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REBELLIOUS WOMEN IN THE NOVELS OF ELIZABETH GASKELL

by

Ruth Marie Cavanagh 

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

Department of English

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommended to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled REBELLIOUS WOMEN IN THE NOVELS OF ELIZABETH GASKELL, submitted by Ruth Marie Cavanagh in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my mother Margaret Cavanagh, who introduced me to the works of Elizabeth Gaskell, and to my father Red (James) Cavanagh. I thank them both for the great interest they have always shown in my education.

I would like to thank Dr. Sara Stambaugh for her invaluable advice, patience, wisdom, and consistency.

ABSTRACT

In Mary Barton, North and South, and Ruth by Elizabeth Gaskell women play major roles illustrating the social concerns of these novels. The heroines of the novels contradict and rebel against the traditional nineteenth-century attitudes held by other characters. The impulse to rebellion throughout the novels is based on the liberating theology of Gaskell's nineteenth-century Unitarianism. The central female characters in the novels reflect the Unitarian emphasis on the potential liberating nature of religious belief. These novels also demonstrate the far-reaching social implications of a democratizing theology. Gaskell applies her religious principles to social situations in order to promote reform of exploitive and unjust practices. The women in these novels use moral reasoning to combat injustice and restrictions on feminine behaviour in the nineteenth century. The social situations described in the novels highlights the tensions between the industrial working class and the upper classes, and the women in these novels are used to uncover the fundamental class dysfunction that marked the Victorian era. Gaskell has presented a religious ethic aimed at ameliorating class tension and providing a source of individual empowerment that challenged the Victorian reliance on Christianity as a means of defining and regulating behaviour.

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INTRODUCTION

Elizabeth Gaskell strongly believed that the society in which she lived was increasingly tending toward social crisis (Lucas p. 151), and she addressed this in her novels by giving her female characters a voice of rebellion inspired by her own religious beliefs. Gaskell illustrated repeatedly in her novels, particularly Mary Barton, North and South, and Ruth, young women responding to situations that affected their own lives and provided significant commentary about broader social considerations. The responses of the women in Gaskell's novels are often contrary to traditional expectations for personal behaviour and form a potent challenge to the definitions of appropriate behaviour in Victorian England. Gaskell's portrayal of women who voice opinions and make choices that highlight exploitation in society is directly informed by the Unitarian teachings that Gaskell espoused. The challenges made against social convention by Gaskell were intended to be reconstructive. This impetus to social amelioration was, in fact, an important aspect of nineteenth-century British Unitarianism.

John Lucas has proposed that the English middle class, beginning with Chartist challenges in the 1840s, became fearful that the working class would eventually become seriously violent (Lucas p. 151). Lucas groups Gaskell in a trend of middle-class liberalism based on fear and insularity. However, I believe that Gaskell was also concerned with addressing inequality and injustice and promoting understanding between classes in society. The inclusion of violence by the workers in Mary Barton and North and South proves that Gaskell was aware of the growing frustration of the working class. Her insights into the lives of the workers shows that she believed that they were justifiably frustrated and were not innately unruly and insubordinate. Many critics agree that Gaskell's sensibilities were formed by the specific beliefs of

Unitarianism[1] and her concern with the working class was based on a genuine interest in the well-being of individuals and with issues of morality, not with middle-class protectionism. In fact, Gaskell was dismayed by the idea that the content of her novels was inspired solely by exploitive accounts of controversial events and she believed such an idea undermined her true purpose. She wrote to her publisher in response to a request for a preface to Mary Barton:

> I hardly know what you mean by an 'explanatory preface.' The only thing I should like to make clear is that it is no catch-penny run up since the events on the Continent have directed public attention to the consideration of the state of affairs between the Employers, & their work-people. (Letters #26)

Coral Lansbury suggests that writing a preface that tended to define Mary Barton in the context of politically charged events was distasteful to Gaskell (Novel of Social Crisis p. 22). Gaskell felt that such a piece of writing was exploitive and would weaken the message of the novel by making it merely topical. Ultimately, Gaskell wrote in defence of her view of the conditions of the working class, "It is enough to say, that this belief of the injustice and unkindness which they [the working class] endure from their fellow-creatures, taints what might be resignation to God's will, and turns it to revenge in too many of the poor uneducated factory-workers of Manchester" (Preface to MB p. 37).

Gaskell, inspired by her Unitarian beliefs, wrote in the spirit of a reformer. Unitarianism was one of the many dissenting religions that were established because of beliefs differing from those of the Church of England. Valentine Cunningham explains that the development of these alternative religions in the nineteenth century was largely a result of sociological forces (p. 18). The trend to dissenting religions mirrored the influence of the many social changes occurring throughout the

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1For general discussions of the influence of Unitarianism on Gaskell see Monica Fryckstedt's Elizabeth Gaskell's Mary Barton and Ruth: A Challenge to Christian England (Diss. Uppsala U, 1982), Winifred Gerin's Elizabeth Gaskell (Oxford UP, 1976), Coral Lansbury's, Elizabeth Gaskell: The Novel of Social Crisis (Barnes & Noble, 1975) and Elizabeth Gaskell (Twayne, 1984) and Patsy Stoneman's Elizabeth Gaskell (Indiana UP, 1987).

nineteenth century. Cunningham explains that many dissenting religions flourished in industrializing urban centres (pp. 74-75). A growing class of working urban poor became increasingly dissatisfied with the Church of England's apparent inability to find in its Christian directives motives and means to foster respect and material support for the working class. Religious dissent embodied a democratizing impetus intended to empower the working classes. The growth of dissenting religions came to be in some ways synonymous with the struggle to reform the divisions of power in society (Cunningham p. 18). Cunningham explains that the strengthening of the influence of dissenting religions, such as Unitarianism, in the nineteenth century suggests an attempt to lessen the scope of social elitism (p. 18).

Cunningham also suggests that the popularity of religious dissent in the nineteenth century was due to a gradual enhancement of the status of the individual (p. 9). He further claims that the ability of the individual to define him or herself independent of class was a profound development of the nineteenth-century novel inspired by religious dissent's increased awareness of individual importance. He points to Elizabeth Gaskell as a major contributor to the trend of making religious and social commentary through novels that highlight individuals' life stories. As a Unitarian, Gaskell believed that every person contributed to society, and thus the average person and the development of his or her conscience became a means to express a demand for greater justice for people of all levels of society.

The nineteenth-century Unitarians gave unusual precedence to the value of man for working out God's plan. They held the conviction that individuals could be responsible for cultivating their moral sense. In order for every individual to be responsible for his or her own moral nature, they believed in the absolute equality of all persons before God and in this world and that God's grace extends equally to all (Cunningham p. 10). According to the Unitarians, every person has equal potential to develop a rational and divinely inspired moral sense. Necessary to such development was the use of the intellect to maintain constant vigilance over one's behaviour. The Unitarians believed that

adherence to arbitrary rules without examination and belief in their worth to mankind was a waste of God's gift of reason and represented a dangerous tendency to neglect the cultivation of a moral sense in favour of blind authority (Channing, "Unitarian Christianity" p. 9). The American Unitarian William Ellery Channing wrote:

> We believe that all virtue has its foundation in the moral nature of man, that is, in conscience or his sense of duty, and in the power of forming his temper and life according to conscience. . . . By these remarks, we do not mean to deny the importance of God's aid or Spirit; but by his Spirit we mean a moral illuminating, and persuasive influence not physical, not compulsory, not involving a necessity of virtue. ("Unitarian Christianity" P. 30)

The rational outcome of the careful cultivation of intellect and moral sense for Unitarians was to implement these elements to improve their world materially and spiritually for the benefit of all. Unitarians also believed in extending mercy to sinners because they did not believe in promoting faith through compulsion and threats of alienation.

Unitarianism was a religion with a social agenda. Coral Lansbury suggests that Unitarians were so strongly identified with social action that "more [people] thought of them as less a religious sect than a political group, radical in temperament, reformers by design" (Novel of Social Crisis p. 12). This impetus to reform was an aspect of Unitarianism that many found deeply threatening and even heretical. Lansbury also writes that the aspirations of Unitarianism were interpreted by many as "the voice of radical dissent" that called into question the social order that religious conformity believed to be determined by God (Novel of Social Crisis p. 35). Gaskell's faith was concerned primarily with possibilities of a living faith "emphasizing personal action" (Uglow p. 6). Unitarians believed that they could improve social conditions by adherence to their beliefs, and they saw it as their duty to take responsible action aimed at developing a society able to consider equally the needs of all people and classes. Dissenting religions, notably Unitarianism, believed that it was part of

religious faith to attempt to provide practical answers to some of the material needs of the poor. Such positive thinking made Unitarians singular in a Victorian world shaken by doubts. Lansbury explains, "It was the incorrigible optimism of the Unitarian that most offended his fellow Christian. In the face of slums and poverty, crime and prostitution, the Unitarian maintained his faith in progress and perfectibility, in the power of reason to effect change" (Novel of Social Crisis p. 13). The dynamism of the Victorian age with its advancements in industry and science overwhelmed many and caused them either to lose faith or become resigned that human intervention was pointless. The tragedies of life had been put there by God. Such fatalism, however, was foreign to the Unitarians who saw no contradiction between the negative effects of a rapidly modernizing society and the existence of a merciful God. This steadfast belief in improvement made them "both the envy and the outrage of their day" (Lansbury, Novel of Social Crisis p. 14). It was this unshakeable belief that improvements could and would occur, if people would acknowledge the causes of problems and search for answers, that seems to have fuelled Gaskell.

As a Unitarian, Gaskell was a great admirer of the ideals of Christian Socialism. She writes in a letter of 1850 of "their [Christian Socialists'] earnest loving search after the Kingdom of God" (Letters #67). This movement was made up of individuals of diverse intellectual, theological, and social backgrounds and was committed to the humane reformation of society based on "the vision of a humanity emancipated from the thrall of custom and the existing ties of social deference" (Norman p. 2). This movement would have appealed to the Unitarian believer. Both placed great emphasis on the role of the individual and the belief in the possibility of improving one's situation in life. C.E. Vulliamy writes, "The idea of the movement [Christian Socialism] was the application of the religious principle to economic problems, with special emphasis on *the supreme importance of individual character*" (p. 3). Similarly, her novels embody Gaskell's commitment to social amelioration. She had a sense of duty that led her

to try to do whatever was within her scope to change society and make it more compassionate and just. Her intent is noted in Alan Shelston's introduction to Ruth: "The example of George Eliot was to show how provincial religious practice, particularly that of Dissent, with its emphasis on the claims of the individual conscience, could provide fertile soil for the novelist committed to the working out of a humane social morality" (p. xvii). Gaskell admired the Christian Socialists and wrote in a spirit similar to theirs of the belief in social reformation based on charity and liberal, democratic theology. Gaskell's Unitarian sensibilities were fundamental to her analysis of her world and the messages she conveyed in her novels. Lansbury concurs: "Her novels and her life as a woman and social reformer were expressions of this theology of optimism. She was a religious writer, but her religion was at variance with most contemporary attitudes" (Novel of Social Crisis p. 15).

Modern liberation theology attempts to promote the importance of individual spirituality and belief in God in preference to church authority. Liberation theology emphasizes the empowering potential of faith and morals for all, but particularly those socially and materially dispossessed of any significant power. I have included discussions of current liberation theology because of the similarity of Gaskell's beliefs with modern liberal theology and to highlight the radical nature of her theology. The examples of modern liberation theology that I have used emphasize the power of liberal theology to promote social change and so illustrate Gaskell's tactic of infusing her Unitarian beliefs in her novels in order to promote social reform.

As a resident of a large industrial city, Manchester, Gaskell had long been aware of the powerlessness of the working class. As she tried to bring to light some of the injustices faced by the workers, Gaskell was making potent commentary on the moral responsibility of the more powerful classes and trying to incite meaningful and voluntary redress. Coral Lansbury suggests that what seems to be the voice of complacent liberalism in Gaskell's novels is in fact one of Gaskell's achievements of subversion. Gaskell created a narrative voice in Mary Barton that

appealed to her middle-class readers because it did not explicitly espouse the workers' viewpoint. However, juxtaposed with the more psychologically convincing realism and unpalatable honesty of her working-class characters the narrative voice works to highlight the need for greater compassion for the workers by the upper classes (Novel of Social Crisis p. 9). Lansbury writes: "Her problem was one of eliciting her readers' sympathies for the poor without alienating them with her belief that poverty was not a natural condition but a state engendered by a capitalist society" (Novel of Social Crisis p. 25).

In the three novels discussed in this paper, Gaskell gives women strong roles to illustrate the misjudgements made about the lives of the working poor and the conditions and prejudices that attempted to keep from this class the power to change their lives. Helena Bergmann writes that many of the social problem novels of the nineteenth century were written by women and tended to give female characters strong roles (p. 15). Bergmann also suggests that a common point of reference among these novelists, including Gaskell, was reliance on religion. She writes, "Basically these novelists put their trust in religion and in the inherent goodness of human beings; what was essential to them was to end the suffering and to prevent outbreaks of violence" (p. 15). While Gaskell fits this description generally, it must be emphasized that she did not create heroines who simply put their faith in God and were designed to embody passive, non-threatening moral inspiration. Gaskell's novels are filled with active women who try to change their material situations, and by doing so they point out the injustices in society. Gaskell's heroines challenge the reader to adopt a new moral standard that must be vigilant and active to have any real influence. Gaskell's Unitarian beliefs are infused throughout her novels and support the rebellion by characters in them. In this paper I will highlight the liberating aspect of Unitarianism by drawing parallels between the rebellious behaviour it allows and modern liberation theology.

Valentine Cunningham points out that Gaskell's characters are rarely identified as Unitarians. The lack of religious identification

of characters who embody the beliefs of Unitarianism, Cunningham suggests, reflects the Unitarian insistence on religious openness and tolerance. Cunningham explains that nineteenth-century British Unitarianism always avoided defining itself too narrowly and that Gaskell's writing reflects her overriding belief in an open and humane Christianity. He also suggests that Gaskell was attempting to show the potential for liberal thinking in all Christian religions and was subverting criticism as a dissenting writer by not giving her characters specific religious affiliations despite the moral concerns in the novels (pp. 139-141).

The female characters in Mary Barton, North and South, and Ruth live in the working world and demonstrate, through their struggles and disappointments, that they do not submit willingly to the idea that their station in life has been divinely ordained. Nor do these women submit meekly to the mechanisms that attempt to control and to exploit them. The heroines in Gaskell's novels use their intellects to better comprehend how the poor are exploited by society and then to promote a redress of the balance of power in between classes. The major female characters in Gaskell's novels continually challenge themselves and the reader to review narrow interpretations of behaviour and the structures in society that uphold such assessments.

Despite the predominance of men in the formal discussions of workers' rights in Mary Barton and North and South, Gaskell also used women effectively to show realistically the pressures faced by the working classes. Gaskell attempted to depict working-class women doing what they, out of necessity, did do; that is, work and try to keep home and family together despite unemployment, illness, injury, and poor living conditions. Gaskell showed the lives of working-class women to be filled with hardship and disappointment. She placed these women in such a context in order to illustrate the abuses inherent in various social systems and the necessity of individual choice and responsibility to gain improvements. Bergmann suggests:

> This non-committed role of women, far removed from the world of Chartist activity, is an important aspect of their

> function as communicators of a social message in the novels. The fact that politics were considered outside women's sphere has enabled the author to express social criticism in oblique terms less offensive to a middle-class reader. (P. 36)

By depicting women facing the pressures of urban life, Gaskell undercuts the simple assumptions made about the working class and about women.

