nathan Huntroyd, for their son cannot be restored to them. Gaskell's vision here is one in which harsh reality is not denied, but it is tempered by her Romantic inheritance. Through the actions of Bessy and through the response of the judiciary, we have seen a version of the human mind that is dependent, not entirely on rationality, or respect for man-made law, but on powers released by the intensity of emotional experience. Benjamin's actions, which have been entirely lacking in feeling, have brought only

catastrophe, but human action that has its origins in intuition has brought some amelioration in the form of a seeing-beauty spirit.

In this chapter I have attempted to chart the emergence and progress of a darker vision that is manifest in some of Gaskell's later writing. In each story a female character has found herself in a situation in which she is denied control and from which she cannot escape. Bridget's grand-daughter cannot escape from her spectral double until her grandmother forfeits her own life. Anna Scherer cannot escape from her wicked husband without help from others, and even then she is traumatized for life. Lois Barclay is friendless in a strange country where her very life is taken from her. Hester Huntroyd, along with her husband, finds herself powerless within family relationships, for neither she nor her husband can save their son from perdition. In each case there is the presence of malevolence which springs from acts of ill-will: a curse, entrapment, persecution, or robbery with violence. In each case, the victim is denied eventual happiness.

The indications are that material gathered for the stories discussed in this chapter was incompatible with Gaskell's earlier optimistic vision, but found expression in the darker vision of her later years. By revealing this darker vision I have noted developmental stages in her work and a subtle shift in her relationship with Romanticism. This shift does not, however, negate her Romantic inheritance, for she has continued to foreground feeling while, at the same time, displaying greater

insights of psychology of character. Gaskell's artistic developments, as revealed in this chapter, point forward to the tragedy of *Sylvia's Lovers* and to the sophistication of many of the characters in *Wives and Daughters*. They also point to the text to be considered in Chapter Seven of this thesis: *Cousin Phillis*, where we see the paradox of suffering in an Eden.



## Chapter Seven: Innocence and Experience

### *Cousin Phillis*

In 1863 Elizabeth Gaskell completed two of her longer short stories, each of which is regarded as a novella. They are united, not only by length of composition, but by the use both of a Cheshire location and of railway construction as an essential plot ingredient. *A Dark Night's Work*, which appeared in Dickens's *All the Year Round* from January to March 1863, will not be discussed here. I have chosen, instead, the shorter but artistically superior *Cousin Phillis*.<sup>1</sup> This story, regarded by many as her finest, first appeared in George Smith's *Cornhill Magazine* in four monthly parts from November 1863 to February 1864.<sup>2</sup> *Cousin Phillis* will be discussed here as a new beginning in Gaskell's professional life; as a return, in her imaginative life, to scenes of her younger days; as a text that has attracted a degree of critical attention unusual for her shorter works; and as a supreme example of her Romantic inheritance.

Within the context of her professional life, Gaskell had developed a good relationship with Smith through the writing and publication of her *Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1856-1857). In subsequent years, Smith published *Curious, if True* (1860) in the *Cornhill*, *Six Weeks at Heppenheim* (1862) in the *Cornhill*, *Sylvia's Lovers* (1863) as a three-

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<sup>1</sup> Gaskell, *CP*, pp. 259-354.

<sup>2</sup> *The Cornhill Magazine* was founded in 1859, the first number appearing in January 1860 and the final number more than a century later in the spring of 1975.

volume novel under the Smith, Elder imprint, and *Wives and Daughters* (1864-1866) serially in the *Cornhill*. Under the Smith, Elder imprint, Smith republished earlier works by Gaskell: *A Dark Night's Work* (1863), *My Lady Ludlow and Other Tales* (1859), and *The Grey Woman and Other Tales* (1865).<sup>3</sup> Having acquired the copyrights of Gaskell's works, Smith continued his support for Gaskell by publishing a collected edition (1872-1873), in eight volumes with illustrations by du Maurier, and, in 1897, an eight-volume pocket edition. Smith, more than any other nineteenth-century publisher, ensured availability of Gaskell's work, novels and short stories, after her death. Five years after George Smith's death, Smith Elder honoured their founder's admiration for Gaskell by bringing out the Knutsford Edition: *The Works of Mrs Gaskell*, edited by Adolphus William Ward (1906).<sup>4</sup> George Smith's importance to Elizabeth Gaskell is further illustrated by the way in which, towards the end of her life, she turned to him for advice and help when purchasing the house at Holybourne. Smith had become a trusted friend to Elizabeth Gaskell, just as Charles Norton had, and in a way that Dickens could never be.

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<sup>3</sup> *My Lady Ludlow* was first published in *Household Words*, in 1858, running from 19 June to 25 September. *The Grey Woman* made its first appearance in *All the Year Round*, in January 1861. For details of Smith, Elder's re-publication of these texts see Sharps, pp. 626, 627 and 631.

<sup>4</sup> For details of the collected editions see Sharps, p.634, and Jenifer Glynn, *Prince of Publishers: A Biography of George Smith* (London and New York: Allison and Busby, 1986), p.99; hereafter Glynn. Sharps only mentions the 1906 Knutsford edition, but Glynn gives details of the 1872-73 and 1897 editions. See also advertisements at the end of volumes in the Knutsford edition of Gaskell's works. An illustrated edition of Mrs Gaskell's Novels and Tales in seven volumes is advertised at three shillings and sixpence per volume, and a cheaper edition in eight volumes is advertised at two shillings and sixpence per volume. For up-to-date bibliographies, see Smith, *Catalogue*, and the Gaskell entry in Shattock, *CBEL*, cols 1291-1301.

By 1860 Gaskell had ceased to be dependent on Dickens for publication of her short stories, for at the start of that year Smith launched his monthly journal and Gaskell was quick to take advantage of this new opportunity, submitting *Curious, if True* for publication in the second number in February 1860. George Smith's social background was quite different from that of Charles Dickens and was in some ways closer to Elizabeth Gaskell's. Smith's father had been born in Scotland in 1789 and, like William Stevenson, had abandoned the possibility of a career in agriculture for the greater certainty of a commercial career in London. In 1816 he joined forces with Alexander Elder to found the firm of Smith Elder which was initially a book-selling and stationery shop.<sup>5</sup> George Smith was born in 1824 and in 1838 he joined the family firm as an apprentice.<sup>6</sup> The firm moved gradually into publishing and by 1844 they had published works by Humphry Davy, Charles Darwin, and John Ruskin.<sup>7</sup> Following the death of his father in 1846, George Smith found himself in charge of publishing at the early age of twenty-two. With the help of an astute reader, William Smith Williams, George Smith embarked on a successful career as a distinguished publisher of nineteenth-century fiction.<sup>8</sup> Publishing was not, however, his only commercial venture, for he also involved himself in overseas trade and used profits from this business to underwrite the launching of the *Cornhill Magazine*.<sup>9</sup> What started out as an initial guarantee, became in effect a long-term subsidy, for the early success of approximately seventy-two thousand copies sold per month was not

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<sup>5</sup> Glynn, pp. 14-15.

