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REFORMING VICTORIAN SENSE/ABILITIES: DISABILITIES IN ELIZABETH
GASKELL'S SOCIAL PROBLEM NOVELS

by

Hunter N. Duncan, B.A., M.A.

A Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School, Marquette University, in
Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Milwaukee, Wisconsin

May 2020

ABSTRACT
REFORMING VICTORIAN SENSE/ABILITIES: DISABILITIES IN ELIZABETH
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Hunter N. Duncan, B.A., M.A.

Marquette University, 2020

This dissertation rewrites the representations of disability, impairment, and illness throughout Elizabeth Gaskell's fiction. The project's four chapters examine blindness in *Mary Barton*, pregnancy, deformity, and typhus fever in *Ruth*, tuberculosis and hysteria in *North and South*, and hysteria and disfigurement in *Sylvia's Lovers*, in order to intervene with disability in its literary, historical, medical, and social contexts by uniting methodologies ranging from Disability Studies, Medical Humanities, feminist theory, and Victorian studies. By looking at the novel and rethinking it through Disability Studies, this dissertation joins contemporary theory with historical context, refreshing scholarly attention toward under-represented bodies and minds. This dissertation is the first extensive examination of how Disability Studies transforms our understanding of Gaskell's fiction. Her novels challenge us to look generously at our definitions of disability through character description, sensory narration, and narrative development. This dissertation examines how Gaskell's unique representations of disabled characters blur the lines between melodrama and realism, precisely to make visible alternative modes of identity, experience, and embodiment. I locate the important value of ethics as a central component of Gaskell's novels.

As an effective practitioner of social justice, Elizabeth Gaskell uses her novels as a space to explain and articulate to her readers the value of diverse representation. Subsequently, ambiguity is a central point of Gaskell's fiction, and makes her work especially important to Disability Studies. I demonstrate how Gaskell's novels allow for a broader consideration of disability to take shape. In this way, disability becomes a more describable and complex condition. By using Disability Studies as the central my central theoretical approach to Elizabeth Gaskell's fiction, this dissertation creates a space for critics to discuss the range and depth of Gaskell's fiction and understand her inclusion of disabled characters. It consists of four primary chapters, detailing the representations of disability at play in the fiction and life writing of Elizabeth Gaskell and some of the most famous Victorian writers, like Charlotte Bronte. The project is preceded by an introduction which roots disability in mid-nineteenth-century narratives and establishes the Disability Studies methodology I employ in each chapter.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Hunter N. Duncan, B.A., M.A.

Throughout the process of writing my dissertation, I have had the privilege of working with an incredible group of scholars, teachers, and leaders, without whom my graduate work would not be possible. My dissertation has been shaped by these influential individuals. I am forever grateful for all of them.

First, I would like to thank my director, Dr. Christine Krueger. When I applied to the PhD program at Marquette, I wrote in my personal statement that I hoped to work with Dr. Krueger during my graduate work one day. Nearly a year and a half later, I was meeting with her in her office, talking with her about ideas for my dissertation, and asking if she would be willing to advise me on this project. I am incredibly honored to have been able to have Dr. Krueger lead me through this dissertation process as my advisor. Dr. Krueger, thank you for championing my work, for guiding me through the research and writing processes, and for allowing me to grow as a scholar, teacher, and leader. Your consistent feedback, expert advice, and encouraging words have helped me move through this dissertation process. Thank you for always being willing to lend me a book, to read my work, and to talk with me about my ideas. You have helped me believe in myself as a scholar and an educator. I am proud to be your last dissertator. Thank you for everything you have given me. I would also like to thank Drs. Brittany Pladek and Leah Flack for their insightful feedback, uplifting comments, and unwavering support of my dissertation. Dr. Pladek, thank you for always providing me with such complex and exciting questions to think about in each chapter. Your feedback on my writing and your willingness to meet with me and talk through my writing helped me develop my argument. Dr. Flack, thank you for believing in my work, for asking me to think beyond the dissertation and consider the big-picture ideas that are so important when writing a dissertation and the ways in which this project could be turned into a book. I've been blessed to be surrounded by such a supportive dissertation team.

In addition to my outstanding dissertation committee, I would also like to extend my sincerest gratitude to the change-makers in Marquette's Office of Disability Services: Jack Bartelt, Heidi Potrykus, Lauren Accola, Jamie Elftman, and Sheri Hochtritt. My Marquette experience would not be the same without each of you. All of you have welcomed me into ODS since day one. Thank you for making ODS feel like my home away from home. Thank you for not only providing me with one of the most accessible and inclusive educational environments of my career, but also for collaborating with me and supporting my goals. Working in ODS with each of you has been one of my most cherished experiences at Marquette. I would also like to specifically thank Jack Bartelt. Jack, you have taught me the importance of a disability ethos that reaches beyond compliance. You have instilled in me what it means to be a good leader, an effective practitioner, and a compassionate advocate. Thank you for always having an open door

and a listening ear, for supporting my career dreams, and for believing in me. I am blessed to call you my mentor, colleague, and friend.

Furthermore, my Marquette experience would not be complete without the remarkable friends I have had standing by my side along the way. I would like to thank the group of amazing women who have consistently surrounded me with support and strength: Lindsay Thomson, Shelby Rusk, Cydney Nagridge, Kathleen Hurst, Kirstin Segale, Giselle Kiraly, Charlotte Laport, Kelsey Ryan, Julia Cooper, Vanessa Kleiss, and Shawn Langness-Varner. Thank you all for the laughter, smiles, and joy you each bring to my life. I'd also like to thank the friends that I have made at Marquette, the Marquette Fam: Cydney, Mike, Caitlyn, Kelly Jo, Meera, Pritesh, and Allison. I can say that I have never felt more instantly included and accepted into such a wonderful group of people. Thank you all for your genuine friendship. I'd also like to thank my colleague, friend, and work wife, Dr. Danielle Clapham. Danielle, you are my hype queen. Thank you for cheering me on throughout this PhD journey, for reading every single draft of my dissertation, for helping me with revisions, and for being the best carpool buddy and officemate ever. Thank you for sharing the same passion for inclusive education, access, and equity. Working with you has been one of the greatest highlights of my academic career.

I would like to also thank my family, especially my parents, Jay and Tracy Deiglmeier, for their unparalleled support of my education and career goals. Whenever anyone asks me where I get my drive, determination, and independence from, I say without hesitation that I get it from both of you. Thank you for believing in my dreams. Dad, it's an honor to be called "Dr.," alongside you. Mom, thank you for being my constant cheerleader. And for always answering the phone when I FaceTime you at least 10 times per day. I am forever grateful for the constant support I receive from you both. Thank you for giving me wings to fly. Thank you, too, to the rest of my family: my brother, Chase, my grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. All of you have had an incredible impact on my life and I am blessed to have such a close-knit family that supports my dreams.

Furthermore, I would like to thank my fiancé (and soon to be husband) Jonathan Duncan. Jon, you are proof of answered prayers. Thank you for being my supporter, advocate, kindred spirit, and best friend. Every day I fall more in love with you. Thank you for being by my side throughout this entire PhD experience, from coursework, to the DQE, to the defense. Thank you for reading every chapter, for helping me carry stacks of library books to and from campus, and for always listening to me talk about disability theory and Victorian literature. You are my favorite part of every day. Thank you for dancing with me in the kitchen, for being the best dog-dad to Linnea, and for your ability to always make me laugh. You are my sunshine. I cannot wait to be your wife.

Finally, I would like to thank my guide dog, Linnea, without whom I would not have completed this dissertation. Linnea, you are my angel. You've had my heart since the first day I met you. Thank you for allowing me to navigate this world safely, for

giving me the ability to live independently, and for empowering me to be wholly myself.
I dedicate this dissertation to you.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	i
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION	1
Chapter Summaries	14
II. CHAPTER ONE: THE MULTIVALENT EXPERIENCE OF VISUAL IMPAIRMENT IN <i>MARY BARTON</i>	19
Sensory Perception and the Social Problem Novel.....	19
Elizabeth Gaskell as an Eyewitness	24
Becoming “Stone Blind” in <i>Jane Eyre</i>	27
More than meets the Eye: Margaret Jennings.....	32
Turning a “Blind Eye”: Mary Barton.....	38
Love at First “Sight”: Will Wilson	43
<i>Mary Barton</i> ’s Visual Aesthetic	47
Conclusion: Love is (not) Blind: <i>Mary Barton</i> ’s Marriage Plot.....	51
III. CHAPTER TWO: (RE)PRESENTING DISABILITY IN <i>RUTH</i>	56
“Crippling” <i>Ruth</i>	56
“The deformed gentleman she had twice before seen”: Mr. Benson...60	
“Ruth’s (fictitious) history”: Ruth Hilton/Ruth Denbigh.....	68
Reprising the “Twin Structure”: Jemina Bradshaw	74
Gender, Medicine, and Crip Theory	79
Conclusion: An Extension of Crip Theory?.....	86
IV. CHAPTER THREE: <i>NORTH AND SOUTH</i> AS THE LITERARY MEDICAL MODEL.....	88

The Politics of Pathos: The (Romantic) Social Problem Novel	88
Nervous Women: Neuroses in <i>North and South</i>	94
The “Able-Bodied” Female Heroine	102
Conclusion	107
V. CHAPTER FOUR: NERVOUS DEPICTIONS: HISTORY AND HYSTERIA IN <i>SYLVIA’S LOVERS</i>	113
Locating Sensory Narration	113
<i>Sylvia’s Lovers</i> as a Psychological Novel.....	120
Dis/abling Female Consciousness.....	131
“violent bodily action”: Rethinking Masculinity and Disability	138
Conclusion	142
BIBLIOGRAPHY	146

INTRODUCTION

What makes Elizabeth Gaskell's fiction so remarkable is that her work does not wholly rely on one particular concept of disability, but it instead blurs the distinctions between Disability Studies theories and models in order to complicate the ways in which disability can be represented in Victorian fiction. For this reason, Gaskell's social problem and historical fiction are not only representative of medical or social models of disability; rather, her work suggests a broader cultural significance wherein disability is continually shaped by medical, social, and political meanings. In this way, Gaskell's fiction enables us to see how Disability Studies can advance our understanding of Victorian fiction and disability:

Disability studies considers disability in political, aesthetic, ethical, and cultural contexts, among others. In literature, many critics examine works to understand how representations of disability and "normal" bodies change throughout history, including the ways in which both are defined within the limits of historical or cultural situations. Disability studies also investigates images and descriptions of disability, prejudice against people with disabilities (ableism), and the ways narratives relate to disability. ("Critical Disability Studies")

In Gaskell's fictional worlds, disability cannot be considered separate from other experiences of embodiment but is instead carefully informed by various subjectivities and social relationships. As a result, Gaskell's fiction unites an array of social constructions of disability with Victorian medical advancements and empiricism. Her work also makes room for crip readings of able-bodied characters. Moreover, Gaskell's fiction is a leading example of how disability as an important and meaningful identity. My dissertation

explores the multifaceted representational methods Gaskell employs throughout her fictional oeuvre in order to establish her significance within Disability Studies scholarship, gender and sexuality studies, and the medical humanities.

Gaskell's novels can capture such a wide-ranging audience because of the ways in which she unexpectedly engages with disability. In covering an array of embodied experiences in Gaskell's fictional worlds, my dissertation allows us to reevaluate our understanding of Victorian conceptions of disability, illness, gender, sexuality, and the body/mind. In this dissertation, I read Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848), *Ruth* (1853), *North and South* (1854), and *Sylvia's Lovers* (1863) through a Disability Studies lens while simultaneously considering Victorian, gender, cultural, and medical concepts. My dissertation considers important aspects of Elizabeth Gaskell's fiction that have been previously left out of the critical conversation. At this point, there has only been limited discussion of disability within Gaskell's texts. Yet, the extensive discussion of pathos and salutary suffering in Gaskell's work is relevant to my argument. Carolyn Betensky, Joseph Kestner, and Hilary Schor all comment on Gaskell's sentimental representations of suffering, especially in *Mary Barton* and *North and South*. Such sentimentality aligns Gaskell's work with Victorian literary conventions, wherein pathos is used to create empathy in bourgeois readers for the working class and other exploited groups. Significantly, Disability Studies has paid little attention to Gaskell, it is central to the critique of sentimentality and pathos as social justice advocacy. From the perspective of Disability Studies, then, I argue that in representing disabled characters, Gaskell precludes sentimentality through her narrative techniques that disrupt stereotypes of disability and critique our understanding of ability.

In its entirety, my project intervenes in wide-ranging conversations about the body, mind, medicine, and society. My dissertation offers an interdisciplinary approach to the study of Victorian literature and culture through a careful examination of Elizabeth Gaskell's fiction. By merging Disability Studies, Victorian studies, gender and sexuality studies, and medical scholarship together with Elizabeth Gaskell's fiction, disability becomes a constellation of social and representational change. I suggest that by thinking about disability empirically and non-judgmentally, Elizabeth Gaskell understands various kinds of oppression, like gender and class, but especially disability. By exploring the various ways in which people can be abled and disabled, Elizabeth Gaskell could, in turn, think more precisely about social problems, on whom they were inflicted, what agency those persons maintained, and what obligations her readers should recognize towards them. For Gaskell's fiction, disability is at once in productive tension and union with various other instances of outsider status. My dissertation merges Gaskell's character representations with intersectional theoretical approaches in order to highlight the cross-disciplinary connections that we can make throughout Gaskell's fiction. Informed by Disability Studies scholars like Martha Stoddard Holmes, Julia Rodas, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Tanya Tichkosky, Alison Kafer, and Victorian and gender studies scholars like Christine Krueger, Mary Wilson Carpenter, Hilary Schor, Coral Landsbury, and Mary Poovey, this dissertation unites theoretical approaches with Victorian fiction and reads Elizabeth Gaskell's novels in light of Disability Studies. My project offers a critical moment for a range of scholars because it demonstrates how a variety of fields like Victorian studies and Disability Studies, for example, can mutually benefit from examining disability in Gaskell's work.

Equally important to my scholarly and theoretical approaches to Gaskell's fiction are the ways in which her life and experiences develop her understanding of disability in each text. For this reason, my dissertation also highlights key moments from Gaskell's life as they inform her understanding of disability. As an example, Elizabeth Gaskell is recognized for her friendship with Charlotte Brontë. In fact, they published their first novels within months of one another: *Jane Eyre* in 1847 and *Mary Barton* in 1848. Both novels attracted widespread attention, the identities of their pseudonymous authors were quickly revealed and the careers of two influential Victorian novelists were launched. Gaskell's social problem novel drew both fire and praise from contemporaries for questioning the ethics of Political Economy and encouraging empathy with Chartists. Nevertheless, while *Mary Barton* may have had an immediate impact on social reform debates, it has been somewhat eclipsed in literary history by its predecessor. *Jane Eyre* has preoccupied feminist and psychoanalytic critics, theorists of the gothic and post-colonial literature, and many other varieties of critics. Significantly, *Jane Eyre* also figured prominently in the emergence of Disability Studies literary criticism. At roughly the same time post-colonial critics were drawing attention to the racialization of Bertha Mason, Disability Studies critics spotlighted the "stone blind" Edward Rochester as a particularly potent example of the oppressive attitudes towards the visually impaired that we had inherited from the Victorians. In Disability Studies, Victorian literature as a whole has not come to be known for progressive portrayals of disability, in general, and blindness and visual impairment, in particular. For example, Martha Stoddard Holmes's groundbreaking *Fictions of Affliction: Physical Disability in Victorian Culture* provides

an extensive list of such sentimental and sensational depictions that linger on today in popular ideas of blindness.¹

Yet, in the months leading up to the publication of their first novels, Brontë and Gaskell shared an experience of visual impairment and its treatment, detailed in their correspondence. Charlotte and Emily Brontë brought their father, Patrick, to Manchester for cataract surgery. Though Gaskell lived in Manchester, there is no evidence that she met her friend Charlotte in person during the period of Patrick's treatment and recovery. But in letters to Gaskell, Charlotte did describe in graphic detail Patrick's progressive impairment, the medical examination, the surgical procedure and the lengthy recovery process. In other words, both Brontë and Gaskell had blindness on their minds as their novels were taking shape. So memorable was this correspondence that, years later, Gaskell would choose to reproduce much of it verbatim in her *Life of Charlotte Brontë*. One might say that it had helped her to "observe the intimate relation between sight and blindness as ways of being in the world." This engagement with visual impairment not only led Gaskell to a very different understanding of blindness from that represented by Edward Rochester, but also was integral to the development of her narrative methods as a pioneer of realism in social problem fiction.

My first chapter examines what I call the multivalent experience of disability in *Mary Barton*, wherein Gaskell explores the ways in which sight and blindness do not

¹ For examples of blindness as "total darkness" and as conclusions, see Wilkie Collins's *Poor Miss Finch* (1872) and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847). See also the Appendix in Martha Stoddard Holmes's *Fictions of Affliction: Physical Disability in Victorian Culture*, pages 197-198 for a complete list of blind characters in Victorian literature. For contemporary reflections and critical focus on cultural perceptions of blindness, see Georgina Kleege's "Blindness and Visual Culture: An Eyewitness Account" in *The Disability Studies Reader* (4th ed.) and her book, *Sight Unseen*.

exist as a polarity but rather as a simultaneous experience. Informed by Disability Studies, we can see that Margaret Jennings' character development in *Mary Barton* challenges sentimental and sensationalized representations of blindness, including those that established the medical model of blindness. Whatever melodrama is associated with Margaret's restored vision at the novel's close, Gaskell's narrative methods have prevented readers from marginalizing or exoticizing her; she is not a helpless victim to be saved by a heroic medical man. Most obviously, Gaskell devotes a key plotline to Margaret Jennings and the process by which this working-class woman loses her sight. In *Mary Barton*, Gaskell gives blindness a plot; it is not a singular event or a tragedy that results in total darkness or a character's demise. Narrating blindness as a process leaves crucial room in the novel for Margaret's agency. This is true to a considerable extent even when Margaret's sight is surgically restored. Indeed, Margaret's agency is key to my further claim that Gaskell also offers an alternative to the medical model of blindness. Mary Wilson Carpenter has demonstrated how Victorian doctors in the rising specialty of ophthalmology promulgated melodramatic representations of blindness to enhance their own professional stature. Refuting this potent combination of medical authority and imaginative force has been a key objective for Disability Studies. In their place, as Georgina Kleege writes in *Sight Unseen*, contemporary Disability Studies offers a "new image of blindness [which] is blander and more mundane, a mere manner of seeking practical solutions to everyday inconveniences" (Kleege 228). I will argue that something very much like Kleege's practical and even, one might say, realistic image of blindness can be found in *Mary Barton*. Margaret counters Mary Barton's overwrought sympathy

for her friend's plight with matter-of-fact accounts of her practical challenges and graphic descriptions of her changing vision.

Instead of narrating blindness and sightedness as independent perspectives, Gaskell destabilizes nineteenth-century conventions of visual and non-visual experiences through multivalence. As a result, Gaskell intervenes in the early stages of the medical model of disability (Linton 11). One of my aims, then, is to establish the import of *Mary Barton* for Disability Studies. Equally, however, I wish to demonstrate how Disability Studies enables us to understand more fully the development of realist narrative technique, particularly as a form of literary advocacy. Though there is much more to realism as an ideology, as a method of description it is conventionally associated with vivid, concrete detail. That is, realism is "graphic," or, ocularcentric. *Mary Barton* has long been cited to illustrate this feature of realism, notably Gaskell's graphic account of the workers' hovel, with its bare furnishings and seeping sewage. The purpose of such powerful description in social problem fiction is to enable readers to empathize with unfamiliar conditions. How this empathy is produced has been difficult to explain, however. I propose that approaching *Mary Barton* through Disability Studies alerts us to the fact that it is not Gaskell's descriptions, but our own analyses that have been ocularcentric. Even in the famous passage of the workers' dire housing, smell is certainly as important as sight. What I will show is that through her progressive understanding of visual impairment Gaskell actually displaces ocularcentric in favor of the multivalent experience of disability.

Following my first chapter on *Mary Barton*, in which I use a fairly traditional reading of the medical and social models of disability, my goal in the second chapter is to

explore a more radical extension of Disability Studies via crip theory *Ruth* (1853). This is a way to suggest how Disability Studies can be a useful tool for reading *the body* in social problem fiction for both disabled and non-disabled characters. Though *Ruth* is not without its melodramatic tones, akin to *Mary Barton*, the novel continues to develop Gaskell's realism in social problem fiction, disrupting traditional Victorian narratives of disability and gender. Recognized as one of her most controversial social problem novels, Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth* focuses on the narrative of a "fallen" woman, Ruth Hilton. In tandem with *Ruth*'s polemical content, my analysis of Gaskell's second social problem novel will likewise be controversial. One of the reasons that Disability Studies has not considered *Ruth* extensively is because we do not view pregnancy as a disability and I, too, do not intend to treat pregnancy as a disability. In the mid nineteenth century when Gaskell is writing *Ruth*, however, we can see how the Victorians treated pregnancy in a very class-specific way. In my first chapter, I explained how the representational methods of *Mary Barton* emerged from Gaskell's experience as an "eyewitness" to Patrick Brontë's cataract surgery. Her motives for writing *Ruth* share a similar genesis. Like *Mary Barton*, *Ruth* arises from Gaskell's personal experiences with "fallen" women during her Unitarian charity work in Manchester. After Gaskell meets Pasley, a prostitute who was "orphaned at fourteen, seduced by a young doctor called to attend her when she was ill, and then driven from hunger to steal. Pasley became Ruth Hilton, who embodied society's sexual exploitation of poor and beautiful young women—and this exploitation may be physical or it may be moral and psychological" (Landsbury 26). In 1852, Gaskell begins the process of writing *Ruth*. Specifically, Gaskell's social reform agenda is her primary inspiration for this novel. Like the controversial content in *Mary Barton*, *Ruth* is

similarly charged with social and political aims attributed to Gaskell's personal experience. In *Elizabeth Gaskell*, Coral Landsbury explains,

Her novels reflected her experience of society and were generally polemical and often controversial. *Mary Barton* was a sympathetic study of strikes and trade unions founded by a militant working class. This was followed in 1853 by *Ruth*, a study of a fallen woman and her illegitimate son that was burned by some members of her husband's congregation. (Landsbury 7)

Like Gaskell's distinctive engagement with visual impairment in *Mary Barton* as archived in her letters in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, Gaskell's social reform work informs her perspective on "fallenness" in the social problem novel and in the Victorian period more broadly.

Coupled with Gaskell's personal experience as an influence to the plot of *Ruth* is her use of sensory narration throughout the novel, though this time, Gaskell's use of sensory detail is distinctly different than that of *Mary Barton*. Sight, sound, and smell again become significant details that provide evidence for Gaskell's eyewitness account of Manchester's "social problems" and also promote her realistic narrative technique. Landsbury highlights the impact that Gaskell's observations had on her writing and reform work when she notes, "For [Gaskell] the slums were never a strange and alien world to be seen from afar, but familiar places of dismal wretchedness where she could see and smell poverty. [She] did not observe them in the abstract after the fashion of so many reformers" (Landsbury 5-6). Gaskell's unconventional methods of observation clearly challenged the ways in which Unitarians practiced their social reform. Through her actual accounts and her use of sensory details to describe her observations, Gaskell

makes the concepts of “difference” (disability, poverty, factory life, and working-class women’s experiences) concrete and important.

Chapter Two reaches beyond Disability Studies and into a crip theory approach to *Ruth* in order to illuminate the ways in which Elizabeth Gaskell narrativizes the body via attention to social, political, medical, and gendered identities in social problem fiction. Much of *Ruth* criticism has mainly focused on discussions of “fallenness,” Christianity/morality, and the Victorian marriage plot. Critics have also noticed the significance of the body in this novel. They have addressed the “reproductive body,” the “unresisting body,” the “norm” of the female body, the “fallen woman and nurse-savior in one body,” “Ruth Hilton, who embodies society’s exploitation of poor and beautiful young women,” the “domesticity” of the female body, and lastly, the “prostitute’s body.” (Poovey 44; Swenson 15; Landsbury 26; Pykett 12; Matus 48). Although these scholars bring important awareness to the implications of gender, class, social, and medical treatment of “fallen” female characters like Ruth, their sustained attention to the *body* and *embodiment* engages with specific disability rhetoric that invites further investigation. At present, there is little to no scholarly discussion of disability in *Ruth*, even though the novel features a physically disabled character, Mr. Benson, and other physical conditions like pregnancy and typhus fever. Crip theory therefore provides a productive framework for exploring Ruth’s significance in this novel, in Gaskell’s career, and to Victorian social problem fiction as a genre.

Ruth’s fallenness also makes possible a rethinking of Victorian representations of identity, disability, and gender as we explore Ruth as the novel’s central crip figure. Though *Ruth* is not the first novel in the Victorian period to discuss the narrative

trajectory of the “fallen” woman’s body, I argue that the ways in which Gaskell complicates Ruth’s story are compelling and worthy of revisiting through crip theory. Indeed, a “fallen woman,” Esther, played a crucial role in the plot of *Mary Barton*. Building on Kristine Swenson’s argument in *Medical Women in Victorian Fiction*, I focus on the challenges Ruth poses to the representations of both disabled and non-disabled characters whereas my analysis of Esther strictly focuses on representation methods of disabled characters. Swenson writes,

Ruth Hilton plays a range of seemingly contradictory womanly roles [including nurse] whose coming together in one body implies their connectedness not only in her novelistic world but also within Victorian culture. [She] is an abandoned woman and single mother who transgresses class boundaries and disrupts social expectations. (Swenson 15)

Ruth’s status as this novel’s crip figure is emblematic of the nineteenth century’s treatment of “disgraced” women. As this novel’s crip figure, we can extrapolate further how Gaskell’s social problem fiction contextualizes marginalized bodies in the nineteenth century.