Aina Rubenius quotes a letter citing Gaskell's concern about the effects of industrialization:

> I do think that we must all acknowledge that there are duties connected with the manufacturing system not fully understood as yet, and evils existing in relation to it which may be remedied in some degree, although we as yet do not know how; but surely there is no harm in directing the attention to the existence of such evils. (P. 143)

Along with her obvious concern for the working class as a whole, Gaskell was aware that increasing numbers of young women were choosing factory work in preference to domestic work (Rubenius pp. 159-60). The prominent position that she gives to women and their responses to the influences they encounter in industrial society show her particular interest in the sub-group of young urban working women. Her concern about this sociological shift is apparent in Mary Barton, North and South, and Ruth. Frequently in these novels, issues of concern are voiced didactically by the male characters. However, the "evils" of the factory system are shown with greater intimacy and clarity by women's experiences. While Gaskell often highlights the problems of industrialization from a woman's point of view, she always reminds the reader that these are not just the problems of one social sub-group. They are the problems of society as a whole, and their effects are widespread. Gaskell used with great effect the relationship of women and industrial life to illustrate the exploitation of the working class and of women.

Work is also shown to be a necessary and often constructive part of feminine life. As Bergmann points out, many of Gaskell's heroines

are working class (p. 16). They are able to lead a more independent life than would be acceptable to Gaskell's middle-class readers. Yet Gaskell's young women demonstrate that they are able to be intellectually, emotionally, and morally self-governing. Their work provided many young women with their own money, when it was not appropriated as part of a family income, and with a sense of living and working for their own goals and well-being (Walkowitz p. 74). In Gaskell's novels, work is one avenue by which women can become personally and socially responsible. For Ruth Hilton her work life is a large part of her development to maturity and her social redemption. While Margaret Hale never becomes a worker, her connection with the working class enables her to become a responsible, socially aware factory owner's wife.

The growing independence of young working women was a phenomenon of the nineteenth century believed by many to be a proof of their waywardness and lack of social responsibility (Walkowitz p. 74). Barbara Hanman argues that women's independence and their increasing traffic in the world away from the home threatened Victorian ideas about order and propriety. She describes the prevalent nineteenth-century view: "access to the public sphere [for women] is necessarily contaminating: either it attaches one to the world and gives one interests and motives, or it somehow damages, perhaps even taints, one's character" (p. 352). However, when Gaskell's women apparently, in the public view, fail to live morally and responsibly, she shows that they have been to a great extent victimized by the social forces that exploit them. Gaskell demonstrates through her women characters how those, women and the working class, without public access and power are easily manipulated by those with public access and power. Gaskell's women choose ways that do not involve overt political commentary to reject the prejudices that entrap them. They turn inevitably to a Christian ethic that is egalitarian and potentially liberating for all. The adherence to moral principles that demand individual judgement instead of deference to authority creates a unique and subtle form of social rebellion. Patsy Stoneman writes: "This doctrine [self-government],

potentially subversive of the authority not only of the Church but of class and gender, underlies everything Elizabeth Gaskell wrote" (p. 60).

The major female characters in the three novels progress from being typically childish girls to truly adult women. They become able to answer for themselves the moral questions that they encounter. As a result, they demonstrate profound emotional and psychological development. The choices that Gaskell's heroines make usually enhance Gaskell's themes and highlight the inadequacies of accepted social and industrial practices. All of these women are faced with critical choices that reflect larger social questions, and their responses provide alternatives to the established ways of thinking and acting. As well, despite the unconventional nature of many of their decisions, these women often make choices that allow them to become stronger people and to improve their lives. It is the women who often make the most successful choices and show convincingly the deficiencies of the social and industrial systems; the strength and success of the women in Gaskell's novels adds the disturbing aspect of gender rebellion to some already controversial topics.

Rubenius suggests that by themselves women's choices, such as whether to marry or who to marry, do not constitute significant themes in the novels, but that they illustrate the power of individual moral awareness to make society function better (p. 76). The question of marriage arises for Mary Barton, Margaret Hale, and Ruth Hilton. The decisions that these women make about marriage show their ability to make responsible choices and reinforce Gaskell's ideas about what is moral and constructive for the individual and society. The choice of husband, or the choice not to marry, reflects the values of the heroine. In all cases the values implicit in the heroine's choice reflect those of Gaskell and often highlight opposed values that Gaskell believed to be corrupted. While Gaskell herself shied away from calls for an extension of women's political rights (Letters #276), her novels gave women a strong and rebellious voice that illustrated her own theories for social reform. The commitment not to advocate political solutions to social problems indicates Gaskell's scepticism that profound social

change could be effectively legislated without the support of society (Rubenius p. 55).

Unitarianism formed Gaskell's world view, and the women in her novels express her conviction that individuals have the moral responsibility to try to correct injustices in their world. Inherent in the conviction that people must attempt to redress injustices is a commitment to a certain degree of rebellion. In accordance with Unitarian belief, Gaskell viewed rebellion as justifiable, even necessary, in order to help a weak or defenceless group or individual (Rubenius p. 69). And the fact that she gave female characters such a prominent place in her work was not in any way at variance with her belief in the uncompromised equality of all individuals. As Lansbury points out, "to be born a woman and Unitarian was to be released from much of the prejudice and oppression enjoined upon other women" (Novel of Social Crisis p. 11).

MARY BARTON

Mary Barton contains the voice of the liberating and reconstructive Unitarianism that Gaskell believed in. Mary Barton is the character in the novel who primarily embodies the aspects of Unitarianism that Gaskell believed promoted individual responsibility and dignity and tended to break down prejudice and injustice. Despite the important thematic role of Mary's father, John Barton, as the voice of suffering and injustice, his attempts toward redress are ultimately combative and unsuccessful. It is Mary who, as she develops maturity, provides a voice consistent with the reformative aspects of nineteenth-century British Unitarianism.

As father and daughter, the lives and fortunes of John and Mary are unavoidably linked. Gaskell used this pair to provide a unique perception of dissatisfaction among the working class. Joan Chittister proposes the Biblical story of Job as a paradigm for rebellion in accordance with current liberation theology (p. 2). The model for liberation theology that Chittister constructs around the story of Job seems to be an apt way to interpret the roles Gaskell has given John and Mary as they embody the beliefs of Unitarianism. John and Mary Barton show, as they encounter a variety of unjust practices and attitudes, the tendency of society to victimize them because of their relative lack of power to question and to fight against injustice as they encounter it. The role of the one who questions and exposes injustice is the key one ascribed to Job in Chittister's model and it is the role that both John and Mary play.

John is the oppressed worker who can no longer accept his poverty as a natural condition that he must silently endure, and in this way he matches what Chittister sees as the key element to Job's personality (p. 3). John Barton's main function in the novel is to give voice to the suffering of the industrial poor and to question if their misery stems from the disregard and prejudice of those with moral, political, and social power. So, like Chittister's Job, John Barton is "the figure outside the system, who confronts it with the reality of undeserved

pain" (p. 2). However, despite the moral justification of John's impulse to rebel, he ultimately alienates himself from all social groups and fails as a legitimate reformer. John loses his faith in man and in God and thus, in the end, cannot offer a humane solution. Chittister points to the ineffectiveness of immoral acts of anger and frustration: "Yet to take justice unto himself [Job], to allow his anger to destroy him, to become what he hates, Job learns from God, is no solution either" (p. 5).

The voice of rebellion and liberation, however, does not simply burn out in the frustration of John Barton. It takes root in his daughter Mary who provides repeated examples of rebellious non-acceptance of exploitation and injustice based on challenges to accepted moral standards and assertions of an individual's right to fair treatment. Such moral rebellion was at the heart of Gaskell's Unitarianism and is now being heard as the focus of modern liberation theology (Comblin p. 64). Gaskell's choice of Mary as the character who shows a faithful and workable rebellion based primarily on individual power reflects her Unitarian beliefs. Mary provides examples of rebellion with reconstructive purposes that go beyond "avenging the old system" and begin "to envision a new one" (Chittister p. 5).

Mary Barton plays the role of the successful rebel in the novel and she thereby suggests another parallel with Chittister's model. The inheritors of Job's righteous dissent, including the liberation from the compulsion of orthodox thought to endure exploitation silently, were Job's daughters (p. 6). Chittister suggests that it is the inheritance of hope that is bestowed on Job's daughters. They symbolize the hope for a world where "oppressive power is disempowered so that the powerless can triumph, the relationships of the world are reordered and hope is made new in Job's daughters" (p. 7). So too, in Mary Barton Mary shows that, through faith and conscience, exploitive relationships can be exposed and undermined, and hope be restored. Mary's role as a sign of hope is symbolized for the reader at the end of the novel when Mary and Jem Wilson, her new husband, have immigrated to Canada. Mary's and Jem's relocation to Canada is not an exile. Jem has promising new

employment (MB p. 461), and they are not separated emotionally or physically from their family and closest friends. Jem's mother and Mary's friends Job Legh and his granddaughter Margaret and Will Wilson all intend to join Mary and Jem in their new home. Everything about their new life is promising. Coral Lansbury concurs that this end to the novel symbolizes hope for a new society centered on the values developed in Mary as she has progressed to moral and social responsibility (Elizabeth Gaskell p. 10).

It is noteworthy that Gaskell chose to embody in a female character rebellion based on fidelity to conscience and reason, to exposure of the truth through honesty and plain speaking, rather than on overt political action, because this reinforced the Unitarian belief in the equality of all persons, male or female. Such a strategy allowed Gaskell to formulate potent criticism without directly affronting her readers (Bergmann p. 36).

Gaskell deals with issues of power and responsibility, and she subtly offers alternatives to exploitive power that come from the fundamental beliefs of Unitarianism and amount to a liberation theology. Chittister explains exploitation: "The purpose of exploitative power, either brutal or benign, is to drain the other of whatever power the exploited might lay claim to in order to advance the purposes of the rulers themselves" (p. 12). Mary Barton gives many examples of exploitation, and Gaskell's approach is to undermine through the speech and actions, consistent with the liberating aspect of Unitarianism, of her characters the structures that uphold exploitation. As such, it is a highly rebellious piece of writing. As Chittister explains, to raise questions about the adequacy of accepted behaviour is rebellion: "Even the questions themselves, in fact, are seen as instances of treasonous infidelity or arrogant rebellion in a world where exploitation is the climate and character of the ruling class" (p. 12). Mary Barton's is a key voice in the novel as it uncovers and rejects exploitive behaviour. Gaskell uses Mary effectively to expose exploitation and show that it can and should be rejected in accordance with moral thinking. Mary's experiences and her eventual ability to speak out against what would

enslave her embody the Unitarian belief in the rebellious and redemptive power of plain-speaking. Mary's story refutes the orthodoxies that perpetuate exploitation. Such orthodoxies teach the exploited to "Be silent. Be satisfied. Be nothing" (Chittister p. 4). Mary rejects and challenges injustice at every step.

Merryn Williams suggests that it was an innovative step by Gaskell to create a working class heroine (p. 9). Gaskell puts her heroine and the fact of her work-life to great use in the novel. The influences of industrial life have a great impact on the events of Mary's life and the way she develops as a woman. In coming to terms with these influences Mary becomes self-governing and responsible. Being out in the world as a worker allows her to analyze various aspects of her world and to decide how to cope. As Mary becomes more aware of the forces governing her world, she subtly subverts those that exploit her and so reinforces the views given didactically by her father. Mary's experiences in the industrial world give the reader a psychological intimacy with the pressures and expectations placed on a young working woman. Mary's experience in the work world also allows her initial immature and unrealistic rebellious instincts to develop into a serious and legitimate rebellious sensibility rooted in a strong Christian moral ethic.

There is no debate in the novel about Mary going out to work. Even though the Bartons are enjoying a period of financial stability in the early part of the novel, everyone able to contribute to the family income must do so. Mary never resists going to work and shows a clear comprehension of the reality of her life. When the time comes, John and Mary must decide what Mary will do. The limit of choices is made obvious. John is opposed to women working in factories because he believes it to be unwholesome for them (MB p. 43). This leaves only two options: domestic service and dressmaking (MB p. 61). Both John and Mary are against domestic service. Mary shows an unrealistic desire to be lady-like in her employment and is against domestic service because "a servant must often drudge and be dirty" (MB p. 62). Despite the naivete of this desire to avoid the unpalatable aspects of working life,

it also shows that Mary is aware of how unappealing is most of the work open to her. Mary also does not wish to "be known as a servant to all" (MB p. 62) and is beginning to display her instinctive dislike of a system that makes one person self-abnegating in the presence of those deemed her superiors by society. Mary does not want to give up her individuality and be defined by the single word "servant" that strips her of dignity and individual rights. She thus mirrors John's view of domestic work as a form of slavery that epitomizes the exploitation of one class by another: "a pampering of artificial wants on the one side, a giving-up of every right of leisure by day and quiet rest by night on the other" (MB p. 61). While she has some vain notions, Mary clearly displays unwillingness to participate in a system that exhibits no concern for her needs. The clear acknowledgement of the working class's decision not to participate willingly in their own exploitation is one aspect of the rebellion of this novel. Dressmaking is the chosen occupation for Mary.

Despite Mary's belief that she has saved herself from hard labour and drudgery by becoming a dressmaker, she has in fact entered a line of work that was notoriously akin to slavery because of the exceptional number of hours the young dressmakers were required to work and the notably poor pay they received (Fryckstedt pp. 143-45). As Fryckstedt explains, the plight of dressmakers was a subject that Gaskell followed throughout her life beginning in the 1840's (p. 145). In Mary Barton Mary's experiences in the dressmaking trade educate her about herself and the influences upon her and allow Gaskell to highlight the difficulties of industrial society. Mary eventually comprehends the inequalities that make survival and self-respect difficult for the workers. This education in the work world gives Mary the maturity and social awareness to rebel against the forces that exploit her rather than to continue to believe that she can somehow circumvent them. This emphasis on developing the intellect and psyche of all persons as a way to empowerment is a reflection of Unitarian belief. Raymond Holt recognizes this impetus as a key facet of nineteenth-century British Unitarianism and a strong force for change. He writes, "if men are to

be freed from reliance on external authority they must be educated to be independent in judgment and if men are to be responsible citizens they must be given knowledge" (p. 20). Mary must, and does, learn to confront head-on the forces that affect her life, and she learns that there is no disgrace in work; rather, the disgrace lies in the conditions imposed on many of the workers.

Mary begins her education when she learns that a premium is necessary to secure a place in a first or second-rate dressmaking establishment (MB p. 63). Her ambition considerably lowered, Mary is apprenticed "on consideration," that is with no pay, for two years (MB p. 63). When Mary finally does receive a salary, it is only a "minute weekly pittance" (MB p. 63). So Mary works long hours but is unable to support herself and be independent; she can soon see that even survival on her own would be impossible. While working, Mary maintains their home for herself and her father and takes responsibility for their finances: "all the money went through her hands, and the household arrangements were guided by her will and pleasure" (MB p. 58). As Mary and her father sink deeper into poverty, however, it is not always pleasurable for Mary to keep house. Unable to support herself and increasingly aware of their worsening position, Mary gains cruel insight as to how her life could play out.

Mary and her father sink deeper and deeper into poverty, and Mary gradually takes all responsibility for attempting to keep them alive and somewhat comfortable (Lansbury, Novel of Social Crisis p. 31). As Mary becomes more adult, she begins to assess and to comprehend the forces directing their lives. Mary is forced to acknowledge the insufficiency of her own salary to support herself and her father: "But the rent! It was half-a-crown a week, nearly all Mary's earnings, and much less room might do for them" (MB p. 158). Christina Walkley points out that "it was virtually impossible for a woman to support herself, let alone any dependants, solely by her needle" (p. 81). Mary begins to make adult decisions as to how best to manage. As she gradually pawns their household items, Mary learns that everything has a monetary value (MB p. 159). Through the eyes of Mary's acquaintance, Sally Leadbitter, the

reader can see that Mary has begun to assess and take seriously how difficult it is to survive in the industrial world and the factors that work against her. Sally Leadbitter "keenly observed the signs of the times; she found out that Mary had begun to affix a stern value to money as the 'Purchaser of Life'" (MB p. 160). Mary awakens to the realities of industrial life, such as her inadequate salary, that take away her power to do anything beyond surviving. However, unlike her father who becomes bitter, Mary's share in their mutual suffering eventually makes her mature and compassionate.