<sup>6</sup> Glynn, p. 19.

<sup>7</sup> Glynn, pp. 29-30.

<sup>8</sup> Glynn, pp. 45-52.

<sup>9</sup> Glynn, pp. 113-115.

sustained. Sales declined to twenty-seven thousand copies per month in 1869, and they reached a nadir in the early 1880s with only twelve thousand copies a month.<sup>10</sup>

The *Cornhill* was William Makepeace Thackeray's brainchild as much as George Smith's. Thackeray, like Charles Dickens before him, had gained experience of journalism and nursed the idea of running his own journal. In 1859, the year that Dickens jettisoned *Household Words* in favour of *All the Year Round*, Smith joined forces with Thackeray, appointing him as editor, to produce the *Cornhill Magazine*, a monthly journal priced at one shilling. The editorial policy shared some of the aims of Dickens's journals, for the *Cornhill* was to include quality fiction, reviews, and discussion of topical events. A principal difference, however, was the kind of readership at which Smith's journal was aimed. While Dickens set out to address a popular audience, Smith aimed at a more sophisticated readership: the professional and middle-class reader.<sup>11</sup> This greater degree of sophistication was underlined by Thackeray who, on becoming editor said 'the magazine must bear my *cachet* you see and be a man-of-the-world magazine'.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, a family audience was in mind, as indicated by Thackeray when he expanded on his editorial ideas: 'At our social table, we shall suppose the ladies and children always present; we shall not set rival politicians by the ears'.<sup>13</sup> The apolitical element suggests that under Thackeray, at

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<sup>10</sup> Glynn, pp. 143-147.

<sup>11</sup> For a brief but useful comparison of the *Cornhill's* readership with that of Dickens's journals, see *Gaskell Further Letters*, p. xix; and, additionally, Andrew Sanders, 'Serializing Gaskell: from *Household Words* to the *Cornhill*', *GSJ*, 14 (2000), 45-58 (56). The date of the first number of the *Cornhill* is erroneously given in *GSJ* as 1863.

<sup>12</sup> Glynn, p. 123.

<sup>13</sup> Glynn, p. 124.

least, the *Cornhill* would not be a platform for social or political reform. A further difference between Dickens's journals and the *Cornhill* was one that stemmed from editorship, since Smith did not consistently exercise the same degree of editorial control as Dickens, though he did carry some editorial responsibility, sharing with Thackeray the right of decision on contributions. After Thackeray's resignation, in April 1862, it is likely that Smith exercised more editorial control, at least until 1871 when Leslie Stephen was appointed editor. During the nine years he was without a full-time editor, Smith relied on sub-editors, including Frederick Greenwood who wrote the conclusion to *Wives and Daughters*, and on G. H. Lewes as consulting editor.<sup>14</sup>

The *Cornhill* was from the outset, not only different from, but in many ways superior to *Household Words* and to *All the Year Round*. For improved visual impact, Smith rejected the two-column page layout that had been favoured by many nineteenth-century publishers, including Howitt, Dickens and Blackwood. He used, instead, the full width of the page for his text so that the eye of the reader moves across the entire page, returning to the left-hand margin less frequently than when following a two-column page. To add to the visual appeal of his journal he included black and white drawings. Some of these are full-plate and accompany either the first page of a number, or the first page of a chapter, or poem, within a number of the journal. Other illustrations are quarter-plate, and appear within the text, sometimes on the first page

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<sup>14</sup> For an account of the conclusion to *Wives and Daughters* see Sharps, p. 469.

of a chapter of a novel, sometimes part-way through a contribution. Articles with a scientific content often included detailed diagrams of considerable merit. Illustrations which appeared in early editions of the *Cornhill* were often the work of distinguished artists, including Millais. In 1863 du Maurier, at the start of his career as an illustrator, contributed a drawing for *Cousin Phillis*. Reading matter included a mix of factual articles, poetry, and quality contemporary fiction. By the time that *Cousin Phillis* appeared in the *Cornhill*, Thackeray, for whom Gaskell disliked to write, had resigned as editor.<sup>15</sup> The inclusion of quality fiction remained central to Smith's policy, examples of which are the serialization of George Eliot's *Romola* from September 1862 to August 1863, and Trollope's *The Small House at Allington*, in shorter parts, from the winter of 1862 to the spring of 1864. With regard to attribution, Smith concurred with Dickens, for most contributions to the *Cornhill*, apart from obituaries and poetry, appeared anonymously.<sup>16</sup> He did not, however, agree with Dickens on editorial policy, for he remained true to Thackeray's wish to avoid using this journal to promulgate an agenda for political or social change. It would seem that, as a vehicle for Elizabeth Gaskell's fiction, the *Cornhill* was quite different from *Household Words* and that George Smith, as a publisher and as a man, was quite different from Charles Dickens. By 1863, Elizabeth Gaskell had come a long way from *Lizzie Leigh*, which had been her first contribution to *Household*

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<sup>15</sup> *Gaskell Letters*, p. 595.

<sup>16</sup> See *The Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals 1824-1900*, ed. by Walter E. Houghton and others, 5 vols (Toronto: University of Toronto Press; London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966-1989), I, 324, for the editorial note on attributions. For the first twenty years of its life, the *Cornhill* was largely anonymous, with signed articles beginning to appear from about 1880. All of Gaskell's contributions to the *Cornhill* are identified in the *Wellesley Index* through Smith's account books.