In my third chapter on *North and South*, I explore Gaskell’s representations of illness and disability as a critique of social, gendered, and class binaries. By reviewing what has already been written in Victorian fiction about disability, we can extrapolate further how *North and South* perpetuates tropes, stereotypes, and conventions of disability through its romanticized plot and character development. As a result, we can see how Gaskell’s use of nineteenth century literary conventions reflect common disability representations we know today. For this reason, Elizabeth Gaskell’s fictional

oeuvre cannot entirely escape the implications of appealing to bourgeois characters, conventional Victorian plots, and romantic narrative techniques that have inherent in them a politics perhaps different than that of what Gaskell advocates for in her earlier novels like *Mary Barton* and *Ruth*. This is especially noticeable with the novel's female protagonist, Margaret Hale. Margaret might be said to share similar qualities to Mary Barton and Jemima Bradshaw. As Coral Landsbury explains:

in *North and South* it is Margaret who embodies the middle class with all its sentimental attachment to picturesque villages seen through Tennyson, its distaste for tradesmen and those who earn their money openly, its fervent belief in rank and class, and, withal, a muddled determination to set society to rights. (Landsbury 40)

Through Margaret's character, plot, and narrative development, *North and South* adds to the romantic and sentimental structure with which *Mary Barton* and *Ruth* conclude.

Gaskell champions the romantic narrative structure and character developments commonly associated with fiction like *Jane Eyre* in order to reach her audience, who is accustomed to reading provincial romance novels, like *Pride and Prejudice*, *Jane Eyre*, and *Mary Barton*.

Chapter Four extends the project of Gaskell's social problem fiction into her historical novel, *Sylvia's Lovers*, as I examine the conventions of gender and disability through the representations of Philip, Kinraid, and Sylvia. Throughout her career, Gaskell was interested not only in the injustices of the present, as she reveals in her social problem novels, but also but in the long-term consequences of injustice. She wrote numerous works of historical fiction, mainly in the form of stories and novellas, and one historical novel: *Sylvia's Lovers* (1863). Disability is a key feature of this novel, as it was

in her social problem fiction. As with the array of representations of disability, illness, and impairment (blindness, deformity, pregnancy, typhus fever, hysteria, and tuberculosis) in Gaskell's social problem novels, *Sylvia's Lovers* also presents a range of diverse experiences, from Sylvia Robson's post-partum "brain fever" to Philip Hepburn's facial disfigurement and post-war trauma. *Sylvia's Lovers*, however, places greater demands on disability narratives than Gaskell sets up in her earlier social problem fiction. Justice required she not only transform perceptions across class lines in her fiction, but across temporal ones, as well. In *Sylvia's Lovers*, Gaskell invokes disability to engage her readers with the ethical concerns of a remote historical moment: the Napoleonic Wars. By doing so, she exposes the ways in which history informs the present, as Coral Landsbury explains:

The past, as Elizabeth Gaskell continually states in the novel, is a part of present life. Some parts of it are visible like mountain peaks, others have been obscured by the drift of events. By the historian's recall of the past the terrain of contemporary society is made explicable for those who do not choose to follow the common practice of walking blindfold down a strange road. The past was not a box of curiosities to be examined in idle moments, but a living force directing current events. (Landsbury 163)

Gaskell relies substantially on disability to bring into representation those features of history that "have been obscured by the drift of events," and to remove the blindfold that prevents readers from acknowledging their role in perpetuating past injustices.

Disability makes Gaskell's ethical project visible and meaningful within *Sylvia's Lovers*. Though a comprehensive discussion of Gaskell's historical fiction is beyond the

scope of my purpose here, I would suggest that analyzing the significance of disability in this historical narrative enables us to understand its place in Gaskell's historical imagination, more broadly, and of the relevance of history to addressing injustice. While Gaskell's social problem novels are often invested in "tangible evidence," her historical fiction adds a valuable and necessary layer of personal experience to her already-important evidence-based narrative strategies in her previous social problem fiction. For example, in contrast to the historical narrative of *Sylvia's Lovers*, "[Gaskell] saw in her own society a greater homogeneity, which had been achieved by a corresponding loss of individuality" (Landsbury 164). By juxtaposing the characterizations of Sylvia Robson, Philip Hepburn, and Charley Kinraid through a variety of sensory details, narrative techniques, and character perspectives, Gaskell uniquely portrays experiences of disability that she has not previously explored within her social problem novels.

Chapter Summaries

In Chapter One, "The Multivalent Experience of Visual Impairment in *Mary Barton*", I focus my attention on Gaskell's first social problem novel, *Mary Barton* (1848) as the most paradigmatic narrative of disability in Gaskell's fiction. In "The Multivalent Experience of Visual Impairment in *Mary Barton*", I juxtapose *Mary Barton* with Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) to argue that Gaskell's use of disability representation encourages contemporary readers to view disability largely through the social model. In their fiction and life writings, both Gaskell and Brontë construct a vision of blindness and visual impairment and, by extension, the medical and social models of disability. However, Gaskell's fiction exposes the connections between disability and non-disability, sightedness and blindness, and novel and reader and legitimizes a range of

sensory experiences. This chapter illuminates the ways in which Elizabeth Gaskell complicates Victorian conventions of blindness, specifically as it impacts the Victorian woman. By closely examining the innovative representations of visual impairment throughout *Mary Barton*, “(Re)envisioning Blindness in *Mary Barton*” demonstrates how disability offers a more nuanced understanding of human experience and identity in the Victorian social problem novel.

In Chapter Two, ““(Re)presenting Disability in *Ruth*” I extend the conversation of disability in Chapter One into a combined Crip Theory approach to Gaskell’s second and most controversial social problem novel. My analysis offers a crip rereading of *Ruth* (1853) that centers around the plot, narrative, and character development within this novel’s social world. This reading first explores the typical use of disability via the clearly physically disabled character, Mr. Benson, then, I centralize my analysis on Ruth through crip theory. I begin with a Disability Studies reading of *Ruth* to first establish the relationships between DS and crip theory, before turning to a more extended crip reading of *Ruth*. I use a “cripping” critique of *Ruth* to examine how Disability Studies can be mobilized in different ways. A crip reading of *Ruth* is more productive than a medical/social model reading of the social problem novel because it troubles the binary understanding of disability located in the medical/social model and in the social problem novel. In this chapter, I offer an analysis of the “fallen” woman, Ruth, as the crip figure, steeped in social and cultural stigmatization and medical and social models of disability. Reading the novel as a narrative of crip theory transforms our understanding of the “fallen” woman’s experience in the Victorian social problem novel. As a result, “(Re)presenting Disability in *Ruth*” is a means to subvert Victorian “norms” while also

addressing applications of a crip reading through disabled and non-disabled characters alike.

Chapter Three, “*North and South* as the Literary Medical Model,” departs from the disabled/crip readings of Chapters 1 and 2 to study Elizabeth Gaskell’s most critically acclaimed social problem novel, *North and South* (1854). This chapter explores how Gaskell’s fiction employs many of the same disability representation strategies but with a focus on chronic illness as another layer of disability and disabled experiences. In Chapter 3, I trace the shift in Gaskell’s representations of disability from her earlier work to *North and South* to show how this text becomes increasingly ambiguous and unsettled as Gaskell is more and more engaged in exploring broader understandings of disability, such as illness and impairment. Through *North and South*, I develop a Disability Studies approach to chronic illness by examining Mrs. Hale’s experiences of hysteria and Bessy Higgins’s tuberculosis. The chapter begins with a consideration of illness/disability representation in *North and South* a text framed in explicitly ambiguous representational methods, knowable by exploring Gaskell’s uses of sensory narration, plot, narrative, and character development. In *North and South*, Gaskell develops our understanding of disability by positioning illness as a central component of the novel. This chapter illuminates elements in the novel that often look like sub-plots, but in actuality, they are crucial to our understanding of Gaskell’s place in Disability Studies scholarship. By analyzing Gaskell’s representations of Margaret, Mrs. Hale, and Bessy, *North and South* enhances and expands our understanding of illness and disability in the Victorian social problem novel and in Disability Studies.

Chapter Four, “Nervous Depictions: History and Hysteria in *Sylvia’s Lovers*” adds an important layer to the first three chapters by considering Gaskell’s inclusion of historical fiction to her social problem novels. Disability is a key feature of this novel, as it was in her social problem fiction. As with the array of representations of disability, illness, and impairment (blindness, deformity, pregnancy, typhus fever, hysteria, and tuberculosis) in Gaskell’s social problem novels, *Sylvia’s Lovers* also presents a range of diverse experiences, from Sylvia Robson’s hysteria to Philip Hepburn’s facial disfigurement and post-war trauma. *Sylvia’s Lovers*, however, places greater demands on disability narratives than Gaskell sets up in her earlier social problem fiction. This chapter offers a rereading of *Sylvia’s Lovers* with what we already know about Elizabeth Gaskell and her social problem fiction in mind. Subsequently, we can see how her historical fiction pioneers new understandings of disability within the nineteenth century literary imagination. By using Disability Studies as the central theoretical approach to Gaskell’s historical fiction, I can create a space for critics to discuss the range and depth of Elizabeth Gaskell’s fiction and understand her inclusion of disabled characters. Through the centralization of personal experience, sensory narration, and character development, this chapter locates a valuable and necessary layer of personal experience to her already-important evidence-based narrative strategies in her previous social problem fiction. In Chapter Four, I add that through sensory narration, character, and plot development, *Sylvia’s Lovers* represents a form of both historical and psychological fiction that should be considered part of Gaskell’s oeuvre. Gaskell’s fusion of sensory narration and her focus on individual characters’ perceptions (particularly Sylvia and Philip) throughout *Sylvia’s Lovers* is indicative of her importance within Disability

Studies and Victorian scholarship. What is more, this particular point of view allows for a rereading of this historical novel through a Disability Studies theoretical lens.

CHAPTER ONE: THE MULTIVALENT EXPERIENCE OF VISUAL IMPAIRMENT
IN *MARY BARTON*

“Of all the things that sight can see, it often does not observe the intimate relation between sight and blindness as ways of being in the world.”

Tanya Titchkosky, *Disability, Self, and Society*

Sensory Perception and the Social Problem Novel

Disability Studies recognizes visual experience as a spectrum rather than a polarity. This concept enables us to recognize the remarkable ways in which Elizabeth Gaskell’s social problem fiction critiques conventional understandings of sight and blindness. Disability is itself a multivalent experience, consisting of the realities of physical impairment (diagnosis) and the social construction of disability (stigma, stereotype, and trope). In her first social problem novel, *Mary Barton* (1848), Elizabeth Gaskell merges these two components of disability into one simultaneous experience. As a result, *Mary Barton* develops the representational methods of disability that can account the diverse expressions of visual impairment, even among people with the same diagnosis. Significantly, *Mary Barton* unites medical and social models of disability, suggesting a new model of disability that incorporates the realities of one’s impairment with their lived social experience of disability. *Mary Barton* is a pioneering text in which sensory details and sentimental scenes collide, where medical advancement and social stigma intersect, and where genre conventions of the social problem novel and the Victorian marriage plot converge. In this chapter, I will foreground the significance of sensory perception, Elizabeth Gaskell and Charlotte Bronte’s formative friendship, and representations of blindness throughout *Jane Eyre* and *Mary Barton* in order to demonstrate how Gaskell revises our understanding of blindness and impacts Disability

Studies. In a text that assumes a non-disabled reader, an author who narrates the multivalent experience of disability allows readers to experience a dual subjectivity of non-disabled identity in the readers' embodiment and disabled experience in the narration.

Gaskell draws our attention to the multivalent experience of disability through her sustained use of sensory details at the novel's outset. Strikingly, both sight and sound open *Mary Barton*, which invites readers into the experience of factory women. Gaskell's synesthetic description would become characteristic of her realist technique, but its origins lie here, in the aims of her first social problem novel. Through her use of multivalence, the aesthetics of a social problem novel could restructure the feelings of Gaskell's readers towards people they had never truly experienced. Gaskell addressed herself to a bourgeois audience whose perceptions were conditioned by ocularcentric representations. On the one hand, the influential aesthetic of the picturesque, aligned with bourgeois ideology, had no place for factories or factory workers. On the other, insofar as the bourgeois encountered representations of factory life, they were the stereotypes promulgated in print media, most prominently in graphic accounts of factory accidents, with their images of mangled workers' bodies. How synesthetic description could be used to achieve a multivalent experience is evident in Coral Landsbury's account of Gaskell's purpose as a social problem novelist:

[Gaskell] wanted to make the reader understand that the working class was not another species and the slum was not a different world, but a place of common humanity where friendship could be found together with music, and learned men in

cloth caps could be as enthralled by the wonders of nature as any gentleman botanist. (Landsbury 13-14)

Whereas Landsbury's emphasis on a philosophical, or ethical point—the moral obligations entailed in recognizing “common humanity,”—I emphasize how the sense of *common identity* is created in a reader. Gaskell's readers would become members of a “interspecies,” if you will, part of an identity that crossed class lines. This new, multivalent experience could be imagined through unconventional sensory details. It would entail not only the visual, which we conventionally associate with realism, but the aural—the “music” of factory life.

This is evident from the opening scene of *Mary Barton*, which shifts from the aural to the visual details to allow readers to experience the “common humanity” of factory women. Gaskell describes “Groups of merry and somewhat loud-talking girls, whose ages might range from twelve to twenty, came by with a buoyant step” (*MB* 5). The reader experiences the cacophony of voices and the clamor of the factory girls' steps as they walk, a synesthetic description that loudly disrupts the decorous quiet of domestic novels and cultural expectations of “proper” Victorian women. Arousing readers' class and gender prejudices may seem like an unproductive narrative technique because bourgeois readers would consider these working women to be their inferiors, and, “loud talking girls” as offending against feminine vocal decorum. But in actuality, it is Gaskell's first step in allowing her readers into a multivalent experience, enabling them to have an experience across divisions of gender and class. In an era before recording and broadcast technology, sound places the readers in the proximity necessary to *hear*, positioning them in the streets with the “merry and somewhat loud-talking girls” where

factory women are at home to better understand their experience. As the factory girls frolic, Gaskell makes their voices heard in an inharmonious symphony; they are at once melodic and chaotic. Gaskell juxtaposes “merry” and “loud-talking” to create multivalence, setting the stage for *Mary Barton*’s narrative.

By introducing the factory girls through sound, Gaskell disrupts her readers’ visual stereotypes, as well as positioning them as subjects within the girls’ environment. But as suggested by Landsbury’s characterization of Gaskell’s fiction cited above, *Mary Barton* would also be notable for its vivid—even graphic—description. What Gaskell’s readers may have pictured when they thought of factories and factory workers was not merely at second hand, but likely of the horrific accidents and mangled bodies featured in the press. As Darby Jean Walters reminds us,

Newspapers portraying factory accidents frequently borrowed sensationalist fiction to appeal to their readership. The particularly gruesome nature of many factory accidents, further emphasized by the graphic narrative style of the reports, thrust the threatening image of the fragmented body into public consciousness. The distribution of such narratives increased as the circulation of newspapers became more widespread. Thus, during the first half of the nineteenth century, awareness of disability increased dramatically and new questions arose not only about the relationship of the disabled body to the nondisabled spectator, but also about the relationship of the disabled body to the workforce. (Walters 175)

These often-sensationalistic images required from Gaskell a counternarrative of compelling sensory force. She mirrors the “graphic narrative style” of the newspaper reports of factory accidents with her illustration of lively factory women. While

sensationalistic journalism encouraged ghoulish voyeurism or disgust, Gaskell wanted her readers to look carefully and to see accurately. Resisting both an aesthetic and an ethical “norm” of the picturesque, she uses graphic detail to create anti-picturesque scenes of industrial life.

In the final lines of the opening passage, Gaskell turns from auditory to visual description, guiding the reader into what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson terms an ocularcentric² stance toward the working-class women. We learn that the factory girls’ garb consists of “unpicturesque fashion”: “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” (*MB* 5). Undeniably, they depart from ideal feminine beauty, but their “dark hair, neatly and classically arranged” suggests an interiority not entirely alien to Gaskell’s readers: irregular features do not indicate slovenly or undisciplined characters. Still, the girls’ “irregular features” underscore the importance of their physical alterity. Of “below average” beauty, they do not conform to the “rubric of normality,” a term Lennard J. Davis applies to the construction of disability.³ It is precisely the factory girls’ abnormality that distinguishes the outset of *Mary Barton* as resistant to Victorian normative frames. By centering her opening social problem scene around synesthetic descriptions of the factory girls, Gaskell places the reader into a multivalent experience.

² See Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s chapter, “Dares to Stares: Disabled Women Performance Artists and the Dynamics of Staring” in *Bodies in Commotion: Disability and Performance* for a definition of “ocularcentric.”

³ See Lennard J. Davis’s chapter, “Bodies of Difference: Politics, Disability, and Representation” in *The Disability Studies Reader*, first edition (1997) for a discussion of the history of normalcy.

By simultaneously experiencing their own subjectivity and that of the factory women, readers can begin to create a sense of “common humanity” with the factory girls.

Elizabeth Gaskell as an Eyewitness

Gaskell’s initial experience with blindness likely originates from her friendship and correspondence with Charlotte Brontë. In the late summer of 1846, before Gaskell begins writing *Mary Barton*, her friend, Charlotte Brontë was residing in Manchester with her father. They had travelled to Manchester so that Patrick Brontë could undergo cataract surgery. The demands of Patrick’s condition and surgery apparently precluded Gaskell and Charlotte Brontë meeting in person, in their letters they shared details of their own writing processes as well as information about their families. Gaskell found Charlotte’s account of her father’s blindness and recovery so striking that a decade later she would include it in her *Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857). Thanks to Gaskell’s sustained attention to Patrick’s fading eyesight, diagnosis, surgery and recovery, her *Life of Charlotte Brontë* provides us with key evidence of nineteenth-century medical approaches to blindness and the infancy of ophthalmology as a medical specialty—five years before the first International Ophthalmologist Convention was held in London (Carpenter 144). What is more, it provides insight into Gaskell’s experience with sensory impairment just at the time she was about to embark on her first social problem novel. It is likely that this exchange of letters profoundly influenced her synesthetic techniques in general, as I have discussed above, as well as her decision to devote a significant sub-plot

to blindness, specifically. Perhaps informed by her companionship with Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell seems acutely aware of an array of visual fields⁴.

In *The Life*, Gaskell's account of Patrick's blindness was not without some conventional pathos, though, when letters are not given verbatim, it is difficult to know what language should be attributed to Gaskell and what to Brontë. Paraphrasing Charlotte's correspondence in *The Life*, Gaskell wrote: "Her father's eyesight had become seriously impaired by the progress of the cataract which was forming. He was nearly blind. He could grope his way about, and recognize the figures of those he knew well, when they were placed against a strong light; but he could no longer see to read" (*Life*, 302). The clichéd phrase, "grobe his way about," is commonly applied to the blind by the sighted and is one we will encounter in both *Mary Barton* and *Jane Eyre*. For the most part, however, Gaskell focuses dispassionately on the practical logistics of Patrick Brontë's condition and a graphic description of his treatment. She characterizes Emily and Charlotte's venture to Manchester as one of seeking "practical solutions" for their father's blindness (Kleege 228).

As Charlotte's correspondent, and now again, as her biographer, Gaskell herself occupies a multivalent experience, a virtual eyewitness not only to the medical procedure, but to its emotional impact on Charlotte Brontë. In Manchester, the Brontës met the

⁴ According to Carpenter, around 1847, Charlotte Brontë's father, Patrick Brontë, had an operation done in Manchester to cure him of his cataracts. Perhaps because of her friendship with Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell may have been aware of this operation. Furthermore, Florence Nightingale also influenced Gaskell, as Mary Poovey demonstrates throughout *Uneven Developments*. Although Florence Nightingale's influence on Gaskell's writing is most evident in *Ruth* (1853), Gaskell's awareness of the burgeoning medical field, including nursing as a profession, could also develop her knowledge about visual impairments.

famous oculist “Mr. Wilson,” the doctor who would later perform Patrick’s cataract surgery (*Life* 303). In an August 26, 1846 letter to Gaskell, Charlotte Brontë detailed Patrick’s surgery and its immediate aftermath. Gaskell found this letter so compelling that she included it verbatim in her biography of Charlotte. Charlotte wrote,

The operation is over. It took place yesterday, Mr Wilson performed it; two other surgeons assisted. Mr Wilson says, he considers it quite successful; but papa cannot yet see anything. The affair lasted precisely a quarter of an hour; it was not the simple operation of couching, Mr C described, but the more complicated one of extracting the cataract. Mr Wilson entirely disapproves of couching. Papa displayed extraordinary patience and firmness; the surgeon seemed surprised. I was in the room all the time, as it was his wish that I should be there; of course, I neither spoke nor moved, till the thing was done, and then I felt that the less I said, either to papa or the surgeons, the better. Papa is now confined to his bed in a dark room, and is not to be stirred for four days; he is to speak and be spoken to as little as possible. (Gaskell 303)

Brontë’s clinical references to methods of cataract surgery, devoid of squeamishness or disgust, force Gaskell to *look at* an embodiment of blindness at the same time she *looks into* what bodies reveal about states of mind. To sit motionless is to exhibit “patience and firmness,” something that can be appreciated only by those who don’t look away from disability.

Recalling this experience after Charlotte’s death, Gaskell would associate it directly with the composition of *Jane Eyre*, writing vividly in *The Life* that Charlotte “began, in this time of care and depressing inquietude, - in those grey, weary, uniform

streets, where all faces, save of her kind doctor, were strange and untouched with sunlight to her, - there and then, did the brave genius begin ‘Jane Eyre.’” (Gaskell 305). Readers of *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* may have been surprised to learn where Brontë began writing her famous novel. Indeed, Gaskell’s perspective has yet to be addressed by contemporary critics of *Jane Eyre*. But we can also recognize here the impact Gaskell’s engagement with Patrick Brontë’s blindness had on the composition of *Mary Barton*. We already know that Gaskell, like Brontë, was inspired by first-hand experiences of the anti-picturesque scenes of Manchester streets and unfamiliar faces of factory girls. Yet readers of *Mary Barton* may be surprised to learn that Gaskell’s narrative technique can be attributed to her multivalent experience of Charlotte’s narrative of Patrick Brontë’s blindness. The monochromatic imagery (“grey, weary, uniform streets”) and blurred images of “strange” faces “untouched by sunlight” describe an imagined experience of visual impairment. It hints at a new way of seeing for a sighted author and her readers. We can now better appreciate Gaskell’s narrative technique, illustrated above in my discussion of the opening of *Mary Barton*. Gaskell founds her realist practice on the creative experience of sensory impairment. The anti-picturesque Manchester streets and cacophonous voices of workers require distinct senses. Forced to “grope” through this unfamiliar world, readers might come to perceive between themselves and others a blinding likeness.

Becoming “Stone Blind” in *Jane Eyre*

By locating the origins of Gaskell’s narrative technique in an engagement with sensory disability as productive difference, I am establishing the relevance of Disability Studies to Gaskell’s career as a social problem novelist. But my claim is also that

scholars in the field of Disability Studies must attend to Gaskell's exceptional representations of disability. One reason Gaskell's innovative representation of blindness has been overlooked is owing to its proximity to *Jane Eyre*, with its dramatic, highly sentimental and erotically charged blinding and maiming of Edward Rochester. *Jane Eyre* has preoccupied Disability Studies scholarship as the definitive example of Victorian attitudes towards blindness. In addition to the narrative strategies I have delineated above, Gaskell narrates visual impairment in a manner that not only counters the pathos of Rochester's blinding in *Jane Eyre*, but, even more importantly, might have provided a viable challenge to the emerging medical model of disability. I argue that the medical model takes root in the representational methods of *Jane Eyre* instead of those in *Mary Barton*. These novels appeared as the emerging field of ophthalmology was generating a narrative of pathos for blindness in order to enhance its prestige and cast its practitioners as heroes. Like Brontë's narrative, the medical model came to eclipse any other alternative to representing blindness: "[Rochester's eyes] show no life after blindness, offer no hope to the blind, except that the condition might prove impermanent or that death might come quick" (Kleege 73). Conversely, as I will demonstrate, for Gaskell, blindness has a plot and is a lived experience.

However, despite Gaskell's complex treatment of blindness, *Mary Barton* has received far less critical attention within Disability Studies than *Jane Eyre* for a variety of reasons.⁵ As a romance novel, *Jane Eyre* has attracted a wider audience over a longer

⁵ *The Madwoman and the Blindman* (2013) edited by David Bolt, Julia Rodas, and Elizabeth Donaldson is the first extensive examination of Disability Studies and *Jane Eyre* and is incredibly foundational for foregrounding DS approaches to Brontë's novel. Georgina Kleege's *Sight Unseen* also focuses her chapter, "In Oedipus' Shadow," on *Jane Eyre* and other literary depictions of blindness.

period than the historically-specific social problem novel, *Mary Barton*. A corollary, perhaps, is the relative status of *Jane Eyre* and *Mary Barton* among critics of Victorian literature; Brontë's romance novel overshadows Gaskell's social problem narrative. DS inattention to Gaskell's character Margaret in favor of Rochester also reminds us that, though there is a recent trend to recover female narrative of disability, discussions of masculine disability continue to predominate.⁶ Juxtaposing the final chapters of *Jane Eyre*, wherein the powerful and patriarchal Mr. Rochester is maimed and blinded, and those chapters of *Mary Barton* concerning Margaret, demonstrates the relationship between the politics of representing disability and narrative form. Moreover, it reveals how an alternative medical model of disability might have emerged in the nineteenth century.