Gaskell was aware of the deprivations of poverty and the intense psychological suffering they can cause and shows this through the loneliness and hopelessness in Mary's life:

> For when she returned for the night her father was often out, and the house wanted the cheerful look it had had in the days when money was never wanted to purchase soap and brushes, black-lead and pipe-clay. It was dingy and comfortless; for, of course there was not even the dumb familiar home-friend, a fire. . . .
>
> If her father was at home it was no better; indeed it was worse. He seldom spoke, less than ever; and often when he did speak they were sharp angry words, such as he had never given her formerly. Her temper was high, too, and her answers not over-mild; and once in his passion he had even beaten her. (MB P. 161)

The alienation Mary feels leads her towards the temptations offered by young Harry Carson, the mill owner's son. It is not Harry Carson himself that Mary is enamoured of; it is an escape to a better life that appeals to her: "[Mary's] mind wandered over the present distress, and then settled, as she stitched, on the visions of the future, where her thoughts dwelt more on the circumstances of ease, and the pomps and vanities awaiting her, than on the lover with whom she was to share them" (MB p. 160). Mary falls into the same trap as her aunt Esther had by believing that she can marry a gentleman and become a lady. The story of Mary's involvement with Harry Carson, and the extent

that it echoes the unfortunate life of Esther, create a vehicle for some of the novel's most illuminating scenes and potent social criticism. Hazel Mews says, "she [Gaskell] tries honestly to face the difficulties confronting girls working amongst the temptations of the new industrial cities" (p. 83). However, Mary eventually sees that Carson intends only to exploit her and Gaskell uses her insight to criticize the exploitive mechanisms at work in society and to illustrate the power of individual choice to subvert injustice.

In her relationship with Harry Carson, the events of the story are always shadowed by the history of Mary's aunt Esther. Both women's vain wishes for a better life of both women and the experiences that those wishes engender provide a significant social commentary. As Jenny Uglow suggests, "The key figure in Mary's inner conflict is Esther, the prostitute" (p. 207), who stands for the guilty, sexual side of Mary. However, Esther also represents the threat of sexual exploitation inherent in the lives of young women workers. Christina Walkley points out the high probability that many young working women, expecially seamstresses, would eventually become prostitutes (p. 81). Esther illustrates Gaskell's awareness of the prevalence of prostitution among working-class women and its causes. Esther tells Jem Wilson how she became a prostitute:

> "We [Esther and her daughter] should have done well, but alas! alas! my little girl fell ill, and I could not mind my shop and her too; and things grew worse and worse. I sold my goods any how to get money to buy her food and medicine; I wrote over and over again to her father for help, but he must have changed his quarters, for I never got an answer. . . . So I went out into the street, one January night." (MB P. 210)

Esther's account of her descent into prostitution is similar to an account by a real prostitute recorded by Henry Mayhew and cited by Christina Walkley: "I had a child, and it used to cry for food. So, as I could not get a living for him myself by my needle, I went into the

streets and made out a living that way" (p. 82).[2] Esther herself warns Jem Wilson of the danger Mary faces: "see after Mary and take care she does not become like me [a prostitute]" (MB p. 209). The stories of Esther and Mary illustrate that certain behaviours, such as the seduction and abandonment of young women, exploitive of the working class, were at work in and justified by society. That Esther becomes a prostitute illustrates the danger Mary faces and underscores how extraordinary and subversive is Mary's eventual rejection of her would-be seducer.

The seduction of working-class women was justified by erroneous beliefs about their behaviour. Esther wishes to be lady-like and to highlight her good looks with beautiful clothes. John warns her, "Esther, I see what you'll end at with your artificials, and your fly-away veils, and stopping out when honest women are in their beds; you'll be a street-walker, Esther" (MB p. 43). Mariana Valverde has put forward evidence that the Victorians believed that the love of fine clothing was one cause of prostitution (p. 176), and thus John's prophesy for Esther betrays this belief. Valverde also points out that the Victorians made a clear distinction between "honest dress" and "finery," the distinction being based on class. It was acceptable for an upper or middle-class woman to wear fine clothes, but when a working class woman did so, she was seen to be appropriating the attributes of those above her socially. As a result, she was labelled as unstable and immoral and therefore was open to sexual exploitation. Valverde suggests that such prejudiced views were the basis of the moral regulation and exploitation of women in the capitalist society of the nineteenth century (p. 169).

John is also oppossed to Esther's independent nature: "That's the worst of factory work, for girls. They can earn so much when work is plenty, that they can maintain themselves anyhow. My Mary shall never work in a factory, that I'm determined on" (MB p. 43). "That's" in the above quotation refers to the independence that regular individual wages

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[2] Quoted from E.P. Thompson and Eileen Yeo. Eds. The Unknown Mayhew: Selections from the Morning Chronicle 1849-1850. London: Merlin Press, 1971.

gave factory girls (Rubenius p. 238). Naturally, Esther is angered by John's judgements about what she considers her own business and her growing independence. Esther leaves the home she has with her sister and brother-in-law and tries to create an independent life for herself. The exchange of words between John and Esther has important meaning in the novel. Gaskell seemed to be aware of the impact industrialization and urbanization were having by creating greater choices of employment and where to work and to live. New expectations were developing, and they often clashed with the traditional. Judith Walkowitz has discussed the implications of such a shift in attitude as it affected young women. She writes:

> Young women's entrance into the urban job market represented a continuation of long-held values which prescribed that women work to support themselves and contribute to the family income. However, family conflict as well as family obligation may have motivated a young woman to leave her home to move to the city or take another residence in town. . . . Young women restless with the subordination and fatalistic acquiescence expected of their class may have been most likely to make this break. Thus the repeated negative description of young 'fallen' women as 'wild and impulsive' by their parents as well as rescue workers can be turned on its head--indicative, perhaps, that these young women were more inclined to self-assertion than most of their working-class contemporaries. (P. 74)

Work away from the home with wages paid frequently enough to have steady access to cash gave young women the chance to become independent of family obligations. They now had money available to them that allowed them to act in defiance of old strictures.

As Walkowitz points out, the tendency to personal assertion and independence was often interpreted as threatening and unseemly. The rebellion implied by a woman demanding her independence often defined her in a negative way, as "wild and impulsive." This is how John Barton sees Esther. However, despite her eventual failure to make a successful

independent life, Esther's motivation is understandable. Mary is similarly motived, but in her the rebellion is supported by a strong moral sense and fidelity to conscience that makes it a positive aspect of Mary's character. Mary's rebelliousness is also tempered by a strong sense of family and responsibility for others. One of the major differences between Mary and Esther is that Mary does not leave her father. Mary stays with him and shares in the difficulties that affect them both, and she gains compassion and the ability to consider others. But Mary never loses her rebellious impulse; indeed in the end, her ability to assert herself saves her. The rebellion that Mary expresses demostrates the power of personal assertion and reflects the Unitarian belief in the need for individuals to reject unjust behaviour.

Gaskell shows that dreams like Mary's and Esther's of becoming ladies were doomed to failure by an exploitive system, not by the girls' inherent lack of worth. I have mentioned the negative associations attached to the business of dressmaking. Fryckstedt agrees that it is significant that Gaskell placed both Mary Barton, and Ruth Hilton of the novel Ruth, in dressmaking positions (Fryckstedt p. 145). While Gaskell deals with the issue of dressmaking more explicitly in Ruth, Mary Barton clearly set out the pitfalls of working life from a feminine perspective. Esther sympathizes with the subtle influences that could lead a young girl to flirt with a man of higher social standing in the hope that he will take her away from her working-class life. She says: "I found our Mary went to learn dress-making, and I began to be frightened for her; for it's a bad life for a girl to be out late at night in the streets, and, after many an hour of weary work, they're ready to follow after any novelty that makes a little change" (MB p. 211). Mary meets Harry Carson on her walks home from work and she gradually comes to believe that another life is possible for her.

Before she takes the position, Mary has already believed that being a dressmaker is almost like being a lady and that it will give her the opportunity to meet fine gentlemen and eventually marry above her social station (MB pp. 62, 160). Lansbury points out that ideas like Mary's were common and were used to hide the negative aspects of the

needlework trade. Dressmaking was advertised as a refined trade offering rewards beyond the salary, which was small (Novel of Social Crisis p. 57). Thus, Mary is determined to capitalize on the opportunities she believes exist in dressmaking and to use the one asset she has, her beauty, to change her life. Uglow explains that beauty was a marketable commodity: "Mary's beauty is her only hope. . . . Like the manual skill of the workers, her body is her sole asset, and is priced as such by her employer and by Harry [Carson]" (Uglow pp. 206-07). Through Mary and Esther, Mary Barton suggests that the culpability for such ambitions and their consequences does not lie with the girls. Fryckstedt points out that Gaskell was not alone in her concern with prostitution and the working conditions that led girls to it. She quotes a letter to the Times, written after Mary Barton was published, voicing the concerns evident in this novel:

> Are they to be most blamed or pitied who, with this alluring picture before their eyes, and wearied with their existing state of slavery, give themselves up to be the slaves of sin, without even one thought of the fearful vortex into which they are plunging? (P. 144)[3]

Through the vain hopes of Mary and Esther, and Esther's end as a prostitute, Gaskell shows the reader the exploitation of the working class, particularly women. As both Esther and Mary attempt to improve their material situations by capitalizing on their looks, Gaskell shows beauty as a precious commodity in the marketplace. She also shows that the sale of beauty was a way of maintaining for the upper classes a marriage system dependent on the availability of lower class girls to be the partners in gentlemanly pre- and extra-marital affairs (Fryckstedt p. 132). Mary's fictional function is to expose the tacit acceptance of seduction and prostitution by the upper classes in Victorian society.

The independence of choice that Esther tries to claim as her own threatens her brother-in-law, so much that he avows that Esther will become a prostitute as the appropriate end to her actions. John Barton's

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[3] Quoted from 'To the Editor of the Times,' Times, March 31, 1853, p. 8 col. 3.

fear that Esther will become a prostitute and her fulfillment of this fear reflect some of the underlying social issues that Gaskell was trying to confront. Gaskell shows us that the independence sought by Esther was extremely difficult for young women to achieve. The industrial world was filled with impediments and dangers. One of the most ominous dangers was seduction by one's social superiors. John's disgust with Esther corresponds with the prevailing attitude that vanity led to seduction. Fryckstedt says, "To the nineteenth-century, vanity and love of dress among working-class girls were dangerous propensities" (p. 128). The seduction of working class girls was one of the worst forms of exploitation. Esther is guilty of poor judgement and she commits a social sin by exposing herself to exploitation. However, Gaskell has pity for Esther and places greater blame on the upper classes that impose negative connotations on her actions and use these connotations as an excuse to exploit her. I believe also that Gaskell blames John Barton for punishing Esther's attempts to achieve independence from him by defining her as an outcast from the working class.

Walkowitz suggests that concern about pre-marital sexual activity in the working class was defined largely in economic terms. As long as it led to a responsible relationship that did not destabilize the community, it was one's own business (p. 74). While Gaskell would not have condoned extra-marital sex in any circumstance, Esther's situation is primarily a failure to recognize and reject the forces that would exploit her. Gaskell is using Esther to show how exploitation occurred and kept the poor weak and poor. Gaskell was aware of the high frequency with which working-class girls became prostitutes and, as Fryckstedt notes, to those who studied the situation it was obvious that this was not due to their inherent wickedness. Fryckstedt writes, "In one respect contemporary observers were unanimous: prostitution could not be ascribed to the lust and sexual desire of the prostitutes. Its causes were to be sought in the low wages of women, overcrowded dwellings, vanity, seduction and the marriage system" (p. 128).

John has commented that money earned by women is sufficient to

support themselves but only when work is "plenty" (MB p. 43). The mention of the availability of work touches on an issue that affected the whole working class. However, it may have been an even more important issue for women, particularly those who wished to be independent. Martha Vicinus points out that women's employment opportunities were more limited than men's (Widening Sphere p. ix). While in some localities there may have been slightly more variety, women were generally more limited in work opportunities than men. Most of women's work was periodic by nature, and women earned only about one-half the amount per-day that men earned (Walkowitz p. 76). Despite these inequalities, women had no part in the trade union movement (Lansbury, Novel of Social Crisis p. 52) and so were disadvantaged even within their own class because of their gender. It was extremely important to the working class not to allow their women to be seduced and left with illegitimate children to support thereby further depleting their meagre resoucres. As Martha Vicinus says, despite the dynamism of industrialization and urbanization, family responsibility and respectability still came before individual freedom or economic opportunity, and Victorian society's judgement of women's behaviour, both private and public, was severe (Vicinus, Widening Sphere p. x).

Esther and Mary both know that marriage is necessary for respectability. Esther makes the mistake of believing in a promise rather than waiting for the fact. She says, "He was so handsome, so kind! Well, the regiment was ordered to Chester (did I tell you he was an officer?), and he could not bear to part from me, nor I from him, so he took me with him. . . . [F]or mark you! he promised me marriage. They all do" (MB p. 209). She has been seduced by his appearance and gentle manners, different from the criticisms she received at home, and by the promise of marriage. Mary, too, understands the importance of marriage and believes herself "as good as engaged to be married" (MB p. 120) to Carson long before such a discussion with him takes place.

The stories of Esther and Mary work together to show plainly the exploitation of the working class. One of the most important functions of Mary in the novel is to put the responsibility of exploitation on

those who perpetuate it. Mary's association with Carson and the echoes of Esther's experiences show the reader the schemes and attitudes that disempowered the working class. Mary's awareness of how close she has come to ruin teaches her to respect the depth of the injustices forced on her class. Mary defies the common perception of working-class women by upbraiding Carson as the unscrupulous person he is.

Mary's illusions that Harry Carson loves her enough to marry her are still intact until she confronts him. She is appalled when Harry Carson admits that marriage was not in his plans. Harry Carson's conversation with Mary incites profound psychological growth and comprehension of individual motives and consequences on Mary's part. Mary loses her innocence, as she must for moral growth. The scene in which she rejects Harry Carson is central to the novel because it shows plainly both the double standard in the attitude of rich young men towards poor working girls and Mary's moral and psychological awakening. Carson clearly intends to ruin a young girl in a way that parallells the story of Esther. Mary's experience with Carson shows the exploitation by one class of another, and Mary gives voice to its injustice. This confrontation between Mary and Harry Carson shows more plainly than any other point in the novel the exploitive and destructive nature of a social system that deemed it appropriate to use working-class girls for their casual sexual pleasure.

Carson admits to Mary, "that of course I have never thought of it [marriage] till now. I thought we could be happy enough without marriage" (MB p. 183). The author tells us that these words have a profound effect on Mary: "Deep sank those words into Mary's heart" (MB p. 183). Carson further betrays his light attitude when he eventually makes an offer of marriage only "to satisfy your [Mary's] little ambitious heart" (MB p. 183). Carson's words show Mary the shallowness of his love. As well, the whole conversation has the tone of a bargaining session. Carson has merely found that his purchase is not so easy to acquire and in concession makes a higher bid. It is difficult to trust him, and Esther's caution: "he promised me marriage. They all do" haunts the scene (MB p. 209). Mary realizes:

> now she knew. . .the attachment she might have created; . . . . was of that low despicable kind, which can plan to seduce the object of its affection; that the feeling she had caused was shallow enough, for it only pretended to embrace self, at the expense of the misery, the ruin, of one falsely termed beloved. She need not be penitent to such a plotter! That was the relief. (MB P. 183)

Thus, Mary begins to understand that Carson has been attempting to take advantage of her material deprivation in order to seduce her. Gaskell makes clear, through Mary's thoughts, her belief that such seduction was exploitive of both class and gender. There is a strong implication that the fault for the ruin of working-class girls through seduction lies largely with the seducer. Lansbury writes that it was commonly believed by the upper classes in the nineteenth century that the working class was by nature sinful and licentious and thus poor as God's retribution (Novel of Social Crisis p. 28). This view was used to justify the use of young working-class women in illicit relationships because it was believed that they were willing participants untroubled by conscience. However, Mary points out that it is Carson who is truly licentious. He has pursued her as a sexual object even though he has no real love for her. The reader is able to discern that Mary has confused a desire to get away from poverty with love, but also she has believed herself to be in love and to be loved. Mary is not coldly ambitious, and she is not willing to make a mere bargain of herself. She does not allow herself to be sold, as Esther did, and does not give the upper class the power to further weaken her position.