*Words*, for she had departed from the didacticism, and dramatic effects of her early novels and stories, and from her reliance on humble life as the focus for human experience. It is believed that Elizabeth Gaskell welcomed the opportunity to write for George Smith as she had become increasingly uneasy in her relationship with Dickens. The literary relationship founded on mutual social concerns and an editor's admiration for a writer's skills, was drawing to a close and after the end of 1863 Dickens published none of Elizabeth Gaskell's work. During the two remaining years of Gaskell's life her short pieces appeared either in *Fraser's Magazine* or in George Smith's *Pall Mall Gazette*. Her final full-length novel, *Wives and Daughters*, appeared serially in the *Cornhill*.<sup>17</sup> As her third contribution to the *Cornhill*, *Cousin Phillis* represented a new beginning. She had tested the water two years earlier with the shorter *Curious, If True*, under Thackeray's editorship, and in May 1862 with *Six Weeks in Heppenheim* just as Thackeray was resigning.<sup>18</sup> Now that Thackeray had gone, she could deal directly with George Smith, a man she had come to respect, like and trust. This was the start of a new chapter in her professional life.

Of all her shorter works, *Cousin Phillis* is one of the longer pieces, but it is far from being the longest. It is almost the same length as *The Moorland Cottage* (1850), but only a little longer than *Lois the Witch* (1859). Although it is usually regarded as a novella, it is substantially shorter than either *My Lady Ludlow* (1858) or *A Dark*

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<sup>17</sup> See Sharps, pp. 457, 469, 527 and 531.

<sup>18</sup> *Six Weeks in Heppenheim* appeared in the *Cornhill* in May 1862. Thackeray resigned as editor in the same month (Glynn, p.132). It is safe to assume, therefore, that when Gaskell submitted this story, Thackeray was still editor but considering the possibility of resignation.

*Night's Work* (1863).<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, the story is long enough to allow for extensive exploration of thought and feeling, while, at the same time, suggesting a considerable passage of time through the comings and goings of two of the principal characters. Part of the appeal of the story is the fact that it seems to be just the right length for a leisurely development of the plot, in line with Phillis's gradual transformation from girl to woman. This mode of development also made the story particularly suitable for the monthly instalments of the *Cornhill*.<sup>20</sup> With regard to length, although there was the possibility of two further instalments, it is questionable if the additional length would have added to the quality of the work.<sup>21</sup>

With regard to tone and subject matter, *Cousin Phillis* shows a departure from the stories that were discussed in the previous chapter of this thesis, and a return to an earlier frame of mind on the part of the author. The quieter tone is achieved through the leisurely pace of the narrative and the pastoral milieu of rural Cheshire. This is the countryside of Gaskell's Sandlebridge days, when she was joyful and optimistic. Although passion is present here, it is not expressed in the same way as it is in *The Poor Clare* for example, and malevolence is entirely absent for there is no conscious intention to cause harm. *Cousin Phillis* also differs from many of the stories discussed in earlier chapters of this thesis since there is no conflict between feeling and reason. Moreover, there is very little exterior drama. Even the building of the railway does

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<sup>19</sup> These comparisons are based on the pagination in the World's Classics edition of Elizabeth Gaskell's short stories.

<sup>20</sup> Sharps notes that this leisurely manner 'better suited a monthly than a weekly form of publication' (Sharps, p. 427).

<sup>21</sup> *Gaskell Further Letters*, pp. 259-260, including fn. 2 on p. 260.



not, in itself, have any physical impact on life at Hope Farm, since it does not encroach on Mr Holman's land. The two young men who work on the railway bring about a disturbance that is significant, but it is restricted to an emotional level. For Phillis, there is no broken engagement, as there is for Nest Gwynn in *The Well of Pen-Morfa*, nor is there a shameful pregnancy as there is for Lizzie in *Lizzie Leigh*. Of the stories discussed in this thesis, *Cousin Phillis* is closest in mood and subject matter to *The Cumberland Sheep-Shearers*, since it too focuses on rural life, farming activity, and young love, and in each case the love is unspoken. Even the homely activity of cutting bread and butter is repeated in *Cousin Phillis* to signify the yearning of unfulfilled love. But while the youthful attachment is known to the parents and encouraged by them in *The Cumberland Sheep-Shearers*, it remains a secret until the end of the story in *Cousin Phillis*. It is this lack of openness that weighs most heavily on Phillis, contributing to her physical illness which is evidence of her inner suffering.

Phillis's suffering is real enough but it is not brought about by any action that is intended to cause harm. In looking for a pattern of causality, we can only find an excess of goodness. Phillis is blessed with loving parents, but Mr and Mrs Holman are too loving, to the point of providing a love that is blind to their daughter's emotional life. Perhaps because of this excess of love, and because of her rural seclusion, Phillis is too innocent, and too untutored in the ways of human nature. She has no experience or knowledge of perfidy. But even the perpetrator of Phillis's suffering is

no villain. Holdsworth's abrupt departure, and subsequent marriage, can make him appear to be emotionally shallow, but he is above all an honest and hard-working young man. It is the centrality of the work ethic in Holdsworth's life that causes him to leave for Canada so hastily, and which takes his mind away from any romantic attachment formed at Heathbridge. He is a man of action, rather than a man of feeling, but he does not intend to bring pain to the Holman family. As Holdsworth's friend, and as Phillis's cousin, Paul Manning behaves as a thoroughly decent and sympathetic young man, but it is his honesty that contributes to Phillis's emotional pain. Had he kept Holdsworth's final words to himself, instead of sharing them with Phillis, he might have prevented Phillis's imagination from running out of control. To complete the picture of innate goodness in this story, even the slothful and half-witted farm labourer, Timothy Cooper, shows thoughtfulness in diverting the noisy carts away from the side of the farmhouse when Phillis is recovering from brain-fever.

Nonetheless, in spite of so much goodness, and in spite of so many good intentions, suffering is the subject of *Cousin Phillis*. Suffering is of course central to Romantic expression and it is often the subject of Wordsworth's poetry: desertion, disappointment and loss are all common themes, especially in his contributions to *Lyrical Ballads*. The pastoral elements of *Cousin Phillis* suggest a return to Gaskell's early engagement with Wordsworth's poetry; the flower garden of Hope Farm, with its humming insects, is reminiscent of her description of the garden at Sandlebridge, where she worked on Coleridge and Wordsworth, and said of the latter 'my heart

feels so full of him'.<sup>22</sup> The story owes less to Coleridge than to Wordsworth, but there is no place at all for another poet who was central to her poetic interests during those years, for the coarseness and truly reprehensible actions that characterize Crabbe's poetry are entirely absent from *Cousin Phillis*.

