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# "Freedom in working": Representations of working women in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton*, *Ruth*, and *North and South*

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"Freedom in Working:" Representations of Working Women in  
Elizabeth Gaskell's Mary Barton, Ruth, and North and South

(TITLE)

BY

Amy King

**THESIS**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF

**Master of Arts**

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY  
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

2009

YEAR

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Abstract

In my M.A. thesis, I explore Elizabeth Gaskell's representations of women workers in her three novels, *Mary Barton*, *Ruth*, and *North and South* through the context of Victorian domestic ideology and social class. I argue that Elizabeth Gaskell supported and challenged the accepted gender roles for women. Through a close reading of her novels and short stories, I analyzed the reasons behind her conflicting and ambiguous portrayals of working women. I argue that while Gaskell clearly advocated domestic work as the "natural" work for women, her views on wage-earning labor varied; however she suggests that women, regardless of class, could find fulfillment through serving others, whether in the home or outside the home. In my thesis, I examine her depictions of women working in domestic service, needlework, and factory work and analyze the positive and negative effects of these occupations upon the characters in these three novels. I divided my thesis into five chapters: Class ideology in the Victorian Era, "Three Eras of Libbie Marsh," Domestic Servants, Needleworkers, and Factory Women.

As a result of my research, I conclude that Gaskell does not offer a clear solution for the problem of working wives and mothers. As a middle-class working woman, mother and Manchester resident, Gaskell personally understood the problem faced by all working women: how to balance non-domestic work with family duties. Although Gaskell does not offer a clear solution to this problem in her fiction, she does show understanding and sympathy for working women who could not afford the luxury of staying home and doing the "natural work" of wife and mother as most middle-class women could.

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August 10, 2009

“Freedom in Working:” Representations of Working Women in Elizabeth Gaskell’s  
*Mary Barton, Ruth, and North and South.*

Introduction

Elizabeth Gaskell lived at a time when women writers were publishing novels that centered on the struggles of strong female heroines. George Eliot and Charlotte Bronte as well as writers Harriet Martineau and Caroline Norton did not accept Victorian society’s domestic ideology concerning women and criticized the confining role in which middle-class women were forced to exist. Scholars disagree on the extent to which Elizabeth Gaskell advocated a more expansive role for women in her novels and short stories. Recently, however, scholars have recognized that her social problem novels not only criticize unfettered industrial capitalism, but also criticize the precarious position it caused for working-class women. Gaskell, like her contemporaries, wrote to a primarily middle-class audience; however, she chose to write about the vulnerable condition of the working class woman in many of her novels.

There were three main occupations for working-class women in the Victorian Age: needlework, domestic service and factory work. Gaskell describes these three occupations in many of her minor and major works including “The Three Eras of Libbie Marsh,” *Mary Barton, Ruth, and North and South.* Gaskell, who lived in Manchester, England most of her life with her husband William Gaskell, a Unitarian minister,



sympathized with the overworked and poorly paid women and men of the industrial classes. As a minister's wife in the industrial north, Gaskell witnessed firsthand the working and living conditions of working-class men and women. Many of her novels are based on the realities she witnessed as well as on newspaper accounts and Parliamentary reports that circulated during her lifetime. Even though she was criticized by many members of her own class for inciting anger against industry and capitalism, she did not apologize for writing about working-class conditions.

Through her fiction, Gaskell suggests that women, regardless of class, could find fulfillment through serving others, whether in the home or outside the home. While it is clear that Gaskell advocated domestic work as the "natural" work for women, her views on non-domestic or wage-earning labor vary. At times, she depicts wage-earning work as positive and fulfilling, while at others, she portrays this type of work as physically and emotionally harmful for women. Gaskell's works were not as subversive as some written by her friends and contemporaries like Caroline Norton or Charlotte Bronte, but, like them, she also discounted the domestic ideology that viewed women as powerless "Angels" and "Queens." Critic Françoise Basch in *Relative Creatures* claims that Gaskell opposed women's work due to its risk to female virtue and the damage done to families (184). Patricia Zakreski gives a similar view that Mary Barton's temptation and Ruth's fall were caused by social factors, "late nights, motherlessness, and the need to work" rather than moral problems (29-30). Both scholars suggest that Gaskell viewed work outside the home as threatening, but this is not entirely accurate. Gaskell's opinion on this issue was much more complex. She did not view work as the sole cause of Mary's

temptation or Ruth's fall. As Gaskell created complex heroines, she also created complex situations for them to face.

Unlike Basch and Zakreski, Marianne Camus and Pearl Brown view Gaskell as a writer who rejected the domestic ideology put forth by the middle class. Camus proposes that Gaskell felt a "deep sense of power linked to her sex" (27) and that she consistently "undermined Victorian values" (10) in her works. Although there is much evidence to support the first statement--Gaskell's belief in the power of women--her argument that Gaskell undermined Victorian values is overstated. Although Camus is correct in her claim that Gaskell rejected the ideology of the subordinate and intellectually inferior woman, she did view the domestic sphere as the proper place for a woman. In "From Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* to her *North and South*" Brown claims that Gaskell's purpose in writing *North and South* was to critique "the high price a middle class woman must pay to fulfill the roles of moral arbiter, class mediator, and assimilator" (355). She argues that although Gaskell's working-class characters, Mary Barton and Margaret Legh, experience some sense of autonomy and self-actualization through their work, Margaret Hale, a middle-class woman, cannot; instead Margaret subverts her own identity to fill the role as moral guardian and domestic angel (Brown 355). Although the first part of Brown's argument has merit, she discounts how Margaret derives power and satisfaction through her role as manager, caretaker, and the public liaison of her family. Through Margaret's charitable work with the working-class poor and her impact on Thornton, Gaskell suggests that middle-class women had the potential to be powerful forces outside of the private sphere as well as inside. Although it is not clear how Margaret will use her skills and powers as Thornton's wife, Gaskell clearly implies that

she will be happy in this role. Margaret seems to reflect Gaskell's views that middle-class women could be just as powerful in a domestic role as in a non-domestic career.

Although these scholars disagree on Gaskell's position regarding women as workers, many agree that, while she could not come to a solution, she addressed the issues of working women more thoroughly than almost any other author in her time. Francoise Basch claims that "among the major writers of the first half of the Victorian Era Elizabeth Gaskell is certainly the only one to have dealt fairly fully with female labour" (180). Marianne Camus argues that Gaskell "sees and shows the contradictions of her time as far as women and workers are concerned. That she is unable to offer any real solution is partly due to her middle-class background" (49). Catherine Stevenson agrees that Gaskell found the problem of women and work difficult to solve: "Gaskell's silence about women's work in the mills, her repeated use of the generic "men" to describe factory workers, and her celebration of cooperative domestic labor indicate how problematic she—like other members of the Victorian middle class--found the whole issue of women's work outside the home" (*Victorian Web* n. pag.). Stevenson accurately recognizes Gaskell's reluctance to take a side on the issue of women and work. While her representations of factory women appear often in her literature, none of her major characters are shown actually working in a factory. Gaskell's works indicate that she viewed domesticity as the ideal and natural role for women, although she considered more domestic occupations (i.e, nursing, governess, domestic servant) as adequate options. Gaskell's fiction clearly suggests that she did believe a woman's first duty was to her home and children, so in this way, her views coincide with the conservatives of the

time; however, she also believed that women, as well as men, could find happiness and fulfillment as wage earners serving others outside the domestic sphere.

Elizabeth Gaskell, a middle-class wife and mother, found some independence as a professional author. According to her biographer, Shirley Foster, as well as critic Deidre D'Albertis, Gaskell did not need to depend on her husband financially or professionally, although she did consult him often. She negotiated her own publishing deals and remuneration, often arguing with editors like Charles Dickens in order to achieve her particular desires for her fiction. Foster writes that she encouraged other female writers like Charlotte Bronte, George Eliot, and Harriet Martineau and sought advice from them as well (77). As suggested through her own family and professional life, Gaskell believed the duties of wife and mother to be "natural" and paramount, but she also believed that women could find happiness and independence through wage-earning work as she did. Anyone who examines her industrial and social reform novels like *Mary Barton*, *Ruth* and *North and South* will be able to recognize Gaskell's respect for women in suitable occupations both inside and outside of the home.

Through Margaret Hale of *North and South*, Gaskell seems to speak for all middle-class women constricted by society's expectations when Margaret succinctly summarizes the problem Victorian women had in reconciling individualism with familial obligations:

When they returned to town, Margaret fulfilled one of her sea-side resolves, and took her life into her own hands. Before they went to Cromer, she had been as docile to her aunt's laws as if she were still the scared little stranger who cried herself to sleep that first night in the

Harley Street nursery. 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 might be set apart for freedom in *working* (italics mine - 406).

Gaskell implies here that eventually all women have to come to terms with being able to fulfill their duties to their families without sacrificing their own personal desire for autonomy. In the scene above, Margaret decides to use her financial independence to achieve personal independence from her aunt. Although her inheritance could allow Margaret to lead a life of luxury and idleness, she chooses to find meaningful work to do instead. Gaskell does not indicate that she will be paid for her work, but only that the work she does will ensure her freedom from complete obedience to authority and will add value to her life. This quote also seems to imply that work, paid or unpaid, could give all women some freedom from the authorities that govern their lives, male or female.

Gaskell clearly believed that domestic work and wage-earning work benefited women because each of her heroines derives independence and power from working even though her work may cause her physical suffering. Mary Barton is a dressmaker who provides for herself and her father after he loses his job. Ruth also starts out as a dressmaker, but eventually becomes a governess and nurse. Through these latter two occupations, she feels fulfilled and redeemed because she provides for herself and her son without depending on the poor Bensons for her sustenance. Margaret Hale, although not working for a living, occupies herself helping with chores at home as well as visiting the poor in Milton. Gaskell especially sympathized with working-class women because many

did not have the choice to stay at home and do their “natural work,” but were forced to work outside of the home in a factory or dress shop for twelve to eighteen hours of the day in order to feed their families. Even working-class women with working husbands had to contribute to the household income because factory wages were low and jobs insecure. Through her novels and short stories, Gaskell clearly shows a vested interest in working women of all classes, whether they worked to provide for themselves or worked to provide for others.