Mary's ability to make a commitment to Jem when she finds herself truly in love and loved, even though he is poor like herself, shows a strong moral sense and intellectual maturity. Her choice of Jem Wilson over Carson carries the implication that she has become morally more mature because Carson proves to be an inferior and immoral man. Mary tells Carson: "I don't think I should have loved you now you have told me you meant to ruin me; that's the plain English of not meaning to marry me till just this minute" (MB p. 183-84). Mary has the confidence

and the moral authority to say to Carson, "Now I scorn you, sir, for plotting to ruin a poor girl. Good night" (MB p.184). This last statement of Mary's puts her and Henry Carson on equal terms, and it is a strong indictment of young men who exploit the vulnerability of poor working women. These are powerful statements for Mary to make. They break down attitudes that upheld the use of young working-class women for casual sexual relations and prostitution as an acceptable practice. These statements also point out who is morally responsible for the continued exploitation of such young women. To uncover the forces that uphold injustice by use of one's reason and conscience and adherence to morals was a major focus of Unitarianism. To speak out as Mary does also reflects the spirit of modern liberation theology. Like Job, Mary calls attention to the circumstances of her life and the lives of the poor and refuses to allow blame to be placed on girls like her and Esther. She points out the inaccuracies and injustices of the orthodoxies that oppress and accuse her.

Mary's courage in concealing her father's identity as the murderer is another manifestation of the Unitarian commitment to rebel when necessary to avert injustice. Uglow writes, "In ethics this challenge to convention put equality before hierarchy, moral justice before legal judgement" (p. 7). To conceal her knowledge of murder and restrain the law from taking its course is a highly rebellious act of usurpation of power. Mary has often listened to her father speak his belief that the workers are unjustly exploited and abused by their employers and she understands his hatred for the employers has become deep enough for him to murder one of them. Her love and compassion for her father motivate her to conceal that he is the murderer of Henry Carson, and Mary goes so far as to destroy the evidence that would incriminate him (MB p. 302). In this case, Mary can envision no purpose to the workings of temporal justice. She has seen her father regressing and becoming overwhelmed with his situation in life, and she knows that to put him before the law would punish him, but it would not reform him. Mary realizes that in this case the law is inadequate to weigh the reasons that made her father act as he did. Mary's decision is not an easy one, and Gaskell

makes sure the reader knows that it is a serious moral dilemma for her. As Mary contemplates rescuing Jem, she knows she must do it without incriminating her father. Gaskell writes, "But the lion accompanied Una through the wilderness and the danger; and so will a high, resolved purpose of right-doing ever guard and accompany the helpless" (MB p. 302).

Gaskell chose to have Mary reject the demands of the state's laws for several reasons. Gaskell did this in order to allow John Barton and Mr. Carson, the murdered man's father, to face each other without the intervention of a law inadequate to respect the forces that drove John to murder. Keeping John from prosecution also protected the labour union that had ordered him to commit the murder as a show of its anger with the owners and so indicates Gaskell's respect for and acknowledgement of the workers' right to solidify their resistance to exploitation. It is also important that Gaskell made Mary the person who decides to hide John from the law because she deliberately protects the man who murdered her would-be seducer.

Mary's decision to shield her father from the law is a difficult moral decision on her part which illustrates Gaskell's ideal of moral and humane justice. Justice in the novel is abused by Mr. Carson as a means for revenge. Carson's desire that the murderer of his son be brought before the law is presented almost as a mania, and it has no real purpose other than retribution. Carson says, "you [his son] shall be avenged" and the novel asks, "True, his vengeance was sanctioned by law, but was it the less revenge?" (MB p. 266). Since John Barton is clearly dying, there is no evidence that social order is in any further danger from him, and the reader knows that Carson is not aware of the union's involvement. Mary's concealment of John from the law and the fact that she impedes the law by destroying evidence force John Barton and Mr. Carson to meet each other. Mr. Carson is forced to hear John's words and to see the evidence of his poverty and helplessness (MB p. 439). Carson is stopped from using the law as a way to avenge his son's death, and so he is forced to go to John Barton personally to get any satisfaction. If John had been arrested and taken over by an impersonal

law, the meeting between him and Carson probably would not have happened. Mary is the character who forces rich and poor to acknowledge one another's humanity. Mary is the one who speaks of mercy when John and Mr. Carson eventually confront each other:

> "Oh, sir!" said Mary, springing forward, and catching hold of Mr. Carson's arm, "my father is dying. Look at him, sir. If you want Death for Death, you have it. Don't take him away from me these last hours. He must go along through Death, but let me be with him as long as I can. Oh, sir! if you have any mercy in you, leave him here to die." (MB P. 434)

Carson is eventually able to feel sympathy for John Barton's situation: "something of pity would steal in for the poor, wasted skeleton of a man, the smitten creature, who had told him of his sin, and implored his pardon that night" (MB p. 439). After seeing John in his home and speaking with him, Carson is able to understand "the circumstances and feelings which had prompted John Barton's crime" (MB p. 452). Through her intervention between her father and the law, Mary has ensured that John's actions, though wrong, were not entirely in vain. Carson has significantly changed his perception of justice because he has been forced to face the misery of his son's murderer. The change in Carson is apparent by two short prayers he makes, one when he initially meets John Barton, "Let my tresspasses be unforgiven, so that I may have vengeance for my son's murder" (MB p. 436) and other after he has reflected on Barton's situation, "God be merciful to us sinners. Forgive us our tresspasses as we forgive them that tresspass against us" (MB p. 441). Mary deserves credit as a thoughtful agent of reconciliation who shows herself to be a woman capable of an independent ethical and moral sense not often shown in nineteenth-century literature. Lansbury writes, "Mary the child becomes Mary Barton the woman, who acquires an understanding of herself and society from misfortune and death" (Novel of Social Crisis p. 23).

Mary's temptation to protect her father is motivated partly by her love for him (MB p. 312), but it is also rooted in her share in their

suffering. Unlike Esther, Mary never leaves her family to put her own pleasure foremost. She remains loyal to her family and to her class, and the fact that she shields her father, and by extension the labour union for whom he murdered, has highly rebellious implications. While Mary never has any direct dealing with the union, she is aware of its existence and of her father's association with it (MB p. 159). Mary, of course, knows of her father's trip on behalf of the union to present their charter of workers' grievances to the government and of the failure of his effort. It is significant that Mary later shields her father from another arm of government that would most probably make a victim of him a second time. Mary also knows that the trade union continues to influence her father:

> for there were not seldom seen sights which haunted her dreams. Strange faces of pale men, with dark glaring eyes, peered into the inner darkness, and seemed desirous to ascertain if her father were at home. Or a hand and arm (the body hidden) was put within the door, and beckoned him away. He always went. And once or twice, when Mary was in bed, she heard men's voices below, in earnest, whispered talk.
>
> They were all desperate members of Trades' Unions, ready for any thing; made ready by want. (MB P. 162)

Although Mary finds the influence of the trade union a threatening force, she never betrays her father's involvement with it. Her protection of her father also protects the union. The actions of the union have been unjust and ill-conceived, but it's solidarity is never comprised making clear that despite its wrong actions, the union was justified in rebelling and attempting to claim rights for itself. Gaskell's Unitarianism was willing to rebel and change society in the interests of moral justice and so is similar to and reflects the aims of modern liberation theology as well by showing and rebelling against the degradating effects of exploitation.

Finally, Mary's decision to protect her father from the law can be seen as a protection of the man who would have seduced her. Uglow

suggests that from the time that John Barton learns of Mary's association with Harry Carson, one can never be sure of the extent to which it influenced his compliance with the union's murder plot. Uglow suggests, "we feel that there could be an alternative plot, in which the murder was motivated not by political bitterness but by John's jealous anger at Carson's pursuit of Mary, which he had 'bloodily resented'" (pp. 208-09). It can be argued that because Mary ensures that the murderer of her would-be seducer remains free, Gaskell is criticizing the tacit denial, common in the nineteenth century, of a man's culpability in producing fallen women.

Mary is the person in whom the reader can place hope that change based on individual thought and rejection of injustice can occur. She shows by her private decisions that change must come from within and be based on individual choices, a tenet of Unitarianism. This challenges the Victorian reliance on prescribed responses according to class and gender. Helena Bergmann argues, "Mary Barton functions as the central character in this story of love and political tension: her personal development and emotional entanglements are all linked up with the social theme" (p. 29). Gaskell was trying to dismantle attitudes opposed to the Unitarian belief that all persons are equal in potential. Her religious beliefs are essentially democratic and could dramatically transform established social rules.

As it is filtered throughout this novel, Gaskell's Unitarianism forms a consistent theology of liberation. Through the attitudes and experiences of her female characters, Gaskell demonstrates and justifies the rebellious and empowering nature of Christianity. She writes: "My poor Mary Barton is stirring up all sorts of angry feelings against me in Manchester; but those best acquainted with the way of thinking & feeling among the poor acknowledge its truth; which is the acknowledgment I most of all desire, because evils being once recognized are half way on towards their remedy" (Letters #39a).

NORTH AND SOUTH

North and South is a comparatively unusual story of a young woman's journey to adult self-knowledge and social responsibility. The knowledge Margaret Hale attains, how she gets it, and the use she puts it to form a rebellious statement about the perceived role of women in Victorian society. Margaret comes of age by rejecting the expectations of middle-class feminine behaviour. The novel is also a love story, but the romance between Margaret Hale and John Thornton is continually tested by their respective systems of ethics. What is unusual about the characterization of Margaret is that she is placed at the centre of a bitter dispute that represents the state of labour relations. Like Mary Barton, North and South shows the development of its central female character towards maturity within the context of social upheaval and her growing awareness of its causes. Heroines in Victorian novels did not typically have the strong, independent voice about complicated social issues that Margaret has. The reader gets greater psychological insight into Margaret, as she undergoes a radical social awakening, than into any other character in the novel. Her voice gives unity to the various points of view in the novel and forms a pattern for social amelioration.

There are two main stories of rebellion in the novel. These are the tale of the Milton workers' strike and the tale of the mutiny at sea of Frederick Hale, Margaret's brother. In both cases, Margaret involves herself in the rebellions and eventually rebels on her own on behalf of the workers and of Frederick. In Milton-Northern, the city that Margaret and her parents move to early in the novel, Margaret becomes aware of the frustration that the industrial workers feel due to the lack of power they have over fundamental issues such as wages. Initially, Margaret does not understand what a strike is, and when she does, she is shocked by the drastic quality of this action. However, Margaret's friend Nicholas Higgins explains his motivation to strike: "My lass," said he, "yo're but a young wench, but don't yo' think I can keep three people, that's Bessy, and Mary, and me, on sixteen shilling a week? Dun yo' think it's for mysel' I'm striking work at this time?"

(N&S p. 183). Nicholas also tells her:

> "Why yo' see, there's five or six masters who have set themselves again paying the wages they've been paying these two years past, and flourishing upon, and getting richer upon. And now they come to us, and say we're to take less. And we won't. We'll just clem to death first; and see who'll work for 'em then." (N&S P. 182)

Margaret understands that the workers are at the mercy of the absolute authority of the owners, and she sympathizes with them. Similarly, when Margaret hears the story of her brother's part in a mutiny, she approves it, saying, "Loyalty and obedience to wisdom and justice are fine; but it is still finer to defy arbitrary power, unjustly and cruelly used, not on behalf of ourselves, but on behalf of others more helpless" (N&S p. 154). Her justification for rebellion reflects the Unitarian belief that defiance against law and custom are justified when they are aimed at helping the weak and defenceless. The novel's emphasis on justified rebellion on the behalf of those without power reflects Gaskell's attraction to Christian Socialism and its commitment to empowering the disadvantaged through material support and by voicing their grievances. Margaret's participation in the rebellions by the workers and by Frederick is also a way of covertly rebelling against the strictures on women's behaviour in Victorian society (Schor p. 126).

Initially, Margaret has no enthusiasm for acquainting herself with the people of her new urban environment in Milton. She is not familiar with them, and she does not understand their activities or motivations. For instance, when she must look for a maid, she gets her first insight into their desire to remain personally independent of those who employ them. Such an attitude echoes the belief expressed by John and Mary Barton that many domestic positions require too great a personal sacrifice to make them attractive. Margaret discovers "the difficulty of meeting with anyone in a manufacturing town who did not prefer the better wages and greater independence of working in a mill" (N&S p. 109).

The women workers first approach Margaret in such a way that makes

their overall boldness less threatening. She finds that their open friendliness combined with a feminine interest in clothing begins to make her comfortable in her new home:

> The girls with their rough, but not unfriendly freedom, would comment on her dress, even touch her shawl or gown to ascertain the exact material; nay, once or twice she was asked questions relative to some article which they particularly admired. There was such a simple reliance on her womanly sympathy with their love of dress, and on her kindliness, that she gladly replied to these inquiries, as soon as she understood them; and half smiled back at their remarks. She did not mind meeting any number of girls, loud spoken and boisterous though they might be. (N&S P. 110)

The women workers display individuality and discrimination as they admire and inquire about specific items of Margaret's clothing. These women also express their opinions without any misgivings about their right to do so. In North and South feminine interest in clothing is not considered inappropriate or immoral. What makes working-women's fascination with clothing in Mary Barton unsavory is that it justifies sexual exploitation. North and South exhibits no such link between an interest in fashion and a woman's morals. Like the working women she meets, Margaret has a strong, independent spirit and she cannot help but respond positively to them.

One of the most radical things that Margaret does is treat her social inferiors as equals. In Margaret's egalitarian relationship with the Higgins family Gaskell embeds much of the novel's Unitarian-inspired message that all persons are equal. Margaret respects Bessy Higgins enough to confide her anxiety about her mother's health and so forms a true intimacy unusual between people of different classes (N&S p. 186). Through Margaret's friendship, the harsh and unhealthy conditions of industrial work are revealed. Bessy provides the complement to her father's diatribes on the masters' unjust practices and his theories of organized agitation by telling about the conditions the workers are expected to endure in the factories. Margaret is curious to know what

forces in her life have produced Bessy's morbid preoccupation with death and she asks her, "Why, Bessy, what kind of a life has yours been?" (N&S p. 131). The response she gets opens a whole new world for Margaret and it helps her to understand better why Nicholas Higgins is so bitter about the masters' unwillingness to deal humanely and fairly with the workers in order to change work conditions. Bessy tells Margaret:

> "I think I was well when mother died, but I have never been rightly strong sin' somewhere about that time. I began to work in a carding-room soon after, and the fluff got into my lungs and poisoned me."
>
> "Fluff?" said Margaret, inquiringly.
>
> "Fluff," repeated Bessy. "Little bits, as fly off fro' the cotton, when they're carding it, and fill the air till it looks all fine white dust. They say it winds round the lungs, and tightens them up. Anyhow, there's many a one as works in a carding-room, that falls into a waste, coughing and spitting blood, because they're just poisoned by the fluff."
>
> "But can't it be helped?" asked Margaret.
>
> "I dunno. Some folk have a great wheel at one end o' their carding-rooms to make a draught, and carry off th' dust; but that wheel costs a deal of money, five or six hundred pound, maybe, and brings in no profit: so it's but a few of th' masters as will put 'em up; and I've heerd tell o' men who didn't like working in places where there was a wheel, because they said as how it made em' hungry, at after they'd been long used to swallowing fluff, to go without it, and that their wage ought to be raised if they were to work in such places. So between masters and men th' wheels fall through. I know I wish there'd been a wheel in our place, though." (N&S P. 146)

Helena Bergmann suggests that Gaskell was interested in the implications of the growing social awareness of women in the mid-nineteenth century (p. 72). The use of two women to bring out an example of the

dysfunction in labour relations in this period reflects Gaskell's belief in the possibility of greater public involvement for women. The discussion between Margaret and Bessy illuminates the real conditions that the working people must endure and forces Margaret and the reader to acknowledge that avoidable injustices are being practised. Margaret's willingness to discuss with Bessy the truth about industrial conditions shows her ability to act on her egalitarian values and truly come to know the workers and what their lives are like.