Interestingly, Brontë initially revises notions of visual experiences through Jane's point of view. When Jane wanders through the woods, she narrates, "I thought I had taken a wrong direction and lost my way. The darkness of natural as well as of sylvan dusk gathered over me. I looked round in search of another road. There was none: all was interwoven stem, columnar trunk, dense summer foliage—no opening anywhere" (Brontë 496-497). Although Rochester is the blind character of the novel, Jane is temporarily blinded by her unfamiliar surroundings in the new terrain. In this moment, Jane is able to occupy a new, multivalent subject position when she temporarily loses her sense of sight. Jane seeks the perceived stability of sight as she moves throughout the woods, "For the

⁶ See Martha Stoddard Holmes's chapter, "An Object for Compassion, an Enemy of the State: Imagining Disabled Boys and Men" in *Fictions of Affliction*. See also Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's foundational work, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, for extensive examinations of *Jane Eyre*, Rochester, gender, and disability. See also Karen Bourrier's *The Measure of Manliness: Disability and Masculinity in the Mid-Victorian Novel*.

sighted, seeing is both instantaneous and absolute. To see is to take something in at a glance and process it whole, comprehending all its complexities. Sight provides instantaneous access to reality” (Kleege 96). In the forest, Jane receives fragmented glimpses of unfamiliar ground: “I proceeded: at last my way opened, the trees thinned a little; presently I beheld a railing, then the house—scarce, by this dim light, distinguishable from the trees, so dank and green were its decaying walls” (Bronte 497). By metaphorically blinding Jane, Bronte, like Gaskell, explores the spectrum of visual and non-visual experiences. However, Jane’s vision is restored when she sees the blinded and maimed Mr. Rochester, anesthetizing the effect of the disability critique in the novel.

When we compare *Jane Eyre* to *Mary Barton*, we can see how *Jane Eyre* is an example of a text that does not engage with the multivalence of disability. While the text deals with both parts of disabled reality: medical diagnosis and social stigma, they remain separate. Rochester never confronts the social and physical realities of his condition at once. Instead, Bronte contextualizes disability only through the point of view of Jane Eyre. Mary Wilson Carpenter explains, “Jane Eyre, after marrying the blind and crippled (one hand had been amputated) Rochester, exclaims to the reader that she became ‘his vision’” (Carpenter 145). Despite Bronte’s initial experimentation with the processes of blindness and sightedness, *Jane Eyre* evokes a sighted/sightless polarity that problematizes the novel’s conclusion, as David Bolt suggests, “When applied to Brontë’s novel this dynamic becomes inverted because Jane, rather than Rochester, emerges as the representative of power, the sighted character with whom the sighted Implied Reader identifies” (Bolt 41). In *Jane Eyre*, sight and blindness are framed as exclusive experiences, as opposed to *Mary Barton*, where Gaskell blurs the distinction between

seeing and not seeing. Jane narrates, “But in his countenance I saw a change: that looked desperate and brooding—that reminded me of some wronged and fettered wild beast or bird, dangerous to approach in his sullen woe. The caged eagle, whose gold-ringed eyes cruelty has extinguished, might look as looked that sightless Samson” (Bronte 497-98). Jane interprets Rochester’s blindness as both pathetic and sublime, which evokes the grotesqueness associated with conventional descriptions of blindness. After his blinding, Rochester’s identity is trapped within the dark walls of Ferndean, where we see his blindness through Jane’s eyes.

Bronte contrasts sightedness and blindness as a means of moving us toward a perception of disability as conclusive and grotesque. Rochester is not only blinded, but he is also maimed. His double-disablement adds to the grotesqueness that we are supposed to associate with his physical appearance. *Jane Eyre*’s preoccupation with physical alterity is a distinctive feature of the novel’s longstanding representation of disability as grotesque. Perhaps informed by Charlotte Bronte’s eyewitness account of her father’s cataract surgery, Jane’s visceral response to Rochester casts him as monstrous. She remarks, “It is time someone undertook to rehumanise you,’ said I, parting his thick and long uncut locks; ‘for I see you are being metamorphosed into a lion, or something of that sort’” (Bronte 503). Jane’s language indicates the perception of the (dis)abled man as being *less than* human; he is at once dependent and deviant, “Because the hand of the blindman is animalistic, verging on the monstrous, and therefore classically adverse to beauty, it signifies alterity in relation to which vision appears antithetical and thus normative as a means of perceiving beauty” (Bolt 39). Bronte uses graphic imagery to

detail Rochester's altered physical appearance, yet her use of the imagery exaggerates the representation of his disabilities.

For Bronte, the experience that matters most is Jane's (sighted) perspective. When he reveals his maimed hand, Rochester expects Jane to be revolted by its "ghastly" appearance, "'On this arm, I have neither hand nor nails,' he said, drawing his mutilated limb from his breast, and showing it to me. 'It is a mere stump—a ghastly sight! Don't you think so, Jane? I thought you would be revolted, Jane, when you saw my arm, and my cicatrized visage'" (Bronte 503). Though the novel turns from blindness to physical maiming at this point, *Jane Eyre* remains invested in the notion of seeing, and subsequently, the reaction to a disability upon seeing it. Rochester anticipates Jane's aversion to his disfigurement; his word choice insists upon a visual representation of maiming, something that he, presumably, could not see for himself. As we have seen from her letters to Elizabeth Gaskell, the narrative that matters most when detailing visual impairment is her own visual interpretation. By centering *Jane Eyre* on the "romantic" plot between a sighted woman and a blind and maimed man, Bronte cultivates a visual aesthetic that labels Rochester's disablement as grotesque. When we reexamine *Jane Eyre* first in contrast to then in conversation with *Mary Barton*, we ultimately gain a clearer understanding of Gaskell's narrative innovation.

More than meets the Eye: Margaret Jennings

As I have established, by considering Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* and Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Bronte*, we can see the ways in which Gaskell details her own ideas about visual and non-visual perception and the politics of representation. With a narrative strategy that depends so much on sensory perception, particularly sight, Gaskell

significantly gives prominence to a character who is going blind: Margaret. Just as the descriptions of the factory girls engage—and then confound—bourgeois stereotypes, Gaskell’s development of Margaret Jennings resists the “conventional” portrayal of the of the “disabled” female character⁷. Gaskell uses imagery to destabilize the isolated spaces between readers and characters, reminding us that the novel itself is multivalent. By constructing a narrative around the process of going blind, Gaskell shifts our perspective of and our response to her (dis)ability. Margaret’s narrative does not depend on blindness as an event that leaves her in absolute darkness. Instead, Margaret’s visual field reminds readers that vision is a spectrum rather than a polarity. Margaret’s narrative generates a process of blindness which enhances the novel’s plot and establishes her agency.

In *Mary Barton*, Gaskell offers an alternative lens for reading blindness. In using *Jane Eyre* as an example, it is difficult to conceptualize a character with an impaired visual field that is going to turn out to be anything but an object of pity, inspiration, or marginalization. In contrast to *Jane Eyre*, in *Mary Barton*, Gaskell does not represent blindness in any particular Victorian convention. Instead, she is illustrating the intricate transition from sightedness to sightlessness through Margaret’s varying stages of visual impairment. Like her empirical depiction of the factory girls and her detailed descriptions of Patrick Bronte’s cataract surgery, Gaskell illustrates Margaret’s blindness with a kind of scientific accuracy that flourished mid-century⁸. This fusion of medical rhetoric with

⁷ See Deborah Kent’s essay, “Disabled Women: Portraits in Fiction and Drama” in *Images of the Disabled, Disabling Images* (1987); also see Adrienne Asch and Michelle Fine’s chapter, “Nurturance, Sexuality, and Women with Disabilities: The Example of Women and Literature” in *The Disability Studies Reader*, first edition (1997) for discussions about portrayals of women with disabilities.

⁸ In the mid-nineteenth century, expertise in medicine and medical practice began to increase. Specifically, doctors who specialized in studying the eye and ophthalmology

the social implications of Margaret's blindness reiterate the ways in which *Mary Barton* merges medical and social models of disability.

Margaret's vivid and graphic account of her vision illuminates new ways to understand the spectrum of sight as multivalent and variable. Her narrative process subverts readers' expectations of blindness as they enter into a multivalent experience as they read her story. Matter-of-fact tone, graphic word choice, and precise detail give Margaret's description of her vision lead readers into a multivalent experience: "Vision is a series of discrete activities, not a constant, seamless, pervasive ebb and flow of information" (Kleege 114). Vision is therefore an ongoing process. When light, shadow, depth, and distance change, so, too, does the information our eyes and brain receive. By combining Margaret's diagnosis of blindness with her lived experience of the process of going blind, Gaskell offers her readers a complicated—and perhaps more accurate—representation of vision impairment. For example, when Margaret discusses her visual acuity with Mary, she explains:

"Yes, pretty near as well as ever. Th' only difference is, that if I sew a long time together, a bright spot like th' sun comes right where I'm looking; all the rest is quite clear but just where I want to see. I've been to both doctors again, and now they're both o' the same story; and I suppose I'm going dark as fast as may be. Plain work pays so bad, and mourning has been so plentiful this winter, I were tempted to take in my black work I could, and now I'm suffering from it." (*MB* 51)

were prominent. See Mary Wilson Carpenter's "A Cultural History of Ophthalmology in Nineteenth-Century Britain" for more details.

Margaret describes blindness in graphic, even clinical detail. What is more, however, is that the quantifiable language Margaret uses to detail her visual field is fundamentally tied to her own experience of vision. As a result, readers are invited into a multivalent experience of visual impairment. Margaret's description of the "bright spot" explains to Gaskell's sighted readers what Margaret can see from her perspective. The narration of Margaret's blindness from her own point of view orients the novel's readers within a multivalent position while also allowing Margaret ownership of her experience and narrative. Margaret's self-explanation directs our attention to the complexities of blindness. Although Margaret's discussion of the mourning dresses she makes and her doctor visits seem at first like an arbitrary list, it is precisely Gaskell's use of these details that highlights the process of Margaret's experience.

With Margaret's narrative, we can see that Gaskell is insisting on Margaret's agency, her autonomy, and her productivity, which extends the project of Gaskell's social problem fiction.

Margaret ends her discussion of her blindness by saying, "I were tempted to take in my black work I could, and now I'm suffering from it" (*MB* 51). Here, we see a reversal of the term "suffering," which typically indicates how disabled characters are portrayed in Victorian literature. Yet in Margaret's description, the word "suffering" signifies practicality over pathos. From staring at the black linen for so long, her eyesight is quickly fading. Margaret does not feel badly for herself; she does not "suffer" from her blindness. Readers may likely expect Margaret to feel sorry for herself and to lament on her newly disabled reality. Instead, Margaret remains determined to work and wants to live with her disability rather than run from its perceived reputation. Although her desire

to work also reflects bourgeois Christian stoicism, Margaret deviates from the conventional “disabled” female character. Her serious desire to earn a living resists the genre conventions of the period. She declares to Mary, “I think I should go blind any way, and I darn’t tell grandfather, else I would leave it off, but he will so fret” (*MB* 51). Margaret’s matter-of-fact tone is again reiterated here as she describes how she “should go blind any way” but her blindness will not prevent her from working. Significantly, Gaskell develops Margaret’s autonomy through the process of going blind.

Gaskell uses Margaret’s account of her blindness in order to reveal ways in which sightedness and blindness intersect. By providing a bridge between Margaret’s blind experience and the readers’ (presumably) sighted experiences, Gaskell’s use of imagery invites readers into Margaret’s point of view and thus, into a multivalent experience of disability. When she is discussing her decreasing visual field with Mary, Margaret explains, “and my eye is so much worse, not hurting so much; but I can’t see a bit with it. There now, Mary,’ continued she, shutting one eye, ‘now you only look like a great black shadow, with the edges dancing and sparkling’” (*MB* 51). In this moment of disclosure, Gaskell shifts our attention to a new perspective of disability, even more realistic one, as Margaret is given space in the narrative to assert her voice and detail her experience. By juxtaposing words like “black shadow” and “dancing and sparkling,” Gaskell offers contradictory word pairings that allow readers to see Margaret’s visual experience. The stillness of the “black shadow” juxtaposed with the bright edges that are “dancing and sparkling” give life and movement to this scene and allow us to recognize that blindness is a spectrum. The merging of light and shadow is also a literal example of vision loss, illustrating Margaret’s narrowing visual field while also enabling the novel’s

readers to visually adapt to her changing world through their multivalent experience of reading the text. Without readers noticing, Gaskell impairs their vision along with Margaret's. Unlike Jane's temporary and metaphorical blindness in her venture to Ferndean, Margaret's progressive vision loss allows readers to vicariously imagine, adjust to, and experience a fluctuating visual field. The textured imagery constellates Margaret's identity and evokes a more tangible sense of her experience.

Margaret's financial support for her family moves her away from the limited representation of disabled female characters. When describing the process of her visual experience to Mary, Margaret proclaims, "'No,' said Margaret, quietly fixing her tearful eyes on Mary; 'I know I'm not mistaken. I have felt one [eye] going some time, long before I ever thought what it would lead to; and last autumn I went to a doctor; and he did not mince the matter'" (*MB* 51). As I have pointed out in *Jane Eyre*, Jane and Rochester's discussion of his blindness relies on Jane's observations. However, in this conversation between Margaret and Mary, Margaret establishes her authority by describing her own experience to Mary. Her use of the words "No" and "I know I'm not mistaken" especially highlights her authority. She has "felt one [eye] going some time," which indicates her awareness and acceptance of her visual field. Margaret continues, "But how could I do that, Mary? For one thing, grandfather would have known there was somewhat the matter; and, oh! It will grieve him sore whenever he's told, so the later the better; and besides, Mary, we've sometimes little enough to go upon, and what I earn is a great help" (*MB* 51). Margaret's blindness is a plot; it is not simply an "event" or an "end" to her story, unlike Rochester's conclusive blindness and maiming in *Jane Eyre*. After the onset of her blindness, Margaret's economic and familial duties still must be fulfilled.

Turning a “Blind Eye”: Mary Barton

While Gaskell might be said to “restore our vision” through Mary Barton’s eyes, like Jane’s perspective at the conclusion of *Jane Eyre*, Mary’s vision is similarly problematic as it removes readers from the multivalent experience of disability in the text. The novel’s titular character conveys sighted readers’ well-meaning, if often obtuse expectations and attitudes toward (dis)ability, much like Jane’s reactions to Edward Rochester’s disablement. Her sympathetic responses to Margaret’s blindness are rooted in nineteenth-century sentimentality. Surprise, sadness, dismay, and pity characterize Mary’s response to Margaret’s blindness, “[Margaret] fell into an agony of tears, while Mary knelt by her, striving to soothe and to comfort her; but, like an inexperienced person, striving rather to deny the correctness of Margaret’s fear, than helping her to meet and overcome the evil” (*MB* 50). In this moment, Gaskell anticipates the responses her readers may have to Margaret’s blindness. Their reactions would likely follow Mary’s. Mary wishes to help Margaret “overcome the evil” of her blindness (*MB* 50). Her instinctual reaction relies upon her presumptions and perceptions of blindness. Rather than choosing to embrace Margaret’s disability, Mary wants to refute its reality.

In doing so, Mary seeks a substitute for the experience of the disabled character (Margaret) by replacing her perception of disability for the actual experience of it. Gaskell narrates Mary’s sense of helplessness, an inability not merely to comfort, but to change the narrative of Margaret’s progression towards blindness, “The truth was, Margaret’s secret weighted heavily and painfully on her mind, and she felt her inability to comfort; besides, she wanted to change the current of Margaret’s thoughts” (*MB* 52). The “secret” is not actually Margaret’s blindness; instead, it is Mary’s inability to imagine

Margaret's blindness as anything but final. Indeed, a disability may be caused *by* an event, or an accident, like we have seen from the conclusion of *Jane Eyre*, or the onset of an illness/disease, as the factory women, Patrick Bronte, and Margaret demonstrate. For Gaskell, however, blindness does not signify tragedy. Mary's emotional reaction to Margaret's blindness exacerbates the notion of blindness as catastrophic. Such a charge of pathos removes the practicality from *Mary Barton's* narrative project, which, as Georgina Kleege points out, "it's hard not to cringe at traditional representations of blindness as a life-ending tragedy" (Kleege 90). Despite Mary's perspective, Margaret's narrative trajectory does not end because of her blindness.

Mary remains outside of the multivalent experience, in which Gaskell has situated the sighted reader, with none of the sensory detail to resist pathos. Through Mary's perspective, then, readers are also removed from a multivalent experience of disability. From Mary's point of view, readers now view blindness as both sentimentalized and glamorized. This is especially apparent first when Gaskell directly addresses the readers through Mary's perspective: "In the uncertain fire-light you could not help noticing that she had the groping walk of a blind person" (*MB* 99). In other words, in the impaired view of a sighted person (Mary), observing Margaret's appearance, her disability evokes pity. Mary is saddened by Margaret's perceived immobility. As if to protect herself from these painful feelings, Mary then reimagines Margaret's identity as glamorous, "'Why, Margaret,' at length she exclaimed, 'thou'll become as famous, may be, as that grand lady fra' London, as we seed one night driving up to th' concert room door in her carriage'" (*MB* 101). Mary's abrupt shift in tone from describing Margaret's "groping" walk to discussing how Margaret may become a famous "grand lady" suggests her

discomfort with disability. She must quickly categorize Margaret in some way or another in order to make herself feel comfortable with Margaret's blindness. In this moment, readers also must note that it is Mary's idea for Margaret to pursue a singing career, and not Margaret's idea. In contrast, Margaret desires to work while learning to live with her blindness. Mary continues to observe Margaret when she narrates, "[Mary] stepped outside the door. Margaret was practicing her singing, and through the still night air her voice rang out like that of an angel" (*MB* 104). Unlike the sensory-filled scene of the factory girls' voices at the beginning of *Mary Barton*, we hear Margaret's voice as it is filtered through Mary's ears. Angelic and beautiful, Margaret's singing shapes the readers' perception of blindness as inspiringly melodic (and, as Georgina Kleege would likely concur, this moment will make readers "cringe.").

Observing Margaret through Mary's eyes initially takes readers out of a multivalent experience, but once sensory details are again employed, readers are able to better comprehend Margaret's experience. Although Margaret remains the subject of Mary's observations, Gaskell refutes her (and the readers') expectations through Margaret's actions. Mary observes that Margaret no longer has the "groping walk of a blind person" when she narrates,

"At first I were afraid o' trusting her, and I used to follow her a bit behind; never letting on, of course. But, bless you! She goes along as steadily as can be; rather slow, to be sure, and her head a bit on one side as if she were listening. And it's real beautiful to see her cross the road. She'll wait above a bit to hear that all is still; not that she's so dark as not to see a coach or a cart like a big black thing, but she can't rightly judge how far off it is by sight, so she listens." (*MB* 213)

Like the merging of sight and sound in the opening scene of the factory girls in *Mary Barton* and in Gaskell's biography of Charlotte Bronte, Mary's observation change from her opinion and perspective to a distinct attention to sensory details. We can almost hear how Margaret navigates the industrial landscape. Because she cannot see obstacles, she must rely on her ears to indicate that it is silent and therefore safe to cross. This scene is actually remarkable for its accurate details. It describes the intricate orientation and mobility skills that blind and visually impaired people use in order to navigate social environments safely. Mary's focus on sensory details transforms her (and the readers') perspectives of Margaret.

Gaskell again uses sensory details and omniscient narration to move readers back into a multivalent experience of disability as Margaret ends up making money from her singing career despite Mary's perception of her blindness. When Margaret returns to Manchester from her career venture in London as a singer, she explains to Mary, "and I'm getting more money than I can well manage; and, dear, would you just take this bit o' gold, and pay me back in good time?" (*MB* 155). Mary's pitying and glorifying perspective breaks down in this moment when Margaret offers her money. Margaret even has to insist upon Mary taking the money by saying, "would you just take this bit o' gold, and pay me back in good time?" The phrasing of "would you just" creates a light and almost exasperated tone. We can clearly see and hear Mary and Margaret's friendship taking form. We are no longer in opposition between the two characters, such as when Mary observes or describes Margaret. Mary and Margaret continue their dialogue when Mary begrudgingly comments, "I wish I could sing," said Mary, looking at the sovereign" to which Margaret replies,

“Some has one kind o’ gifts, and some another. Many’s the time when I could see, that I longed for your beauty, Mary! We’re like children, ever wanting what we have not got. But now I must say just one more word. Remember, if you’re sore pressed for money, we shall take it very unkind if you do not let us know. Good bye to ye.” (*MB* 155)

Whereas Mary previously pitied and praised Margaret for her singing, she now finds herself wishing that she had the same voice as Margaret. Moreover, Margaret’s logical, matter-of-fact response suggests an acceptance of her disability, thus enabling Margaret to accept the medical diagnosis and the new social realities of her vision impairment.

Gaskell concludes this scene with omniscient narration that brings readers into a multivalent experience. Omniscient narration illuminates Margaret’s experience when Gaskell writes, “In spite of her blindness [Margaret] hurried away, anxious to rejoin her grandfather, and desirous also to escape from Mary’s expression of gratitude” (*MB* 155). In this moment, Margaret defies both Mary’s and the readers’ perceptions of blindness through her quick movement. She no longer has the “groping walk of a blind person”; instead, we are invited into the actual experience of her disability via Gaskell’s use of omniscient narration. Gaskell disassembles Mary’s point of view in the final line of this scene when we are placed inside of Margaret’s perspective: “and desirous also to escape from Mary’s expression of gratitude” (*MB* 155). Margaret is, presumably, almost completely blind, except for some light and shadow perception, as we know from her earlier discussion of her blindness. Yet, ironically, she can still *see* Mary’s “expression of gratitude.” Gaskell represents Margaret’s chagrin just as much as she represents Mary’s

discomfort. Therefore, this scene carefully disrupts perceptions and expectations of blindness through sensory detail and omniscient narration.

Love at First “Sight”: Will Wilson

In the middle of Margaret’s narrative, Elizabeth Gaskell inserts a hyper-sentimentalized love story through an overly dramatic use of sensory narration. As a result, Gaskell questions the ways in which sensory narration shape multivalent experiences. On the one hand, sensory narration enables readers to understand diverse experiences; however, on the other, perhaps an over-reliance on sensory details can shift the narrative toward problematic sentimentality. This section of *Mary Barton* is entangled with conventions of disability, desire, and the domestic novel that we have seen from my analysis of *Jane Eyre*. What is more, Gaskell names the character who falls in love with Margaret “Wilson,” perhaps after the doctor who performs Patrick Bronte’s cataract surgery just months before she begins writing *Mary Barton*. Although Margaret’s love interest is not a doctor, upon first meeting her, Will Wilson, a sailor, immediately falls in love with her because of her singing. Mary observes,

Mary was amused to see how the young sailor sat entranced, mouth, eyes, all open, in order to catch every breath of sound. His very lids refused to wink, as if afraid in that brief proverbial interval to lose a particle of the rich music that floated through the room. For the first time the idea crossed Mary’s mind that it was possible that the plain little sensible Margaret, so prim and demure, might have power over the heart of the handsome, dashing, spirited Will Wilson. (*MB* 166)

In his “entrancement,” Will Wilson is completely captivated by Margaret’s singing. As Mary points out, “mouth, eyes, all open, in order to catch every breath of sound” (*MB*

166). Such an overload of sensory input allows the sentimental to take over. Mary, and subsequently, the readers of the novel, are then confronted with some unlikely plot twists: the sentimentalization of the non-disabled man falling in love with the disabled woman. Suddenly, the novel's social problem narrative shifts to a conventional Victorian courtship plot.

Moreover, this section of the novel shores up complex emotional concerns about desire, conventions of Victorian marriage plots, and disability. In *Sight Unseen*, Georgina Kleege argues, "If the girl is blind, she will be that much more unattractive, or that much less able to control her own sexuality" (Kleege 43). Georgina Kleege's word choice illuminates the precarious position blind women (in fiction and in reality) often face: they are either "more" or "less" desirable, depending on the cultural perceptions that surround them. It is important to note that this section of Margaret's narrative is told through Mary's point of view, which only further places Margaret in light of pathos:

[Will] had fallen deeply in love with the quiet, prim, somewhat plain Margaret: [Mary] doubted if Margaret was aware of it, and yet, as she watched more closely, she began to think some instinct made the blind girl feel whose eyes were so often fixed upon her pale face; that some inner feeling made the delicate and becoming rose-flush steal over her countenance. (*MB* 188)

Mary's observations are tinged with sympathy and jealousy and in turn, shape how readers perceive Will's attraction to Margaret. Margaret is thus limited to Mary's point of view. The absence of sensory details when Mary is sentimentalizing Margaret demonstrates that Mary is following the readers' expectations. By describing Margaret as "quiet, prim" and "somewhat plain," and then concluding by narrating "the delicate and

becoming rose-flush” that covered her face, Mary’s observations anticipate the readers’ ideas of how Margaret should appear as the *less than* desirable blind woman in a courtship plot. Furthermore, Mary’s observations echo the resentfulness women can feel toward one another in the Victorian marriage market. Therefore, although Mary initially describes Margaret as the “quiet, prim” and seemingly a non-threatening rival in the marriage market, her words hint at the jealousy she feels toward Margaret that we have previously seen with her feelings about Margaret’s singing. In turn, Gaskell inverts the conventional structure of the Victorian marriage plot by placing Margaret on level ground with Mary. Despite Mary’s perspective, the two women are equally involved in the progression of the novel’s courtship plot.

Gaskell concludes Mary and Will’s conversation by first leaning upon readers’ expectations—the strong sailor falling in love with the innocent blind girl—then destabilizing readers’ perception by announcing that Margaret is in fact, happy *without* Will. In a conversation with Will about Margaret, Mary argues, “she’s the only one I know, I believe, who seems free from care. Her blindness almost appears a blessing sometimes; she was so downhearted when she dreaded it, and now she seems so calm and happy when it’s downright come. No! Margaret’s happy, I do think” (*MB* 207). Though Mary’s last observation is not without some residual sentimental tones, “her blindness almost appears as a blessing” and the use of “No!” with the exclamation mark, Gaskell transforms Mary’s and readers’ attitudes toward a more nuanced experience of disability.