Historians like Thomas Carlyle and Friedrich Engels documented the atrocious living conditions of the working classes in cities like Manchester, Gaskell’s home. In the 1840’s, conditions were especially poor because of high bread prices, bad harvests, unemployment, and low wages (Altick vi). The Corn Laws, issued in 1815, along with the 1834 Poor Law Amendment, harmed the working classes because the Corn Laws kept bread prices high at a shilling a loaf while the Poor Laws made it even harder for the poor to find relief in charity. The Poor Laws prevented the poor classes from finding help from their local parishes because the government took control of poor relief from them. As a result of the Poor Laws, the government set up workhouses to provide relief for the poor; however the conditions in the work houses were so dismal that people starved rather than entered one. In essence, they were set up in order to deter people from being poor (Altick vi). In *Past and Present*, Thomas Carlyle criticized the government’s inhumane treatment of the lower classes and the Corn Laws’ support of the land-owning upper classes.

Elizabeth Gaskell offers a similar critique in *Mary Barton*. The novel, although published in 1848, was based upon the early part of the 1840’s, or the Hungry Forties. In it, Gaskell humanized the issues facing the working classes like job loss, starvation, and lack of

representation within the government through Mary Barton, a heroine who witnesses the suffering of her relatives and friends caused by an indifferent capitalist system.

Domestic servants are well represented through major characters in *Mary Barton*, *Ruth* and *North and South* although Gaskell does not choose this occupation for her heroines. Gaskell provides several different images of domestic service through the characters of Alice Wilson in *Mary Barton*, Sally in *Ruth*, and Dixon in *North and South*, and compared to her depictions of needlework and factory work, her depiction of this occupation is mostly positive. Perhaps Gaskell viewed domestic service as the least complicated and most suitable occupation for women because it was so closely tied to the home and domesticity, which she saw as the ideal role for a woman. Needlework, like domestic service, was also considered a womanly occupation because it was associated with the domestic sphere; however, Gaskell's depicts this work more negatively than domestic service. *Mary Barton* and *Ruth* contain representations of the overworked and poorly paid seamstress, an occupation that was widely known for exploiting poor women employed in dress and millinery shops. Like many of her contemporaries, Gaskell also criticized the dressmaking industry through depictions of overworked seamstresses like Mary Barton, Margaret Legh, and Ruth. According to recent scholars, Lynn Alexander and Patricia Zakreski, during the 1840's and 1850's, many publications, novels, paintings and poems brought the issue of the exploited needleworker into public awareness and because of this, a reform movement developed among middle-class women to improve the terrible conditions of these workers. Needlework was one of the most prevalent and poorly paid occupations for a woman in the Victorian age. According to Victorianist Sally Mitchell, domestic service was the largest area of employment for women and girls

in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Factory work, which had better wages and generally better conditions than needle work was another occupation available to working-class women; however, none of Elizabeth Gaskell's major characters were factory workers. The only female factory worker in any of her novels is Bessy Higgins from *North and South*, a minor character who dies half way into the novel because of a lung disease she developed from working in a factory. It is interesting that even though women were a major part of the factory working population, Gaskell does not proportionally represent them in her works. Explanations for this absence of female factory workers in her novels and short stories, I will examine later.

Like her contemporaries, Charles Dickens and Benjamin Disraeli, Gaskell used her fiction to speak for the disenfranchised and exploited classes; however, she did not desire to set one class against the other. In all of Gaskell's social criticism, she challenges the status quo by carefully representing the multiple sides of the issues facing the working classes. Gaskell understood the challenges that working women faced and gave them a voice in her fiction. This paper will examine Gaskell's representations of the three major working-class women's occupations--domestic service, needlework and factory work-- as well as her opinion regarding the role of a woman in the home and the importance of work for women of all classes.

Since Gaskell so significantly concerned herself with controversial issues relating to gender and class in the early Victorian Era, my purpose in writing this paper is to provide social and historical context for readers of Gaskell's fiction. I will show how Gaskell immersed herself in the values of her day, specifically, the effects of industrialization on working-class women's autonomy and domesticity.



## I - Class Ideology in the Victorian Era

In *Daily Life in Victorian England*, Sally Mitchell thoroughly describes the working and living conditions of the early, middle, and late Victorians. Mitchell argues that Victorian society's distinct class systems were based on the traditional practices and beliefs of the rural and urban areas of England. Financial income did not solely divide one class from the other; rather traditional aspects like family connections, birth, wealth, manners, clothing, and speech all determined one's class identity (Mitchell 17).

According to Mitchell, each class lived separately from the other and had its own customs and social rituals. It was considered socially unacceptable for a member of one class to act above or below his own class. This is especially true in the early Victorian Era; towards the latter part of the nineteenth century, rigid class distinctions eased.

Victorians implicitly recognized a three-tiered society consisting of the working class at the bottom, then by the middle, and the upper classes; however, in a legal sense, the law only acknowledged two, aristocrats and commoners. Socially speaking, however, every English citizen belonged to a distinct class. The working class was made up of men and women whose work was visible on their clothes and hands because it was rough and dirty, and they collected wages either daily or weekly (Mitchell 18). The middle class differed from the working class in the type of work they did, and the fact that only men did it. Unlike working-class women, middle-class women were not expected to earn a living, and if they did, it was considered disgraceful. The middle-class men did work involving their mental faculties rather than physical. They also earned a monthly or a yearly salary rather than weekly. The upper class, which consisted of the aristocracy and

landed gentry, were the most privileged and wealthy people in England. They did not need to work for a living because they derived their income from money they made off inherited land or investments (Mitchell 18-25).

The working class by far outnumbered all other classes in Victorian England. According to Mitchell, three out of four people in England did manual work in the Early Victorian Era, or the years 1837-1851, which is the time period that Elizabeth Gaskell wrote *Mary Barton* (18). The majority of these workers were agricultural laborers, domestic servants, or factory workers. According to Mitchell, other occupations open to the working class included “mining, fishing, transportation, building, the garment industry, and other manual trades” (18). Working-class men and women worked just to stay alive and provide sustenance for themselves and their families. Those workers who were only semi-skilled or unskilled did not have the job security that many skilled workers had. Any type of illness, injury, or economic downfall sent them into poverty and starvation because their wages only provided enough money for short term sustenance. According to Sonya Rose in *Limited Livelihoods*, 80% of working-class men did not make enough money to support their families (77). Mitchell writes that 60 % of working-class men earned an average salary of “under twenty-five shillings a week” (38), and a small family could be comfortable with an income of one pound a week. Because men usually earned less than £1 a week, it was necessary for another family member to supplement the income. Because of poor wages, working-class wives and daughters had to work until they had children, and for some, even after. According to Rose, working-class families had many children because children eventually would be wage earners, and because there was a high infant mortality rate, there was a high probability that many

children would not survive into adulthood (89). While her children were young, a working-class woman could not continue to work twelve to fourteen hour days unless she had a relative or a neighbor to watch her children while she worked. Many working women did piece work or took in lodgers to add income; however, even with the extra money, the family would remain poor (Mitchell 20). Because it was difficult for a working-class family to survive on the man's income alone, children would go to work in factories at an early age or the older children would watch the younger ones while the mother went back to work. This occurred in working-class families until at least 1870, when the Education Acts made it mandatory for children to attend school and required that elementary education be available to every child regardless of class. These acts helped the lower classes achieve upward mobility, but they also made life even more difficult for working families, especially for women who had relied on their children to do household work, and made it less likely for the children to contribute to household income (Rose 150). It was necessary for working class women to work as their husband's work did not provide them a living wage.

Fifteen percent of all workers were considered skilled workers, a sub-class of the working-class, who had a higher and more dependable income than unskilled workers. Skilled work included occupations such as "printers, masons, carpenters, book-binders, shoemakers, tool makers, and expert dress makers" (Mitchell 20). Skilled work included any trade that was learned through an apprenticeship, which meant that a child would learn the trade by working without pay for at least two years. These workers usually came from families who could do without their children's income for several years. In factories, men only were hired for skilled work, so boys, not girls, were trained in skilled

factory work on complicated machinery. Skilled factory workers were boiler makers and engineers. In *Mary Barton*, Gaskell accurately represents the higher standard of living that skilled workers achieved through the character of Jem Wilson, a factory mechanic and foreman. During an economic downturn, while other less skilled workers are jobless and starving, Jem possesses a stable job and income because of his superior mechanical skills and knowledge. While other men, like Mary's father, John Barton, cannot find work, Jem keeps his family out of poverty and starvation because his employer values Jem's abilities. In *Daily Life*, Sally Mitchell provides a detailed chart of the yearly wages for middle and working-class occupations:

Annual Salary in Pounds

Highly skilled mechanics and artisans.....	150-300
Skilled workers, including cabinetmakers, typesetters, Carpenters, locomotive drivers, senior dressmakers.....	75-100
Semiskilled working men, skilled women in factories and shops.....	50-75
Seamen, navies, longshoremen, some domestic servants.....	45
Farm Laborers, soldiers, typists.....	25
Lowest ranked shop assistants, domestic servants, needleworkers.....	12-20

(Mitchell 34)

From this chart, it is important to note that skilled workers earn twice as much as unskilled workers and that two of the three primary employers of working-class women, domestic service and needlework, are listed on the last line of the chart. While Jem would mostly likely earn between thirty to forty shillings a week as a mechanic, Mary only earned around ten as a seamstress. Not only were women excluded from learning skilled factory work, they also earned much less than men doing the same work. One of the

reasons women earned less money than men stemmed from middle-class ideology of female domesticity.

The middle class grew in number and in importance throughout the Victorian period. In 1837, the middle class encompassed 15 % of the English population; in 1901, they made up 25% of the population (Mitchell 20). They also gained political power with the passage of the Reform Bill of 1832, which enfranchised middle-class men. The middle class consisted of a variety of professions and workers from doctors and lawyers to manufacturers and clerks. Their wages also varied greatly from £ 2,000 annual salaries earned by some doctors and clergymen to £150 earned by some teachers and clerks. The middle class also had its own social structures (Mitchell 33). The older professions enjoyed the highest social status. These included doctors, military and naval officers, Church of England clergymen, professors, judges, lawyers, and upper-level government officials (Mitchell 21). During the Victorian Age, a new set of professionals joined the middle class like bankers, wealthy merchants, and manufacturers who helped the middle-class increase in size and power. Police inspectors and farmers (who employed laborers to do the manual work) were also members of the middle class. Money did not determine class because some clerks earned less than some factory workers; however, because they did mental rather than physical work, they were still considered middle class. For middle-class women, their class statuses were derived from their husbands since they did not have occupations. Elizabeth Gaskell, as the wife of a minister, was part of the middle class as were most of her readers.