Of all Gaskell's shorter works, including those discussed in this thesis, *Cousin Phillis* has attracted the most critical attention. Writing in 1952, A. B. Hopkins regarded the work as 'High Achievement'.<sup>23</sup> Here, Gaskell's descriptive powers come in for special praise and, despite a few reservations, Hopkins concludes that *Cousin Phillis* is a story of 'uncommon beauty'.<sup>24</sup> More than ten years later, in 1965, Edgar Wright described *Cousin Phillis* as 'the preliminary to her final achievement' and, like Hopkins, praised the descriptive power of the work, in particular, the precision of detail, and the symbolism of the description.<sup>25</sup> In the following decade, in 1979, Angus Easson noted Gaskell's 'power in handling and exploring emotion, her portrayal of society and individual', qualities that made her 'outstanding amongst the nineteenth-century short-story writers'.<sup>26</sup> Ten years later, in 1989, Wendy Craik, writing on the role of lore and learning in *Cousin Phillis*, conceded that *Cousin Phillis* was Gaskell's finest work.<sup>27</sup> Here, Craik notes a maturity of skill which, unlike

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<sup>22</sup> *Gaskell Letters*, p. 7.

<sup>23</sup> A. B. Hopkins, *Elizabeth Gaskell: Her Life and Work*, (London: John Lehmann, 1952), Contents page and pp. 273-277; hereafter Hopkins.

<sup>24</sup> Hopkins, pp. 277.

<sup>25</sup> Edgar Wright, *Mrs Gaskell: The Basis for Reassessment* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), p.204.

<sup>26</sup> Easson, *Elizabeth Gaskell*, p. 226.

<sup>27</sup> Wendy Craik, 'Lore and Learning in *Cousin Phillis*', *GSI*, 3 (1989), 68-80 (68); hereafter Craik 'Lore and Learning'. Craik's full-length study of Gaskell, *Elizabeth Gaskell and the English*

some of her earlier work, does not depend on sensational incident to advance the plot, or to promote questioning.<sup>28</sup> In the following decade, in 1995, Terence Wright placed *Cousin Phillis* at the centre of Gaskell's achievement, noting in particular, that this story demonstrates the author's ability to 'make us feel that the greatest matters in our lives may turn on the smallest; that human feeling makes the trivial of immense moment'.<sup>29</sup> This selection of critical comments on *Cousin Phillis* points to the particular merit of two aspects of this work: the accuracy of description, and the supremacy of feeling. It has also been claimed that the structure of *Cousin Phillis* owes something to the myth of the Fall, because a pattern of innocence, knowledge and suffering underpins Phillis's emotional journey.<sup>30</sup> Yet Phillis's growth from girl to young woman is inevitable, for her parents will not always be there to protect her, and suffering is unavoidable in life. Terence Wright's comment about the momentous nature of human feeling carries strong Wordsworthian echoes, and reminds us that *Cousin Phillis* is, above all else, an adventure of the heart. Through a consideration of the symbolism of description, noted by Edgar Wright, I intend to show how the depths of human feeling are revealed through significant application of descriptive detail in this story.

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*Provincial Novel* (1975), does not include a consideration of *Cousin Phillis*, since, even as a long-short story, it is outside the brief of a book on the novel.

<sup>28</sup> Craik, 'Lore and Learning', p. 73.

<sup>29</sup> Terence Wright, *Elizabeth Gaskell, 'We are not Angels': Realism, Gender, Values* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan; New York: St Martin's Press, 1995), p.148.

<sup>30</sup> Thomas E. Recchio, 'A Victorian Version of the Fall: Mrs Gaskell's *Cousin Phillis* and the Domestication of Myth', *GSJ*, 5 (1991), 37-50.

Elizabeth Gaskell's Romantic inheritance is demonstrated in *Cousin Phillis* in two cardinal ways. One is the foregrounding of interior drama, already noted and to which I shall return, but there is also the treatment of religion. Religious belief and practice is central to life at Hope Farm and it is all-pervasive. But this very pervasiveness means that religious observances are often enacted in places other than consecrated buildings dedicated to Christian worship. In his dual role of farmer and preacher, Phillis's father combines his responsibilities for agriculture, good citizenship, and Christian worship, without moving from one spot in the stubble-field. Within the space of a minute he welcomes the stranger, Paul Manning, instructs one of his labourers to create a water-furrow across a field and to repair the thatch on a cottage, and then, hesitating only to change the tone of his voice, launches into a hymn to which he beats time with a spade. This combination of religious worship, informal dress, and natural surroundings, far from striking Paul Manning as incongruous, moves him almost to tears. It is an image that is compatible with Elizabeth Gaskell's Unitarian background, for it is a scene of natural rather than sophisticated worship.<sup>31</sup> It is also part of the Romantic ideal of spiritual refreshment through communion with nature.

There are times when Mr Holman himself can be seen as a Romantic figure, through his relationship with nature, which is central to his thoughts and actions, and through

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<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Gaskell's description of the Dissenting chapel where Mr Benson preached in *Ruth*, ed. by Alan Shelston (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 152-153. This description is believed to be a recreation of Brook St Chapel, Knutsford, where Gaskell worshipped as a girl.

his relationship with religion. Although as a Christian minister, with the benefit of at least a modest education, he might be expected to be reasonably well-read, it still comes as a surprise to Paul to find that Holman has provided his daughter with a copy of Virgil (70-19 BC). Holman's frequent references to the great Roman poet may surprise the reader, but it is the pre-Christian poet's relationship with nature, as depicted in the *Georgics*, that draws Holman, just as it had attracted Wordsworth and would attract Tennyson. But Holman's choice of books for the family bookshelf holds a further surprise, for it shows that his Dissenting principles do not prevent him from including the Catholic Dante in his collection. Phillis tells Paul that Virgil and Dante are items in a heap of old books bought cheaply, which suggests that they have been acquired randomly, yet they play a significant part in life at Hope Farm. Ebenezer Holman is far from being a minister with a narrow view of religion; his vision encompasses the world of nature, and the world of poets whose works pre-date the age of religious dissent and even pre-date the birth of Christianity. Although Gaskell does not quote from Coleridge here, the implication is that for Mr Holman, God's love is as universal and timeless as 'the blue sky' which, for Coleridge, 'bends over all!'.<sup>32</sup> This is not quite Pantheism, but it is far from being a narrow perception of religion. Mr Holman's faith stems from the Romantic fusion of religion and nature as expressed in an earlier Gaskell story: *The Heart of John Middleton*. For Middleton, the Lancashire hills were divine: for Holman the stubble field was a temple. The author's choice of Dante, as a constituent of the Holman book

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<sup>32</sup> *Christabel*, in Coleridge, *Poems*, pp.187-205; l. 331.

collection, carries a further significance, since opposing attitudes to the poet are symptomatic of the misunderstanding that will arise between Phillis and Holdsworth. While Phillis tries to read Dante for the sake of the poetry, Holdsworth sees these attempts as a means to an end: a knowledge of the Italian language. As a railway man, the focus of Holdsworth's interest in Italy is the process of modernization, for this would require greater speed of travel and, in consequence, lead to increased mobility of people. Such mobility will take him away from Hope Farm as suddenly as it brought him there.