Disabled female characters are rarely given opportunities in Victorian fiction to become anything but inspirational figures, and yet, Gaskell continues to resist cultural and literary representations by moving from the sentimental to sensory details. This is

especially apparent when Will Wilson asserts his points of view. Here, Mary becomes the advocate for change. Whereas she previously evokes emotion in her observations of Margaret, her conversation with Will transforms her perception of blindness and indicates Will's liminal perspective. Will comments to Mary:

“I could almost wish it had been otherwise,” said Will, thoughtfully. “I could have been so glad to comfort her, and cherish her, if she had been in trouble.” [Mary responds] “And why can't you cherish her, even though she is happy?” asked Mary. “Oh! I don't know. She seems so much better than I am! And her voice! When I hear it, and think of the wishes that are in my heart, it seems as much out of place to ask her to be my wife, as it would be to ask an angel from heaven.” (*MB* 207)

This passage refutes the readers' expectations. Will argues that he *wishes* that Margaret were unhappy so that he could take care of her in her own “sullen woe” as Jane does for Rochester in *Jane Eyre*. Drawing from Mary and Will's conversation, there is a parallel between Victorian depictions of disability and modern reality, as Georgina Kleege writes,

Is marriage to a blind person really so different? I ask my sighted husband this, but he can't really answer. He's only been married to me. Would he be threatened by a completely independent wife? Does my blindness unman him, forcing him to take on the caretaking role traditionally reserved for females? Behind these questions is the assumption that blind spouses bring nothing to the union except utter dependence, and, if the sighted partner is lucky, a cloying gratitude. Blind people are so needy, so defined by their need, that they must be incapable of nurture, affection, love, loyalty, laughter, companionship, comfort, conversation, support, sympathy, or any of the other qualities people seek in a life partner. (Kleege 24-25)

Margaret's contentment with her blindness clearly alarms Will, and, presumably, the novel's readers. In response to Will's exclamations, Mary offers a reply that is quite unlike her previous observations, "Mary could not help laughing outright, in spite of her depression, at the idea of Margaret as an angel; it was so difficult (even to her dress-making imagination) to fancy where, and how, the wings would be fashioned to the brown stuff gown, or the blue and yellow print" (*MB* 207). Mary's immediate laughter at Will's perception of Margaret signals to readers how they should also react to his emotional assumptions. Gaskell shifts the narrative from Will's sentimental statements in favor of the sensory-details Mary provides. The visual attention to the sartorial renews our awareness to Margaret's physical appearance. Margaret's "brown stuff gown" thus has more reality than the overly sentimentalized perceptions from characters like Will.

Mary Barton's Visual Aesthetic

How, then, does Gaskell's complex engagement with sensory difference inform her intervention in Chartist politics and social reform? Here, we must return to the graphic accounts of factory accidents in the sensationalist press, to images that stood for "the worker" in the minds of the bourgeoisie. Consistent with the anti-picturesque portrayal of the factory women, Jane's observations of Rochester, Mary's initial descriptions of Margaret, and Will Wilson's perspective, is John Barton's visual aesthetic. John Barton's narrative returns attention to the factory girls, this time, without the sensory detail. John Barton's first-person narration takes us out of the multivalent experience of disability, which results in changing how the reader perceives concerns of class and gender throughout the novel. As readers have seen with *Jane Eyre*, the juxtaposition between sightedness and blindness removes them from a multivalent

experience. Following John Barton's point of view, readers can no longer witness or experience different perspectives, like the factory girls. The gruesome details provided in the newspapers about disabling factory accidents clouds John Barton's perspective of factory work.

Much like how Will Wilson seeks to control Margaret's happiness, John Barton wants to impress his views of factory life upon others to impose social order on female (and particularly *disabled female*) experience. He insists that Mary will *never* be a factory worker, and continues his tirade against Esther, Mary's aunt, and the "fallen woman" of the novel, when he declares,

"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." (MB 8)

This bifurcation attempts to sway the perspective of the readers. He considers resistant women (especially factory girls and "wanderers" like Esther) as emblems of finality. Like the cultural and literary representation of blindness as a life-altering tragedy, John Barton sees factory work for women as a similar disaster. Like the grotesque image of Rochester's blind and maimed body, readers are supposed to be repulsed by John Barton's descriptions of factory women; their bodies are not representative of the aesthetics associated with "proper" Victorian women. The concept of the factory develops the notion of the dangerous female body. The domestic sphere is thus used to regulate women's bodies; Mary is physically safer in the household. There, she can

reproduce and cultivate new life, whereas if she were to work in a factory, her life would, essentially, be over.

The very real dangers of factory life combined with the potential for wives and mothers to leave their homes in favor of work create a convergence of conventional cultural concerns. Ironically, however, the containment of the domestic sphere, and subsequently, the female body, is rather illusory. This is especially apparent when John Barton and Elizabeth Gaskell's perspectives merge. We can see this when Mary is weighing her potential career options. Gaskell writes, "Mary must do something. The factories being, as I said, out of the question, there were two things open—going out to service, and the dressmaking business; and against the first of these, Mary set herself with all of the force of her strong will" (*MB* 25). Instead of using omniscient narration to allow her readers to explore the experiences of her characters, Gaskell directly addresses her readers and describes her own views on factory work (Landsbury 12). Gaskell herself worked to "rescue" women from factory work because she believed that their work was physically harmful.

John Barton's, and, in turn, Elizabeth Gaskell's, perspectives challenge the novel's attempt to create a "proper" home; as Lynn Pykett suggests in *The "Improper" Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman's Writing*, "the improper feminine could only be contained within the patriarchal family, an institution which it also constantly threatened to dissolve or destroy" (Pykett 56). When Mary is visiting Alice Wilson, she has a conversation with Jane, Alice's sister-in-law about how John Barton detests factory work for women. Jane replies,

“No, I know he doesn’t [approve of factory work]; and reason good. They oughtn’t to go at after they’re married, that I’m very clear about. I could reckon up” (counting with her fingers) “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.” (*MB* 130-31)

What Gaskell, John Barton, Mary Barton, and Jane Wilson cannot envision is the positive potential that factories provide for women. What we can learn from John Barton’s section of the narrative is that *Mary Barton* is grappling with concepts of gender, class, and disability.

In light of my analysis of John Barton, we can extrapolate further to *Mary Barton*’s best-known marginalized character, Esther. In contrast to the absence of sensory detail in John Barton’s emotional vision of factory work, Gaskell returns to sensory detail, specifically, the sense of sight, to revise perceptions of the “fallen woman.” Esther’s narration uses her vision as the lens through which we see the narrative, which reemphasizes the ocularcentric: “In her wild night wanderings, she had noted the haunts and habits of many a one who little thought a watcher in the poor forsaken woman” (*MB* 171). Esther takes on the role of the narrator. She is an eyewitness through which readers can experience her specific plot as the “fallen” woman. Through Esther, readers are again positioned within a multivalent experience.

Gaskell blurs the perceived boundary between sightedness and blindness in Mary and Esther's reunion. When Mary enters scenes with Esther, her vision is literally impaired. Upon seeing Esther, Mary mistakes her for her dead mother and exclaims, "Oh! Mother! Mother! You are come at last!" She threw herself, or rather fell, into the trembling arms of her long-lost, unrecognized, aunt Esther" (*MB* 248). The repetition of the exclamation marks in Mary's dialogue evokes a hurried pace that not only demonstrate Mary's disorientation, but also the readers' misrecognition of Esther. Like Mary, readers are overcome with the thought that her (dead) mother is actually alive. Gaskell writes that Mary then "threw herself, or rather fell" into Esther's arms. It seems odd that a character that presumably has "functioning" eyesight would encounter these obstacles. In her misunderstanding, Mary appears to lose some of her vision. The way that Gaskell uses sensory detail in Mary and Esther's roles has serious implications of how readers view disability. Esther and Mary therefore help readers see Gaskell's narrative technique as at once multivalent and ocularcentric, which ultimately provides significance to Margaret's characterization.

Conclusion: Love is (not) Blind: *Mary Barton's* Marriage Plot

In *Mary Barton's* conclusion, love is, in fact, not blind. Margaret must regain her sight in order to achieve the "traditional" heroine's ending. Interestingly, however, Margaret is completely absent from the novel's conclusion. As with the ending of *Jane Eyre*, in which Jane's perspective of Rochester's blindness is dominant, we only encounter Margaret's experience through Mary and Jem. As we have seen from *Jane Eyre*, Victorian literature is often unable to conceptualize an autonomous disabled

character that not only must Margaret be “cured” of her blindness, but she also must be removed from the narrative as a double erasure.

Though Margaret and Will marry at the end of the novel, Margaret must first have her vision restored, thus problematizing the novel’s treatment of blindness and disability: “Will and Margaret are married?” to which Jem replies, “Not quite, but very near” (*MB* 417). In order for Mary to discern why Margaret and Will are not married yet, Jem asks her to guess: “He covered his little boy’s eyes with his hands for an instant, significantly, till the baby pushed them down saying in his imperfect way, ‘Tan’t see.’ ‘there now! Johnnie can see. Do you guess, Mary?’” (*MB* 417). The child’s gestures and his “imperfect way” of speaking reflect the notion of innocence that we are supposed to associate with Margaret. Gaskell caters to the readers’ expectations and, to an extent, the readers’ desires for Margaret’s narrative. As Martha Stoddard Holmes argues, “Regained sight is usually the only circumstance in which blind nineteenth-century women characters become sexual and marry” (Holmes 86). Readers are placed in the position of Will, Mary, and Jem, all of whom wish Margaret to regain her sense of sight through a medical cure. Jem concludes, “They have. She has been couched, and can see as well as ever. She and Will are to be married on the twenty-fifth of this month, and he’s bringing her out here next voyage” (*MB* 417). With her sense of sight repaired, Margaret can achieve the conventional marriage-plot ending reserved for non-disabled Victorian women. The final scene of Johnnie, Jem and Mary’s child, demonstrating Margaret’s restoration of sight sentimentalizes and subsequently erases the blind woman’s narrative.

However, Gaskell complicates the medical “cure” of Margaret’s sight and the novel’s marriage-plot ending by creating a double marriage plot, in which Mary marries

Jem. Mary and Jem's marriage deflates the pathos of Margaret and Will's union. In *Fictions of Affliction*, Martha Stoddard Holmes calls this dual marriage plot a "twin structure," in which melodramatic fiction of the late nineteenth century often pairs a disabled female character with a nondisabled female character, and each of their trajectories diverge with the marriage plot:

Melodrama's use of a 'twin structure' that pairs a disabled woman with a nondisabled one and gives them distinctly different physical, emotional, and marital futures may have offered a way to tap into emotional excess with all its interesting possibilities safely anchored to a few distinctive, visibly disabled female bodies with no danger of marrying. (Holmes 37-38)

Mary Barton precedes and even anticipates the "twin structure" that Holmes discusses in melodramatic fiction of the latter half of the nineteenth century. Moreover, *Mary Barton* offers a different form of this "twin structure" by having *both* the disabled and nondisabled female characters marry. What is perhaps more significant, is that when Mary and Jem are discussing Margaret and Will's marriage, they are living in Canada, and not in Manchester. Margaret and Will remain in Manchester, which suggests that Margaret's plot, rather than Mary's, will continue. Stoddard Holmes provides a list of authors she believes cultivate a nuanced approach to the "twin structure" when she writes, "Collins's novels construct disabled women as figures of eros rather than pathos. Like Craik, Yonge, and the later Dickens, Collins imagines disabled women as potential wives and mothers" (Holmes 76). I would like to add Gaskell to the list that Holmes provides. In a period where marriage plot endings were abundant and almost necessary in Victorian literature, Gaskell's parallel plotline is an act of resistance and reinvention.

Mary Barton's conclusion is not distinctive to Gaskell's treatment of Margaret, but rather, it is a broader consideration of the implications of the Victorian marriage plot, female autonomy, and cultural expectations and values. Consequently, the novel's conclusion raises more questions than it answers. Scientific innovation and social convention again collide as Margaret is cured of her blindness and then enters the marriage market. Although this kind of closure can be frustrating, these questions are Gaskell's point. Throughout the novel, readers have learned to question our own views of factory work, the "fallen" woman, the marriage plot, and blindness. Gaskell's "twinning" of the marriages of Mary and Jem and Margaret and Will is inherently inconclusive, drawing on disability, specifically, blindness, as a process rather than a definitive ending.

Mary Barton develops the ways in which literature can engage with the social construction of disability as well as the physical moments of impairment because of Gaskell's emphasis on the multivalence of visual impairment. Gaskell's first social problem novel unites the realities of impairment with social stigma simultaneously. In "Mainstreaming Disability Studies?" Julia Rodas suggests that disability in Victorian literature is "a grappling with identity" (Rodas 372). Therefore, despite *Mary Barton*'s conventional ending, readers cannot easily forget Margaret's experience because they have been directly involved in "seeing" it. As Georgina Kleege argues, we must (re)examine the image of blindness we are accustomed to. She writes, "It will force us to abandon old clichés that equate blindness with ignorant despair, and sight with virtuous wisdom. Surely it's time for some new metaphors. In the meantime, you see things your way and I'll see them mine. But when we close our eyes, maybe we'll see everything the same" (Kleege 228). It is precisely the practicality of blind experiences that result in

creating this new image. *Mary Barton*'s conclusion, then, is not simply a reassertion of Victorian values. *Mary Barton* offers a revision of blindness; it is a productive grappling with narrative form, gender and class conventions, sightedness, and blindness.

CHAPTER TWO: (RE)PRESENTING DISABILITY IN *RUTH*

“*Ruth* is not simply about a fallen woman’s Christian redemption. The novel enmeshes the fallen woman’s story within a larger social narrative of reform and responsibility, of sickness and health both moral and physical, both personal and public.”

Kristine Swenson, *Medical Women in Victorian Fiction*

“Crippling” *Ruth*

Ruth (1853) requires a reading beyond that of Disability Studies: a crip reading.

By using crip theory to examine Elizabeth Gaskell’s second social problem novel, *Ruth*, I bring attention to this novel’s social, medical, cultural, and political context. This chapter offers an intersectional argument, one that focuses on the disabling nature of Ruth’s fallenness and the social stigma that continually pathologizes her moral fall. Unlike the “dwarf” Mr. Benson or Margaret’s blindness in *Mary Barton*, Ruth is doubly disabled as she is both viewed as the crip figure and female. In this sense, a broadly Disability Studies reading is not enough to level my critique, but crip theory allows us to complicate Ruth as a female, crip figure who is equally marginalized for her sexual transgression. Robert McRuer’s *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* and Allison Kafer’s *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, foreground the value of this important theoretical framework known as Crip Theory. Kafer defines crip theory when she writes,

According to both [Carrie] Sandahl and [Robert] McRuer, disability studies and crip theory differ in orientation and aim: crip theory is more contestatory than disability studies, more willing to explore the potential risks and exclusions of identity politics while simultaneously and “perhaps paradoxically” recognizing the generative role identity has played in the disability rights movement. (Kafer 20)

This chapter enriches Kafer's work because I offer a "cripping" of Gaskell's social problem novel and in turn, an earlier period where we can see extrapolate further the crip figure. Crip theory more broadly intervenes with the portrayal of Ruth's fallenness. It revises the dangerous Victorian conceptions of womanhood, gender, and sexuality as it enables us to read non-disabled characters that we might otherwise overlook.

Generatively, crip theory provides us with avenues to critique more broadly the Victorian conceptualizations of the body.

By applying crip theory to *Ruth*, I offer a more flexible exploration of disability across Gaskell's fictional oeuvre. *Ruth* leaves room for a crippling critique because it leads us into an awareness and attention to ability and disability within a Victorian context. Ruth's characterization is critical of the ways in which non-disabled women's bodies are considered vulnerable by drawing parallels between the non-disabled female body and the social and physical state of disability. Gaskell combines the medical and social models of disability, which begins with *Mary Barton* and the multivalence of disabled experience and brings disabled experience in conversation with other marginalized and vulnerable experience. *Ruth* invites us to read marginalized experience—like that of fallen women—as disabling, in which a crip reading can be useful. In her 2018 keynote lecture, "Crippling the Welfare Queen: Disability and Race in the Afterlife of U.S. Welfare Reform," Jina B. Kim applies a crip reading to female experiences of race and disability. She explains:

"cripping" does not necessitate looking for diagnostic evidence of disability in a text or discourse, nor does it prioritize the positive representation of identifiably disabled characters. Rather, it uses disability as a *lens* for reading literary and

cultural texts, in which the critic pays particular attention to how able-bodied assumptions or ableist ideologies inform the text at hand. Alternately, crippling can explain how a text furthers a critical disability ethos even when there are no disabled characters present at all. (Kim 9)

As a result, by reading Ruth's body as crip, disability challenges and reimagines damaging Victorian ideals about morality and sexuality. This approach allows us to bring *Ruth* into the disability discourse that have been largely overlooked. A crip reading of Ruth's characterization necessitates a rereading of Gaskell's familiar themes from *Mary Barton*: sensory details, disabled characters, and the "twin structure," wherein *Ruth's* narrative strategies depend on viewing Ruth as the crip figure.

While sensory detail is a consistent representational strategy across Gaskell's work, it serves a markedly different function in *Ruth* than it does in *Mary Barton*. *Mary Barton* ends with Margaret's "cure" and the loss of sensory representation. *Ruth* continues to scale back the use of sensory details. By removing sensory narration, Gaskell makes disability invisible in each text. As a result, a crip reading of *Ruth's* fallenness illuminates the discrete ways in which Victorian novelists treat disabled/female/sexually active women. Sensory experience is noticeably removed throughout *Ruth* and thus enables a more pathologized (crip) reading of fallenness to take place. In effect, the removal of sensory details creates distance between the reader and Ruth's experience, which allows readers to marginalize Ruth as a crip figure in their reading experience, whereas in *Mary Barton*, sensory detail allows readers to humanize Margaret. Although readers still get sensory detail from Mr. Benson's character, which humanizes the disabled character, we lose that detail with Ruth, thereby placing her in a

marginalized subject position. Consequently, when we approach Ruth's characterization through the minimization of sensory details, we can see how Ruth's sexual transgression marginalizes her. This text positions fallenness as a lower state than disability—notably, a state that can only befall women. Sensory details noticeably invoke a character's humanity throughout Gaskell's fiction; however, by altering the use of sensory details in *Ruth*, Gaskell magnifies Ruth's status as the crip figure.

In *Ruth*, a crip reading also requires a reevaluation of Ruth's character as compares to the novel's physically disabled character, Mr. Benson, where the Victorians' social consciousness, Ruth's fallenness is considered a worse state than that of Mr. Benson's physical impairment. As a result, a crip reading of Ruth's characterization enriches our understanding of this novel's treatment of disability and female experiences within social and medical models. In *Ruth*, Gaskell merges the social stigma of Ruth's moral fall with the physical pathology of her pregnancy, thus evoking a crip critique of her dual marginalization. Noticeably, Ruth's moral and sexual transgression does not conjure sympathy from the novel's readers, whereas readers are compelled to feel sympathy toward Mr. Benson and Margaret. Disability in Victorian consciousness can (and often does) evoke sympathy. While problematic and damaging, this is not a fatal emotional response. Fallenness, however, does not invoke readers' sympathy, but it is still pathologized as disabling in this novel's social world. When we reread Ruth's characterization as it compares to that of Gaskell's disabled characters (like Mr. Benson) we can see how Gaskell shifts readers' focus toward a crip reading of *Ruth*.

By reading Ruth as the crip figure, we can see how Gaskell draws similarities between Victorian ideals of disability and Victorian ideals about womanhood and the

body. In *Ruth*, the twin structure becomes part of the crippling critique central to Ruth's characterization. In order to understand the twin structure in *Ruth*, however, we first need to reflect on how it appears in *Mary Barton*. If we read the parallels between Margaret and Mary's "twin structure" with that of Ruth and Jemina Bradhaw's, then, we can see how Gaskell positions Ruth as the disabled subject in this novel's twin structure. This representational strategy moves beyond the text of *Ruth* itself and into the larger context of Gaskell's fiction. As a result, Gaskell's use of the "twin structure" theme in *Ruth* positions fallenness as part of the Victorians' social stigmatization and pathologization of women's experiences and bodies.

"The deformed gentleman she had twice before seen": Mr. Benson

As with Margaret Jennings's character in *Mary Barton*, Gaskell presents disability in *Ruth* most clearly with the characterization of Mr. Thurstan Benson. Mr. Benson's character has received little critical attention in Gaskell scholarship, despite the key role he plays in Ruth's plotline. While scholars like Deidre D'Albertis, Mary Poovey, Jill Matus, and Kristine Swenson have thoroughly highlighted the representation of Ruth's character throughout the novel, Ruth gains much of her narrative agency through Mr. Benson's presence at the heart of her story. Indeed, in her biography on Elizabeth Gaskell, Winifred Gérin describes Mr. Benson as the "human agent" who could affect Ruth's redemption (Gérin 132). Given Gérin's reading of Mr. Benson, we can then use Disability Studies and crip theory to further analyze his characterization in the context of the Victorian social problem novel.

Gaskell merges sensory narration and sympathy in order to demonstrate how physical disability is represented in this novel. For Mr. Benson in particular, sensory

details become an important factor in recognizing his disability and humanizing his characterization. After Ruth's "fall," she is seen alone, contemplating suicide, when Mr. Benson first appears: "The sound of rushing water was in her ears to the exclusion of every other noise; her eyes were on the current running swiftly below her feet; and thus she was startled to see a figure close before her on one of the stones, and to hear a voice offering help" (R 60). In these moments of silence, Gaskell unites nondisabled with disabled experience and emotion with understanding. Gaskell brings a deeper sense of humanity to this moment where the novel might collapse upon Ruth's death. Metaphoric, sensory imagery coexists with the disabled body and ultimately, Mr. Benson's voice supersedes the natural imagery. Here, Mr. Benson represents the revolutionary disabled male figure. In *Fictions of Affliction*, Holmes notes, "[Disabled men] offered a way to classify not only the feelings that might be inside people who were disabled, but also the complex emotions that might surge within the nondisabled people who read about, saw or knew them" (Holmes 101). Gaskell layers the emotionally-charged scene with interludes of shared gazes and silence that weave the feelings of both Ruth and Mr. Benson together. This scene is the apex of Mr. Benson's exigency as the agent of change in Ruth's narrative. Mr. Benson represents the heroic figure who quite literally saves Ruth's life.

By presenting Mr. Benson's disability first through Ruth's eyes, Gaskell demonstrates how disability can be formed through perception and how it can also challenge normative ideals of the body. Gaskell notes Ruth's observations with practical word choice when she writes:

[Ruth] looked up and saw a man, who was apparently long past middle life, and of the stature of a dwarf; a second glance accounted for the low height of the speaker, for then she saw he was deformed. As the consciousness of this infirmity came into her mind, it must have told itself in her softened eyes, for a faint flush of colour came into the pale face of the deformed gentleman, as he repeated his words: ‘The water is very rapid, will you take my hand? Perhaps I can help you.’ Ruth accepted the offer, and with this assistance she was across in a moment. (*R* 60-61)

Like Margaret’s logical explanation of her blindness in *Mary Barton*, Ruth’s observations of Mr. Benson appear as a list. She first notices that Mr. Benson’s stature is that of a “dwarf,” and then she sees his “deformity.” Although the language Ruth uses to describe Mr. Benson’s physical appearance is problematic, her initial observations of him offer readers a foundation for understanding his disability. Readers can simultaneously see Mr. Benson through Ruth’s eyes as she gradually gathers information about his physical appearance. In this traumatic scene, Gaskell positions her readers in the subjectivity of the “fallen” woman as readers take on the perspective of Mr. Benson from Ruth’s point of view.

However, Gaskell complicates Mr. Benson’s representation with the language she uses to indicate both Mr. Benson and Ruth’s thoughts in a moment of dual recognition, in which both characters blur the lines between disabled (crip) and able-bodied figures. When Ruth notices Mr. Benson’s “infirmity,” Gaskell writes that “it must have told itself in her softened eyes, for a faint flush of colour came into the pale face of the deformed gentleman” (*R* 60-61). Although we are initially in Ruth’s thoughts at the beginning of this passage when she observes Mr. Benson, Gaskell then moves us into Mr. Benson’s

consciousness so that we can see *both* Ruth's "softened eyes" and Mr. Benson's "faint flush of colour" at the same time. This simultaneous blurring of consciousnesses signals additional layers to Mr. Benson's character development. Unlike the one-sided responses to disability we see in *Jane Eyre* and in *Mary Barton*, where non-disabled characters, like Mary Barton, Will Wilson, or Jane Eyre, observe and react to disabled characters like Margaret Jennings and Mr. Rochester, *Ruth* takes these observations and responses one step further by merging sentimentality and realism together.

Ruth's observations also evoke sympathy in the novel's readers through her attempt to understand Mr. Benson's experience, reminding readers of the cultural and social resonance of disability. Whereas *Mary Barton* attempts to sentimentalize and glamorize Margaret's blindness throughout *Mary Barton*, Ruth's observations of Mr. Benson are rooted in her attempt to understand him rather than to define him. As she continues to examine Mr. Benson, Ruth notices,

She was struck afresh with the mild beauty of the face, though there was something in the countenance which told of the body's deformity, something more and beyond the pallor of habitual ill-health, something of a quick spiritual light in the deep-set eyes, a sensibility about the mouth; but altogether, though a peculiar, it was a most attractive face (*R* 60-61).

The repetition of the word "something" reflects the list that Ruth initially made of Mr. Benson's appearance, while also alerting readers to Mr. Benson's physical alterity without drawing on overly dramatic or emotional language. Though the vagueness of the word "something" moves away from Gaskell's typically ocularcentric descriptors, Ruth's

repetition of the word “something” allows Gaskell’s readers to experience a broader consideration of disability and its literary and real-life meanings and values.