The impact of the expanding middle class was not only felt in Parliament and in the British economy; their way of life became the model for all Victorian families. The

middle-class ideology of separate spheres for men and women was considered “normal” behavior for all of British society, even for the working class who could not achieve this ideal because of financial restrictions. Women occupied the private sphere, men the public. While middle-class men could move back and forth between the public and private spheres, a woman was expected to stay in the private sphere. Middle-class wives managed the home and raised the children while the husband went out into the world and earned the income to provide for his family. Men were the breadwinners, and women supported their husbands. Anything outside of this model was considered abnormal. In fact, it was considered “socially unacceptable” for a middle-class woman to earn money through her work (Mitchell 143). Public disapproval of working middle-class women stemmed from a variety of sources: popular literature, evangelical religious fervor, fear of competition, and property laws. Each of these factors ensured that few job opportunities or educational opportunities existed for women of any class.

Unlike their working-class brethren, it was not necessary or even advisable for a middle-class woman to work unless she needed to provide for herself or her family. Married women especially were not expected or encouraged to work. Under *coverture*, when a woman married, all of her property and income became her husband’s because they were considered one person. The husband was expected to act for his wife in all legal situations, to protect or *cover* her. Barbara Bodichon and Caroline Norton, writers and women’s rights advocates, attempted to change the laws concerning married women so that wives would have legal rights to their own property and children. In her most influential work, *A Brief Summary, in Plain Language, of the Most Important Laws Concerning Women*, Bodichon compares the property rights of single and married

women: "A single woman has the same rights to property, to protection from the law, and has to pay the same taxes to the State, as a man...A man and wife are one person in law; the wife loses all her rights as a single woman, and her existence is entirely absorbed in that of her husband" (24-25). She goes on to write that all of the wife's possessions and property before marriage belong to her husband afterward, and that legally, he can do whatever he wants with them. In Victorian society, it seems that working would not have benefited a married woman because all of her income would legally be under the control of her husband. The law of coverture enforced the dependence of the married woman on her husband, thereby making it unnecessary for a woman to find her own occupation. Legally, married women had less power and independence than any other group; however, this did not discourage women from marrying since, theoretically, they would be more financially secure than as single women or widows. The limited legal rights of married women helped perpetuate the "separate spheres" ideology of the Victorian family.

Other reinforcing factors of this ideology were the many Victorian conduct books, poems, novels, and essays published and read by the middle class. Male and female authors promoted a domestic ideology and veneration of the "morally superior" woman. Coventry Patmore's popular poem, "The Angel in the House," and John Ruskin's essay, "Of Queens Gardens," idealized the Victorian woman as the moral guardian of her husband and children. In the nineteenth century, Patmore's "Angel in the House" sold more copies than any other poem besides *Idylls of the King* in England and America (Victorian Women 134). Because of this, Patmore helped cement the ideology of the

morally superior and naturally domestic Victorian woman. The following lines from the poem clearly show Patmore's idolization of woman:

Her disposition is devout  
Her countenance angelical;  
The best things that the best believe  
Are in her face so kindly writ  
The faithless, seeing her, conceive  
Not only heaven, but hope of it (Patmore 135).

These lines depict the Victorian woman as angelical and inspirational. Patmore venerates the heavenly qualities of a woman with an almost religious devotion. In these lines, he seems to acknowledge that women, because of their natural piety and angelic faces, are able to inspire even the most faithless person with thoughts of heaven. Later in the poem, Patmore implies that these angelic qualities differentiate women from men and justify a man's duty to protect women from the "evils" of the outside world. In these lines, he seems to suggest that women can only retain their natural goodness through ignorance: "How wise in all she ought to know/ How ignorant of all beside!" (137). Here, he seems to celebrate the fact that a wife knows nothing of what goes on outside the private sphere because her innocence is protected. Patmore's "Angel" understands her proper place and succeeds in her domestic duties, but she is not expected or encouraged to know anything else besides this. Patmore's idolization of women profoundly influenced gender relationships and reinforced the "separate spheres" ideology that permeated the whole culture, but especially the middle class. He helped create an almost perfect model for all women to achieve and men to expect.



John Ruskin's "Of Queens' Gardens" also idolized the Victorian woman as naturally good and domestically suited. In his essay, Ruskin addresses the purpose of education for girls. Although he promotes a similar education for boys and girls, he argues that the *direction* of their education should be suited to the distinctive qualities of the sexes. While a boy's education should consist of knowledge in science and languages, a girl should be educated in these subjects only as to be able to converse intelligently with the men in her life. Ruskin justifies this argument by citing the unique qualities that make a woman fit for the home. The following quote from his lecture illustrates Ruskin's promotion of the separate spheres ideology of the middle-class:

And wherever a true wife comes, this home is always round her.

The stars only may be over her head; the glow-worm in the night-cold grass may be the only fire at her foot: but home is yet wherever she is; and for a noble woman it stretches far round her, better than ceiled with cedar, or painted with vermilion, shedding its quiet light far, for those who else were homeless.

This then, I believe to be, - will you not admit it to be- the woman's true place and power? But do not you see that to fulfill this, she must- as far as one can use such terms of a human creature-be incapable of error? So far as she rules, all must be right or nothing is. She must be enduringly, incorruptibly good; instinctively, infallibly wise...(86).

Ruskin's conception of the "true wife" is one who is capable of making any rustic setting a comfortable home just through her natural goodness and moral wisdom. Like Patmore's "Angel," who inspires others with her countenance, Ruskin's "Queen" makes others feel

at home even when they are not. Both authors imply that a women's power comes from her natural goodness which can only be cultivated in the home; if she leaves her natural sphere, her goodness will be corrupted. Gaskell's views coincide with Patmore's and Ruskin's regarding the domestic sphere as the ideal and natural place for women; however, in her fiction, she creates more realistic, complex, and powerful images of working-class women in this role than do either of these works.

Nancy Armstrong, author of *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, discusses the role of an earlier type of literature that heavily shaped the concept of the ideal domestic woman, the conduct book. In chapter two, "the Rise of the Domestic Woman," she discusses the influence of the eighteenth century conduct book over the middle class, which, she argues, did not even exist at the time these books were written. Armstrong argues that conduct books and novels of manners rose to the height of popularity and influence in the years 1760-1820, significantly contributing to the rise of the middle class. She explains that this type of literature was intended to educate women in the domestic skills and feminine qualities that "prosperous men" expected in a wife. She contends that this writing promoted the notion that a woman's desirability to this type of man "hinged upon an education in frugal domestic practices" and that "she was supposed to complement his role as an earner and producer with hers as a wise spender and tasteful consumer" (Armstrong 59). The disapproval of intellectual and scientific women did not originate with Ruskin and Patmore. In fact, they may have been influenced by conduct books written forty years before their own work. Armstrong cites Thomas Broadhurst's conduct book, *Advice to Young Ladies on the Improvement of the Mind and Conduct of*

*Life* (1810) as one source of “anti-intellectual” sentiment geared towards women. The following quote from Broadhurst illustrates an early criticism of intellectual women:

She who is faithfully employed in discharging the various duties of a wife and daughter, a mother and a friend, is far more usefully occupied than one who, to the culpable neglect of the most important obligations, is daily absorbed by philosophic and literary speculations, or soaring aloft amidst the enchanted regions of fiction and romance (qtd. in Armstrong 68).

Here, the conduct book discourages women from pursuing activities that required vigorous thought and discipline. Instead, Broadhurst argues that any woman who pursues subjects outside her natural duties as mother and wife, wastes her time. Ruskin and Patmore’s ambivalence towards intellectual women parallels the ideology of Broadhurst’s conduct book and supports Armstrong’s argument. Although she does not state explicitly that these authors were influenced by conduct books, she does argue that these books contributed to the rise of the middle class by educating women in “proper” feminine qualities. It is clear that Ruskin and Patmore promote similar ideas in their own works as these conduct books did fifty years earlier, both advocating the suitability of the domestic sphere for women. Indeed, with literature, government, and economics working against female autonomy, it is not surprising that middle-class women rarely worked outside the home.

Similar to Ruskin and Patmore, Gaskell viewed domestic duties as natural and vital work for women, although she also viewed wage-earning work as fulfilling and beneficial for women. While Ruskin and Patmore seem to disapprove of scientifically educated women working outside the domestic sphere, Gaskell believed in the

importance of education for women who worked inside and outside of the home. Gaskell advocated women who worked, paid or unpaid, and reserved her condemnation for the uneducated and idle middle and upper-class lady. Her works suggest that she disapproved of the luxury and idleness money granted to affluent women. Indeed, her critical portrait of the rich Carson women of *Mary Barton* represents Gaskell's contempt for the idleness of wealthy ladies. Mrs. Carson and her daughters are idle, thoughtless, and bored:

Mrs. Carson was very poorly, and sitting up-stairs in her dressing-room, indulging in the luxury of a head-ache. She was not well, certainly. 'Wind in the head,' the servants called it. But it was but the natural consequence of the state of mental and bodily idleness in which she was placed.

Without education enough to value the resources of wealth and leisure, she was so circumstanced as to command both. It could have done her more good...if she might have taken the work of one of her own housemaids for a week (196).

Though Gaskell does not insist that the Carson women need to earn wages working outside the home in order to be useful, she does suggest that Mrs. Carson remedy her sickly state through domestic work, a better cure for her than medicine. Gaskell clearly does not advocate their lifestyle as exemplary; rather, she uses the Carson women to criticize wealthy middle-class ladies who spend their time uselessly. In *North and South* Gaskell's representations of the frivolous life led by Margaret's cousin, Edith, and her aunt Shaw similarly show her condemnation of the idle Victorian lady. Gaskell suggests that although Mrs. Carson and Mrs. Shaw are mothers, they would benefit from having

some type of noble work to do as well by serving others whether inside or outside the home.