I would now like to return to the foregrounding of interior drama in *Cousin Phillis*, for this quality consolidates the Romantic influence that is provided by factors already discussed. Phillis's suffering is entirely internal, even though it is eventually manifested by physical illness, for there is no physical injury. To the casual observer there is little change at Hope Farm during the time that is covered by the narrative, for the seasons come and go, farm work is done, the clock ticks, the cat sleeps, and the daughter of the house inevitably grows from early teens to late teens. Two young men visit the family at Hope Farm for a while and then they move on in life. But one of these young men returns, much later in his life, and in true Wordsworthian fashion he recollects, in tranquillity, the events that struck him as most significant during his former sojourns at Hope Farm and, in particular, those events that pertained to his cousin Phillis. It is through these recollections that we learn something of Phillis's suffering and something of Paul Manning's own emotional development. When we

first meet Paul, he demonstrates all the characteristics of a well-brought up but spirited young man: he relishes his new found independence, fears the constraints of excessive hospitality from the local minister, and feels less than enthusiastic about striking up an acquaintance with unfamiliar relations. We feel that we can believe in Paul Manning and depend on him to provide us with a reliable account of events and of people. This account is given to us through a recollection of everyday events that took place at Hope Farm, and these events are recalled in detail. Significantly, Paul remembers his first visit to the farm, the door through which he gained entrance, and his first meeting with his cousin Phillis. Details recalled include Phillis's knitting and the tray of wine and cake. For subsequent visits it is the ticking clock and the sleeping cat that provide enduring details of the domestic scene. But the most significant detail of all is the pinafore that Phillis wears at the time of Paul's first visit. She wears this on subsequent occasions but eventually discards it. This pinafore serves as a potent symbol from the time when Paul first meets Phillis to the time when he recalls the show-down between himself and Mr Holman when Phillis's secret is disclosed. Paul can never dissociate the image of the pinafore from his recollection of Phillis, even when he looks back after the passing of many years. But it is by looking beyond the pinafore that we find evidence of Phillis's inner life.

The pinafore is significant for several reasons. Du Maurier's illustration in the *Cornhill* shows Phillis wearing the pinafore while she simultaneously peels apples and reads Dante. The pinafore is a simple, unadorned garment which covers her dress



from a little below her throat to well below knee level. It is pinned to the top part of her dress and tied firmly around her waist. Its principal function is to protect her dress from unwelcome marks or stains, especially during the preparation of food. But when Paul first meets Phillis she apparently wears it quite needlessly for she is not engaged in an occupation that could spoil her dress. It is this routine wearing of the pinafore that strikes Paul as odd since he would only expect a child to engage in activities that would necessitate the covering of a better garment with a pinafore. The pinafore does, however, signify other aspects of Phillis's life at Hope Farm. When she feeds the hens she converts the lower part of the pinafore into a container for grain. This means that she can carry the grain around with her as she scatters it among the fowls. These practical uses of the pinafore, protecting and containing, represent the domestic and rural aspects of Phillis's life. But this simple garment has another function too. As an additional layer of clothing, it helps to conceal Phillis's physical form, which means that it does not in any way enhance her appearance. There is also a sense in which the pinafore acts as a barrier in any attempt to make closer contact with the wearer. But, significantly, by the time Phillis meets Holdsworth she has left off wearing the pinafore. Perhaps because of the frequent company of Paul, she has become more conscious of her appearance for, in addition to discarding the pinafore, she has confessed a liking for pretty coloured ribbons. Consequently, Holdsworth's first impression of Phillis is quite different from Paul's, and unsurprisingly, Phillis blushes at her first meeting with Holdsworth. The wearing and discarding of the pinafore provide external evidence of Phillis's consciousness of her own passage from

girlhood to young womanhood. But the nature of Paul's recollection of this time is such that he takes us beyond the pinafore in two ways. We see physically beyond the garment and into the wearer's heart and mind; and later in his recollection, we see evidence of Phillis's inner life beyond the time when she ceases to wear the pinafore. I propose to consider this evidence in detail, for it is the means by which we recognize the interior drama of Phillis's life.

To return to Paul's first meeting with Phillis, his memory of this occasion serves him so well that he recalls how Phillis gazed at him when she thought she was unobserved, but avoided any direct eye contact. This is not the suppressed emotion of Manasseh when he first meets Lois in *Lois the Witch*, but the entirely normal combination of curiosity and reticence on meeting a stranger. Nonetheless, this small incident alerts the reader to Phillis's natural interest in a young man of her own age group, and belies Paul's image of a child-figure in a pinafore. Paul's impression of Phillis as an overgrown pinafored child is given a further challenge when she takes the initiative in conversation, directing the talk to her father's daily routine and choice of reading for his family. Although Phillis appears to be a child of rural seclusion, as suggested by Paul's reference to Wordsworth's 'Lucy' poem, and, therefore, one with little experience of socializing with strangers, she does not share Paul's difficulty in starting a conversation.

Paul's recollection of Phillis continues when he recalls Phillis's sensitivity to his own injured feelings when Mr Holman rebukes Paul for drawing too much attention to his own father's achievements. If this display of sympathy surprised Paul, because of its indication of maturity, it did not make him see his cousin as an equal, yet in many ways, and in spite of the pinafore, she continues to show herself to be more mature than Paul. Even early in the morning, Phillis manages to foil Paul's attempt to take control of the conversation by rebuking him for asking an unnecessary question about the contents of her basket. These incidents, recalled by the older Paul, provide clues to Phillis's emotional life, but she also indicates mental processes which belie the juvenile and domestic image of the pinafore. One of the many aspects of Phillis's personality that Paul finds irksome is her thirst for knowledge, for the knowledge she already has makes him feel inferior to his younger cousin. It is, of course, this aspect of Phillis's inner life, her desire for a greater knowledge of Italian, that promotes her interest in Holdsworth before she has even met him. Any concealed interest Phillis may have had in the young man who was reputed to be fluent in Italian soon finds an outward expression, for Paul recalls that it was at this time that Phillis surprised her father by indicating a desire to wear coloured ribbons. Furthermore, and most significantly, it is shortly before her first meeting with Holdsworth that Phillis stops wearing the pinafore, the garment that Paul had found to be unattractive and inappropriate.