Gaskell’s ambiguous word choice deliberately resists Victorian modes of disability representation. Like Gaskell’s vagueness in naming Ruth’s “fall,” here, it appears that Gaskell’s ambiguity with her use of the word “something” in Ruth’s observations indicates her refusal to confine Mr. Benson’s identity. Though indeed, claiming one’s identity *as disabled* in our contemporary society is powerful, for Gaskell, it would only hinder Mr. Benson’s character development. Given the prominence of ableist and gendered binaries in the Victorian period, Gaskell’s refusal to identify Ruth’s “fall” and in turn, Mr. Benson’s specific physical impairment resists nineteenth-century modes of representation. As Diedre D’Albertis writes in *Dissembling Fictions: Elizabeth Gaskell and the Victorian Social Text*, “In not ‘naming’ her [“fall”], Gaskell works to preserve the uniqueness of Ruth’s story—to insist upon her atypicality—even as she can express it only in a highly conventional language and typology of Christian martyrdom” (D’Albertis 92). Gaskell likewise insists upon Mr. Benson’s agency with the innovative combination of her practical, ambiguous, and sentimental word choice.

In *Ruth*, the blurring of sensational and realistic narrative techniques to represent pain furthers the critical project of crip theory and enables a more generative discussion of Mr. Benson’s characterization. Because pain is often a very real part of disabled experiences, a crip reading of Mr. Benson’s character is important to my argument. As with Gaskell’s fusion of realistic and sentimental sensory details, Mr. Benson’s physical fall reflects dynamic attention to the connection between disability and impairment. This critique of *Ruth* offers ways in which theoretical concepts, like Victorian theories of

“fallenness” and of physical pain can be explored in different historical and literary contexts. Though Ruth’s “fall” is portrayed as a moral one, Mr. Benson’s fall is physical and causes him pain. We can see this when we closely examine the scene of Mr.

Benson’s fall. Gaskell writes:

He could not move as quickly as most men, but he put forth his utmost speed. He followed across the road, on to the rocky common; but as he went along, with his uncertain gait, in the dusk gloaming, he stumbled, and fell over some sharp projecting stone. The acute pain which shot up his back forced a short cry from him; and, when bird and beast are hushed into rest and the stillness of the night is over all, a high-pitched sound, like the voice of pain, is carried far in the quiet air. Ruth, speeding on in her despair, heard the sharp utterance, and stopped suddenly short. It did what no remonstrance could have done; it called her out of herself. (*R* 86)

Sensory details are again noticeable in this scene. Gaskell’s readers are familiar with her use of sound, as this scene reminds us of the “loud-talking” factory girls in *Mary Barton* (*MB* 5).

By “cripping” Mr. Benson’s experience of physical pain, we can illuminate ways forward into a critical awareness of disabled experiences. Gaskell invokes the senses of sight, sound, and physical touch in this passage in which she enables her readers to see, hear, and feel the pain that Mr. Benson experiences. The repetition of the word “pain” when Gaskell references the “acute pain” and the “voice of pain” especially resonates with her readers because they can feel the sharpness of the pain while also hearing it. By hearing the “voice of pain,” Gaskell makes noticeable what would otherwise be

concealed. Indeed, Mr. Benson's fall initiates the pain he feels, likewise, however, it enriches a discussion of disability that includes medical, physical, and emotional realities of impairment that many disabled characters (and disabled people) experience. Kafer suggests a disability praxis that includes *both* disability and impairment. She writes:

the social model with its impairment/disability distinction erases the realities of impairment; in its well-intentioned focus on the disabling effects of society, it overlooks the often-disabling effects of our bodies. People with chronic illness, pain, and fatigue have been among the most critical of the aspect of the social model, rightly noting that social and structural changes will do little to make ones' joints stop aching or to alleviate back pain. Nor will changes in architecture and attitude heal diabetes or cancer or fatigue. Focusing exclusively on disabling barriers, as a strict social model seems to do, renders pain and fatigue irrelevant to the project of disability politics. (Kafer 14)

Gaskell's distinctive use of sensory narration reminds us of the physical and emotional realities disabled people can often experience.

Crip theory is applicable not only to the obviously disabled characters in the text, like Mr. Benson, but it is also useful as we read this novel's non-disabled characters. While Mr. Benson provides a crip reading of physical pain through a disabled character, the importance of physical pain can also be extended to the non-disabled characters throughout the novel, particularly, the women at Mrs. Mason's dress shop. Gaskell resists an overly-inspirational disability trope with Mr. Benson's physical fall and with the subsequent pain he experiences. With her non-disabled characters, like the dressmakers, Gaskell uses pain to draw on readers' sympathy towards their experience. Gaskell's

presumably non-disabled readers will more likely recognize themselves in the dressmakers more than they will in the novel's disabled characters like Mr. Benson, so the purpose of the dressmakers is not to inspire Gaskell's readers but rather to promote a productive sense of empathy.

By analyzing the concrete sensory details Gaskell uses, we can see how *Ruth* imagines new possibilities for narrative methods and literary representations of "crip" bodies in Victorian social problem fiction. In the dress shop, Gaskell describes the condition in which the dressmakers, including Ruth, lived. Like the "unpicturesque fashion" of the factory girls in *Mary Barton*, the dressmakers in *Ruth* advance the anti-picturesque aesthetic of *Ruth's* content (*MB* 5). She writes, "Others stretched themselves into all sorts of postures to relieve the weary muscles; one or two gave vent to all the yawns, coughs, and sneezes that had been pent up so long in the presence of Mrs. Mason. But Ruth Hilton sprang to the large old window, and pressed against it as a bird presses against the bars of its cage" (*R* 5). Like her discussion of the often-gruesome accidents in the factories in *Mary Barton*, Gaskell reveals the unpleasant realities working-class women experienced in *Ruth* through a sensory-filled discussion of the realities of their physical pain. Here, we can see how Gaskell reconfigures the juxtaposition between disability and impairment in the dress shop. The dressmakers' bodies signal the initial representation of physical pain and impairment that we recognize with Mr. Benson and later with Ruth. Moreover, we are also introduced to Ruth in this passage. She is the "caged bird" who becomes the narrative's "fallen" protagonist. Drawing on the imagery of Ruth as the "caged bird" trapped in Mrs. Mason's dress shop, we can see that Ruth is

always already a character in pain just by being a seamstress, and as such, leads us towards a reconsideration of crip figures in Gaskell's narrative project.

“Ruth’s (fictitious) history”: Ruth Hilton/Ruth Denbigh

The ways in which Gaskell represents Ruth's fallenness throughout the novel is even more remarkable than the ways in which she represents the obviously disabled character in the text, Mr. Benson. Ruth's storyline affords some surprising insights when examined via crip theory. I do not mean to imply that Ruth's pregnancy is a disability. Instead, I want to highlight the malleability in the term “crip” and the correlation between the stigmatization of Ruth's status and the conventional Victorian structures of disability and gender (Kafer 20). In turn, the ways in which Ruth is treated in the sociocultural and medical context of the novel work to disable her. Ruth becomes the crip figure with/in her fallenness. She is defined by the Bensons and the Bradshaws as sexually, socially, and pathologically immoral. As Kim explains, “cripping” examines the ways in which able-bodied assumptions and ableist ideologies shape or inform a particular text (Kim 10). By criping Ruth's storyline, we can see how this narrative rereads “fallen” women:

Gaskell wrote *Ruth* precisely in order to counteract categorical descriptions of prostitution, or, more precisely, female sexual conduct. The major point of departure in her fallen woman narrative from earlier versions by other authors was a resolute refusal to conflate sexual transgression with economic exchange. By insisting on the particularity of her heroine's experience, Gaskell positioned herself uneasily between an existing moral code for the regulation of sexual behavior and scientific attempts to anatomize the unchaste woman's social, physical, and psychological milieu. (D'Albertis 75)

Like *Mary Barton*'s resistance to Victorian concepts of blindness and female autonomy, *Ruth* enables us to critique Victorian concepts of "fallenness," womanhood, and the female body.

The Bensons' home is the first indication of Ruth as the cripple figure, wherein her fallenness must be changed in order for her to be socially valuable. Although Mr. Benson has previously saved Ruth from her death, he also proves problematic to Ruth's narrative. In his home, Ruth occupies a precarious social status that thrives on the juxtaposition between fallenness and social decorum. After she moves into the Bensons' home, Ruth gains a new (false) identity in order to avoid the dangers of her "secret" (the realities of her "fall" and her actual identity) being revealed. Faith Benson, Mr. Benson's sister, gives Ruth a new name, Mrs. Denbigh, and falsifies the story of her "history." She remarks to Ruth, "'Then, let us call you by my mother's name,' said Miss Benson, tenderly. 'She would have—But I'll talk to you about my mother some other time. Let me call you Mrs Denbigh. It will do very well, too. People will think you are a distant relation'" (*R* 116). Like *Mary Barton*'s grappling with the "secret" of Margaret's blindness, the Bensons' desire to conceal and change Ruth's identity further magnifies her status as the cripple figure in the text.

A cripple reading of Ruth's new identity as the "young widow," Mrs. Denbigh, highlights the damaging ways in which Victorians conceptualized female beauty and moral value. Ruth's physical appearance is entirely transformed, including cutting her hair "'that was fitter for a bride in lawful matrimony than for such as her'" (*R* 131). Ruth must take on this false identity in order to recover an identity that is in accordance with Victorian social values. As Kristine Swenson remarks, "Though the Bensons 'rescue'

Ruth and bring her into their home, they force upon this beautiful, lively, and surprisingly innocent woman the identity of an ascetic and celibate widow” (Swenson 31). The obscurity we have seen from earlier in the novel disappears in order to reaffirm Victorian notions of proper femininity. In conferring to falsify Ruth’s history, the Bensons allow Ruth’s identity to remain stigmatized within the dominant social discourse and further pathologize Ruth’s “fall.”

In Ruth’s pregnancy, the metaphoric sensory details obscure Ruth’s “disabled” body and she is not given visibility in the text. Whereas previously Gaskell uses sensory narration to evoke a mutual understanding and a realistic portrayal of physical disability in Ruth and Mr. Benson’s initial meeting, Gaskell does not include these important details after Ruth is given her new identity. Moreover, Ruth’s new bourgeoisie identity saves her from doing the work that is literally painful. This is especially apparent in the scenes leading up to the birth of Ruth’s child, Leonard. We see beautiful, even ethereal nature scenes that mark the progress of Ruth’s pregnancy. Gaskell’s use of imagery is especially compelling because of the mid-century debates about medicine and gender, especially for women in labor. Mary Poovey’s *Uneven Developments* explores the controversy when she writes,

The conceptual emergence of hysteria from childbearing, like the putative emergence of sexuality under anesthesia, reveals the contradictory implications of this representation of women. On the one hand, representing woman as an inherently unstable female body authorized ceaseless medical monitoring and control. But on the other hand, this representation of woman as always requiring

control produced an image that always already exceeded the control that medicine could exercise. (Poovey 37-38)

By using natural imagery to describe the progress of Ruth's labor, Gaskell conceals Ruth's physical and emotional pain and metaphorically controls Ruth's "unstable" body.

Through natural, metaphorical imagery, Gaskell reinstates Victorian notions of "acceptable" forms of motherhood and further casts Ruth as the cripple figure. In order to mark the progress of Ruth's pregnancy, Gaskell writes,

The yellow and crimson leaves came floating down on the still October air; November followed, bleak and dreary; it was more cheerful when the earth put on her beautiful robe of white, which covered up all the grey naked stems, and loaded the leaves of the hollies and evergreens each with its burden of feathery snow. (*R* 142)

Indeed, this passage could be read as another moment in which Gaskell purposefully uses ambiguous language to resist Victorian social values and rewrite traditional narratives of fallen women. However, unlike the subversion of norms with the vague word choice surrounding Mr. Benson's impairment, in choosing to hide the realities of Ruth's pregnancy behind natural imagery and colorful hues like "yellow," "crimson," "white," and "grey," Gaskell seeks a substitute for the reality of Ruth's sexual transgression (the birth of her child) that would be more appealing to her readers.

The absence of realistic, sensory narration in favor of ethereal nature imagery anesthetizes Gaskell's readers and denies Ruth the generative possibilities that a cripple reading of her character allows. In a moment that almost requires concrete language, and in a scene where sensory narration would be incredibly relevant, it seems strange that

Gaskell would avoid the overt sensory details that have previously been fundamental to her narrative project. Gaskell moves quickly from this pleasant scene of changing seasons to the moment when Leonard, Ruth's child, is born. Gaskell again uses ethereal imagery to signal Ruth's labor and her delivery of Leonard; however, in doing so, she removes the realities of childbirth. Suddenly, we see that "The earth was still 'hiding her guilty front with innocent snow' when a little baby was laid by the side of the pale white mother" (*R* 142). With words like "guilty," "innocent snow," and "pale white mother," Gaskell makes clear to her readers that she is using this imagery as an innuendo for Ruth's sexual transgression and her subsequent labor and delivery. It is also important to note here that at the time Gaskell writes *Ruth*, she has four daughters, so she would have been well aware of the physical pain involved in childbirth. Yet in choosing to hide this scene behind the guise of natural imagery, Gaskell limits Ruth's character development and reinstates social, cultural, and medical stigma associated with a very real female experience: motherhood.

After the birth of her son, Leonard, Ruth becomes further removed from the narrative and in her place, Leonard can be read as the cripple figure. The trend toward abstract imagery (or downright misrepresentation) that starts at Leonard's birth is continued on as a way to protect the child from his mother's pathologized and stigmatized status. Perhaps what is more significant than "Ruth's (fictitious) history," is the Bensons' key motivation behind obscuring her past: Leonard. Ruth believes that her new identity is necessary, as Kristine Swenson points out, "Living with the Bensons, Ruth internalizes society's judgment of her sexual sinfulness" (Swenson 31). Ruth's identity is now acknowledged Mrs. Denbigh not only to reflect a more socially

recognizable and valuable status, but also as a means of creating a new future for her child, a future in which her status as “fallen” will not affect him. This is especially apparent when Mr. Benson remarks to Faith, ““You yourself suggested she should be considered a widow, for the child’s sake”” (R 111). Mr. Benson continues, ““If it were not for the child, I would tell all; but the world is so cruel. You don’t know how this apparent necessity for falsehood pains me, Faith, or you would not invent all these details, which are so many additional lies”” (R 133). Such a reimagining is critical to our understanding of crip theory. As Kafer points out, “A better future, in other words, is one that excludes disability and disabled bodies: indeed, it is the very absence of disability that signals this better future [...] the figure of the disabled person, especially the disabled fetus or child, becomes the symbol of this undesired future” (Kafer 11). Indeed, Leonard is *not* a “disabled fetus or child”; however, his status as an “illegitimate” child shares similar parallels with the unwanted future for a disabled child (R 107). By crippling Leonard’s characterization, we can gain a clearer understanding of the damaging ways in which the nineteenth century designates value to social, cultural, and political meanings of people.

In *Ruth*, Gaskell directly connects her Unitarian charity work to the narrative of “fallenness,” solidifying Ruth and Leonard’s statuses as the novel’s crip figures. For example, Gaskell was one of the reformers attempting to bring bourgeoisie values and practices to working class women’s pregnancies. What a crip reading of Ruth and Leonard offers, then, is a consideration of the implications of Gaskell’s charity work that informs her representational methods in the text. Whereas recognition and sensory detail have previously been an important factor in representations and understandings of identity across *Ruth*, Gaskell removes this information from the narrative after Leonard is

born. Following his birth, Leonard is initially marked as an undesired child when Faith Benson at first refuses to acknowledge him. Ruth asks Faith, "'Won't you look at him?' Said Ruth. 'He is so pretty!' Miss Benson had a strange reluctance to see him. To Ruth, in spite of all that had come and gone, she was reconciled—nay, more, she was deeply attached, but over the baby there hung a cloud of shame and disgrace. Poor little creature! her heart was closed against it—firmly, as she thought" (*R* 143). In the first part of this passage, Gaskell presents us with both Ruth and Faith's thoughts simultaneously. We note that Ruth feels "reconciled" after the birth of her son, while we are also aware that Faith cannot recognize Leonard's presence. However, Gaskell shifts the majority of this scene to Faith's consciousness through her use of exclamation points and dashes. Faith's concerns about Leonard are then solidified in her refusal to look at him. As a result, the narrative continues to produce a crip reading, in which the novel's disabled and non-disabled characters create and change identity formation across social, medical, and gendered Victorian structures.

Reprising the "Twin Structure": Jemina Bradshaw

As part of a critique of norms, a "cripping" critique of Gaskell's "twin structure" highlights the social conventions that designate Ruth's status as the crip figure. With her new identity as Mrs. Denbigh, Ruth endeavors to support herself and Leonard. To do so, she becomes a governess for the Bensons' neighbors, the Bradshaws. However, complicating Ruth's new career is the eldest Bradshaw, Jemina. The "twin structure" we are familiar with from *Mary Barton* is once again reimagined in this section of *Ruth*. In this case, however, Gaskell pairs Ruth and Jemina Bradshaw as the novel's "twins." The two characters resemble this narrative structure because of their "distinctly different

physical, emotional, and marital futures” (Homes 37). However, like in *Mary Barton*, Gaskell’s use of this structure is innovative. In fact, Gaskell is remarkable for her reprisal of this narrative technique across most of her novels. We will see the twin structure used in *North and South* (1855) with the parallels between Bessy Higgins and Mrs. Hale, and then later, Gaskell applies this structure to *Sylvia’s Lovers* (1864) with Charley Kinraid and Philip Hepburn. For Jemina and Ruth’s “twin structure” plotlines, though, Gaskell enmeshes pathos and female agency in order to explore the dual structure that reappears with Ruth and Jemina.

By juxtaposing the crip figure (Ruth) and the normative figure (Jemina), Gaskell offers distinct attention to how these female characters think, feel, act, and react invites a reimagination of this narrative strategy. As a means of illustrating the emotional excess commonly found in characters within the literary Victorian marriage plot, Gaskell reveals the twin structure via Jemina’s jealousy towards Ruth. Like Mary’s envy about Margaret’s ability to sing, her financial status, her career, and her romance with Will Wilson, Jemina is incredibly resentful toward Ruth. Additionally, like Mary and Margaret, both Ruth and Jemina are almost the same age. Although initially Jemina tells Ruth that she wishes to be “taught” as a “pupil” of Ruth’s akin to her younger siblings, she soon becomes envious of the new governess. This is especially apparent when Jemina thinks:

The jealous dislike which Jemina was allowing to grow up in her heart against Ruth was, as she thought, never shown in word or deed. She was cold in manner, because she could not be hypocritical, but her words were polite and kind in purport; and she took pains to make her actions the same as formerly. But rule and line may

measure out the figure of a man; it is the soul that gives it life; and there was no soul, no inner meaning, breathing out in Jemina's actions. Ruth felt the change acutely. (*R* 218)

Gaskell underscores Jemina's jealousy by divulging her thoughts. However, the end of the passage reveals Ruth's observations as she reacts to Jemina's behavior. By moving from Jemina's point of view to Ruth's, readers can see and actually feel Jemina's attitude toward Ruth and understand Ruth's emotions toward Jemina. In fusing pathos with the details of characters' inner thoughts significantly complicates the "twin structure," leading readers towards a comparison between Victorian conceptualizations of class, gender, and social status.

Gaskell charges *Ruth's* "twin structure" with pathos in order to intensify the contention between Ruth and Jemina as she has previously done with Mary and Margaret. Secrecy and revelation categorize the "twin structure" between Ruth and Jemina just as with Mary and Margaret in *Mary Barton*. Jemina's jealousy soon turns to bitterness and anger when she learns about Ruth's "secret" history and her actual identity as Ruth Hilton. Here, we again see Gaskell complicating and complementing the "twin structure" she pioneers in *Mary Barton*. Jemina is the type of person who social norms dictate will not encounter such stories as Ruth's. In turn, Gaskell's realism conflicts with social norms, and the novel moves away from Gaskell's realist practice in *Mary Barton*. Because Jemina hears of Ruth's "history" second-hand, the emotions she feels toward Ruth escalate. She attempts to piece together this mystery when she thinks:

Could it be false? Could there be two Ruth Hiltons? She went over every morsel of evidence. It could not be. She knew that Mrs Denbigh's former name had been

Hilton. She had heard her speak causally, but charily, of having lived in Fordham. She knew she had been in Wales but a short time before she made her appearance in Eccleston. There was no doubt of the identity. Into the middle of Jemina's pain and horror at the afternoon's discovery, there came a sense of the power which the knowledge of the secret gave her over Ruth; but this was no relief, only an aggravation of the regret with which Jemina looked back on her state of ignorance.

(*R* 286)

Like the list Ruth makes of Mr. Benson's appearance when she first meets him, Jemina's thoughts also seem like a list. Yet whereas Ruth's list was a step-by-step observation of Mr. Benson, Jemina's consciousness is filled with emotion. The use of question marks and the short sentences that follow Jemina combing through "every morsel of evidence" bring bitter tones to the surface.

By pairing Jemina and Ruth as the "twins" in this novel, Gaskell initially imagines very different outcomes for the "fallen" woman and the bourgeois woman. Because Jemina represents Gaskell's own class, she similarly shares readers' expectations of Ruth, especially after learning of Ruth's "fallenness." Jemina's bourgeoisie class shapes how she reacts to Ruth's "secret," in which she feels a sense of power and control over Ruth. Instead of responding with sadness at the weight of Ruth's "secret," Gaskell expects her readers to have an adverse response to Ruth's "lack" of social and moral class. In a rush of emotion, Jemina finally details Ruth's history to Mr. Bradshaw when she states,

"I have hated her, and my hatred was only quenched into contempt—not contempt now, dear Ruth—dear Ruth"—(this was spoken with infinite softness and

tenderness, and in spite of her father's fierce eyes and passionate gesture)—"I heard what you have learnt now, father, weeks and weeks ago—a year it may be, all sin, and I might have spoken of it, and told it there and then, if I had not been afraid that it was from no good motive I should act in so doing, but to gain a way to the desire of my own jealous heart." (*R* 297)

From Jemina's perspective, we learn to interpret "fallenness" as destructive and deviant. Jemina's emotional revelation of Ruth's true identity works to shape readers' opinions about her.

This use of medical rhetoric to describe Ruth's character further enables a "cripping" critique, as her "fall" is representative of the perceived contamination and danger of female sexual transgression and "fallen" women's bodies. For example, after Jemina divulges Ruth's "secret" to her father, Mr. Bradshaw, Ruth's identity is defined as threatening and pathological. Ruth is then described by Mr. Bradshaw as "sickly" when he exclaims, "If there be one sin I hate—I utterly loathe—more than all others, it is wantonness. It includes all other sins. It is but of a piece that you should have come with your sickly, hypocritical face, imposing upon us all" (*R* 296). The Bradshaws fear that Ruth's status will contaminate their home. Ruth's "fallenness" could contaminate, destroy, or disable the Bradshaws' social standing at any moment. Mr. Bradshaw's metaphors of Ruth's "contagion" perhaps even foreshadow the very real contagion of typhus fever at the novel's conclusion. In order to "cure" the Bradshaw family of Ruth's contaminating "fallenness," she must be completely removed from her station as governess in order to prevent the spread of more contagion.

Despite the fear, contempt, and contamination associated with Ruth's character, Gaskell challenges the "twin structure" dynamic by generating sympathy towards Ruth (perhaps surprisingly) through Jeimina. As a result, Jeimina's character helps readers to develop empathy towards Ruth and view the crip figure in anew. Jeimina and Ruth's friendship is especially apparent at the outset of Ruth's desire to be a "sick-nurse." Ruth says to Jeimina, "I have got a plan that makes me so happy! I have not told any one yet" (R 240). Given that Jeimina is the first person to hear of Ruth's goals—her new "secret,"—we can see how Gaskell is exploring the intricate dynamics of the twin structure. After Ruth reveals her desire to become a sick nurse, Jeimina's reaction continues to forecast the two characters' very different futures as part of the twin structure. Jeimina exclaims, "'You? A sick nurse? My dear Ruth, I don't think you are fitted for it!'" (R 241). It is precisely because of Ruth's "contaminated" status that makes her suitable for sick-nursing. Jeimina thinks that Ruth is *too* educated for this form of unskilled work, which, before nursing becomes professionalized in the late 1850s, was regarded as dangerous labor undertaken by women in the working class. However, like Gaskell's inversion of gendered and ableist expectations in *Mary Barton* with Margaret's career and financial stability, she similarly blurs the boundaries between class, gender, ability, and social decorum with Ruth's decision to serve as a sick-nurse.

Gender, Medicine, and Crip Theory

Toward the novel's conclusion, Ruth finds respectability within the dominant social (and medical) order by succeeding at a career in sick nursing, wherein she now occupies a socially legible and valuable space in which she can be redeemed. Despite Jeimina's, and perhaps the readers', expectations of Ruth's sick-nursing, Ruth, like

Margaret, ends up achieving her goals. In this regard, Gaskell accomplishes what Kafer describes as “imagining disability futures differently” (Kafer 12). In fact, Ruth is so successful that her sick-nursing is the focus of the final chapters of the novel. Ruth’s service as a nurse, much like Gaskell’s use of the twin structure, precedes and even anticipates social and literary conventions. Winifred Gérin points out that Gaskell composes *Ruth* two years before the major cholera outbreak of 1854, where Florence Nightingale, a “future friend” of Gaskell’s, began her work as a nurse (Gérin 134). Furthermore, in *Health, Medicine, and Society in Victorian England*, Mary Wilson Carpenter explains, “Before Nightingale, women who wished to become nurses simply learned by doing. The heroine of Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Ruth* (1853) exemplifies this practice” (Carpenter 168). Ruth’s sick-nursing considers the possibilities of “fallen” women obtaining agency, yet more complicatedly, *Ruth* rewrites the narrative of the crip figure with Ruth’s redemptive nursing.