The domestic ideology of the Victorian middle class was so powerful, that not only did it shape gender roles in middle-class families; it also influenced members of Parliament, who passed laws in an attempt to make the working-class family resemble the middle-class family. Parliament passed many laws, especially in the latter half of the nineteenth century in an effort to prevent women, especially wives and mothers, from working long hours away from their families; however, according to many historians, these laws had negative consequences for working women. According to Sonya Rose, the Poor Law reinforced the ideology of the male breadwinner and female dependent and ignored the reality that most working families faced—that is, that women had to work in order for the family to survive (53). These laws were especially hard on women who, because of *coverture*, could not acquire poor relief unless their husbands qualified for assistance. Also, if the husband sought the workhouse, the wife would have to follow him as well because she was considered his dependent (Rose 54). The major Factory Acts passed in the nineteenth century also mainly focused on regulating the hours of “not free agents” or women and children (Rose 55). In these laws, women were equated with children because both groups could not act for themselves. Women had to rely on husbands or fathers, and children on parents. Even though some working women provided for themselves and their families, they were considered dependents by the state. The Factory Acts of 1833 limited hours the hours that children would be allowed to work in factories, and a decade later, similar laws restricted women’s hours as well. Rose argues that the main advocates for enforcing the limitation of women’s working hours

came from “male unionists, encouraged by aristocratic and middle-class reformers who were inspired by evangelical religious rhetoric” (57). Here, Rose seems to clearly imply that domestic ideology, or what she calls “evangelical religious rhetoric,” motivated middle-class reformers into pursuing shorter working hours for women in cooperation with male unionists. In 1844, women were officially labeled as “unfree agents” and were made subject to the Factory Acts as well. The Ten Hours Bill of 1847, intended to reduce the working hours of women and children, limited the hours of all workers because factories could not function without the work of women and children (Rose 56). In 1874, influenced by middle-class concern over working mothers, Parliament passed “The Factories Bill” or “Women’s Health Bill,” which limited the weekly working hours of women and children to fifty-six and one-half hours and also reduced hours for male workers (Rose 59). Rose argues that even though the Factory Acts were intended to improve hours and conditions for working women, mothers especially, they did not affect most employed women since many were domestic workers (73). Ultimately, instead of improving conditions for women, the Factory Acts failed to protect women from low wages because they lessened women’s ability to compete for well paid jobs (Rose 74). For example, in certain jobs, like printing, night work was necessary, and women could not do this because of legal restrictions. The Factory Acts seemed to both improve and harm the condition of the working-class woman. While they did reduce the working hours for women, they did not improve the poor wages women received compared to men. It seems evident, then, that these laws were more concerned with reforming the working-class family than with empowering women in the work place. As the Factory

Acts proved and as Elizabeth Gaskell illustrated in her fiction, there was no easy solution to the problem of working wives and mothers.

The middle and upper-class reformers were not the only groups involved in limiting women's work to the home. According to Dorothy Thompson, the Chartists also wanted to prevent women from working outside of the home. Chartism was England's first labor movement whose primary goal was the enfranchisement of the working classes. Even though Chartists primarily focused on voting rights, concern over the welfare of working families was also a matter of importance. Thompson writes that "The Chartists often repeated their demand that there should be no female labor except in the hearth and the schoolroom. In general, they regarded women's work outside the home as a burden, certainly for married women" (148). It seems evident that working-class men also believed and wished for women to stay at home with their families. According to Thompson's research, England's biggest labor movement upheld the ideology of separate spheres for men and women, so it was not solely a middle-class concern.

## II. – “The Three Eras of Libbie Marsh”

One of Elizabeth Gaskell's first published works was the short story “The Three Eras of Libbie Marsh,” which she wrote for *Howitt's Journal* in 1847. This work serves as a precursor to *Mary Barton* since it preceded it by a year. Both works are set in Manchester and both offer realistic accounts of life amongst the industrial working classes. Although Elizabeth Gaskell received harsh criticism from industrialists for over-emphasizing the sufferings of the working classes in *Mary Barton*, “The Three Eras of Libbie Marsh” offers a more positive view of working-class life in Manchester. As the wife of a minister, Gaskell spent many hours working with the poor in the Manchester slums. She saw how fluctuations in the economy affected the lives of the workers on a daily basis. According to Gaskell biographer Shirley Foster, *Mary Barton* was set in the years 1834 – 1840, a politically and socially turbulent time for Manchester (Introduction, *MB ix*). “Libbie Marsh's Three Eras” in contrast, is set in a more stable and prosperous time period, most likely the early 1830's. “Libbie Marsh” and *Mary Barton* offer distinct depictions of industrial life: one prosperous and one dismal. In *Elizabeth Gaskell: the Novel of Social Crisis*, Coral Lansbury writes that Gaskell's depictions of working-class life were not all tragic. In fact, she points out that many Manchester workers benefited by working in industry rather than agriculture because “Power-loom weavers were the highest-paid industrial workers of the day” (Lansbury 43). This story, like *Mary Barton*, is set in Gaskell's hometown, which she describes as “old, ugly, smoky Manchester! Dear, busy, earnest, working, noble Manchester” (*Four Short Stories* 38). In this quote, Gaskell blends feelings of disgust and pride toward this industrial town, and similarly,



through this short story, Gaskell seems to show that she can reconcile the suffering caused by industrialization with its benefits.

Although the “Three Eras of Libbie Marsh” is set in an earlier time period than *Mary Barton* and among different economic conditions, Gaskell touches upon many issues that she later focuses on in *Mary Barton*, particularly the relationship of women to their work. The story portrays a number of women working in differing occupations within an industrial city. The heroine, Libbie Marsh, works as a seamstress and boards with the Dixons, factory workers who, compared to her, lived comfortably on their wages. During her first day with the Dixons, Libbie is astonished at their extravagant food choices: “Eggs to put to the cream, it was so thin. Ham to give a relish to the bread and butter” (*Four Short Stories* 25). Compared to the home she had lived in before, the Dixons’ fare seems extremely lavish to Libbie although she does offer an explanation as to why this is so: “They were fine spinners in the receipt of good wages; and confined all day to an atmosphere ranging from 75 to 80 degrees; they had lost all natural healthy appetite for simple food, and having no higher tastes, found their greatest enjoyment in their luxurious meals” (*Four Short Stories* 25). Libbie understands that because the Dixons are factory workers in highly paid positions, they are able to spend the extra money they earn on the simple luxuries that offer them the most satisfaction. Through the Dixons, Gaskell shows how high wages can increase the material comfort and purchasing power of the working class. Even though the Dixons “were absent all day from their house; the youngest child was boarded out for the week days at neighbors,” Gaskell does not criticize their way of life (*Four Short Stories* 24). Although later in *Mary Barton*, Gaskell seems to concern herself with the problem of working-class mothers, in “Libbie

Marsh," she portrays Mrs. Dixon as competent and satisfied. The Dixons represent the benefits of factory work in times of economic prosperity and offer an alternative view to Libbie's life as a seamstress.

Although Gaskell does not depict Libbie's work as complete misery, she does portray it as tedious, time-consuming, and poorly paid. On her first night living with the Dixons, Libbie had to unpack her clothes before sleeping "as she had to go out sewing for several succeeding days" (25). When Libbie does not "go out to sew," she works on plain sewing at home. As a seamstress, Libbie has periods where she sews almost every minute of her waking hours with "her few odd moments of pause" and periods where she does not have enough work to pay her rent: "The Dixons were very good sort of people; never pressed her for payment if she had had but little work that week" (26-27). In contrast to the Dixons, who seem to have steady employment and regular wages, Libbie's economic situation is not secure. Libbie also experiences isolation through her work because she either works alone in her room or goes out to work for employers whom she describes as "kind enough people in their way, but too rapidly twirling round on this bustling earth to have leisure to think of the little work-woman excepting when they wanted gowns turned, carpets mended, or household linen darned" (24). Here Gaskell depicts her employers as busy people concerned with filling the orders of their customers rather than befriending a lonely seamstress. Gaskell does not criticize them for their indifference, but their relationship with Libbie is suggestive of a larger problem resulting from an economic system based solely on the "cash nexus."

In the story, Gaskell addresses the issue of working mothers through the minor character Margaret Hall. Because Libbie has no remaining family and no real friends of

her own, she befriends the crippled neighbor boy, Frank Hall, who spends his days alone while his mother, Margaret, works as a washerwoman. Gaskell describes Margaret as a “widow, who earned her living as a washerwomen...toiling for her livelihood” (26). Gaskell clearly does not condemn Margaret for leaving her son at home while she earns a living; instead, she depicts her as a loving mother who works hard to keep them both alive. She, like Libbie, works out of necessity; Margaret has to provide for her son as well as herself. At the end of the story, Libbie moves in with Margaret after her son dies, easing the loneliness of both women.

Gaskell’s opinion regarding working women comes forth most clearly through Libbie herself. When Anne Dixon comes over to ask Libbie to be her bridesmaid, Libbie refuses out of grief over Frank Hall’s death. After Anne’s attempts at persuading her fail, she accuses Libbie of being destined for spinsterhood. Libbie responds to her insult with honest resignation:

I know that as well as you can tell me. And more reason, therefore, that as God has seen fit to keep me out o’ woman’s natural work, I should try and find work for myself. I mean, that as I know I’m never like for to have a home of my own, or a husband, who would look to me to make all straight, or children to watch over and care for, all which I take to be woman’s natural work, I must not lose time in fretting and fidgiting after marriage, but just look about me for somewhat else to do (*Four Short Stories* 43).

This quotation is important because it clearly shows Gaskell’s feelings towards marriage, motherhood, and women’s employment. Libbie knows that women are naturally inclined

to be wives and mothers; however, she understands that most likely she will not fill that role in her own life since she is without beauty and without family. Libbie reflects Gaskell's own beliefs in the natural roles of women as wives and mothers and her beliefs in the value of work. In the last few lines of her speech, Libbie exhibits sentiments of bravery and resignation: "I must not lose time in fretting and fidgeting after marriage, but just look about me for somewhat else to do" (*Four Short Stories* 43). She accepts her lot as a single woman, and instead of wasting time looking for a husband and pining after love, she proclaims that she will find valuable work to do. Unlike many romantic heroines who spend their days looking for a husband, Libbie finds her satisfaction in working for herself and for others. Through Libbie, Gaskell suggests that although motherhood is the natural work for a woman, those who are not mothers should work for self-fulfillment and for the welfare of others. Gaskell understood that not all women could become wives and mothers and that work was the next best option. At the end of the story, Libbie finds peace and happiness serving as a daughter to Margaret Hall because "she has a purpose in life and that purpose is a holy one" (47). Although Libbie does not become a mother, she finds work to do that is equally noble, fulfilling the duties of a daughter to a lonely widow. In her depiction of Libbie Marsh, Gaskell created a unique heroine who finds her happiness in unconventional ways: by working and serving others rather than by marriage and motherhood. Gaskell touches upon the issue of occupational work versus domestic work in this story; however, she explores the topic in more depth through her depictions of working women in her novels, *Mary Barton*, *Ruth*, and *North and South*.

### III. Domestic Servants

Domestic service is Gaskell's least complicated and most positive depiction of working-class employment. Gaskell seems to view this type of work as the least threatening to female domesticity since the work took place within the home. Domestic service was one of the lowest paid and largest employers of women and girls in the nineteenth century. Middle and upper-class households employed working-class girls and women to serve as nursemaids, housemaids, and cooks. Many domestic servants lived in the household with the families they served but some lived with their own families. Elizabeth Gaskell realistically portrays the different types of domestic servitude in *Mary Barton*, *Ruth*, and *North and South*. Alice Wilson represents domestic servants in *Mary Barton* who are paid little and appreciated even less. Through the characters of Dixon in *North and South* and Sally in *Ruth*, Gaskell offers a more positive view of the domestic servant's role in the household. In their roles as the families' main servants, both secure power, respect and love from the families they serve. Gaskell represents a mixed view, revealing both the positive and negative aspects of domestic service through her working class characters.