This discarding of the pinafore suggests a new awareness on the part of Phillis. She had been happy to wear it in the company of Paul for she regarded him purely as a friend, a companion, and one to whom she felt superior. But Holdsworth, because of his greater knowledge and experience of foreign travel, promises the possibility of a different kind of relationship, one in which she would wish to make more effort to create a favourable impression. The discarding of the pinafore suggests that, in her emotional and imaginative life, Phillis is ready for a romantic encounter with a man who is still young, but who has more experience of the world than her cousin Paul. Phillis's misfortune is that her own experience of life is unequal to this encounter and it is her innocence that makes her so vulnerable. This vulnerability is suggested to Paul by her blushes and it is from the time that Phillis leaves off the pinafore that Paul notices her blushes. Phillis's blushes are the outward manifestation of her inner discomfort; they betray her innermost feelings when she most wishes to keep them concealed, and they are always associated with Holdsworth. The blush has replaced the pinafore as a signifier.

Gaskell's use of the blush, as an indicator of Phillis's concealed feelings, might seem like a fairly obvious literary device, but it carries additional significance for a work written in the mid-nineteenth century. Throughout the nineteenth century there seems to have been an upsurge of interest in the phenomenon of blushing, and this interest was expressed by scientists and by poets. Perhaps because of his medical training, Keats was especially fond of using the image of blushing as a representation of human

feeling in his poetry.<sup>33</sup> The following lines from 'I Stood Tip-Toe Upon a Little Hill', published in 1817, could serve as an epigram to *Cousin Phillis*: 'How she would start, and blush, thus to be caught | Playing in all her innocence of thought'. (Keats, *Poems*, 76-82. 99). In 1839 a Dr Burgess published a book on the physiology of blushing.<sup>34</sup> The title of the book suggests a strictly scientific approach to the subject, yet Dr Burgess revealed himself as a true Romantic when he declared that 'Blushing may be styled the poetry of the Soul!', and that blushing is the 'lava of the heart produced by an eruption of feeling'. This comparison of blushing with poetry and lava echoes Byron's assertion that 'poetry is the lava of the imagination whose eruption prevents an earthquake'.<sup>35</sup> Clearly, an interest in blushing was a Romantic preoccupation, and Dr Burgess aligned himself most closely with Romanticism when he asserted that the blush 'demonstrates the impossibility of the *will* ever being able to overcome or control the *genuine* emotions of the Soul'.<sup>36</sup> This association of blushing with genuine emotion and with poetry inevitably recalls Wordsworth's remarks about poetry being the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings. Yet scholarly interest in blushing surfaced again more than thirty years after Dr Burgess's book was published, and at least as many years after the close of the Romantic era. That most eminent of Victorian natural scientists, Charles Darwin, turned his

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<sup>33</sup> This topic is discussed in Christopher Ricks, *Keats and Embarrassment* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974), especially Chapter 2, pp. 19-49; hereafter Ricks. I have drawn on Ricks for the remainder of my discussion on blushing.

<sup>34</sup> T. H. Burgess, *The Physiology or Mechanism of Blushing; Illustrative of the Influence of Mental Emotion on the Capillary Circulation; With a General View of the Sympathies, and the Organic Relations of those Structures with which they seem to be Connected* (London: John Churchill, 1839), cited in Ricks, pp. 19 and 26-27. Dr Burgess published a number of medical textbooks. The Wellcome Library for the History and Understanding of Medicine lists six titles by Dr Burgess, of which three are concerned with skin conditions.

<sup>35</sup> Ricks, p. 26.

attention to blushing in his *Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872).<sup>37</sup> Darwin's interest in blushing, as an activity peculiar to humans, aligned him with the Romantics, because of their stress on common humanity. All this nineteenth-century scholarly interest in blushing seems at odds with more recent attitudes towards blushing, attitudes which in comparison appear to be trite. Common expressions like 'the blushing bride', together with the brevity of the entry on the word 'blush' in most dictionaries, suggest that there is no longer any serious interest in the phenomenon. It is, therefore, necessary to recall the significance of the blush to nineteenth-century readers, in order to appreciate Gaskell's artistic intention. For Victorian readers blushing could represent feelings of shame, modesty, embarrassment, or even indignation. In *Cousin Phillis*, the blush is there to indicate Phillis's emotional response to a situation that was new to her. In his preface to *Endymion*, Keats spoke of the space of life between boyhood and manhood. In modern times we have ungendered this space by calling it adolescence.<sup>38</sup> When we read *Cousin Phillis* today we enter into adolescent pain, or even revisit our own adolescence, which for some readers is so discomfoting an experience that they disparage the story.<sup>39</sup> For Paul Manning, little more than an adolescent himself, there is a struggle to understand the contradictions of his cousin's appearance and behaviour, for these are the indicators

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<sup>36</sup> Ricks, p. 53.

<sup>37</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (London: Murray, 1872), cited in Ricks, p. 50.

<sup>38</sup> This is my development of a point made by Ricks, p. 10.

<sup>39</sup> This is largely anecdotal, being a response made to me personally by some readers of *Cousin Phillis*.

of her interior adolescent drama, and none more so than the wearing of the pinafore and the blushing which follows the discarding of this garment.