In the novel Margaret is particularly aligned with the workers. They allow her to understand how their expectations for their lives are continually defeated in the industrial society. Gradually her sympathy with the workers becomes more profound, and Margaret articulates a moral argument in the novel for a re-evaluation of how the workers are viewed and treated. Margaret's sympathy with the workers seems to come, in part, because as a woman she finds more freedom and a greater chance to examine social issues among this group than she does in her own class (Bergmann p. 111). She also finds that her natural assertiveness is accepted and respected by the workers to a greater extent than it is in her own class. Nicholas Higgins acknowledges that Margaret's influence over him is unusual between a man and woman, but he accepts it. He tells Margaret, "yo're not a common wench. . . . I do it [ask Thornton for a job] for yo'r sake, Miss Hale, and it's first time in my life as e'er I give way to a woman" (N&S p. 383).

Margaret's strength of character is often misinterpreted or belittled by other characters from her own class. When the mill-owner John Thornton is introduced to Margaret he is immediately and uncomfortably aware that she is capable of challenging him. He is aware that "she seemed to assume some kind of rule over him at once," and her looks and movements bespeak "a soft feminine defiance" (N&S pp. 99, 100). However, Thornton finds femininity and a self-possessed attitude a jarring disjunction. Patsy Stoneman suggests that the combination of femininity and the ability to rule is a deliberate attempt by Gaskell to subvert gender definitions that gave women little or no power (p. 39). Thornton's reaction to Margaret is a confusion of physical attraction

and distaste for her apparent self-reliance and disregard for him:

> She sat facing him and facing the light; her full beauty met his eye; her round white flexile throat rising out of the full, yet lithe figure; her lips, moving so slightly as she spoke, not breaking the cold serene look of her face with any variation from the one lovely haughty curve; her eyes, with their soft gloom, meeting his with quiet maiden freedom. He almost said to himself that he did not like her, before their conversation ended; he tried so to compensate himself for the mortified feeling, that while he looked upon her with an admiration he could not repress, she looked at him with proud indifference. (N&S P. 100)

The pride that Thornton finds threatening is associated with intelligence and shows that the independent use of intellect by women was not highly rewarded in Victorian society (Williams p. 41).

The novel shows how difficult it was for a Victorian woman to act in defiance of convention. Hilary Schor explains that the "limits of defined gender roles" kept women from attaining significant public involvement (p. 127). When the striking Milton workers, who are protesting Thornton's employment of strike-breakers, approach his home and mill, Margaret throws herself bodily in front of Thornton in the hope that her presence will avert violence (N&S pp. 233-34). Margaret's priority of helping the striking workers has always been clear to her. However, she soon learns that it is difficult for others in the novel, like Thornton and his mother, to credit her with any motive other than love for Thornton for putting herself between Thornton and the strikers. The novel acknowledges the high probability that as a result of society's determination to keep women from achieving meaningful public idenities, Margaret's intervention between Thornton and the workers will be interpreted as a demonstration of love on her part; she says, "But what possessed me to defend that man as if he were a helpless child! Ah!. . .it is no wonder those people thought I was in love with him" (N&S p. 247).

Thornton proposes marriage to Margaret because he believes her

impulse to defend him from the strikers betrays her love for him. She, however, is offended that Thornton would draw such a conclusion. She lets Thornton know that she does not accept or appreciate the connotations placed on her defence of him in front of the strikers. She is disappointed by Thornton's interpretation of her action because it undermines the importance of her motives and it robs her of independence of thought and action. She rebuffs him: "I do feel offended; and, I think, justly. You seem to fancy that my conduct of yesterday. . . . was a personal act between you and me" (N&S p. 253). Her words make clear that she was motivated to come between Thornton and the workers for reasons that were not personal, and her frustration that a woman's ability to act in response to public issues is not recognized. Thornton is eventually able to understand that Margaret's sense of justice caused her to intervene between him and the striking workers. He is able to admit, "I now believe that it was only your innate sense of oppression (yes; I, though a master, may be oppressed) that made you act so nobly as you did" (N&S p. 254). He still does not realize that Margaret's sympathy is with the workers and that her fear was caused in part because she believed they would harm their cause by becoming violent.

Margaret shows that she is able to act on her principles and that, although she is a woman, she can make moral decisions and live with any unpleasant consequences. She is able to act on her belief that it is right and necessary to defy authority used to manipulate unjustly or to punish. Margaret wants to ensure that her brother Frederick, who is illegally in England to visit his mother, get out of England unnoticed. In order to keep Frederick's presence in England secret, she decides that she must lie to the police about her presence at the train station with Frederick on the night of the accidental death of a man named Leonards (N&S p. 343). Like Mary Barton, she rebels by impeding the process of law and feels justified doing so, because she believes Frederick's actions in the mutiny were righteous but would not be so recognized and he would be jailed for them. However, the consequences of telling the lie prove difficult for Margaret to bear. She later tells her father's friend Mr. Bell, "I could bear the shame, I thought I

could at least. I did bear it. Mr Thornton has never respected me since" (N&S p. 485). However, she never backs away from her decision to shield Frederick from arrest because she espouses without qualification that Frederick's "disobedience to authority was because that authority was unworthily exercised" (N&S p. 325).

Thornton is less able than Nicholas Higgins to value Margaret's strength and independence. He is chagrined to find that she has engineered the reconciliation between him and Higgins and that he has responded much in the way Margaret has long been advocating. Thornton was "more annoyed to find Margaret there than by hearing her last words; for then he understood that she was the woman who had urged Higgins to come to him; and he dreaded the admission of any thought of her, as a motive to what he was doing solely because it was right" (N&S p. 404). It is difficult for Thornton to admit that Margaret, by arguing with him and voicing her beliefs about the respect due to the workers, has influenced him to change the way he responds to a man like Higgins and what he believes is the right treatment of workers.

Margaret's is the unifying voice of the novel, and it prevails over Thornton's to provide a fundamental ethic to guide the amelioration of class relations. It is the Unitarian-informed social ethic of Gaskell's that Margaret arrives at. Margaret comes to know her new home of Milton largely through her knowledge of two families that interact with her own: the Thorntons, wealthy mill owners, and the Higginses, poor mill workers. The novel is structured so that Margaret moves back and forth between these families and weighs the two perspectives on the relationship between master and servant that she discovers.

As the novel progresses, Margaret comes to a consistent egalitarian philosophy that subverts the assumptions upholding the current distribution of power. Thornton makes his prejudices against the workers clear when he says to Margaret and her father:

> "I believe that this suffering, which Miss Hale says is impressed on the countenances of the people of Milton, is but the natural punishment of dishonestly-enjoyed pleasure, at some former period of their lives. I do not look on

> self-indulgent, sensual people as worthy of my hatred; I simply look upon them with contempt for their poorness of character." (N&S P. 126)

Thornton's attitude reflects the popular notion that poverty was a just, divine punishment for inherent sinfulness (Williams p. 18). Margaret articulates Gaskell's Unitarian viewpoint that denied that sinfulness was an inherent characteristic in anyone and that poverty was a naturally occurring phenomenon. In the novel, Margaret rebuts Thornton's belief in the moral inferiority of the poor when she says to Bessy Higgins, "It won't be division enough, in that awful day [judgement day], that some of us have been beggars here, and some of us have been rich; we shall not be judged by that poor accident, but by our faithful following of Christ" (N&S p. 202). Through speeches like this and through what Margaret discovers in the lives of Bessy and Nicholas Higgins, Margaret dispels some of the myths that publicly defined the workers in accordance with the existing distribution of power. Margaret is able to overcome the class insularity that keeps Thornton ignorant of the abilities of the working-class (Lucas p. 145).

In her friendship with the Higginses, Margaret is able to develop her conviction that the poor are not poor because they are inherently sinful, but because the social system keeps them powerless. Margaret suggests to Thornton that the employers keep the workers in a position of mere subsistence for exploitive purposes: "You must take my word for it, that I have heard some people, or, it may be, only some one of the workpeople speak as though it were the interest of the employers to keep them from acquiring money, that it would make them too independent if they had a sum in the savings' bank" (N&S p. 165). The notion of workers being able to save money is subversive because it would give them a resource that would make them less vulnerable to the dictates of the employers. Because they have no resources, such as saved money, the workers are taking a great risk and making a great sacrifice by withholding their labour from the employers, but they have no other way to assert themselves.

In the on-going dialogue in the novel between Margaret and

Thornton, Margaret makes an important distinction between the idea of prerogatives within a defined system and moral right or wrong. She agrees with Thornton that by right of ownership, he does have absolute command of all the resources of his business, including the workers. However, Margaret expresses disappointment over this attitude and bases her objection on religious grounds:

> "I said you had a human right. I meant that there seemed no reason but religious ones, why you should not do what you like with your own". . . .
>
> "I do not think that I have any occasion to consider your special religious opinions in the affair. All I meant to say is, that there is no human law to prevent the employers from utterly wasting or throwing away all their money, if they choose; but that there are passages in the Bible which would rather imply, to me at least, that they neglected their duty as stewards if they did so." (N&S Pp. 164-65)

Margaret raises the idea of rights in conjunction with responsibility. This is a dominant theme in the novel, and Margaret is the character who shows the deepest comprehension of the significance of this issue for the maintenance of social stability. Margaret's ability to see the relationship between actions and their outcomes and to arrive at a theory for improvement is a focal point of Unitarian belief in the use of reason (Channing, "Evidences of Revealed Religion" pp. 65-66). Margaret suggests that there is a direct cause and effect between the treatment of the workers by the owners and the workers' resort to strike action. Margaret suggests to Thornton that he is guilty of misuse of power and that the fault is both practical and moral. If the workers behave belligerently, it is not necessarily because they have flawed characters. The owners have the potential to ensure good relations with their workers, not by domination, but rather through recognition of the workers' independent humanity and needs. Margaret says: "I see two classes dependent on each other in every possible way, yet each evidently regarding the interests of the other as opposed to their own;

I never lived in a place before where there were two sets of people always running each other down" (N&S p. 165). The belief expressed by Margaret that those with the power should act like careful stewards to society is an example of Gaskell's conviction that ministering to society is the best way to live one's faith (Lansbury, Novel of Social Crisis p. 103) and reflects Gaskell's attraction to Christian Socialism which promoted such stewardship.

The idea of mutual responsibility and its implication that the owners are in some measure responsible for the ability of the workers to live dignified and fulfilling lives is new to Thornton and he initially misunderstands Margaret's argument (N&S p. 169). When Margaret raises the idea of mutual dependency, Thornton says, "Because they labour ten hours a-day for us, I do not see that we have any right to impose leading-strings upon them for the rest of their time" (N&S p. 168). Thornton is as yet incapable of comprehending that the working classes cannot maintain stability in their lives without some security of work and work safety. The fact that he does not govern their actions when they leave the workplace does not give the workers significant independence to control their lives. The view voiced by Thornton reveals his ignorance of how the poor live and to what extent poverty destines their activities and behaviours; Thornton allows himself to believe that what he sees as unsavory in the lives of the poor is simply a part of their character that he cannot and should not try to change. Thornton also says to Margaret:

> "I agree with Miss Hale so far as to consider our people in the condition of children, while I deny that we, the masters, have anything to do with the making or keeping them so. I maintain that despotism is the best kind of government for them; so that in the hours in which I come in contact with them I must necessarily be an autocrat. I will use my best discretion, from no humbug or philanthropic feeling, of which we have had rather too much in the North, to make wise laws and come to just decisions in the conduct of my business, laws and decisions which work for my own

> good in the first instance, for theirs in the second; but I will neither be forced to give my reasons, nor flinch from what I have once declared to be my resolution." (N&S P. 167)

The prejudice propagated by the upper classes that the lives of the poor contain proofs of an inferiority is oppressive and provides justification for ignoring their needs. Margaret's role is to undermine the validity of such beliefs and illustrate the Unitarian belief that the idea of inherent inferiority was a repressive tactic (Channing, "Unitarian Christianity" p. 24). Margaret sees that social stability relies on the responsible and equitable distribution of power which is the successful extension of moral dealing between men. She tells Thornton:

> "God has made us so that we must be mutually dependent. We may ignore our own dependence, or refuse to acknowledge that others depend upon us in more respects than the payment of weekly wages; but the thing must be nevertheless. Neither you nor any other master can help yourselves. The most proudly independent man depends on those around him for their insensible influence on his character, his life." (N&S P. 169)

Margaret denies that Thornton's autocratic governing of the workers is healthy for individual workers or for society. She professes a belief in the mutual development of all persons within a system; the logical conclusion of this is that the system enforced on the workers, not their innate characters, makes them childish and unable to practice responsible self-government. To put the responsibility for the workers' development and lives on the system enforced by the masters is highly subversive of the kind of control that was practised in Victorian England. Joan Chittister explains exploitation in a way that fits what Thornton has advocated: "Exploitative power assumes that truth and right and prerogative are in the hands of some, but not all, and that by nature. Exploitative power, in other words, rests upon the notion that some people have the right to control other people" (p. 13). Margaret

understands that the system for governing the workers inhibits their ability to develop themselves fully as people and that the masters use their apparent inability as an excuse to retain absolute control. Margaret's willingness to point out to Thornton the injustices inherent in his views is rebellion designed to free those who cannot effectively fight for themselves.

Margaret understands that all the workers want is the chance to participate in decisions that have significant effects on their lives, and she advocates the recognition that the workers are capable of maintaining a share with the owners in some decisions. This, of course, would take sole control away from the employers and is a radical approach to labour management. Margaret suggests to Thornton that the present dictatorial system is sociologically unhealthy: "But he, that is, my informant, spoke as if the masters would like their hands to be merely tall, large children, living in the present moment, with a blind unreasoning kind of obedience" (N&S p. 166). Margaret thus shows her complex understanding that society is made of individuals who have various talents and aspirations and they must not be treated as extensions of the machinery of industrialization or eventually they will rebel or their abilities will deteriorate and make them burdens in society. Such an attitude reflects the Unitarian belief in the improvability and perfectibility of every individual given the proper nurturance and opportunity. The fact that the workers are willing to strike and starve doing it shows their commitment to their beliefs, and Margaret is impressed by it. She does not, as the owners do, see the workers' willingness to strike as proof of their inability to reason and to govern themselves. Rather, Margaret perceives that the human dignity of the workers depends on their being treated as reasonable beings and that the strike is a sign of frustration, not of intellectual incapacity. Margaret understands the strike for what it is: a breakdown in social relations between inter-dependent classes.