All middle-class households employed at least one servant, but more typically, they employed three, depending on the income of the household. According to Sally Mitchell, if a middle-class household income was £150-200 a year, then the family could only afford one maid-of-all work. If the income of the household was £300 a year, the family could hire a maid-of-all work and a nurse maid as well. The required income for a middle-class household to employ a maid, nursemaid, and cook was £500 a year

(Mitchell 32). The Bensons and Hales, both poor middle-class families, each employed one maid-of-all work in Sally and Dixon; servants who managed to clean, nurse, and cook for the household. Gaskell portrays both the Hales and the Bensons as families who have enough money to live on but not much more; however, they are both able to keep one servant. The reason both families are able to keep a servant is because domestic servants were some of the lowest paid workers. Like seamstresses, domestic servants only averaged £12-20 a year in wages (Mitchell 33). A possible reason for the low wages was the abundant supply of workers. In 1851, 13.3% of employed workers were domestic servants and by 1885, it became the largest area of employment for women and young girls (Mitchell 50).

Compared to the major working-class occupations of factory work and needle work, domestic service, in spite of the low salary, did have some advantages. Like other working class occupations, domestic servants were required to perform manual labor, and out of all three, they had the most limited personal freedom. Servants would be awake before the rest of the household and would not go to bed until the family did. They would also be on call at all hours of the day and night, so they had little free time for themselves. According to Sally Mitchell, their typical daily duties included “carrying coal, filling and cleaning lamps, tending fires, heating water for baths, baking bread, preserving fruit, making meals from scratch, going on foot to do daily marketing and other errands, taking rugs outside to clean by beating; and boiling water for laundry” (31). Because many domestic servants had free room and board, they did have some advantages over other working-class occupations. Since they lived with middle-class families, they had better living conditions and higher quality food than they would have

had living independently. As a maid, a girl learned household management and domestic skills like cooking, cleaning and sewing. Also, because she did not spend money on room and board, an unmarried maid could save money for the future, and she also had a better chance of marrying well since she had contact with male servants, apprentices, and tradesmen (Mitchell 50). Most of these advantages came from living with a respectable middle-class family; however, in a less respectable or less wealthy family, these advantages would decrease as Gaskell portrayed in *Mary Barton*.

In *Mary Barton*, Gaskell represents domestic work as pitiable but fulfilling at the same time. As a working-class girl, one of three employment options for Mary is “going out to service” but like her father, Mary harbors personal prejudices about domestic service. Both John Barton and Mary feel that domestic service prevents workers from having any personal independence. As a consequence of losing her mother, Mary developed independent habits which she did not want to lose. John Barton views domestic servitude as “a species of slavery; 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” (25). In order not to insult her middle-class readers, Gaskell includes a disclaimer after Barton’s speech: “How far his strong exaggerated feelings had any foundation in truth, it is for you to judge” (25). Here, she tells the reader that Barton’s prejudice against the rich affects his discernment, but she also leaves open the possibility that there is some truth to what he says.

Gaskell’s most sympathetic image of the self-sacrificing domestic servant is shown through the character of Alice Wilson, a former servant and impoverished washerwoman who lives in a dingy cellar. One evening, Alice describes her time as a

domestic servant to Margaret Legh and Mary Barton with mixed feelings. Alice explains that while she enjoyed serving others as a servant, she also had to sacrifice her own freedom and family to do it. When she had planned to visit her mother in the South, Alice had to nurse her employer's sick children and then her mistress instead. Also, because the husband drank, Alice had to help the wife manage the shop in addition to her regular duties of cooking, washing, and minding the children, and when the family lost their money, Alice lost her position. After Mary listens to Alice's description of her servitude, Mary restates her own intentions never to enter the occupation herself. Although her description of domestic service is brief, Alice Wilson's story suggests that domestic servants often lacked job security and autonomy, made subject to the whims and caprices of their employers.

Gaskell offers an alternative and more positive view of domestic service in the characters of Sally from *Ruth* and Dixon from *North and South*. While *Mary Barton* voices the opinions of working-class characters, *North and South* and *Ruth* portray the lives of middle-class families like the Bensons and Hales, which explains why the perspective on domestic service changes. Both families employ opinionated and resourceful servants who essentially become part of the families they work for. Dixon, the domestic servant in *North and South*, fulfills many duties as Mrs. Hale's confidant, friend, and nurse. Dixon learns of Mrs. Hales' terminal illness before Mr. Hale or Margaret and becomes Mrs. Hale's primary nurse and caregiver throughout her illness. Although her mother's decisions hurt Margaret, they also demonstrate Dixon's privileged position within the family. As the servant to the young, unwed Mrs. Hale, Dixon's relationship with her lasted longer than even Mr. Hale's or Margaret's. Dixon was an



integral and powerful member of the family circle. Even when the Hales move to Milton, they never seriously considered releasing Dixon from their service. Dixon expresses her opinions to Margaret and Mr. Hale without fear of reprimand. Once, when Dixon goes too far in criticizing Mr. Hale's decision to leave the Church of England, Margaret finally tells her to remember her place. After this, Dixon "obeyed and admired Margaret" because she "like many others, liked to feel herself ruled by a powerful and decided nature" (49). Throughout most of the story, Dixon, after Margaret, is the most powerful member of the family. Mrs. Hale is sickly and weak while Mr. Hale is indecisive and idealistic, so they both allow Dixon to rule the household in Helstone and later in Milton. Through the character of Dixon, Gaskell shows how domestic servants enabled middle-class households to function by performing and even managing household tasks.

Like Dixon, Sally in *Ruth* takes on dual roles as servant and family member in the Benson household. Sally served as the housemaid, nursemaid, and cook for the Benson family even before her current employers, Faith and Thurston Benson, were born. Because of this, the Bensons and Sally have a mutually respectful and affectionate relationship. The Bensons never treat her as a subordinate but rather consider her opinion before making any major decision. Before taking a pregnant Ruth into their home, the Bensons have to persuade Sally into accepting her as well. Not only does Gaskell portray Sally as an equally important member of the Benson family, she also depicts Sally as an influential part of Ruth's moral development. In one instance, Sally chastises Ruth for weeping and not accepting her lot in life cheerfully as a Christian. She then explains to Ruth how the late Mrs. Benson taught her to appreciate her life as a servant:

Well, your station is a servant, and it is as honourable as a king's, if you look at it right; you are to help and serve others in one way, just as a king is to help others in another. Now what way are you to help and serve, or to do your duty, in that station of life unto which it has pleased God to call you? (147).

This speech further demonstrates Gaskell's belief in the nobility of work, equating the duties of the humblest servant to the grandest king. Through Sally, Gaskell imparts the Christian philosophy of cheerfully accepting one's position in life as her duty to God. From her mistress, Sally learned to value her duties as a servant. Sally then teaches the lesson to Ruth, who takes it to heart and accepts her place in the family. In this way, Sally influences Ruth's spiritual growth. Sally's position as the family servant does not make her feel weak or unappreciated; instead, she experiences self-fulfillment and happiness through serving others.

Through the characters of Dixon, and Sally, Gaskell presents a positive image of domestic service. Although both Dixon and Sally often complain about their various responsibilities as servants, they both feel respected and valued by their middle-class employers. It is evident that Gaskell did not view domestic service as a form of slavery, but rather a noble occupation where workers could fulfill their duties to the families they served while also fulfilling their duty to God. Although Gaskell's servant characters have limited personal freedom, because of their location within the domestic sphere, they are shown to have more influence over their employers than factory or needle workers could ever have.

## IV – Needleworkers

In her novels and short stories, Elizabeth Gaskell describes the life of the needleworker, another major area of employment for women in the nineteenth century, more thoroughly than any other working-class occupation. Perhaps the reason she chose this occupation for two of her novels' heroines, Mary Barton and Ruth, was because the needle industry employed women of the middle class as well as working-class women and because of the occupation's domestic association. Middle-class women who needed to provide for themselves worked by the needle because it was considered more refined and womanly than any other occupation available to them. In describing this occupation in her novels, Gaskell could appeal to a wider audience who could more easily sympathize with workers they could recognize and relate to. Through the characters of Ruth and Mary Barton, one middle-class seamstress and one working class, Gaskell depicted the necessity of working as a universal problem for women.

Like many of her contemporaries, Gaskell uses the suffering seamstress as a way to direct the sympathies of the middle class toward an occupation that concerned them as well as those below them. Gaskell first depicted the life of the seamstress in her short story, "The Three Eras of Libbie Marsh," where she gave a fairly benign representation of the needleworking occupation; however, in *Mary Barton* and *Ruth*, Gaskell's description of needlework is far more critical with her emphasis on its long hours, low pay, and damaging health conditions. Her descriptions of needleworking conditions line up with contemporaries like Thomas Hood and Charlotte Tonna as well as prove

historically accurate according to the work of Sally Mitchell, Patricia Zakreski and Lynn Alexander.

Like domestic service, the needle trade was the lowest paid occupation for middle or working-class women because there was an abundant supply of workers with the necessary skills to do the job. Since almost all Victorian girls had some skill with a needle, supply was high and wages were low. In the nineteenth century, the needleworking trades included dressmakers, milliners, who made hats and accessories; seamstresses, who sewed anything made of cloth; and tailors, who cut and sewed men's clothing (Mitchell 62). Tailors were men, and consequently, better paid than their female counterparts. Depending on experience and position, for women, wages could be as high as £80 a year or as low as 7 shillings a week (Mitchell 62-63). Most seamstresses started out as apprentices at the age of fourteen. Apprentice seamstress would earn almost no money during their two to three year apprenticeship and also usually had to pay a significant premium to the shop owner prior to employment. Gaskell represents this problem in *Mary Barton*. John Barton learns through his unsuccessful search to find Mary an apprenticeship in a first or second rate dress shop that all of the establishments required premiums or some amount of money. Mary only finds a position with Miss Simmonds, owner of a dress and millinery shop, because of her beauty. Gaskell describes the details of Mary's apprenticeship:

Mary was to work for two years without any remuneration, on consideration of being taught the business; and where afterwards she was to dine and have tea, with a small quarterly salary (paid quarterly because

so much more genteel than be week), a *very* small one, divisible into a minute weekly pittance (27).