As a potential way to show how disability is a useful lens for a multitude of characters, Ruth’s plot and narrative development serve as ways to read social conventions more broadly in a cultural context via crip theory. Kristine Swenson explains that Ruth’s nursing is a resolution to her moral “fall.” She writes, “Most important for Gaskell’s redemption plot, by her nursing Ruth is absolved of past sin in the eyes of the community, and the shame of Leonard’s illegitimacy is wiped away” (Swenson 30). Although Ruth’s sick-nursing can initially be read as a positive and innovative reimagining of her future, it actually problematizes the novel’s narrative project. Kafer argues, “The presence of disability, then, signals something else: a future that bears too many traces of the ills of the present to be desirable. In this framework, a future with

disability is a future no one wants” (Kafer 11). Gaskell has been playing with the possible outcomes of Ruth’s future since the beginning of the novel. We first see Ruth as the “caged bird” looking out the window of Mrs. Mason’s dress shop, imagining alternate possibilities for herself, then, we see Ruth contemplating suicide, in which she sees no future for herself, then, Ruth enters the Bensons’ home and her future changes entirely as she becomes the widowed Mrs. Denbigh, where she works at the Bradshaws’ home and raises Leonard separate from her “secret” past, and finally, Ruth becomes a sick-nurse, in which her “fallen” status becomes erased with her redemptive sacrifice of serving others. In waiving Ruth’s “secret” history through her nursing, Gaskell renews a discussion of social and cultural conventions as they inform the cripple figure.

In turn, Ruth’s sick-nursing shifts the tone of the novel’s final chapters from a realist social problem novel to almost that of a Victorian melodrama, in which tragedy is the fulcrum of the novel’s conclusion. Gaskell begins the conclusion of *Ruth* with a scene of real contagion: typhus fever. Unlike the innovative fusion of empathy and realism at the novel’s outset, the epidemic at the novel’s close reimagines the narrative as sentimental. Gaskell narrates,

Old people tell of certain years when typhus fever swept over the country like a pestilence; years that bring back the remembrance of deep sorrow—refusing to be comforted—to many a household; and which those whose beloved passed through the fiery time unscathed, shrink from recalling: for great and tremulous was the anxiety—miserable the constant watching for evil symptoms; and beyond the threshold of home a dense cloud of depression hung over society at large. It seemed as if the alarm was proportionate to the previous light-heartedness of fancied

security—and indeed it was so; for, since the days of King Belshazzar, the solemn decrees of Doom have ever seemed most terrible when they awe into silence the merry revelers of life. So it was this year to which I come in the progress of my story. (*R* 371)

Indeed, Gaskell draws on this fictional event as she has previously done with her characters like Mr. Benson and Ruth: from her own real-life experiences. The typhus outbreak highlighted in this passage derives from Gaskell's "information on the earlier epidemic" (Gérin 132). However, the melodrama in this scene escalates through the sensory details she provides. Here, I would like to draw a distinction between the realistic vision Gaskell uses at the beginning of *Ruth* and the sentimental and sensationalistic scenes toward the novel's conclusion. Like the inhabitants of this fictional town of Eccleston, readers are now concerned with the anxiety of typhus fever and they too must be "constant[ly] watching for evil symptoms." Gaskell's personification of the "depression" that "hung over society at large" pulls at the emotions of her readers. Gaskell ends this passage with first-person narration and asserts to her audience that she intends to use this moment to introduce the novel's final events. The emotionally-charged scene coupled with Ruth's decision to serve in the fever-ward paves the way for the novel's melodramatic conclusion (*R* 375).

With a narrative closure that draws upon readers' sympathy through melodramatic tropes, Ruth's nursing career capitalizes on her new status: she is no longer the text's crip figure. The sensationalistic sensory details that Gaskell uses in her description of the epidemic strengthens the novel's melodramatic final moments. What is more, Ruth decides to not only assist the fever-stricken victims during the outbreak, but she is also

determined to care for Henry Donne/Henry Bellingham, the father of her son, Leonard. Gaskell emphasizes Ruth's sacrificial nursing in her care for Mr. Bellingham, which eventually leads to Ruth's tragic death. Ruth's care for Mr. Bellingham is especially noticeable with Gaskell's use of silence and stillness. Again, as with Ruth's first meeting with Mr. Benson, Gaskell employs these sensory details. However, unlike Ruth and Mr. Benson's first meeting, Gaskell uses these details to create an overly-sympathetic and overtly dramatic scene that troubles the novel's narrative progress. She writes, "Ruth was there, constant and still, intent upon watching the symptoms, and acting according to them, in obedience to Mr Davis's directions. She had never left the room. Every sense had been strained in watching—every power of thought or judgment had been kept on the full stretch" (*R* 389). What differentiates this passage from the earlier scenes of silence and sight is that Gaskell uses third-person omniscient narration. We can only observe Ruth caring for Mr. Bellingham through this perspective. Gaskell pays particular attention to developing Ruth's caregiving persona. She is still, silent, and watchful of her patient. Swenson argues that this is typical of a "Victorian melodrama," in which "it is tempting to read the typhus episode merely as a convenient way to contrive martyrdom" (Swenson 23).

Previously, with Mr. Benson's characterization, *Ruth* has resisted the overly-inspirational sentimentality commonly found in many Victorian novels about disability; however, the novel's conclusion falls into this trope with the character I have just done a cripp reading of: Ruth. Arguably one of the most widely recognized and sentimentalized moment in the entire novel is the final "heart-wrenching deathbed scene" (Swenson 23). In Ruth's final moments, Gaskell uses sensory narration of sight, sound, and

physical/emotional touch/feeling to move her readers from productive empathy to problematic sympathy. Like the many cringe-worthy moments that occur throughout *Mary Barton*, Gaskell also implements this overly-sentimental narrative practice in the infamous “death scene” in *Ruth*. Gaskell writes,

There [Ruth] lay in the attic-room in which her baby had been born, her watch over him kept, her confession to him made; and now she was stretched on the bed in utter helplessness, softly gazing at vacancy with her open, unconscious eyes, from which all the depth of their meaning had fled, and all they told was of a sweet, child-like insanity within. The watchers could not touch her with their sympathy, or come near her in her dim world;--so, mutely, but looking at each other from time to time with tearful eyes, they took a poor comfort from the one evident fact that though lost and gone astray, she was happy and at peace. (*R* 393)

In this scene, Gaskell employs third-person omniscient narration to provide her readers with an aerial view of Ruth lying in the attic-room. We are completely removed from Ruth’s consciousness. Whereas previously, we could simultaneously experience what Ruth saw, Gaskell now fixes our attention to her lifeless gaze. We see her lying still and silent while the “watchers” surrounding her look upon her helplessly and silently. Gaskell notes that their sympathy cannot “touch her,” which again reiterates the importance of touch throughout the novel with Mr. Benson’s experience of physical pain. This time, though, the sense of touch is removed and the realities of disability/impairment are no longer accessible. This passage is loaded with sensory details that intensifies the melodramatic project of the novel’s conclusion.

As in *Mary Barton*, the ending of *Ruth* weakens the progressive potential of the rest of the narrative. Gaskell moves us from an exterior point of view of Ruth to an interior perspective when she describes the deterioration of Ruth's dying body/mind. What is perhaps even more compelling about the infamous "death scene" is that Gaskell intentionally uses disability rhetoric again to define Ruth's characterization. She describes her as having a "sweet, child-like insanity within" (*R* 393). This childlike narrative is one that we have seen before, in the conclusion of *Mary Barton*, as it again resurfaces here. By characterizing Ruth's speech in her final moments as "child-like insanity," Gaskell imposes a medical view of Ruth upon her readers, one that renders Ruth as an object of pity. As with Mary and Jem's child's "imperfect way" of speaking at the end of *Mary Barton*, Ruth's broken language sentimentalizes Ruth's narrative and negates her agency (*MB* 417). Gaskell continues to highlight Ruth's final moments in the text when she writes,

But now she sang continually, very soft and low. She went from one childish ditty to another without let or pause, keeping a strange sort of time with her pretty fingers, as they closed and unclosed themselves upon the counterpane. She never looked at any one with the slightest glimpse of memory or intelligence in her face; no, not even at Leonard. (*R* 393).

Given Gaskell's charity and reform work, she would have presumably watched the sickbeds of people in fever-deliriums, among other illnesses. In this scene, Gaskell erases the silence and stillness that the novel's readers and Ruth's "watchers" noticed earlier. These sensory details are removed with Ruth's physical and mental decline. She is described as childlike and even "insane" through her nonsensical singing. Gaskell uses

words like “strange,” “memory,” and “intelligence” to exemplify Ruth’s “lack” of physical and mental stability. By examining the disability rhetoric central to Ruth’s characterization throughout the novel and especially in her final moments in the text, we can extrapolate further how Disability Studies and a “cripping” critique enhances our understanding of the novel’s broader considerations of “fallenness” in the Victorian period and Victorian social problem novel.

Conclusion: An Extension of Crip Theory?

Crip Studies and crip theory provide a valuable framework in which we can approach Gaskell’s second social problem novel. Alison Kafer proposes a political/relational model of disability in order to expand upon and complicate the medical/social model in Disability Studies. She writes,

a political/relational framework recognizes the difficulty in determining who is included in the term “disabled,” refusing any assumption that it refers to a discrete group of particular people with certain similar essential qualities. On the contrary, the political/relational model of disability sees disability as a site of questions rather than firm definitions. (Kafer 15-16)

Ultimately, Crip theory and a “cripping” critique of *Ruth* examine how Disability Studies can be mobilized in different ways. A crip reading of *Ruth* is more productive than a medical/social model reading of the social problem novel because it troubles the binary understanding of disability located in the medical/social model and in the social problem novel. It is a means to subvert Victorian “norms” while also addressing applications of a crip reading through disabled and non-disabled characters alike.

In *Mary Barton*, I argue that we should be doing Disability Studies readings of Victorian social problem novels because the social model tells us that disability is a *social “problem”* worthy of attention. Then, in *Ruth*, I assert that a “cripping” critique is necessary in order to include the social and medical implications of disability/impairment. Crip theory takes the next step in that it addresses both disability and impairment outside of characters who are clearly identifiable as disabled. Mr. Benson offers a crip reading of a disabled character which establishes why Crip Theory is valuable, then in exploring the characterization of Ruth, the dressmakers, Jemina Bradshaw, Faith Benson, and Leonard develops how crip theory can be used to read non-disabled characters. Therefore, we can extend the critical project of Gaskell’s social problem fiction. As a result, crip theory allows us to interrogate and understand the complex ways in which the social problem novel as a genre and Elizabeth Gaskell as a novelist subvert cultural conventions.

CHAPTER THREE: *NORTH AND SOUTH* AS THE LITERARY MEDICAL MODEL

“What this novel suggests is, at best, a series of uneasy marriages and uncertain alliances, between fiction, romance, and reform.”

Hilary Schor, *Scheherezade in the Marketplace:
Elizabeth Gaskell and the Victorian Novel*

The Politics of Pathos: The (Romantic) Social Problem Novel

North and South (1853) leads us toward a more complex consideration of disability as the representations of its three central female characters, Margaret Hale, Bessy Higgins, and Mrs. Hale, challenge our understandings of disability, illness, and able-bodiedness. At the novel’s outset, readers are initially presented with a more conventional approach to disability through the friendship between Bessy Higgins and Margaret. However, by the novel’s close, readers are provided a new framework for approaching disability through the representations of Mrs. Hale and Margaret. Following *North and South*’s narrative trajectory, then, we can see how this novel may initially remind readers of Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* and Gaskell’s first novel, *Mary Barton*. Both novels are especially invested in non-disabled characters’ well-meaning, but problematic, reactions to disability. For example, when Rochester worries that Jane will be repulsed by his newly disabled appearance, he tells her, “I thought you would be revolted, Jane, when you saw my arm, and my cicatrized visage” (Bronte 503). Rochester’s claim reinforces conventional stereotypes that Victorian narratives about disability often suggest. In *Jane Eyre*, Jane’s viewpoint overshadows the perspective of the disabled character. *North and South* similarly replicates this perspective by primarily privileging Margaret Hale’s narrative, point of view, and character development. By comparing Margaret’s characterization with Jane’s, we can see how Gaskell’s

understanding of disability regresses rather than progresses. Consequently, *North and South*'s beginning chapters resort to more conventional Victorian concepts of disabled female characters in Victorian literature.

In *North and South*, Margaret's characterization initially reminds us of a medical model approach to disability, especially as it is conveyed through her relationship with Bessy Higgins. Margaret might be considered as a revision of Mary Barton because of her desire to help and care for others, namely, Bessy Higgins and later, Mrs. Hale. Like Jane's perspective at the conclusion of *Jane Eyre*, Mary's reaction to Margaret Jennings's blindness is similarly problematic, and Margaret Hale also follows this initial response. One example of this is when Mary first learns about Margaret Jennings's blindness. Her immediate reaction is sympathy, then, she wants to help Margaret "overcome the evil" of her blindness (*MB* 50). Mary's instinctual reaction relies upon assumptions about disability that are often rooted in medical model thinking: disability as an individual tragedy, disability as a personal and social burden, and disability as needing a cure. Margaret Hale extends this convention through her emotional response to Bessy's illness in *North and South*. Margaret immediately takes up the responsibility of Bessy's caregiver, rather than her friend. Like Mary, Margaret upholds Victorian conventions of disability and ability. Her caretaking grounds *North and South*'s narrative in nineteenth-century literary conventions that bring to the fore the medical model of disability.

However, Margaret's characterization tasks Gaskell's readers to reconsider their own social and cultural places by taking a closer look at the relationship between the bourgeois and the working class. What differentiates Margaret Hale from Mary Barton, though, is her position within the bourgeois class rather than the working class. Gaskell's

fiction often dissolves class distinctions in order to connect her readers to the content and characters in each novel. She has previously achieved this through the unlikely friendship between Jemina Bradshaw and Ruth Hilton in *Ruth*. Margaret continues this narrative technique with her caregiving friendship to Bessy. Thomas Fair suggests that the relationship between Margaret and Bessy highlights the critical intervention that Gaskell's novels often make in Victorian fiction:

Following up on an invitation, Margaret also sets aside her elevated sensibilities, as well as her class distinctions, and journeys into the working-class section of Milton Northern, specifically, to the home of Bessy Higgins. Margaret's personal interaction, primarily as a caregiver with the Higgins family and later the Boucher family, provides intimate knowledge of working-class conditions atypical for a young woman of her social class. Margaret's movement within and without gender norms gains her firsthand experience and expanded understanding of the industrial conflict and establishes her as a more independent and influential character. (Fair 224)

Through the merging of class boundaries, *North and South* overturns common Victorian narrative and character conventions that it often upholds. Through her relationship to Bessy, Margaret is able to gain an understanding of the broader implications of working-class conditions. Gaskell connects her readers' presumably bourgeois social standing with that of Margaret's, and as a result, Gaskell's readers can also gain an understanding of these dangerous social environments. Despite Margaret's compatibility with Gaskell's bourgeois readers, however, her perspective on disability cannot move beyond medical model modes of thinking.

Consequently, in *North and South*, female friendships are first formed through pathology rather than genuine connection. Gaskell uses pathos to emphasize the medicalized relationship between Bessy and Margaret. As an example, upon first meeting the Higgins family, Margaret soon visits Bessy at her home, where Margaret quickly assumes the role of Bessy's caretaker:

Margaret shrunk, out of sympathy with poor Bessy, who had sat down on the first chair, as if completely tired out with her walk. Margaret asked the sister for a cup of water, and while she ran to fetch it (knocking down the fire-irons, and tumbling over a chair in her way), she unloosed Bessy's bonnet strings, to relieve her catching breath. (NS 91)

Bessy's existence in the novel is only relative to her medicalized relationship to Margaret, which is deeply problematic. The urgency of this scene relies on Margaret's response to Bessy's physical illness, rather than on the realities of Bessy's tuberculosis. By rushing to Bessy's aid, Margaret encourages readers to privilege the perspective of the able-bodied female and to pity "poor Bessy." Margaret's hastened sympathy drives forward the pathologized representation of disability in *North and South*. For Bessy, medical intervention comes from her friendship with Margaret Hale. Margaret soon takes on the role of a medical professional within her caretaking companionship with Bessy. Margaret evaluates Bessy and assesses what could help her feel better, eventually deciding that picturesque details and pathos-filled stories could have curative value.

Gaskell's use of the picturesque in *North and South* is another example of a common narrative convention about disability, one in which picturesque details hide disabled realities behind metaphoric language. Though Margaret may not actually think

that her scenic details may actually cure Bessy, Disability Studies allows us to bring into critical view the impact that these descriptions have on Bessy's and Margaret's relationship. Indeed, the picturesque may have calming effects, however, Margaret's idyllic stories are a placebo rather than an actual cure for Bessy's illness. This moment may remind us of *Ruth*, wherein Gaskell decides to use picturesque details to convey Ruth's labor and delivery. In *North and South*, Gaskell especially engages with the picturesque when Bessy asks Margaret to describe her experiences living in Helstone. She asks Margaret, "'Tell me about it,' said Bessy. 'I like to hear speak of the country and trees, and such like things.' She leant back and shut her eye and crossed her hands over her breast, laying at perfect rest, as if to receive all the ideas Margaret could suggest" (NS 101). Bessy's request for Margaret to tell her tales of Helstone highlights what agency Gaskell gives to Bessy's character development. Indeed, Bessy's wish to hear Margaret's stories is one of the most formative moments in their relationship. Moreover, Margaret's stories are enjoyable for Bessy to hear; the pretty language provides Bessy with some peace and comfort from the realities of her illness.

However, Margaret's narration of Helstone upholds the medicalization of disability because Bessy cannot—and will never be able to—experience or imagine the picturesque landscape of the South. Bessy is seen "laying at perfect rest"; a passive receptacle for Margaret's ineffective anecdotes. Margaret continues to describe Helstone when she replies to Bessy:

"Oh, Bessy, I loved the home we have left so dearly! I wish you could see it. I cannot tell you half its beauty. There are great trees standing all about it, with their

branches stretching long and level, and making a deep shade of rest ever at noonday.” (NS 102)

Although Margaret’s goal through her stories is not to medically cure Bessy and to instead make her happy and feel better, the picturesque language only further pathologizes Bessy. From *Mary Barton* to *Ruth*, Gaskell has previously explored the myriad of ways in which we can envision disability differently, though not always progressively, through the advent of cure. Margaret Jennings’s medical “cure” for her blindness first introduces us to one example of cure. Then, Ruth’s death from typhus fever is another example of the pathologization of disability. Both of these examples erase disability in some way. In *North and South*, the failure of Margaret’s picturesque stories to medically cure Bessy’s illness reveals the instability of the romantic narrative structure to uphold Victorian concepts of disability.

Gaskell removes sentimentality from Bessy’s death in *North and South* entirely and instead, Gaskell reveals Bessy’s death through the comments of other characters in the novel. What distinguishes Bessy’s death from Gaskell’s other social problem novels, like Ruth’s death from typhus fever in *Ruth*, is the way in which Bessy’s passing is noticeably minimized in comparison to other characters’ final moments. Gaskell has previously used death as a way to conclude characters’ narratives, but she has typically done so through pathos and sentimentality. Readers may remember Ruth’s dramatic death at the end of *Ruth*; moreover, readers may also anticipate Philip’s sentimental death-scene at the end of *Sylvia’s Lovers*. In *North and South*, Margaret, and readers, are first made aware of Bessy’s death from Dixon, the Hales’ servant when she explains to Margaret, “That young woman you go to see—Higgins I mean. Well! She died this

morning” (NS 222). This one sentence ends Bessy’s character and plot development altogether. Gaskell’s descriptions of Bessy’s death are so removed from any emotional appeal that the novel’s characters and its readers can easily overlook Bessy’s presence in the novel. In her death, Bessy is not even named; she is simply noted as the “young woman,” “Higgins” (NS 222). Unlike the “watchers” who unblinkingly stare at Ruth during her tragic final moments in *Ruth*, Gaskell’s removal of Bessy’s death (and her name and narrative entirely) recovers traditional nineteenth-century romantic conventions about disability and illness to which this novel’s readers are accustomed. Bessy Higgins challenges readers to review conventions of disabled female characters in a Victorian romance plot.

Nervous Women: Neuroses in *North and South*

However, Mrs. Hale conveys a more flexible approach to female disability/illness and unsettles the narrative trajectory of *North and South*. Gaskell asks her readers to look again at their definitions of disability and illness by turning the novel’s attention to Mrs. Hale’s experience of an ambiguous mental impairment in *North and South*. As Thomas Fair suggests, “Gaskell’s presentation of female consciousness in relation to patriarchal authority functions within an ambiguous if not elusive framework that simultaneously reflects and subverts common tropes identified as part of the Victorian hegemony” (Fair 219). Mrs. Hale’s undefined neuroses is a leading example of Gaskell’s broader considerations of disability and character development. Through this narrative strategy, disability becomes a more complex condition. As a result, Mrs. Hale’s “illness” refreshes readers’ attention broader understandings of disability and female autonomy in the social problem novel.

Through Mrs. Hale's character development, Gaskell's narrative decisions in *North and South* make visible unconventional modes for understanding female experiences of illness and disability beyond medical model thinking. Instead of focusing on common diagnoses for Mrs. Hale's nerves (like hysteria), Gaskell conveys Mrs. Hale's disability through an unclear diagnosis. Mrs. Hale's "illness" may share similar symptoms to that of anxiety, depression, or nervousness.⁹ Mrs. Hale's neuroses are most noticeable when the Hales move to their new home in Milton:

Margaret and Dixon had been at work for two days, unpacking and arranging, but everything inside the house still looked in disorder; and outside a thick fog crept up to the very windows, and was driven in to every open door in choking white wreaths of unwholesome mist. "Oh, Margaret! Are we to live here?" asked Mrs. Hale in a blank dismay. Margaret's heart echoed the dreariness of the tone in which this question was put. She could scarcely command herself enough to say, "Oh, the fogs in London are sometimes far worse!" (NS 65)

In the midst of Margaret and Dixon's organizational effort, we hear Mrs. Hale ask a question: "'Are we to live here?'" (NS 65). Mrs. Hale's inquiry and her "blank dismay" after seeing her new home in Milton critiques the industrial North rather than establishes a medical diagnosis. Gaskell's resistance to pathology is a central point of her social problem fiction and makes her work especially vital to Disability Studies. The Hales' move to the North emphasizes the damaging effects of social environments in order to obscure a more clinical and clichéd diagnosis of Mrs. Hale's neuroses.

⁹ See Elaine Showalter's *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture 1830-1980* for a discussion of various nervous disorders that affected women in the 1850s.

Gaskell dissuades her readers from interpreting Mrs. Hale as an hysterical woman, and asks them to take seriously the implications of industrialization, poverty, gendered social roles. Most noticeably, Mrs. Hale's characterization does not lend itself to conventional portrayals of hysteria. Amy Koerber explains that for Victorian women, hysteria was a frequent medical diagnosis for a myriad of physical or psychological conditions. In *From Hysteria to Hormones*, Koerber suggests:

The nineteenth century pioneered the physical and the hormonal definitions of hysteria, insofar that "the influence of the womb [resonated] more with the hormonal explanation [...] we even see ideas that sound similar to what we currently understand as the nervous system or endocrine system. (Koerber 35)

The obscurity of Mrs. Hale's "illness" could easily suggest that she is indeed experiencing hysteria. However, Gaskell is quick to point out to that Mrs. Hale is actually impacted by the social environments that surround her rather than by any physical or mental conditions that may impair her. This is especially apparent when Mrs. Hale's room in Milton fills with polluted industrial air:

The heavy smoky air hung about [Mrs. Hale's] bedroom, which occupied the long narrow projection at the back of the house. The window, placed at the side of the oblong, looked to the blank wall of a similar projection, not above ten feet distant. It loomed through the fog like a great barrier of hope. Inside the room everything was in confusion. All their efforts had been direct to make her mother's room comfortable. (NS 66)

As Gaskell famously represented the factory-workers' hovel in *Mary Barton*, into which putrid sewage seeped, she now depicts the permeability of polite homes to industrial

poisons, thereby also offering an alternative etiology for Mrs. Hale's nervousness. Bourgeois women may be kept at home, but because their homes are not impervious, they are left to grapple with the environmental effects of industrialization. To apply the conventional medical diagnosis of hysteria to such women is to foreclose any genuinely empirical investigation into their condition that might lay responsibility at the door of industrial capitalism.

North and South reframes female experiences of disability and illness through social change by drawing on a stock character familiar to Gaskell's readers: the hypochondriacal middle-aged woman. Generally used to comic effect in nineteenth-century fiction, most notably by Jane Austen with Mrs. Bennett in *Pride and Prejudice*, this character is not designed to elicit readers' empathy. Rather, she deflects attention away from any critical examination of the causes of her "nerves" or "vapours." Even with Mrs. Bennett, however, Austen subtly invites readers to consider that the wife of a man whose estate is entailed away from his female heirs is right to be concerned about the marriage prospects of her five daughters. Gaskell guides her readers to think more deeply about the tangible, external causes of Mrs. Hale's ailments. Indeed, Mrs. Hale brings to the industrial north a perspective that likely comports with that of many bourgeois female novel-readers. Walking about the streets of Milton, Margaret and Mrs. Hale observe the harmful working conditions, and the contaminated air. During their walk, Mrs. Hale exclaims to Margaret, "'Dear! Everybody is ill now, I think,' said Mrs. Hale, with a little of the jealousy which one invalid is apt to feel of another. 'But it must be very sad to be ill in one of those little back streets'" (NS 161). Gaskell uses Mrs. Hale's commentary to elucidate the ways in which the industrialized social environment

can harmfully affect its inhabitants. Unlike Bessy Higgins, whose experience of tuberculosis seems far-removed from other characters' and readers' experiences, Mrs. Hale's claim that "Everybody is ill now" unsettles our assumptions that illness is a solitary or a metaphorical experience. Mrs. Hale's commentary on industrialization lays bare the foundation for analyzing *North and South* via Disability Studies. Mrs. Hale's neuroses can be read and understood through the social conditions in which she lives. Her characterization contradicts what the novel's readers may expect of a nervous, hypochondriacal woman. Moreover, it indicts the medical diagnosis of hysteria as little more than a cover story for the wrongs of industrialization. Koerber explains, "Specifically, the hysterical woman served as a metaphor that caused medical experts, and women themselves, to understand and account for female problems in a particular way" (Koerber 131). Within this novel's industrial world, Mrs. Hale's "hysterical" behavior is not merely metaphorical. Her characterization and development convey the very real social, cultural, and environmental conditions that impact everyone's experiences in Milton. Gaskell's innovative attention to Mrs. Hale's characterization leads to alternative ways in which readers can think about disability differently in the Victorian social problem novel.