The first time Paul suspects a change in Phillis's emotional life is when he sees her blush on being introduced to Holdsworth. This is not merely the blush of shyness caused through meeting a stranger, for Paul did not recall Phillis blushing when he first met her. On the contrary, Phillis on that occasion was 'untroubled by the sight of a stranger' (*CP*, p.266). She blushes again when she becomes aware of Holdsworth's and Paul's gaze through the window. Here, Phillis is presented to the reader pictorially, fixed in a frame, but each of the young men gazing at her sees her differently. Significantly, Paul is still associating Phillis with the pinafore, but Holdsworth sees her as a beautiful and desirable young woman. Given that Phillis had not previously blushed under Paul's gaze, we may assume that the blush on this occasion is Phillis's response to Holdsworth's perception of her. As the acquaintance between Phillis and Holdsworth deepens, little is said that might suggest any permanence for the relationship. As Betty the servant notices, it is by the actions of looking and touching that warmth of feeling develops, and not through the spoken word. For Paul these small incidents carry significance, for he is able to recall them. He remembers Phillis's gaze of wistful curiosity, as she observed him talking with Holdsworth, and her deep blush when her gaze was noticed by Paul. Although Paul recalls many such incidents, he does not offer his own interpretation, but we should have no difficulty in recognizing these constant changes to Phillis's complexion as

indications of her emotional life. Phillis's attempt to conceal her feelings fails rather spectacularly when she rushes out into the rain to rescue Holdsworth's surveying equipment, for this show of concern, together with her anxiety over his wet shirt, leads to emotional confusion for herself and for the young man. Holdsworth betrays his unspoken feelings of gratitude through his looks, which are noted by Paul, and through his clumsy attempt at badinage. The sophistication of Holdsworth's teasing is such that it adds to Phillis's confusion which in turn promotes a new degree of intimacy that brings yet another blush to Phillis's cheek. This is not the blush of self-consciousness caused, as earlier blushes may have been, by the gaze of an attractive young man. It is, instead, an indication of Phillis's response to a developing intimacy. Holdsworth's presence, and in particular his scrutiny, continues to impact on Phillis's emotional life, as shown by her reaction to Holdsworth's attempt to sketch her likeness. Here, Phillis is again presented pictorially, as Holdsworth begs her to keep still while he sketches her, but the situation makes emotional demands on her that prove intolerable, especially when the artist focuses on the most expressive part of the human face: the eyes. Her fluctuating complexion and quickening breath are but a prelude to her abrupt departure from the room, an action that indicates an increasing level of emotional turmoil. This incident with its emphasis on fluctuating colour, rather than straightforward blushing, foreshadows future events. If increased colour to Phillis's cheeks suggests emotional animation, then the draining of colour suggests emotional desolation, for it is her paleness, rather than any blushing, that Paul recalls following the news of Holdsworth's sudden departure.



From the time of Holdsworth's departure, changes in Phillis's complexion are not the only clues to her inner life. From this time on there are changes to her voice which Paul also notices and recalls. Her pale and weary look is accompanied by an aching tone in her voice, and the appearance of spots of brilliant colour on her cheeks is preceded by a change to her voice making it unusually high-pitched. This change to her voice suggests an increasing emotional disturbance, for a rising voice can indicate incipient hysteria. Her sobbing over the book that bore Holdsworth's annotations confirms the cause of her emotional state; her refuge in the wood stack confirms her need for emotional concealment. Paul's misplaced honesty, which compels him to tell Phillis of Holdsworth's final words before his departure for Canada, has the effect of granting Phillis only temporary remission from her suffering. The brief joy brought about by this news of Holdsworth's avowed intention is again illustrated by a change in Phillis's complexion and in her voice. She tries to hide her blushes with her hands, and her sobs change to a song, as she warbles in imitation of the birds. This period of time is the apex of Phillis's emotional stability: she is in complete harmony with her natural surroundings, with her family, and with her imagination, for she has reason to believe that what she imagines will come to pass. But this harmony is short lived, for the thunder-storm that gives Mrs Holman a head-ache symbolizes and portends the emotional storm that must soon engulf Phillis when she learns of Holdsworth's marriage to a girl in Canada. On hearing this news Phillis's voice changes again, this time to a wail, and within a day or two her voice has acquired a discordant jangle.

But when the news of Holdsworth's wedding is broken to the entire household, Phillis's suppressed emotional distress is so great that she momentarily loses the power of speech, setting her lips together to prevent any vocal betrayal of her true feelings. When she does speak her voice is as sharp and discordant as her feelings.

Paul's observations of these changes to Phillis's complexion and to her voice prepare him for the inevitable crisis, but the crisis is postponed until such time when Mr and Mrs Holman must learn the truth of their daughter's emotional life. Before this crisis breaks, Paul provides us with further clues to Phillis's inner suffering: the convulsive movements of her hands, dark circles round her eyes, and the whiteness of her lips. Phillis is now close to emotional, mental and physical breakdown, and the symptoms are so evident that, mercifully, they alert Mr Holman to the possibility of something being amiss with his daughter.

Phillis's illness, described as brain-fever, makes possible a release of all Phillis's pent-up emotions. When she recovers she tries to make plans for the future, but her uncertainty is still in evidence by the way in which she still blushes, if only a little, and by the way in which she can only falter out her wish for change, rather than asserting it confidently. Phillis's life must move forward, for there is no return to the pinafore. But her uncertainty about the future is underlined by the way in which she sets aside the coloured ribbons she had once desired to wear. Paul's final recollection of his cousin Phillis is the visual and audible evidence of her inner uncertainty. It is the same

kind of evidence that has provided the reader with access to Phillis's inner life since the time when she discarded the pinafore. Paul's recollection has taken us way beyond the pinafore, and into the very depths of Phillis's inner life, thus revealing to us her interior drama. There is a sense in which *Cousin Phillis* prepares the ground for a Romantic novel of the later nineteenth century: Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, for Hardy describes Tess as a field woman pure and simple, yet the reader recognizes that such an appellation belies the magnitude of her interior drama and suffering. Fate treats Phillis less cruelly, but to the casual observer she is, though not a field woman, a country girl, pure and simple. The reader, however, has recognized, through Paul's recollection, the inner life of a simple and innocent girl as she learns, painfully, the ways of mankind, with its good intentions and accidental injuries.

As noted earlier in this chapter, critical acclaim for *Cousin Phillis* has been high for almost half a century. The story represents the culmination of Gaskell's short fiction and of this thesis. It is arguably the supreme example of Gaskell's Romantic inheritance as manifested in her shorter fiction. In none of her other work is there less dependence on dramatic incident. The drama in *Cousin Phillis* is entirely internal, for there is neither birth, death nor physical injury. The precise description of physical details, praised by scholars, always has a purpose, and is frequently there to signify aspects of the inner life. The location of Hope Farm with its resemblance to Sandlebridge suggests a return, on the part of Gaskell, to her younger days and to her

love for the poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge. But this is too simple an approach to the story, for if Gaskell is revisiting scenes of personal happiness, she is doing so as a mature woman with the benefit of experience. Consequently, there is in the story the inevitability of suffering as a condition of life. There is also the inevitability of change and growth, as Phillis herself realizes when she can only speak falteringly about returning to the old days. For Paul, Phillis's suffering has been his sentimental journey, and we feel that in maturity he will be a wiser man than Holdsworth. Yet all of this is achieved without any overt didacticism, the author appearing to be entirely absent from the narrative, which is conveyed to the reader through the words of a young man who himself participates in the rural scene and who is a catalyst for the change that Phillis must face. The uncertainty that surrounds Phillis's future is part of Gaskell's maturity as a writer, for the story does not require closure and is better without it.