Gaskell deliberately emphasizes the seamstresses' dismal salary, pointing out that Mary's income would never be very great. Even though Mary does not earn much money through her work, it does keep her from the edge of starvation and helps pay for her and her father's living expenses. Through her work, she becomes the provider of the family instead of her father, who is jobless throughout the novel. As mentioned previously, this role reversal concerned many Victorian social reformers like Lord Ashley and Friedrich Engels; however, Gaskell depicts Mary as being empowered by her role as the family breadwinner. Through this role, Mary becomes more womanly, unselfish, and decisive.

In *Ruth* and *Mary Barton*, Gaskell shows more concern about the effects of the needleworkers' regular long hours of work than their poor salaries. Seamstresses and dressmakers commonly worked between twelve to fifteen hours a day, but during the Season, their hours of work increased to eighteen and twenty (Mitchell 63). The needleworkers' long hours and poor working conditions concerned many Victorian social reformers. Images and descriptions of suffering seamstresses working in poor conditions appeared in novels, newspapers, paintings, and magazines, especially during the 1850's. In one article in *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*, the author criticizes men for seeking a nine hour work day while women had to work at least twelve hours a day:

Nine hours a day's work for a man! With thousands of women in London who know exactly what it is to sit sewing *twenty* consecutive hours in the day for six weeks together, with the milliners' hours standing at the following figures:--

Shortest time (in season).....	12 Hours
Busy time.....	15
Emergencies.....	18
In some cases.....	22

(“The Englishwoman in London” 2)

This anonymous author’s information came from newspapers like the “Edinburgh Review, April 1859” as well as government reports. Even though the author has an indignant and biased tone throughout the article, the information reported coincides with historical statistics as well as Gaskell’s own representations in her novels. According to Lynn Alexander, most Victorian needleworkers stitched for twelve hours a day consecutively in poorly ventilated rooms in close proximity to one another and ate poor food. These conditions contributed to blindness and disease (12).

While Ruth’s experiences as a seamstress are mostly negative, in *Mary Barton*, Gaskell provides a more balanced portrait of the occupation. At most, Gaskell seems critical of the long and irregular hours of Mary’s occupation. During the summer, Mary worked at her dress shop from six in the morning to late in the evening or whenever the work was finished for the day. In the winter, she was not required to come to work until after breakfast, most likely because the shop did not have as much work as during the summer. Although Gaskell depicts Mary’s work as long and monotonous, Mary never suffers any harmful effects from it. She is even shown to have some free time in the evening for visiting friends and walking with Harry Carson. If anything, perhaps Gaskell suggests that Mary might not work *enough* since she has time for flirting inappropriately with the young Carson.

The foil to Mary's character, Margaret Legh suffers more from her occupation as a slopworker, the poorest paid needleworking occupation. "Women who could not afford to pay the premiums for apprenticeship ended up as slopworkers sewing shirts, trousers or piecework" for poor remuneration (Alexander 17). Because slop workers worked at home, they had to provide their own candlelight; so many worked all day and night in dimly lit rooms. The poor lighting conditions often led to blindness as Gaskell depicts in *Mary Barton*. As a result of her needlework, Margaret loses her eyesight early on in the novel. Rather than depicting this as a tragedy for Margaret, Gaskell instead shows how other opportunities open up for Margaret. It is because of her blindness that Margaret looks to singing as a way she can use her talents to help provide for herself and her grandfather. Margaret is able to escape a dismal life of sewing by utilizing her other talent. Although Gaskell is not offering Margaret's experience as a solution for all working women, she does seem to imply that women should explore their talents in order to see how they might benefit from them as Margaret does.

Gaskell's most critical images of needlework appear in *Ruth*. Similar to Mary Barton, Ruth works in a dress shop with other unmarried girls her own age; however, unlike Mary, Ruth must live in the dress shop because she has no other residence, so while Mary has some independence, Ruth relies entirely on Mrs. Mason for her well being. For Ruth, the orphaned daughter of a small farmer, life in a dress shop contrasts dramatically with her former life on a country farm. Ruth's guardian secured a position for her with Mrs. Mason, the owner of a dress shop, for a period of five years. Gaskell describes Ruth's experiences as a seamstress in detail:

Ruth Hilton passes wearily one January night, now many years ago. I call it night; but strictly speaking, it was morning. Two o'clock in the morning chimed forth the old bells of St. Saviour's. And yet more than a dozen girls still sat in the room into which Ruth entered, stitching away as if for very life, not daring to gape, or show any outward manifestations of sleepiness. They only sighed a little when Ruth told Mrs. Mason the hour of the night...for they knew that, stay up as late as they might, the work-hours of the next day must begin at eight, and their young limbs were very weary (7).

In this quote, Gaskell describes the physical and psychological effects of working up to eighteen hours a day. The girls, fearful of losing their jobs, do not complain or show any outward sign of fatigue or tiredness even though they are working as late as two o'clock in the morning. The next day, they had to begin sewing again at 8:00 a.m. regardless of when they went to bed. Through these representations, Gaskell illustrates the physical suffering caused by the needleworking industry. The completion of the work took priority over the health of the workers. After the tedious night of work, Ruth looks at her future in despair: "Oh! How shall I get through five years of these terrible nights! In that close room! And in that oppressive stillness! Which lets every sound of the thread be heard as it goes eternally backwards and forwards" (11). Here, Ruth describes the room's lack of air, space, and noise--a distinct contrast to the open spaces of her former life in the country. Unlike Ruth, Mary Barton, perhaps because she grew up in a crowded, industrial city, never suffers from the confined space of the work room. In describing the work room as confining and inhuman, Gaskell seems to compare the room to a coffin or a



prison. She even uses the iconographic image of the caged bird to describe Ruth's psychological state. Through these images, it is clear that Gaskell believed that conditions for needleworkers could use improvement, but she never clearly indicates how those improvements should come about. According to Alexander, female social reformers blamed the shop owners for the poor conditions and would persuade male relatives into boycotting establishments with bad reputations (11). Unlike these female reformers, Gaskell does not blame Mrs. Mason entirely for contributing to the misery of her employees. She even offers a justifiable and sympathetic explanation for Mrs. Mason's harsh management. Gaskell describes Mrs. Mason as a widow with six children to support who "worked away as hard as any of them" (7). Gaskell depicts Mrs. Mason as a middle-class working woman who had to work just as hard as her employees in order to provide for her family. Through her, Gaskell shows that making a living was a common struggle for many women, not just those of the working class. Gaskell does not hold Mrs. Mason completely responsible for the working conditions because that would have been offering a simple solution to a complex problem, which she never did. The fact that she presents both sides of the problem without a clear solution is typical of Gaskell's social criticism.

During the early and middle part of the Victorian Age, needlework was the only appropriate occupation available for middle-class women who were not educated enough to become governesses because sewing was considered a natural, domestic skill for a woman. Unlike factory work, needlework was not considered a threat to a woman's morality or to the working-class family because many women could do the work at home. As I will later discuss, social reformers like Lord Ashley worried about factory work's

effects on the morality of working-class women, but these reformers never showed the same concern for the morality of the needleworker. Perhaps the reason for this was because needlework was so closely linked to the domestic sphere that reformers were not afraid of women losing their womanly qualities through it. Lynn Alexander argues that “the seamstress escaped the stigma of being a factory worker. Because of class issues and low moral standards associated with factory work, this was an important distinction...The seamstress was someone to whom readers could respond without prejudice” (9). Here, Alexander explains that Victorian authors used the seamstress as a sympathetic figure in their fiction because her character would not be undermined by moral ambiguities. Although Gaskell does not portray factory women as morally corrupt, she must have been aware of their reputation, and consequently, made her heroines seamstress instead.

However, even though Mary Barton and Ruth work in genteel and womanly occupations, Gaskell never portrays them as domestic angels because both make unwise and morally questionable decisions. Although John Barton chooses the needleworking occupation for his daughter so that she does not end up like her aunt Esther, the prostitute, Mary comes close to following Esther’s path. Barton believed that Esther’s work in the factory gave her too much independence and ambition, which caused her to run away from her life in Manchester with her lover. Because of this, Barton does not even consider factory work for Mary. Similar to her aunt Esther, Mary desires to escape her life by becoming Harry Carson’s wife although his intentions towards her were never honorable. Through her realization of her love for Jem Wilson, Mary escapes her aunt’s fate by rejecting Harry Carson. Through Mary and Esther, Gaskell suggests that a woman’s occupation had little to no effect upon her morality. Esther and Mary worked in

completely different occupations but shared similar temptations. Patricia Zakreski argues that Gaskell did view work as partly responsible for Mary's inappropriate flirtation with Harry Carson:

Through Mary, Gaskell candidly examines the issue of the sexual dangers that plagued the working woman without alienating her readers or sealing the fate of her heroine and suggests, rather boldly, that the problem is social rather than moral. It is Mary's late nights, her motherlessness, and her need to work that are shown to be primarily at fault (29-30).

I agree with Zakreski's statement in part. Gaskell does depict motherless girls like Mary Barton and Ruth as vulnerable and naïve, but does not suggest that their work is the primary cause. Gaskell shows the lack of family guidance to be more morally damaging than the need to work. Ruth's naiveté and lack of familial protection contribute the most to her "fall". Mary and Ruth both lack a solid family structure that would help prevent them from succumbing to temptation. Mary's mother died when she was a young girl and her father turned to opium and violence, so she really does not have anyone who monitors her behavior. Ruth lost both parents before her arrival at Mrs. Mason's while an indifferent and unknown guardian looked after her financial affairs, but nothing else. Even though both girls meet their lovers because of their jobs, Gaskell does not accredit it as the root cause of Ruth's fall and Mary's temptation. Rather, Gaskell suggests that having no family and very little knowledge of the world is more damaging on a young girl than having to work. The circumstances of Ruth's "fall" occurred because she was lured to the countryside by Bellingham so that she could visit her former home. Through

this, Gaskell suggests that Ruth's vulnerability stems from nostalgia and her lack of family rather than her occupation.

Once Ruth becomes part of the Benson family and receives an education, she is much better equipped to resist temptation than before. Midway through the story, when Bellingham proposes to Ruth, she has the moral strength to reject him. Ruth must be one of Gaskell's most dynamic characters as she evolves from an ignorant and friendless sixteen-year old girl into a strong, independent, and mature woman. There are many contributing factors that influence her positive development: family, motherhood, education, and career. Ruth's wage-earning work as a governess and sick nurse allows her to feel independent and useful. In the novel, Ruth works as a governess for the Bradshaws, and is able to maintain herself and her son through her work. The morally righteous Mr. Bradshaw hired Ruth out of sympathy for her plight as a widow with a young son. When he later discovers that she is a fallen woman with an illegitimate son, he immediately fires her and cuts off all ties with the Benson family. Even though her career as a governess ends sadly for Ruth, her desire for a career and useful employment does not diminish. Through this, Gaskell suggests that Bradshaw's false sense of moral superiority caused Ruth's dismissal, not any fault of her own. Although Ruth is the fallen woman, Gaskell makes Bradshaw the flawed character.