Once again, Gaskell uses her social problem fiction as a means of thinking through disability in clear and original ways; however, her fiction does not always fully escape conventional narrative methods, especially for the ill/disabled characters that she includes. While Mrs. Hale may initially seem like a remarkable presentation of an ill/disabled female character in the social problem novel, there are ways in which Mrs. Hale is a key part of narrative clichés and stock-characterization that cannot be ignored.

For example, we have previously seen Gaskell dealing with narrative conventions and stereotypical character representation through the advent of a medical cure for Margaret Jennings's blindness in the last scenes of *Mary Barton*. Furthermore, readers may also recall the conclusion of *Ruth* bringing an all-encompassing melodramatic and romantic death-scene to Ruth Hilton's final moments. Perhaps more notably, though, Mrs. Hale's representation reminds Gaskell's readers of her short fiction, *Round the Sofa* or *My Lady Ludlow*, in which Gaskell centralizes these stories around a typical Victorian "invalid" woman. *North and South* brings together all of these narrative conventions that Gaskell has hinted at in her other novels through the cliched representational methods she applies to Mrs. Hale.

Mrs. Hale's conventional characterization compels us to deconstruct the medical model within *North and South*. For Gaskell, medicine and scientific advancements are nineteenth century innovations of which she has mixed feelings. On the one hand, Gaskell understands that medical advancements are important, as she highlights in her discussion of Patrick Bronte's cataract surgery in *The Life*. Yet, on the other, Gaskell's attention to Mrs. Hale's medical treatment in *North and South* reveals Gaskell's wariness to fully support medical authorities, like Dr. Donaldson, who comes to take care of Mrs. Hale. The physician, Dr. Donaldson, soon visits Mrs. Hale seeks to diagnose and help to "cure" her of her anxieties. For example, after a particularly dramatic episode of Mrs. Hale's neuroses, she is given medication from Dr. Donaldson. Mrs. Hale goes from experiencing "violent hysterics" to again behaving like herself (NS 132). Gaskell comments on the benefits of the medication from Dr. Donaldson when she writes, "The medicines and treatment which Dr. Donaldson had ordered for Mrs. Hale, did her so

much good at first that not only she herself, but Margaret, began to hope that he might have been mistaken, and that she could recover permanently” (NS 156). Through Gaskell’s observational methods, we can see how Mrs. Hale’s momentary recovery illuminates the fragility and the dangers of Victorian medicine. Margaret’s comments reveal that perhaps Dr. Donaldson “had been mistaken” in his diagnosis of Mrs. Hale, and maybe she could be completely (and permanently) cured of her illness (NS 156). Unlike the medical treatments provided to Margaret Jennings or even Patrick Bronte, which allude to more controlled and consistent medical care, Gaskell is cautious when she discusses Mrs. Hale’s medical interventions. *North and South*’s critical discussion of medicine anticipates the rise of psychiatry later explored in *Sylvia’s Lovers*. Because medical treatment in the nineteenth century was often viscerally targeted towards women, Mrs. Hale’s experience of medicine indicates Gaskell’s attention to, and suspicion of, the conventional medical model. Mrs. Hale’s experience with various medical “cures” seeks to solve the “problem” that she poses to the rest of the narrative. Despite the medical care she receives, Mrs. Hale dies from her mysterious illness, and Gaskell is then able to solve the plot problem of Mrs. Hale’s characterization.

In *North and South*, Mrs. Hale’s (and Bessy’s) deaths do not bear weight because their deaths are a plot convenience rather than a narrative closure. Like Bessy’s death, Mrs. Hale’s death is similarly distanced from the novel’s readers. We are initially made aware of Mrs. Hale’s impending death through the perspective of Dr. Donaldson, Margaret, and Mr. Hale:

Dr. Donaldson took [Mr. Hale’s] arm, and led him into the bedroom. Margaret followed close. There lay her mother, with an unmistakable look on her face. She

might be better now; she was sleeping, but Death had signed her for his own, and it was clear that ere long he would return to take possession. (NS 173)

Although the all-too familiar melodramatic death-scenes Gaskell frequently employs at the conclusions of her social problem novels are indeed typical of the Victorian narrative technique, in *North and South*, Gaskell moves the characters' deaths to the middle of the novel in order to swiftly resolve the obstruction their characterizations cause to the rest of the narrative.

Mrs. Hale is often viewed as a superfluous character in the larger critical framework of the novel, and for this reason, Mrs. Hale poses an ethical problem to *North and South*: she is in the way of the remainder of the novel, and especially Margaret Hale's character development. For example, Mrs. Hale might be said to represent perhaps a more "anxious" version of Mrs. Bennet in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Gaskell strategically positions Mrs. Hale's death in the middle of the novel. When placed in the middle of *North and South*'s narrative trajectory, Gaskell's readers can easily glance over Mrs. Hale's final moments and move on from her representation completely:

Convulsions came on, and when they ceased, Mrs. Hale was unconscious. Her husband might lie by her shaking the bed with his sobs; her son's strong arms might lift her tenderly up into a comfortable position; her daughter's hands might bathe her face; but she knew them not. She would never recognize them again, till they met in Heaven. (NS 258)

Gaskell explains that we "might" see Mr. Hale, Margaret, or Frederick, Margaret's brother, caring for their mother in her final moments. However, by repeating the word "might," Gaskell leaves out the typical emotional death-scene she usually employs in

favor of casting Mrs. Hale aside as quickly as possible. Consequently, Mrs. Hale is only useful to the narrative in her absence from it altogether.

The “Able-Bodied” Female Heroine

Though Gaskell’s representations of Bessy and Mrs. Hale undeniably entail some troublingly clichés about disability, Margaret’s characterization reveals the instability of “ability,” made especially apparent through a Disability Studies rereading. In *North and South*, the ill/disabled female character is productive to the narrative mainly in her death, particularly the development of Margaret’s character. This raises ethical concerns about disability and ability that Gaskell herself had explored in *Mary Barton* and *Ruth*. Gaskell could not have been oblivious to these contradictions. In fact, as we shall see, she would address these problems in her next novel, *Sylvia’s Lovers*, with a critique able-bodiedness. And there is evidence of the origins of that larger project already here, in *North and South*. By focusing the rest of *North and South*’s narrative on Margaret Hale, Gaskell reveals that disability can also inflect apparently able-bodied characters.

Margaret may initially remind readers of Jane Eyre, Mary Barton, or Jemina Bradshaw; but her characterization may more accurately resemble that of Charley Kinraid in *Sylvia’s Lovers*. In her historical novel, Gaskell will demonstrate how Kinraid first appears non-disabled; he is the strong, handsome, and masculine hero of the historical-romance novel. In actuality, however, Gaskell uses Kinraid’s plotline to critique the perceived stability of able-bodiedness. For example, Kinraid becomes impaired through his physical endangerment and kidnapping. This is especially noticeable when Gaskell describes Kinraid’s capture by halting all movement and sound: “Kinraid groaned with impatience at seeing [Philip], free to move with quick decision, so

slow and dilatory” (SL205). In this scene, readers can experience the ways in which Kinraid’s freedom is painstakingly being taken away from him. Margaret’s experience in the industrial north shares similar qualities to Kinraid’s kidnapping. In Milton, Margaret’s agency and autonomy are slowly restricted. Gaskell stifles Margaret’s freedom by stopping sensory input. When Margaret walks through the streets of Milton, she observes, “Here there was no sound. The robin had gone away into the vast stillness of night. Now and then, a cottage door in the distance was opened and shut, as if to admit the tired labourer to his home; but that sounded very far away” (NS 53). Margaret’s experience in Milton is the precursor to Kinraid’s kidnapping in *Sylvia’s Lovers*. In fact, the two characters may be mirrors of one another. Through her narrative and plot development, Margaret’s journey interrogates the false binaries between ability and disability. Like Kinraid’s unstable place as the “able-bodied” seaman, Margaret’s position as the non-disabled heroine in *North and South* is similarly precarious. Gaskell’s representation of Margaret’s narrative showcases ways in which someone who is seemingly able-bodied and independent can be read as disabled.

In *North and South*, Margaret’s characterization critiques the larger impacts of pain, violence, and injury on the “able” female body. One of the most compelling examples of this is when Margaret intervenes with a violent factory workers’ strike while walking through the streets of Milton. This important moment in Margaret’s plot provides a clear marker in the development of her characterization and is a reminder to Gaskell’s readers that their concept of “ability” is unstable. Like Kinraid’s noiseless capture at the hands of the press-gang, Margaret’s intervention with the workers’ strike is also silent:

Margaret felt intuitively, that in an instant all would be uproar; the first touch would cause an explosion, in which, among such hundreds of infuriated men and reckless boys, even Mr. Thornton's life would be unsafe,—that in another instant the stormy passions would have passed their bounds, and swept away all barriers of reason, or apprehension of consequence. Even while she looked, she saw lads in the background stooping to take off their heavy wooden clogs—the readiest missile they could find; she saw it was the spark to the gunpowder, and, with a cry, which no one heard, she rushed out of the room, down stairs,—she had lifted the great iron bar of the door with an imperious force—had thrown the door open wide—and was there, in face of that angry sea of men, her eyes smiting them with flaming arrows of reproach. The clogs were arrested in the hands that held them—the countenances, so fell not a moment before, now looked irresolute, and as if asking what this meant. For she stood between them and their enemy. She could not speak, but held out her arms towards them till she could recover breath. (*NS* 183)

Gaskell narrates that Margaret moves toward the crowd “with a cry, which no one heard” and then when she arrives, she “could not speak” (*NS* 183). This scene indicates Margaret's attempt to attain agency; her self-determination is especially noticeable in her intervention with the workers' strike. However, Gaskell's careful attention to stillness and soundlessness demonstrates how Margaret, like Kinraid, is now physically and socially vulnerable. Where Margaret's characterization departs from Kinraid's, though, is in her choice to intervene with the strike, whereas Kinraid's agency is taken from him in the kidnapping. Gaskell explores the breadth of female autonomy and the concept of ability and disability through Margaret's physical endangerment.

Gaskell uses Margaret's injury to deconstruct perceptions of illness/disability as exclusionary experiences of embodiment. During the strike, Gaskell highlights the precariousness of the female body and the flexibility of the term *disability*. This is especially apparent when Margaret places herself between the violent strikers. Gaskell writes that "A stone has grazed [Margaret's] temple" (*NS* 186-187). Although this scene is distinctively less violent than Kinraid's kidnapping in *Sylvia's Lovers, North and South* offers a generative reimagining of disability, the female body, and physical pain through Margaret's position at the center of the workers' strike. Because Margaret may already remind readers of their own bourgeois social standing, the injury she sustains from the strike especially resonates with the novel's audience. Readers can perhaps more easily imagine themselves in Margaret's place; *North and South* then enables readers to focus on the social and physical positioning of women in the nineteenth century more broadly. Margaret's characterization questions the perceived stability of the able-bodied female character in social problem fiction and demonstrates the malleability of the term disability.

Margaret's intervention in the strike and her subsequent injury revises notions of disability and gender in *North and South*. What is more, Margaret's wound offers a foreshadowing of Sylvia Robson's convulsions in *Sylvia's Lovers*. For example, Gaskell describes Sylvia's convulsions as "the quivering she could not still" (*SL* 332). Sylvia's physical convulsions are the external representation of her internal unhappiness in her imprisoning marriage. For Gaskell, disability and gender are intertwined experiences of embodiment that reveal broader social issues, especially as they impact women. Just as Sylvia's convulsions are a physical reminder to readers of female oppression in the

eighteenth and nineteenth century, Margaret's injury is a physical representation of the ways in which patriarchal authority and industrialization harm women. In the context of *North and South*, Margaret's wound highlights the consequences of industrialization on women's experiences. Like Sylvia's convulsions, Margaret's bleeding forehead reveals the hidden internal struggles for women to attain their own authority against patriarchal order. Significantly, Margaret's physical injury rewrites the narrative trajectory of the perceived able-bodied female heroine in the social problem novel.

Importantly, however, Gaskell resists our interpretation of Margaret *as disabled*. Instead, Gaskell uses an ambiguous portrayal of impairment in order to consider how Margaret's physical injury represents the difficulties for women to gain agency in the nineteenth century. This is especially apparent when Mrs. Thornton mis-identifies Margaret's injury after the strike: "Mrs. Thornton spoke loudly and distinctly, as to a deaf person. Margaret tried to rise, and drew her ruffled, luxuriant hair instinctively over the cut. 'I'm better now,' said she, in a very low, faint voice. 'I was a little sick'" (NS 189). Margaret is first perceived as a "deaf person" by Mrs. Thornton, then, Margaret clarifies that she was "'a little sick'" (NS 189). Interestingly, none of these "diagnoses" accurately explain Margaret's forehead wound. Gaskell has previously resisted concrete definitions of disability in *Mary Barton* and *Ruth*. She continues to accomplish this in *Sylvia's Lovers*. *North and South* brings together Gaskell's vague representation of disability through Margaret's head injury. This resistance to concrete medical approaches to disability is Gaskell's point. For Gaskell's social problem and historical fiction, disability is not one particular defining character trait; instead, disability is a necessary and

important element in narrative, plot, and character development that constellates the broader social, cultural, and historical moment to which Gaskell's fiction responds.

Gaskell's treatment of female injury as a public and a pathologized spectacle reinforces the powerlessness women experienced in the nineteenth century. In fact, most of the female characters in Gaskell's novels face public and medical scrutiny. In viewing Margaret as the disabled spectacle, Gaskell demonstrates conventional modes of disability representation that rely on more traditional Victorian stereotypes. Ruth, Sylvia, Bessy, and Mrs. Hale are particularly pathologized examples, and Margaret's characterization continues to highlight this Victorian convention. After Margaret faints from her head injury, Gaskell uses the sense of sight to explore Margaret's new subjectivity. With a crowd of onlookers staring down at her, Margaret experiences a compounding of shame in her new physically vulnerable state:

She could not be alone, prostrate, powerless as she was,—a cloud of faces looked up at her, giving her no idea of fierce vivid anger, out of personal danger, but a deep sense of shame that she should thus be the object of universal regard—a sense of shame so acute that it seemed as if she would fain have burrowed into the earth to hide herself, and yet she could not escape out of that unwinking glare of many eyes.

(NS 197)

Because Margaret's social class similarly reflects the status of Gaskell's female readership, Margaret's injury and her experience as the shameful "the object of universal regard" signals to Gaskell's (presumably female) audience the very real cultural and social experiences that they too would likely understand.

Conclusion

Although Margaret's bold moment of courage intervening in the workers' strike is one of the most remarkable scenes in *North and South*, it is an anomalous instance of female agency, more a source of embarrassment than exemplary heroism by the novel's close. After her injury, Margaret is disabled and ashamed; a doubly marginalized status in this novel's social world. Gaskell then uses the remainder of Margaret's narrative to remind her readers of the violent and dangerous consequences of industrialization, particularly as they victimize women. In *North and South*, Gaskell asks her readers to revise their notions about ability, disability, and gender, especially during times of industrialization and social change. Margaret challenges readers to look anew at their responses to both able-bodied and disabled women. Margaret's experience during and after the strike is significant for foregrounding the novel's conclusion and ultimately reveals the vulnerability of able-bodiedness and female autonomy in the Victorian period. Whether this is a realistic depiction of women's disabilities as subjugated persons, or a sop to readers' tastes for a conventional romance closure, is unclear.

Instead of bringing to the fore the importance of women's autonomy, Gaskell reveals how one consequence of industrialization and a romanticized ending depends upon stifling female agency. Gaskell has previously muted Margaret's voice in order to expose her precarious position in the middle of the workers' strike when she moves toward the dangerous rioters "with a cry, which no one heard" and then where she "could not speak" (NS 183). However, with the conventional marriage-plot ending of *North and South*, Margaret's silence comes to reveal her lack of agency as she is literally enclosed in bourgeois femininity. Gaskell's ambivalence about Margaret's agency is apparent in

the conflicting connotations of her description of Margaret's new domestic environment and her state of mind, writing:

It was very well for Margaret that the extreme quiet of the Harley Street house, during Edith's recovery from her confinement, gave her the natural rest which she needed. It gave her time to comprehend the sudden change which had taken place in her circumstances within the last two months. She found herself at once an inmate of a luxurious house, where the bare knowledge of the existence of every trouble or care seemed scarcely to have penetrated. The wheels of the machinery of daily life were well oiled, and went along with delicious smoothness. (NS 385).

On the one hand, bourgeois domesticity provides a retreat protected from the ills of industrial capitalism in which Margaret might contemplate her situation and gain new insight. On the other, Margaret is now trapped as an "inmate" within the "extreme quiet" of Milton, voiceless and powerless in a domestic fantasy world designed to be impervious to the suffering and exploitation on which its privilege is built (NS 385). Gaskell does not give any sound to Margaret's thoughts; instead, all that remains audible is the decorous hush "of daily life" that "went along with delicious smoothness" (NS 385). Margaret's loss of agency is especially noticeable in her limited dialogue at the novel's close, as Gaskell carries Margaret's silence through the final scenes of *North and South* to illustrate the ways in which her agency is compromised.

Perhaps Gaskell's treatment of Margaret acknowledged the usual fate of bourgeois wives; perhaps it also hinted at the cost to Gaskell of being a woman writer. We must think back to earlier chapters to recall Margaret's loquaciousness--from sparring with Mr. Thornton over ethics, to telling Bessy stories of Helstone--to appreciate

that the consequence of the marriage plot may be her silence, for which there is no cure or relief. While Margaret has previously been an able-bodied “medical” practitioner through her caretaking of Bessy and Mrs. Hale, her injury during the strike and her subsequent silence resonates with Gaskell’s readers by reminding them of the distinctive contingencies of female ability. Whereas Bessy and Mrs. Hale embody disabilities inflicted on women by industrialization, the conventional marriage-plot closure tries to convince us that Margaret’s silence is not a disability, but a choice. She acts to save Mr. Thornton’s factory with her inheritance and then is rewarded with his marriage proposal, which she accepts gladly and *silently*. Margaret is the problematic medical practitioner and financial benefactor as well as the voiceless female victim. Remembering that Jane Austen gleefully restored Lizzy Bennet’s voice after her marriage, Gaskell’s decision to associate the happy ending of marriage with Margaret’s silence is all the more striking. As we have seen in *Mary Barton*, *Ruth* and *North and South*, Gaskell thought through disability in order to tackle some of the most entrenched injustices of her society. We could only wish that she would have followed through on her own logic of disability to indict a bourgeois gender hierarchy that legally and socially disabled women. Significantly, Gaskell herself suffered few of the disabilities inflicted by coverture—her husband never claimed her earnings; she purchased property for the family; she certainly enjoyed a very public voice. Significantly, it would not be long before Gaskell returned to disability as a way of thinking through the condition of women. Indeed, her next novel, *Sylvia’s Lovers*, would deconstruct the marriage plot and focus on a wronged woman who declared her anger in no uncertain terms.

Disability Studies joins with feminist criticism, then, to challenge the prescriptive ideology of the marriage plot. Modelling a social problem novel on *Pride and Prejudice* likely was meant to attract readers keen on marriage-plot solutions, favored by many of Gaskell's contemporaries. For example, the romantic closure of *Jane Eyre* was clearly familiar to Gaskell. But even here, it is Jane's voice declaring:

Reader, I married him. A quiet wedding we had: he and I, the parson and clerk, were alone present. When we got back from church, I went into the kitchen of the manor-house, where Mary was cooking the dinner, and John cleaning the knives and I said—'Mary, I have been married to Mr Rochester this morning. (*JE* 517)

The wedding may have been quiet, but Jane isn't. And as was evident in the contrast between *Jane Eyre* and *Mary Barton*, Gaskell was hardly shy about forcing her readers to perceive class and gender alterity through disability, rather than resorting to sentimental clichés about blindness.

Disability Studies intervenes with the curative nature of the marriage plot conclusion by critiquing the implications of the quiet and conventional closure. In fact, the marriage plot conclusion does not actually remedy any social problems throughout *North and South*, but it instead leads to a more complex consideration of disability, gender, and social roles within the Victorian novel. In *North and South*, Disability Studies allows us to question the productivity of the marriage plot by illustrating its consequences through the loss of Margaret's voice and her agency. While Gaskell's representations of disability in *North and South* may be uneven, and, in the case of Margaret, retrograde, her use of Victorian narrative conventions enables both Victorian and Disability Studies scholars to think in more sophisticated terms about disability and

the politics of narrative. Disability Studies extrapolates further the implications of Victorian narrative tropes, representational conventions, and common literary methods. By bringing to light some of the problems inherent in the prescriptive marriage plot conclusion of *North and South*, Disability Studies complicates the critical reception of Elizabeth Gaskell's social problem fiction. As a result, *North and South* raises medical, social, and ethical concerns central to the critical project of Disability Studies literary criticism.

CHAPTER FOUR: NERVOUS DEPICTIONS: HISTORY AND HYSTERIA IN
SYLVIA'S LOVERS

“It is in the passage of social commentary that Elizabeth Gaskell reveals her refusal to subscribe to notions that the past was necessarily worse, or better, than the present, the past is never used to furnish values by which the present may be judged.”

Coral Landsbury, *Elizabeth Gaskell: The Novel of Social Crisis*

Locating Sensory Narration

The historical novel adds to the ways in which Disability Studies can engage with Victorian fiction more broadly. By reading *Sylvia's Lovers* with what we already know about Elizabeth Gaskell and her social problem fiction in mind, we can see how Gaskell's engagement with the special problems of historical representation contributed pioneering understandings of disabilities to the nineteenth century literary imagination. Using Disability Studies as the central theoretical approach to Gaskell's social problem fiction has revealed how destabilizing “normative” sensory perception serves a key heuristic function. Therefore, this encourages readers to doubt their stereotyped beliefs about the working class, fallen women, the disabled, etc., and to “look anew.” Applied to historical fiction, Disability Studies draws attention to Gaskell's strategies for troubling her readers' beliefs about the past and their uncritical acceptance of “official” historical accounts. Historical hindsight for Gaskell is not 20/20. Rather, it, too, requires a diverse range of perceptive abilities to blur, shade, complicate and call into question narratives of steady historical progress that rationalize the status quo. In this chapter, then, I will use Disability Studies to analyze Gaskell's use of sensory narration and character and plot development in order to demonstrate how the historical framework of *Sylvia's Lovers*

leads to new ways to reflect on the past, look to the present, and envision possible futures.

Gaskell opens *Sylvia's Lover* with a visually rich description of the fictional whaling town of Monkshaven during the Napoleonic wars. Gaskell has previously used sensory details, especially sight, in *Mary Barton*, *Ruth*, and *North and South* to promote a more realistic description of disability, illness, and impairment. She has also used these details to explore the limits and the possibilities of the picturesque and anti-picturesque to produce narrative, plot, and character development. Here, perhaps in recognition of the challenge faced by her readers in orienting themselves in place and time, Gaskell appeals to sight, the dominant sense of most of her readers. Unlike the grimy, dark, and gloomy factory-towns described in the social problem novels, however, the vibrant landscape of Monkshaven is filled with excitement: the sea, ships, crowds, and shops. Quickly, Gaskell focuses our perceptions on a dramatic event seen first both through the point of view of Sylvia Robson and her friend, Molly Corney, two working-class girls, and a generalized crowd of villagers:

the breathless girls were close together in the best place they could get for seeing, on the outside of the crowd; and in as short a time longer they were pressed inwards, by fresh arrivals, into the very midst of the throng. All eyes were directed to the ship, beating her anchor just outside the bar, not a quarter of a mile away. (*SL* 16)

Gaskell's emphasis on *seeing* the spectacle of the whaling ship orients us within this novel's historical world. We learn what is important to the people of this unfamiliar place and time—what draws “all eyes.” Yet, at the same time we are led to suspect that Sylvia and Molly bring distinctive interests to this scene. Indeed, Gaskell subverts visual details

in order to re-focus the narrative on characters' perceptions, rather than on a narrative told through one particular visual field. Therefore, Gaskell orients the novel's characters and its readers to a fundamentally different view of sensory narration, as Julia Rodas explains in "On Blindness," "[The sighted] waltz through life depending unconsciously on this sensory accident, not on a set of managed skills" (Rodas 122). The result of this narrative decision is a transformation of our experience of *Sylvia's Lovers* by alerting us to the malleability of sensory narration. In *Sylvia's Lovers*, Gaskell manipulates an array of narrative techniques in order to portray disability through perception rather than through one particularly dominant sensory experience (like sight), as Julia Rodas continues, "A blind person may not experience her own blindness as loss or absence on a personal level, (since perception and the integration of knowledge do not necessarily require sight)" (Rodas 116). Although *Sylvia's Lovers* initially engages with visual information, as we have seen from the novel's opening scenes, Gaskell complicates this narrative strategy by focusing on individual perspectives and their multi-layered sensory experiences.