Margaret gradually becomes the practical head of her family, an unusual role for a Victorian woman with a living father (Williams p. 42). Victorian women were generally given little or no significant

personal freedom and lived under the rule of some dominant male. In Margaret's case this is not so. She has outgrown her father and her brother and become their protector and source of strength. In the case of her father, Margaret has become his moral superior. This is not to imply that Mr. Hale has become sinful or that his dissociation from the Church of England has left him without a guiding moral principle. However, Mr. Hale has become unstable and ineffective. His moral sense is mostly a source of confusion for him. When Margaret momentarily considers confiding in her father the death of the man at the railway station upon Frederick's departure and her lies concerning this incident, she is painfully aware that:

> Formerly Margaret would have come to him as priest as well as father, to tell him of her temptation and her sin; but latterly they had not spoken much on such subjects; and she knew not how, in his change of opinions, he would reply if the depth of her soul called unto his. No; she would keep her secret, and bear the burden alone. (N&S p. 359)

It is significant that Gaskell depicts Margaret with independent moral and religious governance. Shirley Foster attests that it was extremely difficult, even actively discouraged, for women to cultivate their own moral and religious identity. Questions of morality and religion were considered part of the masculine domain (p. 86-87). Since Mr. Hale has made his decision to quit the Church of England, he has been declining into confusion and ineffectiveness. Margaret correctly assesses that she must become her own moral guardian because of her father's inability and unwillingness to guide her. This unorthodox father-daughter relationship is ultimately liberating for Margaret. The change of roles between father and daughter challenges accepted ideas of power relations between the sexes. Margaret outgrows and eventually surpasses her father and develops a more stable moral sense that motivates her to act on her beliefs for the benefit of others.

Margaret's struggle for self-government in her own life is tied to her interest in the workers' desire for increased control over theirs. The novel contains many indications of Margaret's wish to find

meaningful outlets for her energy and intelligence. Margaret is drawn to the stimulating world of business and its social influences that was reserved almost exclusively for men:

> It was rather dull for Margaret after dinner. She was glad when the gentlemen came, not merely because she caught her father's eye to brighten her sleepiness up; but because she could listen to something larger and grander than the petty interests which the ladies had been talking about. She liked the exultation in the sense of power which these Milton men had. It might be rather rampant in its display, and savour of boasting; but still they seemed to defy the old limits of possibility. (N&S P. 217)

Margaret is coming to appreciate the dynamics of industrial society and is developing a strong interest in the management of industrial resources that has profound thematic importance. Margaret's life turns out in such a way that she has a great deal of power as Thornton's financier, and it is important to her, and ultimately to Thornton, that she understand what practices she is sanctioning. Margaret becomes an example of a sociologically aware and responsible owner of industry.

Thornton eventually comes to appreciate Margaret's strength of character. He becomes able to respect the integrity of Margaret's choices regardless of her rejection of him in love. He tells his mother:

> ". . . I see a great deal of difference between Miss Hale and Fanny [Thornton, his sister]. I can imagine that the one may have weighty reasons, which may and ought to make her overlook any seeming impropriety in her conduct. I never knew Fanny have weighty reasons for anything. Other people must guard her. I believe Miss Hale is a guardian to herself." (N&S P. 389)

This is quite a significant statement of approval of Margaret. Thornton is able to credit Margaret with having serious thoughts and intentions that enable her to be a truly autonomous person. Such a valuation of a woman by a man in Victorian literature is exceptional. Thornton no

longer seems now to find Margaret's ability for self-government threatening or unbecoming to a woman.

Margaret's ability to act for others manifests itself most successfully in Thornton's eventual conversion to her viewpoint. While this may be read superficially as the typical inspirational ability of a woman, it is far from it. Throughout the novel Margaret has been hard and confrontational in her approach to Thornton. To achieve any sort of influence Gaskell's heroines must be demonstrative and outspoken (Bergmann pp. 108-09). Thus, Margaret has not inspired Thornton by a demeanour of vague healing and comforting powers. Margaret manages to convert Thornton to a truly new approach to labour relations by telling him that his ideas and methods are immoral and they tend to create, rather than alleviate, social problems. Thornton pays Margaret the highest compliment possible to her intellect and moral sense. At a dinner party, a year after Margaret has left Milton, Thornton expresses his desire to put into practice her views concerning master and employee relations: "My only wish is to have the opportunity of cultivating some intercourse with the hands beyond the mere 'cash nexus'" (N&S p. 525). Margaret has been the dominant voice for a new approach to labour relations and the social improvement this would provide, and it is significant that she has convinced an experienced businessman of the validity of her ideas.

Judith Newton writes that the idea of female capability was relatively new and that it was difficult for women to find outlets for their abilities (p. 6). Margaret finds herself in a position of power after she inherits money from her father's friend Mr. Bell, and she determines how it will be used. Middle-class women like Margaret did not work because of necessity, like working-class women, nor were they encouraged to do so as a source of fulfilment, and it was increasingly difficult for them to define themselves in the industrial society outside the home (Newton pp. 16-17). Margaret deliberately grapples with this problem in the novel:

> But she had learnt in those solemn hours of thought, that she herself must one day answer for her own life, and what

> she had done with it; and she tried to settle that most difficult problem for women, how much was to be utterly merged in obedience to authority, and how much be set apart for freedom in working. (N&S P. 508)

Margaret manages to surmount the limitations on women's behaviour as she takes command of the money she has inherited. Margaret approves Thornton's desire to try new labour management methods and is prompted to use her money to give Thornton a new business opportunity. Margaret's willingness to make it possible for Thornton to implement a better system of labour relations reflects her continued interest in the business-labour debate.

In the novel, Margaret's marriage to Thornton serves as a means by which she and Thornton can implement her ideas of developing a system of labour management that is based on Christian morals and respects the equal humanity of owners and workers alike. Even though marriage would normally have enforced a Victorian woman's submission to her husband, in this case it is not believable that Margaret's new faith in Thornton will be abused. Thornton has consistently been portrayed as honest and sincere, and his professed belief in new business management techniques is not an empty gesture, as Margaret knows. Margaret is also becoming Thornton's major shareholder (Lansbury, Novel of Social Crisis p. 98). Lansbury notes that legally Thornton has become a debtor to Margaret and she says that this reflects Margaret's higher status in both her business relationship and her personal relationship with Thornton (Novel of Social Crisis p. 114). Margaret has fulfilled Thornton's declaration that she "is a guardian to herself" (N&S p. 389). The marriage of Margaret and Thornton reflects the Unitarian perception of marriage as a union of sympathetic values and interests (Lansbury, Novel of Social Crisis p. 11). There is no indication in the novel that a marriage between Margaret Hale and John Thornton would have come about if Thornton had not adopted Margaret's ethic for dealing with the workers. Gaskell uses Margaret's love interest to illustrate the novel's social concerns (Bergmann pp. 136-37). Thornton, however, influences Margaret's outlook also. Margaret comes to appreciate the potential of

the industrial society that she initially despised, in part through her relationship with Thornton.

Speech is Margaret's primary means of influence in the novel. In keeping with the Unitarian belief that it is right to speak on behalf of a person or group that cannot do so effectively for themselves, Margaret speaks on behalf of the workers to Thornton and succeeds in broadening his understanding of the forces at work in industrial society. According to Patsy Stoneman, the use of speech by women to challenge male authority is highly subversive (p. 13). By speaking out, Margaret threatens the validity of the existing method of governing labour and by extension questions fundamental beliefs about the distribution and use of power. Because Margaret accepts individual workers as her equals, she is able to understand their point of view and to accept their rebellion as a justified refusal to be subject to arbitrary authority. Margaret's decision to rebel against exploitive authority, personified by Thornton, although she is not a worker herself, shows Gaskell's belief in Christian Socialism's active promotion of aiding the disadvantaged.

The novel reflects Gaskell's social outlook and is a truly powerful story of a young woman's growth to maturity. Gaskell was in fact trying, through the character of Margaret Hale, to tear down the attitudes and traditions within society and embodied in John Thornton that were repressive of individual moral and intellectual freedom. Gaskell used the feminine voice to provide the most potent opposition to traditional thinking. Unitarianism, or Liberal Christianity, as it called itself, provided the major inspiration for the rebellious and socially active example provided by Margaret Hale.

RUTH

Around the character of Ruth Hilton, Gaskell tells a tale of redemption. It is the redemption of a fallen woman, a figure in Victorian society believed to be unworthy of any significant reintegration or redemption (Fryckstedt p. 139). The novel throughout is supported by and modelled on a liberating morality inspired by Unitarianism. Ruth incorporates a religious and moral challenge against the forces that exploit sin in order to maintain control over the perceived sinner. Gaskell uses the fallen woman as an icon for the religious debate between "humane Unitarianism" and "punitive Calvinism," according to Patsy Stoneman, and so illuminates her belief that moral reasoning is more constructive than religious orthodoxy (p. 111). As a piece of rebellious writing that calls for equal respect for all individuals, Ruth attempts to speak for the silenced and exploited in religious and moral terms and presents a theology of liberation. Ruth challenges religious belief as a means of repression just as does current religious rebellion. Modern liberation theology calls for renewed emphasis on the healing ability of Christianity that "abet[s] personality integration or social integration" (Comblin p. 67). The rebellious messages in Ruth attempt to break down the structures of religious orthodoxy that uphold exploitive power and thwart individual moral autonomy.

Gaskell challenges orthodox morality by preaching that the stigma of the sinner should not be used to persecute indefinitely an individual. It is a challenge similar to the one that modern liberation theology makes in Joan Chittister's reading of the Job text. Her contention is that the idea of sin can be constructed in such a way that it acts as a means of oppression and coercion. She suggests:

> Job's suffering is not the plan of God or the test of God. It is not God, after all, who is afflicting Job. It is the Accuser who questions Job's endurance and Job's abilities and Job's fidelity. It is the Accuser who sets out to try Job. It is the Accuser who changes Job's life and cuts off

Job's opportunities and holds Job in servitude to sorrow. (P. 2)

Mariana Valverde attests that in Victorian England such moral oppression was becoming widespread and much of it was focussed on women: "As industrial capitalism developed, working-class women came to be not only exploited but also morally regulated" (p. 169).

There are many indications in the novel of the prevailing attitudes that would have prohibited a fallen woman from making a successful reintegration into the community. Ruth's lover, Henry Bellingham, indicates to the reader the lack of opportunity open to such women. As he thinks of Ruth for the first time in the many years since he seduced her, he "wondered what had become of her; though, of course, there was but one thing that could have happened, and perhaps it was as well he did not know her end, for most likely it would have made him very uncomfortable" (Ruth p. 278). The "one thing" referred to is a certain life of strife and humiliation and probably prostitution (Fryckstedt p. 134). Bellingham instinctively shrinks from contemplating his responsibility for Ruth and the consequences to her of their affair. Later, he displays the belief that fallen women were not worthy of respectable work when he realizes that Ruth has become the governess to the socially prominent Bradshaw family in Eccleston, the town where Ruth has come to live and Bellingham, now calling himself Donne, has come to run as a Member of Parliament. The novel illustrates how unlikely it would have been for an unwed mother to secure such employment when Bellingham muses, "how the devil had she played her cards so well as to be the governess--the respected governess, in such a family as Mr Bradshaw's?" (Ruth p. 279).

After she has learned that Ruth is not a widow but is an unwed mother, Jemima Bradshaw, oldest daughter in the Bradshaw household, also acknowledges the stigmas that normally would attach to Ruth and prevent her the opportunities to shape her own life. After she learns of Ruth's past, Jemima is comforted by the certainty that should Ruth's story become known, she would no longer have a rival for Walter Farquhar's affections:

> Her jealousy was gone, she knew not how or where. She might shun and recoil from Ruth, but she now thought that she could never more be jealous of her. In her pride of innocence, she felt almost ashamed that such a feeling could have had existence. Could Mr Farquhar hesitate between her own self and one who. . . . (Ruth P. 326)

The implied answer is no, and Farquhar himself confirms this later in the novel. After Ruth's past has become town gossip, Farquhar considers himself lucky not to have become associated with her:

> He was very full now of the remembrance of Ruth; and yet he was also most thankful, most self-congratulatory, that he had gone no further in his admiration of her, that he had never expressed his regard in words, that no one, as he believed, was cognizant of the incipient love which had grown partly out of his admiration, and partly out of his reason. He was thankful to be spared any implication in the nine-days' wonder which her story had made in Eccleston. (Ruth P. 369)

Indeed, Farquhar is so shocked by the revelations about Ruth that he resolves to protect himself from such a woman: "His natural caution induced him to make a resolution never to think of any woman as a wife until he had ascertained all her antecedents" (p. 370). Such a strong emphasis on women's private lives indicates the attempts to control individual behaviour in Victorian society (Vicinus, Widening Sphere p. x).

The novel indicates the unequal share of blame and guilt ascribed to a man and to a woman in an extra-marital love affair like Ruth's and Bellingham's. Despite Bellingham's shameful treatment of Ruth, leaving her alone and pregnant, the greater shame for their association is heaped upon her (Williams p. 112). While youthful trysts such as Bellingham's and Ruth's were considered normal, even healthy, for young men, they were unpardonable for women (Williams p. 27). However, Ruth herself undercuts the validity of such an assumption. When Ruth refuses to renew her relationship with Bellingham, she tells him, "what I did

wrong then [during her affair with him], I did blindly to what I should do now if I listened to you" (Ruth p. 299). Her words indicate that Bellingham is equally culpable with her in sin for his knowledgeable encouragement of their affair. The independence and assertiveness of her beliefs shock Bellingham. Despite his responsibility in the affair, Bellingham does not face the same reprisals as does Ruth. He knows that for Ruth to retain a comparatively good position in society her past with Bellingham must remain secret, and he reminds her, "Don't you know how much you are in my power?" (Ruth p. 300). The implied threat illustrates the exploitive power that Bellingham has and that Gaskell's morality of equality attempted to combat.

Gaskell's dissatisfaction with a society that upheld exploitation by labelling the victim as a sinner and outcast is a central concern of the novel and is visible in the scene that shows Bellingham proposing marriage to Ruth. This passage of the novel is similar to the one in Mary Barton in which Henry Carson proposes to Mary. Both Bellingham and Carson attempt to bargain for the objects of their desire as saleable items. When Bellingham proposes to Ruth, he is angry and exasperated that Ruth will not agree to become his mistress again and phrases his proposal as though he were bargaining. He says, "We will try something more, and bid a higher price" (Ruth p. 302). In both novels, the young men offer marriage only as a way to deceive the young women as to their sincerity. Such manipulation highlights the accepted exploitation of working-class girls without any consideration for the consequences to them. Ruth, however, has the courage to reject Bellingham because of a strong belief in his moral insufficiency to provide a good model for a child: "If there was one thing needed to confirm me, you have named it. You shall have nothing to do with my boy, by my consent, much less by my agency. I would rather see him working on the roadside than leading such a life, being such a one as you are" (Ruth p. 303). Ruth's criticism of what kind of person Bellingham is is highly rebellious and is reminiscent of Mary Barton's similar denunciation of Harry Carson. The rejection of upper-class men by women from a lower class, who speak from rational and moral motives, shows the liberating aspect of a

morality that accepts the independent reasoning of all members of a society. The ability to question and speak out against the oppressor is the most fundamental form of rebellion (Chittister p. 12), and it was fostered by Gaskell's Unitarianism as an extension of her belief in the paramount importance of speaking the truth.

The power of exploitation depends on the silence and lack of power of the exploited. The exploiter must manipulate the exploited to remain in a role that serves the exploiter's needs and ensures the continued powerlessness of the exploited. Ruth's potential ability to stop such manipulation is evident when Bellingham realizes that Ruth has the courage to defy his threats. He laments the moral independence he encounters in Ruth as he attempts to coerce her to resume a relationship with him. He says, "Good Heavens! Ruth, you will drive me mad. Oh! what a changed person you are from the sweet, loving creature you were! I wish you were not so beautiful" (Ruth p. 297). Bellingham does not value Ruth's ability to speak on her own behalf because it robs him of his ability to control her and to possess her as a beautiful object (Schor p. 47). Both Bellingham and Farquhar are attracted to Ruth when she remains quiet and docile. Ruth's ability to speak on her own behalf, however, destroys Bellingham's power over her. She need no longer be dependent on his image of her to survive psychologially. Ruth can withstand his aggression and like Margaret Hale in North and South has learned to put other considerations ahead of romantic love (Newton p. 11). One attains power only by withholding what the exploiter desires.