After her dismissal from the Bradshaw household, Ruth takes on another womanly occupation as a sick nurse. Gaskell makes it clear that this occupation was a last resort for Ruth when Jemima expresses shock and horror after hearing Ruth's intentions to become a sick nurse. According to scholar Bronwyn Rivers, nurses and governesses were familiar figures in Victorian novels (141). She claims that prior to Florence Nightingale's nursing reform movement of the mid-nineteenth century, two images of the

female nurse permeated literature. One image was the “incompetent and dissolute” paid nurse, who did not care about patients, only about money. The other image was of the unpaid, “idealized domestic angel” who used her instinctive maternal qualities in her nursing duties (Rivers 143). Ruth does not seem to fit either image exactly, but seems to be a combination of the two, perhaps favoring the latter image. Gaskell portrays Ruth as maternal and self-sacrificing, qualities that make her especially competent and fitted for this occupation; however, she also earns wages for her services. Through nursing, Ruth combines self-sacrifice with wage-earning work when she nurses men and women back to health during a fever outbreak. Through Ruth’s nursing work, Gaskell suggests that nursing has the potential to be the optimal profession for women who can use their instinctive maternal characteristics to benefit others while supporting themselves and their families. After nursing Bellingham back to health, Ruth catches Typhus from him and dies. According to Zakreski, nursing is just another womanly profession that ends “disastrously” for Ruth (40). Although it is true that each of Ruth’s occupations culminates in tragic consequences--pregnancy, alienation, and death—Gaskell does not depict her work as ultimately responsible. Ruth gains financial and moral benefits from each career opportunity. As a sick nurse, Ruth achieves the ultimate sacrifice by giving her life for a patient and ultimately benefits from this. Ruth sacrifices her own life for others and through her death, earns a sainted status, which causes her son to lose the stigma of illegitimacy.

Gaskell does not suggest that any of Ruth’s occupations,--seamstress, governess, or sick nurse--ever morally damage her; instead, she suggests that through this work, Ruth becomes stronger, more independent, and more womanly. Ruth finds her redemption through working and sacrificing for others.

## V. - Factory Women

Factory work is the least womanly occupation represented in Gaskell's two industrial novels, *Mary Barton* and *North and South*. In both stories, Gaskell offers authentic and rich images of factory life; however, interestingly enough, neither of her heroines does factory work. It is mainly through the male characters of John Barton, Jem Wilson, and Nicholas Higgins that factory work is shown. Gaskell does depict female factory workers through general descriptions of female laborers as well as through minor but influential characters like Mrs. Wilson from *Mary Barton* and Bessy Higgins from *North and South*. In these novels, Gaskell's descriptions of factory work coincide with historians like Sonya Rose, Sally Mitchell, and Harold Beneson, all experts in the subject of Victorian occupations. Although Gaskell does not always depict the work as positive, she does seem to give a balanced account of working conditions in Manchester factories. Even though women are not the prominent factory workers in her novels, she does give them adequate representation through minor characters and positive descriptions. Gaskell's representations of female factory work are mixed and complex; while she challenges social conservatives who associated immorality with factory work, she also shows concern over the threat of female factory work to the domestic sphere.

In his article, "Patriarchal Constraints on Women Workers' Mobilization," Harold Benenson discusses how domestic ideology and patriarchal views prevented female workers from forming unions early in the Victorian Era. He explains how the number of women working as weavers in Lancashire factories increased as a result of the Napoleonic Wars, which drained the factories of male workers. Women and children took

the places of men who went off to war. He writes that by 1808, “possibly half of all domestic weavers were women and children” (Benenson 614). Powerloom weavers eventually replaced handloom weavers from 1820-1850, causing distress for men and economic gain for women since they were able to work a powerloom equally as well as men. Because of this, daughters and wives were able to work in factories for their own independence or to contribute to the income of their households. Benenson describes the positive outcomes that came from women being employed in factories and also mentions the negative consequences that went along with it. He argues that “The wives’ employment spawned a service economy for performing domestic chores that enlisted ‘tea-women’ (who provided hot water to factory operatives), seamstresses, home helpers and baby minders” (Benenson 617). Here, Benenson describes how working wives caused an economic trickle-down effect. Female factory workers could not watch their children or fulfill all their domestic duties like sewing and washing; however, because they made good wages, they were able to hire other women to do these chores. In this way, their work economically benefited other women who earned their sustenance in these service industries. Benenson claims that although factory work provided independence and autonomy for many women, some negatives went along with that including sexual harassment, brutal treatment, and lack of opportunities for advancement.

Sonya Rose similarly describes conditions for working-class women in the factories as both challenging and rewarding. Rose writes that wages in powerloom weaving were relatively the same for men and women, which was not typical for most other industries in Great Britain (154). She explains that weaving was unique because both men and women worked together without competing for jobs. Many employers

wanted to hire women particularly because they worked for less money and were less likely to form unions. Women mill workers faced sexual discrimination from male overlookers as well as sexual advances from mill managers. Many men used positions of authority to take advantage of female employees (Rose 158-160). Rose's description of the working mother is more dismal than Benenson's. Besides their workplace challenges, women had to go home and perform domestic duties like laundry, cooking, cleaning, watching and feeding children, and managing the household expenses (Rose 166). Rose argues that the Victorian principle of separate spheres impacted the working-class home making women primarily responsible for domestic duties. Women had to work a double shift while men only had one. She writes that while some men did domestic chores, they were hardly shared equally (166). Rose clearly establishes that though men and women did similar work, their home lives were very different; working-class women had dual roles as worker and mother, making their lives more stressful and difficult than their male counterparts.

In *Mary Barton* and *North and South*, Gaskell treats the subject of female factory work with objectivity, neither overly praising nor unjustly condemning female mill workers. Gaskell gives similarly positive descriptions of the factory girls of Manchester and Milton in both novels. In *Mary Barton*, she describes the factory girls as "Groups of merry and somewhat loud-talking girls, whose ages might range from twelve to twenty, [who] came by with a buoyant step" (6). Here, Gaskell describes their personalities as generally lively, boisterous, and loud. In the next paragraph, she describes their appearance:



Their faces were not remarkable for beauty; indeed, they were below the average, with one or two exceptions; they had dark hair, neatly and classically arranged, dark eyes, but sallow complexions and irregular features. The only thing to strike a passer-by was an acuteness and intelligence of countenance, which has often been noticed in a manufacturing population (7).

Although Gaskell appears to criticize the beauty of factory girls by describing them as unremarkable, she emphasizes their visible sharpness and intelligence. She describes this intelligence as being typical of those in the manufacturing population suggesting that manufacturing workers are generally smarter than other types of workers. Perhaps Gaskell suggests that working for high wages with complicated machinery makes factory workers more intelligent than agricultural or domestic workers. Gaskell further illustrates the positive features of factory girls when she describes their encounters with flirtatious young men: "...the girls held themselves aloof, not in a shy, but rather in an independent way, assuming an indifferent manner to the noisy wit or obstreperous compliments of the lads" (7). Gaskell suggests that because of their financial independence, factory girls are able to assert their independence in other situations. Factory girls do not need men to support them, so they choose to ignore them. In *North and South*, when Margaret first encounters the factory girls in Milton, she describes them in a similar way: "The girls with their rough, but not unfriendly freedom, would comment on her dress, and on her kindness...She did not mind meeting any number of girls, loud spoken and boisterous though they might be" (72). At first, Margaret, the middle-class gentlewoman, is affronted by the unrestrained and free manners of the factory girls, but eventually she

accepts their manners as normal and friendly. Gaskell's description of factory girls in *North and South* almost exactly matches her descriptions in *Mary Barton*. In both novels, she consistently emphasizes the free spirit, independence, liveliness, and loudness of the girls. In neither of the descriptions does she criticize them for being masculine, immoral, or unnatural which were common accusations associated with factory girls.

Since Gaskell represents factory girls in such a positive light in both her industrial novels, it is surprising that none of the major female characters are factory workers. The only female factory worker she gives a voice to is Bessy Higgins of *North and South*. There are several plausible explanations as to why this is so. Factory work was considered the most unfeminine type of work for women. Sonya Rose cites several examples of working-class men describing the masculine characteristics of their female coworkers (137). Sally Mitchell writes that factory girls had the reputations of being "rough and disreputable," which, she argues, was caused by their high wages and comparative freedom (57). Gaskell does suggest that factory girls were somewhat bold but unlike many of her contemporaries, never suggests that they are immoral. According to Françoise Basch, author of *Relative Creatures*, Peter Gaskell and Michael Sadler argued that factory conditions led to the immorality of its workers, citing a "higher number of illegitimate children, promiscuity, alcoholism, and prostitution" (135-136). Lord Ashley also argued against the "demoralizing" conditions for women in the factories in his speech to Parliament in 1847:

They know nothing that they ought to know...they are rendered unfit for the duties of women by overwork, and become utterly demoralized. In the male the moral effects of the system are very sad, but in the female they

are infinitely worse, not alone upon themselves, but upon their families, upon society, and ...upon the country itself. It is bad enough if you corrupt the man, but if you corrupt the women, you poison the waters of life at the very fountain (qtd in Basch 136).

In this speech, Lord Ashley used middle-class domestic ideology to support his argument against women in the factory. He essentially argued that manly factory work caused women to become morally dissolute, which, because of the woman's place as the moral guardian of the home, resulted in the moral degradation of entire families. Lord Ashley's sole concern in this passage is the corruption of the working-class family, another example of middle-class domestic ideology encroaching upon the lives of the working class. It was because of this type of rhetoric, that legislation was passed in favor of limiting women and children's hours in factories.