*Cousin Phillis* is supremely a Romantic text, for its author has focused on human feeling, while minimizing external event. She has also contextualized this interior drama in a situation that is governed by a Romantic relationship with nature and religion. Through the writing of *Cousin Phillis*, Elizabeth Gaskell has confirmed the presence and significance of her Romantic inheritance. As a literary achievement, the work is a central component of the final chapter of her career, a chapter which began with her first contribution to the *Cornhill*, and which terminated through her untimely death with *Wives and Daughters*.

## Chapter Eight: Conclusion

In this thesis I have tried to establish Elizabeth Gaskell's relationship with Romanticism as shown in her shorter works. I have noted that Gaskell's early journal and letter writing coincided with the later years of the Romantic period. I have also noted that this subjective and confessional form of writing was in itself a characteristic of what came to be known as Romanticism.

The diversity of Romantic expression has been discussed here to reveal two quite distinctive strands, both of which promote the supremacy of human feeling and imagination, and which made themselves felt in the visual arts and music, in addition to literature which has been the main focus of study here. The first strand is one of light and optimism, generally favoured by Wordsworth, who saw the potential for nobility even in the most unpromising of human souls. The second strand is one of darkness and pessimism, which often finds expression through Gothic techniques, the sublime, and the supernatural. This strand of Romanticism has been identified in some of Coleridge's poetry. On occasions, pessimism also finds its way into Wordsworth's view of humanity, though he is less reliant on the supernatural and the Gothic. The most pessimistic view of human nature, during the Romantic period, has been found in the poetry of Crabbe. Crabbe has been included here because of his focus on humble life, rather than his representation of feeling and imagination.

When considering Elizabeth Gaskell's formative years, I have given emphasis to three crucial factors: her emotional life; her access to imaginative poetry and prose; and ways in which her cultural education fused with her Unitarian religion during her late teens and early twenties. As a result of her education and her marriage to William Gaskell, she was able to embrace poetry of the Romantic age with an informed and discriminating mind. As a young woman, she was able to respond to the poetry of Wordsworth and Crabbe, and to discriminate between the optimism of the former and the pessimism of the latter. Her own youthful optimism caused her to align herself most strongly with Wordsworth, while cautiously recognizing the merits of Crabbe.

This alignment with Wordsworth manifests itself most obviously in her early short stories, including those discussed in Chapters Three and Four. In these chapters I have shown how Gaskell concurred with Wordsworth's idea of feeling giving importance to situations and actions, and with his vision of man's relationship with the natural world. At this stage of the research, the indications were that Wordsworth was pre-eminent in Gaskell's Romantic inheritance. This view was, however, soon tested by a close study of some of her later short stories.

A selection of stories set in Cumbria suggested a continuation of the Wordsworthian influence. A close reading of these texts, however, revealed something more complex. While the Wordsworthian presence could still be felt, other influences were also discernible. These additional influences included Coleridge, Goethe and, perhaps

surprisingly, William Blake. While the influence of Coleridge and Goethe had been noted as marginal in one of Gaskell's earlier stories, the influence of these poets was now seen to be central to Gaskell's consciousness. The influence of Blake emerged without precedent though it could now be identified quite strongly. By drawing on Coleridge, Gaskell introduced strong Gothic elements into her writing; by drawing on Goethe she introduced the notion of the young man of sensibility; and by drawing on Blake she was able to fully explore the relationship between emotion and reason.

This engagement with a wider range of Romantic poets, coupled with broader experience in her personal life, led to a shift in Gaskell's consciousness. By identifying this shift I have explored ways in which it was reflected in her engagement with the darker side of Romanticism. This more mature approach has been identified as one which was less optimistic, and which, therefore, focused on representations of unworthiness, underpinned by elements of the Gothic, the sublime, and by deeper psychological insights. While Wordsworth continued to be a major influence in her writing, it was now the darker side of the poet, as expressed in *The Borderers*, rather than her earlier favourite, *The Cumberland Beggar*. It was also noted that this shift in Gaskell's awareness of human nature enabled her to relate to the poetry of Crabbe with fewer reservations than before.

This mature awareness of darkness and light found ultimate expression in Gaskell's mature and frequently praised work, *Cousin Phillis*. Here I discussed her attempt to

return to the optimism of her youth as expressed in her early correspondence. But while Sandlebridge had been delineated in 1837 as blissful, its fictional counterpart Hope Farm, created in 1863, could not preclude the experience of suffering.

Gaskell's engagement with her Romantic inheritance can be seen as one that was not static. Wordsworth always played a part in her thinking, but he was not always the optimistic poet of her youthful fancy, in which he portrayed man as dear to man. He could also be the poet of human suffering and of human folly. This gloomier side of Wordsworth found a place in her mature imagination. As she progressed in her writing, a wider range of poets of the Romantic age also acquired importance in her imaginative life. They included Coleridge, Blake, Goethe, and, more marginally, Keats, Byron and Shelley. Like an unwelcome guest, Crabbe made his presence felt from the start, but as someone to be tamed and softened by the seeing-beauty spirit.

In this study of Gaskell's shorter works, I have traced the development of a writer who began her career writing shorter texts and who developed this strand of her writing mainly through contributions to journals, including *Howitt's Journal*, *Household Words*, *All the Year Round*, and the *Cornhill*. Her journal contributions gave her the opportunity to maintain her anonymity, which enabled her to write freely and experimentally. Gaskell's contribution to the rise and success of the modern short story and the novella cannot be assessed here. What is clear, however, is that her shorter works represent a valuable part of her total output, partly because of their



intrinsic worth, but also because of the ways in which they provide insights into Gaskell's creative processes as a nineteenth-century imaginative writer. These particular processes are just one means by which nineteenth-century fiction benefited from its Romantic legacy.

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