Even though typically a Victorian heroine did not work (Williams p. 9), Ruth has three jobs in the course of the novel. Each job that Ruth has corresponds with a different phase in her life. As a seamstress Ruth becomes a fallen woman. As a governess Ruth attains respectability and proves her worth while keeping her great secret. As a nurse Ruth becomes a social outcast but ultimately liberates herself from the stigma of the fallen woman and redeems herself as a dignified human being. Judith Newton suggests that the emphasis on women working and work as fulfillment is an important aspect of Gaskell's writing that reflects an increasing concern by women in the nineteenth century to

find status beyond the domestic realm (p. 18).

In the 1840s and '50s the dress trade was becoming known as one of the most blatantly exploitive occupations for women. The seamstress was becoming almost the symbol of the injustices imposed on working-class women (Walkley pp. 10-12). Gaskell creates a more direct link between the dress trade and the sexual exploitation of women in Ruth than she did in Mary Barton. Ruth's employment as a seamstress figures in her initial contact with Bellingham. Mrs. Mason, the owner of the dressmaking business where Ruth is employed, uses her more beautiful employees to make her establishment attractive to upper-class customers. The more experienced workers at Mrs. Mason's know that conscientious work is not rewarded but that a nice appearance is, and Mrs. Mason proves them right when she chooses Ruth, a poor worker, to represent the business at the local hunt ball:

> But, looking up, she was struck afresh with the remarkable beauty which Ruth possessed; such a credit to the house, with her waving outline of figure, her striking face, with dark eyebrows and dark lashes, combined with auburn hair and a fair complexion. No! diligent or idle, Ruth Hilton must appear tonight. (Ruth P. 11)

In this novel, Gaskell was more explicitly concerned with the loose moral atmosphere that the dress trade fostered than she was in Mary Barton. The point in this novel seems to be that the dress trade exploited and corrupted young women (Fryckstedt pp. 143-45). Mrs. Mason is willing not only to put her more attractive girls in positions where they may be admired, but she also takes little care about their conduct or well-being when they are not performing a service for the business:

> On Sundays she chose to conclude that all her apprentices had friends who would be glad to see them to dinner, and give them a welcome reception for the remainder of the day. . . . Accordingly, no dinner was cooked on Sundays for the young workwomen; no fires were lighted in any rooms to which they had access. (Ruth P. 34)

Unitarians ardently believed that moral sensibility must be

fostered through careful guardianship. Nurturing and co-operative relationships, primarily in families, was for Gaskell the most reliable means of creating responsible, independent adults (Stoneman pp. 70-71). Gaskell was concerned that the dressmaking trade was particularly remiss in regard to the moral and physical care it offered the young women working as dressmakers (Fryckstedt p. 144). Ruth highlights this belief in order to uncover what Gaskell saw as the exploitive relationship between dressmakers and their employers. While the dressmakers live in Mrs. Mason's home, she takes no interest in them nor feels any sense of responsibility toward them. One of the most pointed passages of criticism in the novel says:

> Mrs Mason was careless about the circumstances of temptation into which the girls entrusted to her as apprentices were thrown, but severely intolerant if their conduct was in any degree influenced by the force of these temptations. She called this intolerance 'keeping up the character of her establishment.' It would have been a better and more Christian thing, if she had kept up the character of her girls by tender vigilance and maternal care. (Ruth P. 54)

Bellingham first notices Ruth at the hunt ball to which Mrs. Mason has sent her knowing that Ruth's beauty will attract attention (Ruth p. 15). He is able to cultivate a friendship with Ruth because of the lack of guidance and supervision of her free time in Mrs. Mason's household. Yet, when she feels Ruth's conduct has become questionable, Mrs. Mason essentially hands Ruth over to Bellingham (Ruth p. 54-55). Later, Bellingham thinks of paying off Ruth like a prostitute and, in fact, has his mother do so for him (Ruth pp. 91, 92). When Mrs. Bellingham gives Ruth the money, she puts it in a note that suggests to Ruth that she seek out a penitentiary (Ruth p. 92), indicating that Ruth has indeed become a prostitute.

The stereotype that women of the lower classes were apt to use their beauty to further selfish or sinful designs is denied in this novel. Gaskell shows that the physical beauty of a woman is in fact

used by those around them. Ruth is oblivious of the potential power of her beauty, and unlike Mary Barton and Esther in Mary Barton, does not contemplate using it as a means to change her life. Her attitude to her acknowledged beauty is simple: "I could not help knowing," answered she, simply, "for many people have told me so" (Ruth p. 12). Ruth is not interested in the importance of dress, either. She says, "I did not know we should have to think about our own dress at all, or I should not have wished to go [to the hunt ball]" (Ruth p. 12). Ruth does not display the same fascination for clothes that Mary and Esther do in Mary Barton. Even though Ruth has no interest in dressing herself up in beautiful clothes, she eventually becomes the victim of seduction and barely escapes prostitution. Ruth's lack of interest in clothing dispels the prejudice that women who were seduced or who became prostitutes had set themselves up by signalling their willingness to put morals second to dress. Ruth is seduced in spite of her disinterest in clothing. Ruth's only motivation for wanting to attend the hunt ball is that she is longing for some diversion in her tedious existence. She simply anticipates "the delight of seeing the noble shire-hall, the boast of the county, and of catching glimpses of the dancers, and hearing the band; much as she longed for some variety to the dull monotonous life she was leading" (Ruth p. 10).

Ruth's innocence of motive is central to the novel. It undermines the built-in excuse of men like Bellingham that they are not really responsible. In Ruth's case, Thurstan Benson, the minister who takes her into his home, recognizes that Ruth has been abused and made into a victim. Benson "noticed [Ruth] at first for her innocent beauty, and the second time for the idea he had gained respecting her situation; there he saw her, crouched up like some hunted creature" (Ruth p. 95). In fact, that is what Ruth is. She is has been hunted by Bellingham and he has often thought of her as an animal to be pursued and tamed for ownership: "It would be an exquisite delight to attract and tame her wildness, just as he had often allured and tamed the timid fawns in his mother's park" (Ruth p. 33). Ruth is in many ways the perfect Victorian heroine. She is beautiful and naive and inclined to follow the advice

of others because of their apparent authority rather than the merit of what they say. Thus, her confidence in Bellingham is formed. It is Bellingham who corrupts the nature of their relationship. Ruth is the one, however, who suffers punishment because of the prejudices and exploitation inherent in her society.

Ruth lives in two homes in the novel, Mrs. Mason's and the Bensons'. The Bensons, Thurstan and his sister Faith, act in the spirit of a merciful and guiding Christianity in the novel. Ruth is spared living out the life of a prostitute because of the charity she receives from them. In the Benson home Ruth develops a moral sense and the ability to assess influences on her and thus becomes able to make choices:

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

Ruth's response to the efforts of the Bensons to help her illustrates the Unitarian belief quoted by Fryckstedt: "that we are born weak and fallible, but not tainted with sin, and ordained to depravity and hell; that we are created capable of good, and that our mission is to promote it; . . . we say that true religion is a matter of loving choice, not of fear and constraint" (p. 76).[4]

In the novel, the point of Ruth going out to work while she lives with the Bensons is to illustrate convincingly her ability to grow into a responsible, psychologically independent person. Money is a concern for the Bensons, and they are forced to economize in order to support Ruth as well as her child (Ruth p. 133). The Bensons and Ruth know that Ruth will eventually have to contribute to the family income: "The time was now drawing near when little Leonard might be weaned, the time

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4Quoted from William Gaskell's Strong Points of Unitarian Christianity. (1873) in Common-Sense Theology. A Second Series of Tracts for the *Times*, 1883. London, 1893.

appointed by all three for Ruth to endeavour to support herself in some way more or less independent of Mr and Miss Benson" (Ruth p. 196). Later in the novel the impact of Ruth's loss of employment on the household finances becomes clear: "I do not mean that there was any great need of money; but a new adjustment of expenditure was required, a reduction of wants which had never been very extravagant" (Ruth p. 368). The Bensons are not in a position to take for granted their finances, and Ruth is aware of this and during the novel comes to a new sense of shared responsibility because of this awareness.

Ruth's second job in the novel is as governess for the Bradshaw family. The importance of this position for her is not just financial. It is a way for her to regain some self-respect and regard herself as a useful person. Gaskell makes Ruth's work a rehabilitative experience (Mitchell p. 174). Ruth begins to sense the importance of such a position at first by questioning whether she is the appropriate person to fill it. She asks, "Do you think I should be good enough to teach little girls, Miss Benson?" (Ruth p. 200). She has a sense of the stigma of sinfulness that would attach to her if the details of her life were known. Ruth also acknowledges the importance of teaching young children and reveals Gaskell's belief that the careful instruction of the young directly affects their ability to reason and develop into morally and socially responsible adults (Stoneman p. 30). Ruth is a success as a governess. She "gave the Bradshaws the highest satisfaction" (Ruth p. 210). As a result of Ruth's capability in her work as a governess she gains respect for herself in the community and proves that she can contribute. Ruth's success as a governess teaching little girls reflects Gaskell's belief in the Unitarian emphasis on the cultivation of the intellect as a means for personal and moral development. Unitarians believed that only through the cultivation of the intellect could mankind hope to fathom and live according to God's designs (Channing, "Unitarian Christianity" pp. 4-5). Thus, it is necessary for Ruth to develop her intellect in order to become closer to God.

Because of Ruth's involvement in the Bradshaw household as

governess, Jemima Bradshaw, the eldest daughter, acquires an important role in the novel. Because of her higher social standing, Jemima has a greater potential to rebel where Ruth would face class discrimination, although as a woman she too is limited by her father and her husband. Felicia Bonaparte suggests that Ruth and Jemima are used by Gaskell as twin characters. Ruth remains quiet and docile while transferring a more open rebelliousness onto Jemima (p. 127). Jemima is a rebel who openly rejects the strictures laid down for her by her father. She also acts independently without his knowledge, but it is the only way that she is able to formulate for herself a sense of fairness and mercy towards Ruth. If she were to obey her father and adopt his view of Ruth, Jemima would be giving in to the "punitive Calvinism" that Stoneman suggests Gaskell was rejecting in this novel (p. 111).

Like Thurstan Benson, Jemima is able to separate a sin from its aftermath and to give it a definite place in time. She is able to subvert the use of sin as a means of oppression. After Jemima learns the details of Ruth's life from the town's milliner, she decides to watch Ruth as she performs her duties of governess as the ultimate test of Ruth's morality. Jemima approaches her task with a sense of compassion and responsibility for Ruth's welfare. As she contemplates her task, she thinks:

> Come what might, Ruth was in her power. And, strange to say, this last certainty gave Jemima a kind of protecting, almost pitying, feeling for Ruth. Her horror at the wrong was not diminished; but the more she thought of the struggles that the wrong-doer must have made to extricate herself, the more she felt how cruel it would be to baffle all by revealing what had been. But for her sisters' sake she had a duty to perform; she must watch Ruth. (Ruth P. 327)

Jemima is charitable and gives Ruth the chance to prove herself. Even though Jemima believes it is necessary to watch Ruth to see if there is duplicity in her character, she understands that Ruth's error was the product of time and place and not an enduring fault of character.

Jemima represents the merciful and nurturing watchfulness, both on Ruth's behalf and that of her sisters, that Gaskell's religious beliefs advocated. Jemima is more able than her father to perform the role of a watchful, caring guardian. Mr. Bradshaw placed his daughters in the hands of someone he has assessed only superficially.

The scrutiny that Jemima subjects Ruth to duplicates the Victorian insistence on scrutiny and regulation of women's behaviour, but in Jemima it becomes a positive, charitable force. Jemima is ultimately able to form the compassionate view that Ruth herself is not wicked and that the circumstances of Ruth's life played a powerful role in what has happened to her and the way she has reacted. Jemima says, "But I have been thinking a great deal about poor Ruth's [situation], you know I could not help it when everybody was talking about it, and it made me think of myself, and what I am. With a father and mother, and home and careful friends, I am not likely to be tempted like Ruth" (Ruth p. 365).

The fallen woman in a middle-class setting disrupts the sense of order in Victorian society. When the details of Ruth's life before she came to Eccleston become known, Mr. Bradshaw, her employer, is enraged. That Ruth kept her past private is a threat to his control. David Underdown explains that the idea of women being independent or "masterless" in thought or action dates back to the 1600s and came out of the Puritan impetus for order and control (p. 82). Mr. Bradshaw feels precisely that this desire to know and control is threatened by Ruth's presence. He fears Ruth's "sinful" nature will corrupt his family. However, the sin is a social, not a moral one. Hilary Schor writes, "To the people of the town, the worst of Ruth's sins is that she has lived among them as one of them, that they would not recognize her as fallen" (p. 69). When Jemima rebels against his judgement of Ruth, Mr. Bradshaw says, "I know who to thank for it [Jemima's disobedience]. When such a woman came into my family there is no wonder at any corruption, any evil, any defilement" (Ruth p. 338). Jemima has refused to accept her father's view of Ruth's actions and has admitted that she knew about Ruth's past long before her father did. Such an admission usurps his power over her and others in his household. The attempt to

gain independence of thought, decision, and action, particularly concerning moral issues, subverts Mr. Bradshaw's sense of order and was viewed by society as sinister, particularly in women (Rowbotham p. 119-20). Because Ruth and Jemima behave independently, they imply the possibility of taking the power to punish or to forgive away from the Mr. Bradshaws. When an individual is left to work out his or her own repentance, Mr. Bradshaw can no longer anticipate what its form will be. It is no longer possible for Mr. Bradshaw to wield moral power over others when they take that responsibility on themselves.

Nursing is the last work that Ruth takes up in the novel. In the novel nursing symbolizes that Ruth has become a pariah and is living out her punishment. The low status of nursing before the 1850s is explained by Martha Vicinus: "the work was considered suitable for untrained, older working women, whose only requirement was a willingness to do hard, unpleasant tasks" (Vicinus, Independent Women p. 86). In Ruth's case it is also the work for someone otherwise unemployable. Ruth tells Jemima plainly, "I cannot get any employment" (Ruth p. 386), and Jemima cannot contradict this. Jemima Bradshaw finds the idea of Ruth becoming a nurse shocking because she believes Ruth to be too refined for such work. Ruth and Jemima discuss her fitness for the work:

> "You, a sick nurse!" said Jemima, involuntarily glancing over the beautiful lithe figure, and the lovely refinement of Ruth's face, as the light of the rising moon fell upon it. "My dear Ruth, I don't think you are fitted for it!"
>
> "Don't you?" said Ruth, a little disappointed. "I think I am; at least, that I should be very soon. I like being about sick and helpless people; I always feel so sorry for them; and then I think I have the gift of a very delicate touch, which is such a comfort in many cases. And I should try to be very watchful and patient. Mr Wynne proposed it himself."
>
> "It was not in that way I meant you were not fitted for it. I meant that you were fitted for something better.

> Why, Ruth, you are better educated than I am!"
>
> "But if nobody will allow me to teach?--for that is what I suppose you mean. Besides, I feel as if all my education would be needed to make me a good sick nurse." (Ruth P. 388)

The acknowledgement that indeed Ruth could not hope to get better work shows the low value of women like Ruth. While Jemima sees that Ruth is qualified for work with greater status, nursing is what is considered appropriate for someone who has sunk so low in society.

Gaskell uses Ruth's experience as a nurse to make it a redemptive instead of merely a punitive experience for her. Vicinus states that beginning in the 1840s, and particularly in the 1850s, nursing took on a higher status and became a profession. She writes that in the second half of the nineteenth century, "nursing was to be transformed from the most menial of women's work to the most exalted" (Vicinus, Independent Women p. 90). Gaskell knew Florence Nightingale and was aware of the importance of the changes that she was making in nursing (Letters #211). Thus Gaskell capitalizes on the knowledge that nursing was a woman's occupation that was dramatically changing and taking on increasing respectability. She makes Ruth a successful member of such an occupation and so subverts the assumption that Ruth was doing unimportant, menial work. Ruth's belief that her education would make her a good choice for a nurse reflects Gaskell's knowledge that a growing number of educated middle-class women were becoming nurses and that it was slowly changing from a strictly lower-class occupation (Vicinus, Independent Women p. 86). Ruth's position as a nurse is also a way for her to prove her moral worth. Along with the increasing respectability of nursing came an increased emphasis on the moral worth of such selfless work. Nursing was becoming accepted as suitable for "women of impeccable moral standards" (Vicinus, Independent Women p. 85).