The immorality of factory women was not the only issue reformers were concerned with; they often cited poor domestic skills among factory women as the result of this type of labor. In his book, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, Friederich Engels criticized an economic system where mothers and wives have to work outside of the home resulting in chaotic family conditions. He observed that "In many families the wife leaves home to go to work as well as the husband, and this results in the utter neglect of the children, who are either locked in the house or handed over to somebody else's care" (Henderson and Chaloner 123). Although Engels shows concern about the welfare of working children who are deprived of parental care, he also criticizes the gender role confusion caused by mothers who go to work while men perform the household duties. He writes that "In Manchester alone there are many hundreds of men

who are condemned to perform household duties. One may well imagine the righteous indignation of the workers at being virtually turned into eunuchs” (Henderson and Chaloner 162). Engels criticizes the factory system for causing working men to lose their masculinity because they are no longer the “breadwinners” of the family. Not only do working wives cause domestic turmoil, Engels also believed that single factory girls contributed to a dysfunctional family dynamic:

The unmarried girls who work in the mills are no better off than their married sisters. Obviously a girl who has been an operative since the age of nine has never had a chance to acquire a skill in house-hold duties. Consequently all the factory girls are wholly ignorant of housewifery and are quite unfitted to become wives or mothers. They do not know how to sew, knit, cook or wash. They are ignorant of the most elementary accomplishments of the housewife, and as for looking after babies, they have the vaguest notion of how to set about it (Henderson and Chaloner 165-166).

According to Shirley Foster, although Elizabeth Gaskell lived relatively near Engels when he was conducting his research in Manchester, it is unlikely that she read his book considering that the English translation did not appear until 1887.

Although there is not a direct link between Engels and Gaskell, she appears to share a few of his sentiments regarding working-class women’s domestic ignorance. In *Mary Barton*, Mrs. Wilson, a former factory worker, comments on her lack of domestic skills early on in her marriage: “There never was such a born goose at house-keeping as I were; and yet he married me! I had been in a factory sin’ five years old a’most, and I

knew nought about cleaning, or cooking, let alone washing and such like work (Gaskell 117). Like Engels, Gaskell seems to criticize industrialization for contributing to the ignorance of women in domestic skills. Continuing her dialogue with Mary, Mrs. Wilson further explains the detrimental effects that occur in the homes of working wives:

I could reckon up, 'ay, nine men, I know, as has been driven to th' public-house by having wives as worked in factories; good folk, too, as thought there was no harm in putting their little ones out at nurse, and letting their house go all dirty, and their fires all out; and that was a place as was tempting for a husband to stay in, was it? He soon finds out gin-shops, where all is clean and bright, and where th' fire blazes cheerily, and gives a man a welcome as it were (Gaskell 118).

Mrs. Wilson blames working wives for contributing to the alcoholism in their husbands because they cannot make their homes cozy and comfortable for their husbands to come home to after work. Here, Mrs. Wilson's rant against married female factory workers coincides with the rhetoric used by reformers like Peter Gaskell, Lord Ashley, and Michael Sadler, who argued that working wives led to the immorality of the working class family; however, it is not clear how much Mrs. Wilson's opinions represent Gaskell's. Francoise Basch argues that these are Gaskell's opinions: "Like the political opponents of female employment, Mrs. Gaskell meant to prove that the destruction of the home was aggravated by the domestic incompetence of workers like Mrs. Wilson in *Mary Barton*...like Bessy Higgins and her younger sister in *North and South*" (185). If Basch's argument is correct, then there seems to be some inconsistency regarding Gaskell's opinion of women at work. Gaskell seems to acknowledge that some types of

waged-work benefit women, yet appears concerned over wives and mothers working outside of the home. It is clear that while she views work as empowering and valuable, she cannot approve of work which causes women to throw off their “natural” work as mothers and wives. It seems most of her disapproval centers around working wives and mothers, and not single women. While she portrays single factory girls as independent and smart, she seems to oppose working mothers. Mrs. Wilson’s views line up with the conservative reformers of her time; however, Mrs. Wilson as a character, is portrayed as a somewhat ignorant, prejudiced, and passionate about her own family circle. Ultimately Gaskell seems to approve of factory work for single women as a means of independence, but shows concern over its effects on working mothers and their families.

John Barton, Mary’s father, shares a similar ambivalence towards women working in the factories albeit for different reasons than Mrs. Wilson’s. Barton knows that Mary needs to find work of some kind, so that she can support herself and contribute to the family’s income; however, he refuses to allow her to work in the factories. He explains to his friend George Wilson why he does not approve of factory work for girls:

That’s the worst of factory work for girls. They can earn so much when work is plenty, that they can maintain themselves any how. My Mary shall never work in a factory that I’m determined on. You see Esther spent her money in dress, thinking to set off her pretty face; and got to come home so late at night, that at last I told her my mind (9).

Barton disapproves of factory work for girls because factory women can support themselves and waste money on extravagant items like fancy clothes. He uses Mary’s aunt Esther as an example of a factory life’s detrimental effects on women. At the time of

his speech, Esther had disappeared from her family with her lover. She later became a prostitute as John Barton feared. At the time, he did not know of her prostitution, but knew of her disappearance and attributed it to the independent spirit that she acquired from factory work. He did not want his daughter to follow the same path. Even though John Barton attributes her immorality to factory work, it is not clear if Gaskell shares this opinion because, later in the novel, Mary almost succumbs to a similar fate although she does not work in a factory. Gaskell does not malign work as the root of Esther's immorality and Mary's temptation but rather the dismal prospects, the "limited livelihoods," and poor opportunities for working-class women.

Bessy Higgins from *North and South* is another sympathetic character who seems to be included in the narrative in order to direct the sympathies of the middle and upper classes towards those enduring the harsh conditions of factory labor. Margaret Hale, a middle-class lady, meets Bessy in the streets of Milton, a fictional manufacturing town. After learning of Bessy's illness, Margaret begins visiting her and eventually develops a friendship with the dying factory girl. Bessy eventually reveals to Margaret that "fluff" in the card-room where she worked caused her illness:

Fluff. 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 fall into a waste, coughing and spitting blood, because they're just poisoned by the fluff (Gaskell 102).

Historians note that conditions within factories varied, with some tolerable and some deadly. Card-room workshops generally did not have ventilation which would have

prevented the fluff from entering the lungs of the workers and the diseases that resulted from it (Basch 127). Although Bessy's work allowed her sister to go to school and her father to buy books and attend speeches, she dies as a result of it. Gaskell does make factory work seem pitiable by having the only female worker die from it. Catherine Barnes Stevenson, in her article, "What Must Not be Said," argues that Gaskell could not solve the women and work question, and that she was "simply participating in a general silence in Victorian fiction about women's work in factories" (*Victorian Web* n. pag.). Stevenson suggests that factory women generally were not proportionately represented in Victorian fiction because a middle-class audience could not sympathize with them since they were completely ignorant about this type of work. Most of Gaskell's readers were middle-class women, an audience unfamiliar with working outside of the home, particularly in industrial occupations. Although her female readers might be able to connect with a seamstress since most of them knew how to sew and depended directly on this industry, a factory worker might be beyond their sphere of comprehension. This seems to be a plausible explanation as to why Gaskell's heroines like Ruth and Mary Barton are seamstresses instead of factory workers. If Gaskell's goal was to garner sympathy for working-class women, then it is not very surprising that she did not give factory women a more prominent role in her fiction.



## Conclusion

Elizabeth Gaskell offers no simple solution to the problem of working women's dual roles as wives and workers. Like Thomas Carlyle, she believed in the "nobility of work," paid or unpaid, but she ultimately viewed the work of wife and mother as the supreme and natural duty of a woman. Although her industrial novels, *Mary Barton* and *North and South*, focus primarily on the effects of industrialization upon the male factory worker, she does show great concern for its effects on women and the family as well. Economic conditions within the working classes required women to find wage-earning work either inside the home or outside of the home. They had few occupational choices: factory work, domestic work, or needlework. Gaskell recognized this problem and addressed it in three of her major novels, *Mary Barton*, *Ruth* and *North and South*, where she included representations of the three major occupations through her characters. In Gaskell's criticisms of these working-class occupations, she offers her readers two contrasting points of view. While her female working women suffer through their work, they also find personal happiness and fulfillment through it. Gaskell did not seek to galvanize the working classes against the more privileged classes but sought to represent the struggles of the poor through her fiction in an open and frank manner.

Gaskell recognized the inability of women to live up to the idealized model of womanhood put forth by writers like John Ruskin and Coventry Patmore. In her novels and short stories, she undermined these images. None of Gaskell's heroines are "angels" or "queens" rather; they are complex women who derive personal satisfaction through service to others both inside the home as wives and mothers and outside the home as

wage earners. Gaskell understood that not all women would become wives and mothers, so they needed employment opportunities just like men. Although many of Gaskell's heroines do find personal fulfillment as wives and mothers, many also find fulfillment and personal freedom through outside employment. Gaskell's female characters are able to find self-fulfillment in other ways besides romantic love. Libbie Marsh supports herself and a lonely mother by working as a seamstress and finds happiness in this role. Ruth finds happiness with the knowledge that through her work, she does not have to depend on the poor Benson family for financial support. She is able to provide for herself and her son through her work as a governess and nurse.

Gaskell offers no clear solution for the problem of working women. While it is evident that she approved of work for unmarried women as a noble way to occupy their time and help others, she also felt that a woman's natural work was as a wife and mother. She did not see a clear solution for women of the working classes who had dual roles as workers and mothers. Perhaps she does offer hope for these women through the character of Ruth. Ruth receives an education from Thurston Benson, and because of this is able to secure a position as a governess. She finds happiness and fulfillment as the teacher of the two young Bradshaw girls. That fact that she does not succeed in this job is not due to her qualifications but rather to Mr. Bradshaw's prejudices and fears.

It is interesting that almost all of Gaskell's working heroines escape their tedious occupations: Bessy through death, Ruth through education, Margaret through singing, and Mary through marriage and emigration. Gaskell suggests that escape is possible and desirable for these women, but does not offer a consistent way to do it. Through talent and education, Ruth and Margaret both escape dismal lives as needleworkers to find

careers that are more fulfilling and satisfying. They earn wages and also find happiness in their new careers. Mary escapes her life as a needleworker when she becomes a wife and mother. Through these characters, Gaskell suggests that careers for women, in addition to their domestic duties, can add to their self-fulfillment, and that women must find a way to balance career with family life. Ruth and Margaret both were able to do this as their careers did not take them away from their families.

As a middle-class woman, Gaskell showed a remarkable ability to empathize with the working-class condition. Although she does not offer a clear solution for the problem of working wives and mothers, she does provide a realistically balanced portrayal of working life for women through her fiction. She depicted work for women as empowering and noble as well as problematic and tiresome. Although Gaskell did not go so far as to offer a feminist view on working women, through her fiction, she did undermine the ideology of the domestic angel that shaped gender roles throughout the nineteenth century, and for this, deserves recognition as an advocate for an expansion of female occupational and educational opportunities.

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