Anne Summers writes that nurses were often seen to be more independent than women in other occupations:

> They [nurses] worked for an institution rather than an

> individual; they had a special kind of market value arising from their willingness to perform extremely objectionable tasks; and on this account they were able, if they wished, to move fairly easily from one post to another. They might be extremely diligent and efficient workers, but they were not cast in a respectful or deferential mould. (P. 41)

As a seamstress, Ruth was neglected and manipulated into prostitution. That Gaskell has chosen an occupation that allows personal independence as a way for Ruth to work out her redemption makes a fitting opposition to the manipulation and exploitation she suffered as a seamstress. As a nurse Ruth regains self-respect and provides a valuable service to society. Gaskell has used one of the traditionally lowly occupations for women and capitalized on its increasing respectability and importance to allow Ruth a means of liberation from the consequences of the exploitation she suffered as a seamstress.

The committed attitude that Ruth brings to her work enables her to turn expectations around and use her occupation to re-establish her status rather than let it stand as a symbol of her diminishment. Ruth's attitude is that nursing requires a variety of skills beyond menial labour. She tells Jemima, "Still, you can't say that any knowledge of any kind will be in my way, or will unfit me for my work" (Ruth p. 389). She also believes that her gentleness and, more important, her capacity for intelligent observation qualify her particularly as a nurse (Ruth p. 388). Ruth's view of nursing defeats its intended punitive nature. She grows in her new occupation and once again becomes a respected member of the community:

> When it was a lessening of pain to have the touch careful and delicate, and the ministration performed with gradual skill, Ruth thought of her charge and not of herself. As she had foretold, she found a use for all her powers. The poor patients themselves were unconsciously gratified and soothed by her harmony and refinement of manner, voice, and gesture. If this harmony and refinement had been merely superficial, it would not have had this balmy effect. That

> arose from its being the true expression of a kind, modest, and humble spirit. By degrees her reputation as a nurse spread upwards, and many sought her good offices who could afford to pay for them. (Ruth P. 390-91)

Although Ruth has regained some status and is offered nursing positions in private, respectable homes, she chooses usually not to take these positions. Her refusal of private work may reflect the independent attitude suggested by Anne Summers and indicate that Ruth will no longer defer to private employers like Mr. Bradshaw or Mrs. Mason.

Ruth decides to accept the position of matron of the fever ward. No one has compelled her to take on this job, and accepting it shows her commitment to her work and to the people who are afflicted (Ruth p. 425). Ruth is able to give constructive service to society even though society has exploited and disregarded her. Ruth's work is no longer only a punishment but is the means by which she can prove the Christian inspiration in her life and this is recognized by the people of Eccleston whom she has helped. An old man outside the fever hospital attests on Ruth's behalf: "Such a one as her has never been a great sinner; nor does she do her work as a penance, but for the love of God, and of the blessed Jesus" (Ruth p. 429). Ruth is a true Christian and a responsible citizen.

Ruth's death is a problematic point in the novel. It can be seen as a punitive action in accordance with orthodox morality. However, her death seems instead to be a shrewd and necessary means of garnering sympathy for Ruth. If Ruth was designed to dismantle the prejudices that allowed the harsh treatment visited upon fallen women in Victorian society, Gaskell needed to retain the sympathy of her reading audience. Gaskell was too astute, not too timid, to allow Ruth to live. It would have been inconceivable to the majority of Gaskell's middle-class readers that someone like Ruth could be given a comfortable and independent place in society. To allow an unwed mother reintegration to respectable society as represented by the Bradshaws would have been offensive to the reading public, for they would have had the same fears as Mr. Bradshaw:

> "It only convinces me more and more how deep is the corruption this wanton has spread in my family. She has come amongst us with her innocent seeming, and spread her nets well and skillfully. She has turned right into wrong, and wrong into right, and taught you all to be uncertain whether there be any such thing as vice in the world, or whether it ought not to be looked upon as virtue. She has led you to the brink of the deep pit, ready for the first chance circumstance to push you in. And I trusted her, I trusted her, I welcomed her." (Ruth P. 339)

Nor could Ruth leave Eccleston to make a life elsewhere keeping her past a secret once again. This would have reinforced negative interpretations of Ruth's character as duplicitous and deceitful.

Gaskell leaves few opportunities for personal fulfillment or for work open to Ruth to illustrate the self-defeating and hopeless lives that were forced on fallen women. She cannot marry respectably and has little hope of earning a living sufficient to keep herself and her son, Leonard. Gaskell's choices were to write of Ruth's penitence, forgiveness, and full readmittance into respectable society, which would have been highly controversial; or the more likely tale of Ruth's and Leonard's removal from the Bensons' to face a life of poverty; or the tale of personal penitence and redemption that she did. In this way Gaskell could address convincingly the question of Ruth's sinfulness. Gaskell needed to deal with the issues of guilt and responsibility, and her Unitarian ethic demanded that it be acknowledged that Ruth was a sinner who actively sought the forgiveness of God. Similarly, the lie that the Bensons tell about who Ruth is when she arrives in Eccleston cannot be morally justified and must eventually be uncovered for Ruth to fully work out her redemption. In order for Ruth to prove herself able to be master of her own conscience, her secret has to become known, and she has to undergo some form of penance. Stoneman argues that it is necessary to Gaskell's religious ethic that Ruth take the responsibility for her own situation (p. 110). Only in this way can Ruth become independent of her detractors and worthy of the right to self-government

and privacy of choice.

Gaskell does not allow Ruth to live and continue as a nurse because she wants a more definite closure to the novel that unquestionably exalts Ruth. Gaskell needs to end the novel in such a way that there could be no doubt that she believed that fallen women were as worthy as any one else of God's full mercy. Ruth has received full forgiveness from God. Gaskell sacrifices Ruth in death in order to assure her triumph over her detractors. Ruth's death is a necessary sacrifice that highlights the false morality of the society that made her an outcast instead of extending to her the mercy required by true faith in God. Gaskell gives Ruth great power in death: "many arose and called her [Ruth] blessed" (p. 430). Gaskell has made Ruth into a saint, not because of her sins, but because Ruth was able to find in herself a well of true Christian faith and charity. Ruth has become a Christ figure who dies not as a punishment for her own sins, but as a sacrifice through which others can learn and strengthen their own faith. Stoneman suggests that Gaskell's Unitarianism is not only sympathetic to women but is a feminine ethic that undermines the traditional patriarchal construction of sin (p. 112). It is subversive because it gives individuals autonomy over their own consciences and allows people to retain personal control through privacy. Gaskell imbues Ruth with a great deal of power in death, and this is part of the subversion of authority in the novel. At the memorial service for Ruth Thrustan Benson reads from the Book of Revelations:

> And he said to me, These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.
>
> Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; and he that sitteth on the throne shall dwell among them. (Ruth P. 457)

The quotation is, of course, in keeping with Gaskell's belief that women like Ruth deserve merciful rather than harsh judgement. It also suggests that those who remain faithful to God, though they suffer, will be exalted through God's mercy. The quotation indicates a reversal of

order: the lowly shall be raised. Those who have suffered great tribulation are able to redeem themselves through their faith in God. The passage from Revelations reflects Gaskell's view of a merciful God and her belief that Ruth was chosen to receive that mercy.

Ruth's death seems also to be a release for her. Had she lived, the only man Ruth could have respectably married, Bellingham, is morally her inferior, and thus she no longer loves him. It would have been a loveless marriage that would expose Ruth's son to the influence of an immoral man. Without marriage or realistic financial independence, Ruth would be confined to life as a daughter, although she is herself a mother, in the Benson household. Given these alternatives, Gaskell allows Ruth to triumph over and escape a role that keeps her forever a child. Bonaparte suggests that Ruth's death was a mercy to her because it was a release from the choice between poverty, hopelessness, and further victimization or an emotionally static and repressed existence as a constant penitent (p. 133-34). The alternative to Ruth's death was a realistic depiction of what did happen to unwed mothers at this time. If the Bensons could not support Ruth, both she and her son would be left to poverty and degradation. This would also tend to confirm the image of Ruth as deserving punishment. Gaskell could not have depicted Ruth continuing in her penitence, because it would have contradicted the Unitarian belief in the possibility of self-redemption and offered no hope. Gaskell spared Ruth that awful fate of continuing as a penitent and so ensured Ruth's son a respectable and promising life.

In the 1892 Preface to Thomas Hardy's Tess of the D'Urbervilles Hardy stated plainly the challenge he was making to literature and to society: "This novel being one wherein the great campaign of the heroine begins after an event [seduction] in her experience which has usually been treated as extinguishing her, in the aspect of protagonist at least, and as the virtual ending of her career and hopes" (p. 3). Although Gaskell made no such obvious statement of intent for Ruth, thirty-eight years before Hardy, she challenged Victorian readers to look beyond the illegitimate sexual involvement of a young heroine and acknowledge the exploitations and prejudices imposed on women. She made

a bold attack on the way women were depicted in literature and treated in life by portraying sympathetically a woman who circumvented Victorian sexual propriety. Gaskell made Ruth into a sympathetic heroine and did not allow her to be extinguished, as Hardy has suggested would have been usual in literature, by one event in her life. Gaskell challenged traditional attitudes by writing a story that proves the personal worthiness of a young woman who would normally have become a social outcast. Writing about the critics of Tess, Hardy suggested that they "may have causes to advance, privileges to guard, traditions to keep going" (Hardy p. 3). Ruth, too, threatened the validity of the beliefs and practices that upheld privilege and inequality in Victorian England.

CONCLUSION

I have attempted to demonstrate that Elizabeth Gaskell used several of her female characters to formulate substantial religious protest against specific unjust practices and, more generally, against the use of religious principles as a means of oppression. As a Unitarian, Gaskell believed above all in a merciful and just God, and she was opposed to the appropriation of God as a way to uphold punishment and injustice. Gaskell wanted to show that social ills were not the natural results of imperfect faith in God. While still reinforcing a strong moral sensibility, she attempted to dismantle the reliance on faith and God as a way to explain misfortune and dysfunction in the world. Thus, Gaskell turned to the principles of her religion to promote social justice.

Mary Barton is a young working-class girl who grows to maturity. In the novel that bears her name, written in 1848, she encounters many of the problems faced by the working class, unemployment, low wages, and poor working conditions. Mary also faces potential sexual exploitation by a man from a class above her. As she experiences different aspects of working-class life, Mary recognizes the lack of power inherent in her class. Mary is able to speak out against the influences on her, as she does when she rejects Harry Carson, and to offer moral criticisms as situations arise. As Mary subverts both Carson's attempt to seduce her and the process of the law that would inevitably take her father, she formulates a potent rebellion against the unequal distribution of power in society that silences the voices of frustrated and embittered workers like her father and tacitly allows the seduction of young working women.

North and South, written in 1855, deals with some of the same issues as Mary Barton did. Margaret Hale in North and South attempts to change the accustomed relations between workers and employers. She makes a specific effort to speak out against the dictatorial practices that employers used to manage the work force. She views autocratic government of the workers as exploitive and contrary to the teaching of Christianity. North and South does not deal explicitly with the sexual

exploitation of women workers as does Mary Barton. However, Margaret Hale displays significant rebellion against the constraints to her behaviour that are imposed because she is a woman. Both novels demonstrate visible concern with the Victorian preoccupation with feminine decorum.

Unlike Mary Barton, Margaret Hale is middle-class, the key difference between Mary Barton and North and South. As a member of the working class, Mary is always responding to conditions within that class as they immediately affect her. Margaret, however, has only second-hand knowledge of life as an industrial worker. Yet she takes it upon herself to understand and respond to the issues of concern for the workers. As she does so, she engages in a debate that runs through the novel about the ethics underlying nineteenth-century labour relations. What results is a formal and prolonged moral argument for the recognition of the equal humanity of workers and owners and for the recognition of workers' rights in the work place. No such coherent argument is offered by Mary Barton. Her social criticisms are implicit in her reactions to various situations. In both novels the social criticisms, implicit or explicit, are rooted in a consistent moral sensibility fostered by Gaskell's Unitarian beliefs.

Both Mary Barton and North and South portray labour unions and attempts by workers to organize and force the formal recognition of their rights. In Mary Barton the labour union, after its failed attempt to get government recognition of its demands, becomes a threatening force and the cause of John Barton's descent into depravity. The labour union causes the murder of Harry Carson. In North and South worker solidarity is less disruptive and sinister than in Mary Barton. There is still violence, but Margaret Hale becomes involved in it and survives physically and psychologically. Indeed, Margaret's acknowledgement of the potential for violence and her willingness to confront it make it seem less outrageous than in Mary Barton. The attempt to confront the violence of the working class that the novel makes through Margaret indicates a commitment to that class to help it avert such measures for its own sake. That commitment seems to me to be rooted in Gaskell's

moral outlook as well as her attraction for Christian Socialism with its emphasis on helping the working class to gain means of empowerment other than through violence.

I have placed Ruth last in this paper, even though it was written in 1853, before North and South, because I believe Mary Barton and North and South are linked in their overt treatment of tension between the working class and the upper classes. Ruth, however, does not include any treatment of friction between social classes. Although Ruth's sexual exploitation is a result of class difference, the novel does not refer explicitly to issues of class friction, although it implicitly challenges class distinctions. Ruth is an overtly religious novel that attempts to subvert the use of religion as a means of oppression. Ruth challenged its Victorian audience to accept the fallen woman. Gaskell promotes the idea, through the charity given to Ruth by the Benson family, that fallen women should be accepted back into society and helped to reconstruct their lives. In order for it to be understood that the Bensons have extended full Christian charity to a fallen woman, the lie they tell about who Ruth is when she joins their household is eventually uncovered and justified as righteous. The Bensons' acceptance of Ruth is a good example of Christian charity only if it is openly acknowledged. As in North and South, the commitment of middle-class characters to help those who are socially more vulnerable reflects the application of moral principles to social problems that Gaskell admired in Christian Socialism. Gaskell also challenges the reader to allow the sin of the fallen woman to be a private matter for her and not to use it publicly as a tool of exploitation.

In Ruth, Ruth Hilton and Jemima Bradshaw both subvert the idea that sin should be publicly defined and used to enforce conformity of behaviour. Ruth chronicles the attempts of the heroine, Ruth Hilton, a fallen woman, to make a respectable life for herself and the social forces that impeded such a possibility. Throughout much of the novel, Ruth manages to evade the normal results of seduction such as ostracism, poverty, and probably prostitution. When she is discovered to be fallen, Ruth manages to make her intended punishment a redemptive

experience. The construction of Ruth as an innocent and sympathetic character is the novel's greatest means of undermining Victorian stereotypes of fallen women. Through the experiences of Ruth, Gaskell has managed to subvert a reliance that she perceived in her society on the concept of a punitive God used for social control. Jemima Bradshaw is an important contributor to the rebelliousness of Ruth. She discovers the truth about Ruth's life and chooses to keep it a secret and to assess Ruth's merit as a person. She also defies the authority of Jemima's father, who represents an unforgiving and punitive morality.

Gaskell filled Mary Barton, North and South, and Ruth with the beliefs of Unitarianism in such a way as to promote the moral independence of all individuals. I have drawn on current liberation theology to highlight the radical nature of the social applicability of Gaskell's theology. I have focussed on Mary Barton, Margaret Hale, Jemima Bradshaw, and Ruth Hilton, showing how these characters reject various forms of injustice and oppression in their lives and exhibit a spirit of moral rebellion aimed at gaining for themselves some of the power that has been used to exploit them.

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