Gaskell reminds her readers that sensory details, especially visual, can both establish and destabilize how we perceive and experience varied identities within our social environment. By first using visual details to emphasize the gradual process of seeing—and not seeing—Gaskell invites readers into the sensory experiences of *Sylvia's Lovers*. Therefore, with a revised emphasis on sensory narration, Gaskell uncovers new ways of perceiving the Monkshaven landscape in *Sylvia's Lovers*. For example, as the crowd, including Sylvia and Molly, wait for the arrival of the whaling ship, Gaskell writes:

It was a pretty scene, though it was too familiar to the eyes of all who then saw it for them to notice its beauty. The sun was low enough in the west to turn the mist that filled the distant valley of the river into golden haze. Above, on either bank of the Dee, there lay the moorland heights swelling one behind the other; the nearer, russet brown with the tints of the fading bracken; the more distant, gray and dim against the rich autumnal sky. (*SL* 18).

The first line in this passage challenges our expectations and our often over-reliance upon visual details. We were first introduced to Monkshaven through exciting visual information, and yet, this “pretty scene” is “too” familiar for the curious onlookers, “the eyes of all who then saw it” (*SL* 18). Because the crowd is actively involved in the process of *not* observing their surroundings, Gaskell illustrates how “sighted people usually enter into blindness slowly—in a process of becoming” (Rodas 119). The singular, tunnel vision focus of the eager onlookers reflects a temporary “blindness” that Gaskell uses to shift our understanding of sensory narration. In *Sylvia’s Lovers*, then, Gaskell offers a critique of the capability of sight-oriented sensory narration and of picturesque details to wholly convey meaning.

Within this historical novel’s world, we quickly learn the importance of the ways that experiences shape perception, which in turn makes *Sylvia’s Lovers* a major intervention in Disability Studies and Victorian literary studies. As I have analyzed above, picturesque details and the sense of sight are unstable and ever-changing. Gaskell must modify our perspectives through her use of narration in order to demonstrate how “The range of blind experience, like the range of visual experience, is infinitely diverse” (Rodas 119). For this reason, the novel’s point of view shifts from third-person narration

to a more focused perspective that moves between Sylvia and Philip, one of Sylvia's future lovers. Unlike the social problem novel, which often relies on and even emphasizes third-person omniscient narration, the historical novel departs from this technique and instead focuses on plot and character development as it is conveyed through individual characters' viewpoints. This change is perhaps because for Gaskell, "the most important aspect of her task was not the recreation of tangible evidence in the form of dress and behavior, but the definition of psychological differences between her own age and that of the Napoleonic wars" (Landsbury 164). By turning to the perspectives of Sylvia and Philip specifically, Gaskell pinpoints two distinct experiences that ultimately reveal diverse ways of being in the world.

Sylvia's Lovers lays bare a theoretical foundation for approaching disability in historical fiction by inverting the novel's use of sensory narration. As an historian, Elizabeth Gaskell uses a multi-faceted and an often-impaired version of sensory narration in order to familiarize her predominantly non-disabled readers to various disabled experiences. Gaskell initially severs our understanding of sensory details such as sight through Sylvia and Philip's distinctive characteristics and actions. At the novel's outset, for example, Gaskell turns her readers towards Sylvia and Philip's points of view through visual details, or, perhaps more precisely, the absence thereof. Like her earlier subversion of the picturesque and of sensory-oriented narration, Gaskell upends our understanding of perception through deliberate visual avoidance. Unlike Ruth and Mr. Benson's mutual looking at one another at the beginning of *Ruth*, Gaskell rewrites the concept of looking in *Sylvia's Lovers* through Philip and Sylvia's interactions, so much so that "the expected elasticity of human connection that mutual looking offers becomes brittle. When we

suddenly find ourselves face to face with some momento mori or our most dreaded fate, we look away” (Garland-Thomson 79). On the one hand, Philip looks at Sylvia, whereas Sylvia altogether avoids looking back at Philip. This is especially noticeable when Sylvia and Molly leave the crowd of eager spectators awaiting the arrival of the whaling ship, and then they go to Philip’s shop to buy clothes. Here, Philip warmly greets Sylvia when he exclaims, “‘Good day, Sylvie,’ he said; ‘what are you wanting? How are all at home? Let me help you!’” to which Sylvia responds by immediately looking away from him, “Sylvia pursed her red lips and did not look at him as she replied, ‘I’m very well, and so is mother, feyther’s got a touch of rheumatiz, and there’s a young woman getting what I want.’ She turned a little away from him when she had ended this sentence, as if she had comprised all she could possibly have to say to him” (SL 25). Their first interaction reflects a moment of deliberate looking-at and looking-away; this moment not only foreshadows Philip and Sylvia’s relationship, but it is also a reversal of the sensory narration readers are accustomed to from Gaskell’s social problem novels. Just as Gaskell maneuvers her readers into looking at the working class, she nudges them to look at history. With her social problem novels, Gaskell disrupts readers’ way of thinking. This same strategy can be applied to her historical fiction. Through *Sylvia’s Lovers*, Gaskell makes her readers think differently about the past, question the present, and imagine the future. After all, hindsight is 20/20, right? Gaskell’s historical and social problem fiction develops a disruptive pattern that spans across time and genre.

Gaskell insightfully employs a multitude of sensory details in order to convey how sight (or lack thereof), sound, and physical movement come together to create new meaning. In *Sylvia’s Lovers*, Gaskell also draws attention to other sensory experiences:

sound and physical movement, in order to highlight how social experiences manifest within historical literature. By inviting multi-sensorial descriptions into her historical fiction, Gaskell demonstrates the importance of including varied experiences into the character, narrative, and plot development of *Sylvia's Lovers*. For example, all too often “Our language depends on the common understanding that not seeing equals not knowing” (Rodas 122). However, I have illustrated in the above passages from *Sylvia's Lovers*, Gaskell explores the ways in which both seeing and not seeing engage in shaping our understanding. These added details allow for a clearer emphasis on Sylvia and Philip's vexed relationship. Sylvia's avoidance of her eyes combined with her jolting, and indeed desperate, movements away from Philip creates a visceral reaction towards Phillip from the novel's beginning and perhaps even foreshadows their future together.

Through varied sensory details, *Sylvia's Lovers* opens the door for a more complex representations of disability within a historical literary context. As an example, with movement and sound, Sylvia continues to evade Philip's ever-present gaze later on in the text when he observes:

All this Philip could see; the greater part of her face was lost to him as she half averted it, with a shy dislike to the way in which she knew from past experiences that cousin Philip always stared at her. And avert it as she would she heard with silent petulance the harsh screech of Philip's chair as he heavily dragged it on the stone floor, sitting on it all the while, and felt that he was moving round so as to look at her as much as was in his power, without absolutely turning his back on either her father or mother. She got herself ready for the first opportunity of contradiction or opposition. (*SL* 40-41)

Despite Philip's unflinching stare, this passage is also rich with other sensory details, particularly physical movement and sound. As Sylvia silently shields her body from Philip's obsessive stare, and when Philip realizes that his reliance upon sight is insufficient to seduce Sylvia, he then attempts to get even closer to her by disjointedly moving himself in her general direction. The "screech of Philip's chair as he heavily dragged it on the stone floor" loudly defines Sylvia and Philip's relationship within scene, and calls readers' attention toward their increasingly tense relationship (SL 40-41). In choosing to layer sensory details together rather than rely on one particular sense, like sight, Gaskell creates a more realistic and inclusive representation of disability in this historical world and through the characters who inhabit it.

***Sylvia's Lovers* as a Psychological Novel**

By attending to the critical project of Gaskell's historical fiction, I also add that through sensory narration, character, and plot development, *Sylvia's Lovers* represents a form of psychological fiction that should be considered part of Gaskell's oeuvre. Therefore, for *Sylvia's Lovers*, "Historical truth must go beyond fact to the psychological interpretation of events. And this task rightly belongs to the novelist, who provided a subjective delineation of a period by fictional types that can speak for the essential nature of their time" (Landsbury 181). Multi-layered sensory narration allows for us to understand the tense relationship between Sylvia and Philip; but it also unveils the ways in which Gaskell complicates disability in the historical novel through an emphasis on the psychological novel. As I have suggested, Gaskell's fusion of sensory narration and her focus on individual characters' perceptions throughout *Sylvia's Lovers* is indicative of her importance within Disability Studies and Victorian scholarship. What is more, this

particular point of view allows for a rereading of this historical novel through a Disability Studies theoretical lens.

Through an emphasis on characters' interiority, in tandem with detailed sensory narration, Elizabeth Gaskell establishes *Sylvia's Lovers* in a Disability Studies critical framework. As a result, *Sylvia's Lovers* is not only an historical novel, but it is also a psychological one. In *Making a Social Body*, Mary Poovey suggests that Gaskell first explores psychological experiences in *Mary Barton*:

Without suggesting that Elizabeth Gaskell single-handedly created modern psychologized subjectivity, or even that the competing narratives in *Mary Barton* are its only discursive ancestors, I do want to argue that, along with other nineteenth-century novels, *Mary Barton* helped delineate the psychological in a way that facilitated its disaggregation as an autonomous domain, whose operations are governed by a rationality specific to it, not to social relations more generally understood. (Poovey 147)

Because of Gaskell's use of sensory narration and her focus on interior characters' perspectives throughout her social problem novels (like *Mary Barton*) and especially in her historical fiction like *Sylvia's Lovers*, "[she] began to adumbrate a domain conceptually adjacent to the social, political, and economic domains that [her] contemporaries were trying to describe" (Poovey 153). *Sylvia's Lovers* narrative transforms our understanding of disability by illuminating the deepest realms of its characters' perceptions.

Although Philip is not physically disabled until the final chapters of *Sylvia's Lovers*, I suggest that we can expand our understanding of psychological disability in this

novel by examining Philip's character development earlier on in the text. Following Gaskell's sensory narration, then, the psychological novel reveals characters' feelings and emotions, especially those of Philip Hepburn. This is in contrast to Gaskell's earlier social problem novels which relied on evidence. Conversely, in *Sylvia's Lovers*, pathos becomes an important strategy in the development Gaskell's literary techniques and her representational methods of disability. However, we must note that *Sylvia's Lovers* is not defined as a work of Victorian sensational fiction; instead, Gaskell's fiction, especially her historical novel, "[is] highly suggestive (in her movement toward relativism and self-awareness) for our understanding of the relationship between the Victorian and Modernist novels" (Schor 7). By tracing Gaskell's sensory narration and her character and plot development, especially with Philip's character, we can better understand the ways in which the historical/psychological novel unravels and unveils new methods to approach disability in *Sylvia's Lovers*.

Gaskell first begins to untangle psychological experiences in *Sylvia's Lovers* historical narrative through the merging of sensory details. Sight, sound, and movement again fuse together as we turn our attention to Philip Hepburn's characterization. Perhaps one of the most telling moments in this novel when Sylvia, Philip, and Charley Kinraid are attending a New Year's Eve party. Philip and Charley are continually at odds with one another throughout the narrative as they each try to win Sylvia's heart. In order to elucidate their complex relationships more clearly, Gaskell uses sensory narration to allow her readers to see the intricate details of their world. Through Sylvia's point of view, Gaskell describes the scene of the party:

[Sylvia\ looked as if she did not return to be noticed, stealing softly behind the romping lads and lasses with noiseless motions, and altogether such a contrast to them in her cool freshness and modest neatness that both Kinraid and Philip found it difficult to keep their eyes off her. But the former had a secret triumph in his heart which enabled him to go on with his merry-making as if it absorbed him; while Philip dropped out of the crowd and came up to where she was standing silently by Mrs. Corney, who, arms akimbo, was laughing at the frolic and fun around her. Sylvia started a little when Philip spoke, and kept her soft eyes averted from him after the first glance; she answered him shortly, but with unaccustomed gentleness. He had only asked her when she would like him to take her home, and she, a little surprised at the idea of going home when to her the evening had seemed only beginning, had answered—"Go home? I don't know! It's New Year's Eve!" (*SL* 138)

Sight, sound, and movement collide in this passage when Sylvia returns silently and swiftly to the festivities. Her noiselessness does not go unnoticed, however, as both Philip and Kinraid observe her presence and are unable to "keep their eyes off her" (*SL* 138). Interestingly, in this passage, it is as though Philip and Kinraid share the same point of view. Gaskell uses the pronoun "their" to highlight the collective male gaze, rather than to individually look at Sylvia through Philip's and Kinraid's separated perspectives. As a result, we can see how the two men are rivals in this novel's social context and can gain a clearer understanding of each characters' relationship to one another.

In order to make this tension more apparent and also make the psychological experience even more visible in this historical narrative, Gaskell quickly moves on to

focus on Philip's experience by emphasizing his movements. This is especially noticeable after he "dropped out of the crowd and came up to where [Sylvia] was standing" (*SL* 138). Gaskell illuminates Philip's characterization through this one quiet yet precise physical movement. This moment singles Philip out as a central character and demonstrates his continued shadowy presence throughout the novel. This scene is possibly one of Gaskell's richest narrative innovations across her social problem and historical fiction because it foregrounds her entry into the psychological novel. Coral Landsbury suggests that, "It is never chronology that defines history for Gaskell but the analysis of how people thought and felt" (Landsbury 95). For this reason, the multi-layered and multi-faceted use of sensory details allow for a closer depiction of Sylvia, Philip, and Kinraid's relationship, while also setting up the intricate details that highlight Philip's characterization and his interiority. Subsequently, Disability Studies enhances the psychological focus of *Sylvia's Lovers* as it allows for a broader consideration of disability and a greater appreciation of Gaskell's narrative techniques.

By analyzing Philip's behavior, perspective, and experiences throughout the novel, we can locate a discussion of madness as it correlates to Philip's characterization. We have already seen Philip's unsettling gaze and movements throughout the text so far; he is increasingly obsessive over Sylvia. This is an important factor in his character development, and it allows us to understand how Gaskell's focus on Philip's interiority attributes to our understanding of Philip in a Disability Studies critical context. Philip has frequently been described in Gaskell criticism as passionate, so much so that his love for Sylvia moves him towards madness. Hilary Schor explains that "[Phillip's] passion nears masochism, in his repeated return to her side despite her scorn, his over-reading in her

polite ‘good-nights’ an encouragement to his hopes. Not only does he blur the lines between possessor and possessed, but he seems to blur the lines of masculine and feminine plots of desire here” (Schor 158-59). In light of a Disability Studies framework, we can expand Landsbury’s and Schor’s discussions of Philip. Philip’s vacillation between “possessor” and “possessed” and his mixture of “masculine and feminine plots” also lend themselves towards a reconsideration of how his character exposes not only the psychological novel, but also a psychological disability throughout the plot and narrative structures of *Sylvia’s Lovers*.

Sylvia’s Lovers helps us to focus on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century conceptions of madness with its combined historical and psychological exploration, wherein we could understand how Philip might be “mad.” Gaskell has previously emphasized ambiguous psychological impairments in her novels, like Mrs. Hale’s neuroses in *North and South*; however, she also extends this critical project to the characters in her historical fiction as well. As Hilary Schor explains, Philip has been said to “blur the lines” between gender and power, but he also distorts our perception of madness, nervous disorders, and hysteria often historically associated with women. We can attribute Philip’s nervous depiction to the rise in scientific discoveries and theories in the eighteenth century which foregrounded that nervous disorders could occur in both men and women. Mark Micale explains in *Hysterical Men: The Hidden History of Male Nervous Illness* that “The new nerve-centered theories of neurosis, in other words, were much less gendered than the preceding (or succeeding) disease models” (Micale 21). Given the rise in scientific innovation throughout the eighteenth century, then, we can see

how Philip's characterization could come to represent a type of male hysteria, madness, or neuroses.

However, recognizing the potential mental impairment or "madness" in Philip's characterization also leads to a consideration of the ways in which eighteenth- and nineteenth-century gender norms reinforce misogyny and female oppression. Indeed, Philip's obsessive behavior compels us to consider the ways in which his characterization could perhaps be "mad" or "hysterical," but, as we will later discover when Sylvia and Philip marry, Philip's treatment of Sylvia relies on patriarchal oppression rather than on an actual mental impairment. Reading Philip's characterization as "mad" or mentally ill problematically excuses his attitude and behavior toward Sylvia. Therefore, Disability Studies brings us into a greater awareness of Gaskell's treatment of disabilities in her texts, wherein we can examine how Philip might be "mad" while also illuminating the problems that this reading creates. Just as Philip can be read as mentally ill, he can also be considered a representation of cultural misogyny in which men feel entitled to female attention. Philip's initial obsession with Sylvia is therefore indicative of his problematic and patriarchal behavior that will later completely control Sylvia. Consequently, Philip's characterization leads us toward a complex examination of culture, gender, and disability in Gaskell's historical fiction.

In order to explore Philip's characterization, we must consider both disability and cultural conventions: Philip might be "mad," or, perhaps more accurately, his behaviors, attitudes, and actions demonstrate patriarchal norms. By approaching this text with a more flexible understanding of disability, then, we can examine Philip's characterization and the larger social commentary that Gaskell offers on gender, class, and disability in

Sylvia's Lovers. Gaskell's resistance to diagnosing Philip with a specific mental impairment resists concrete interpretation of his character as mentally ill. Gaskell's ambiguity is a central point of her fiction and makes her work especially important to Disability Studies. *Sylvia's Lovers* challenges us to look generously at our definitions of disability through character representation, sensory narration, plot development, and narrative trajectory. Victorian fiction often strictly defines its disabled characters (as we have seen from the blind and maimed Edward Rochester in *Jane Eyre*); however, Gaskell's novels frequently depart from this narrative mode by allowing a broader consideration of disability to take shape. Mrs. Hale's undefined neuroses in *North and South* is a leading example of Gaskell's broad considerations of disability and character development. Through this narrative methodology, disability becomes a more describable and complex condition that impacts one's everyday life. For Philip especially, his madness affects his daily experiences and behaviors, which ultimately reinforce patriarchal oppression and cultural norms.

Philip's characterization merges cultural misogyny with experiences of mental impairment in order to cultivate a more malleable consideration of disability in the novel. This is especially noticeable when we see Gaskell describe Philip's continued obsession with Sylvia and his unrelenting desire to defeat Charley Kinraid:

Philip slackened his pace, keeping under the shadow of the rock. By-and-by Kinraid, walking on the sunlight open sands, turned round and looked long and earnestly towards Haytersbank gully. Hepburn paused when he paused, but as intently as he looked at some object above, so intently did Hepburn look at him. No need to ascertain by sight towards whom his looks, his thoughts were directed. He

took off his hat and waved it, touching one part of it as if with particular meaning. When he turned away at last, Hepburn heaved a heavy sigh, and crept into the cold dark shadow of the cliffs. (*SL* 201)

Sight and movement are again used to pair the two male rivals against one another. In this scene, the two men share the same gait. Despite their matched movements, this time, Philip and Kinraid do not share the same visual perspective. Philip stares “so intently” at Kinraid while Kinraid looks in another direction; their divergent glances allow us to see into Philip’s individual perception and experience. Through sensory narration, Gaskell illuminates Philip’s hyper-vigilant state of mind, and Gaskell’s use of precise word choice in describing Philip also emphasizes his meticulous walk. Through these vivid descriptions, Gaskell broadens our perception of disability because we can see how Philip’s obsession is not simply a facet of historical fiction, but it could also resemble a form of male hysteria or madness that became recognizable in the eighteenth century and further contributes to the cultural significance of the text.

The juxtaposition between the viewpoints of Philip’s and Kinraid’s characterization emphasizes Gaskell’s attention to detail when it comes to disability, and consequently, the disruptive nature of her social problem and historical fiction. Gaskell demonstrates how Kinraid’s representation is the complete opposite of Philip’s. She writes, “Secure and exultant, [Kinraid’s] broad, handsome, weather-bronzed face was a great contrast to Philip’s long, thoughtful, sallow countenance, as his frank manner was to the other’s cold reserve. It was some minutes before Hepburn could bring himself to tell the great event that was about to befall him before this third person” (*SL* 193). Kinraid’s characterization as the strong, handsome, able-bodied, romantic hero of the

novel extends Gaskell's project toward a Disability Studies reframing. Although Philip certainly appears the hysteric male, Kinraid's representation calls into question the stability of readers' perceptions, especially when it comes to experiences of disability. For this reason, it is worth noting that in the passage above when Philip is watching Kinraid's conscription at the hands of the press-gang, that Kinraid becomes physically impaired. As Gaskell has previously accomplished with characters like Ruth, who first appears able-bodied but experiences stigmatization and marginalization through her "fallen" status in *Ruth*, Gaskell demonstrates how Kinraid likewise *appears* non-disabled, but in actuality, his characterization complicates the perceived stability of his representation. Just as Gaskell has already disrupted the notion that hindsight is 20/20, she also illustrates that disability can appear in many unexpected forms, and in presumably non-disabled characters as well. While Kinraid is not exactly part of a privileged group to begin with, and by virtue of the fact that he is a poor sailor, he can consequently be kidnapped. In turn, he can become impaired through his physical endangerment. For Kinraid, his vulnerability reminds readers of disability. This shows the ways in which somebody like Kinraid, who is ostensibly able-bodied and self-determining, can be rendered disabled. While Philip watches Kinraid's capture, Kinraid loses all of his freedom and his semblance of able-bodiedness.

Kinraid is evidence that Gaskell's thinking through disability reveals the false association between ability and autonomy. This is especially evident through the sensory narration Gaskell uses to detail Kinraid's capture. Sight, sound, and movement challenge readers to look at Kinraid's capture differently: in light of Disability Studies. When Kinraid finally notices Philip staring at him during the kidnapping, he observes,

“[Kinraid’s] eyes seemed the only part of him that showed cognizance of what was going on. They were watchful, vivid, fierce as those of a wild cat brought to bay, seeking in its desperate quickened brain for some mode of escape not yet visible, and in all probability never to become visible to the hopeless creature in its supreme agony” (*SL* 204). Despite his attentive eyes, Kinraid loses all hope of escape. He is described as a “hopeless creature,” a far cry from the strong and brave sailor he was once described. Gaskell then stalls all movement when she continues to illustrate Kinraid’s kidnapping: “Kinraid groaned with impatience at seeing [Philip], free to move with quick decision, so slow and dilatory” (*SL*205). It is as if this important scene is happening in slow-motion. First, Gaskell pairs Kinraid and Philip’s gaits, then, juxtaposes their viewpoints. She later stifles sound and movement so much so that readers experience the ways in which Kinraid’s freedom and agency are slowly being stripped away from him. The careful attention Gaskell gives to movement, sight, and sound in this scene reflects how judiciously she considers and uses disability across her social problem and historical novels.

It is not just that Gaskell wants to write about disability, but she offers a thinking through of disability and the dynamics of the binaries of able/disabled as a continuum rather than as oppositions. Gaskell carefully considers what able-bodied and disabled/disabling mean in terms of terminology and the kind of associations that are made erroneously and un-self-consciously. Terminology is especially important for Kinraid, who is designated as an “able-bodied seaman” from his capture by the press-gang. During the Napoleonic Wars, the Navy started specifying “able-bodied seaman” so that the press-gangs would not return them home. This is precisely what makes Kinraid

vulnerable. He is evidence of the dis-correlation between ability and autonomy. Kinraid's precarious position demonstrates that being non-disabled is temporary. With his capture, Gaskell asks her readers to look for someone in the novel, like Kinraid, who is considered socially valuable but then becomes the target through an abrupt change in circumstance. Significantly, Gaskell emphasizes that able-bodiedness is situational. As a result, Gaskell's novels employ subversive narrative techniques through sensory narration that bring us into and out of historical, psychological, and social-justice concerns. Kinraid's conscription suggests a more careful consideration of disability and gender throughout *Sylvia's Lovers*. In fact, Kinraid's capture leads the way for a more comprehensive understanding of Sylvia's experience, in which Sylvia has been conscripted by gender.

Dis/abling Female Consciousness

Sylvia has been conscripted by gender, much like how Kinraid was conscripted by the press-gang. During the wake of the Napoleonic Wars, a gender hierarchy was strictly enforced and there was a vicious backlash against feminism. The gradual depletion of sensory details causes Sylvia's consciousness and emotions to come to the novel's forefront and complicates our perception of her. Through Sylvia's deception and narrative trajectory, Gaskell might be commenting on the fact that women were expected to behave differently in the time of war. Deception and forced marriage traumatize Sylvia, which not only makes her angry (and rightfully so), but also suggests a reconfiguration of her mental state. Her presumably dead lover, Kinraid, is no longer an available marriage option for her, and as a result, Philip makes Sylvia marry him. After her marriage to Philip, Sylvia is now emotionless. Rather than writing Sylvia as an hysterical female character, Gaskell instead explores the idea that Sylvia must marry

because she did not have another option. This is another way in which the novel demonstrates how womanhood itself in this time period was socially and culturally disabling. Gaskell details this sad scene when she writes:

Philip and Sylvia were engaged. It was not so happy a state of things as Philip had imagined. He had already found that out, although it was not twenty-four hours since Sylvia had promised to be his. He could not have defined why he was dissatisfied; if he had been compelled to account for his feeling, he would probably have alleged as a reason that Sylvia's manner was so unchanged by her new position towards him. She was quiet and gentle; but no shyer, no brighter, no coyer, no happier, than she had been for months before. When she joined him at the field-gate, his heart was beating fast, his eyes were beaming out of love at her approach she neither blushed nor smiled, but seemed absorbed in thought of some kind. (*SL* 306)

The repetition of the word “no” indicates the negative emotions and headspace that Sylvia is in due to her marriage to Philip. Gaskell repeats that Sylvia was “no shyer, no brighter, no coyer, no happier, than she had been for months before” and her physical appearance reveals her lack of excitement for her marriage to Philip as she had “neither blushed nor smiled” at him (*SL* 306). Sylvia's lack of emotion as indicated by the absence of sensory narration and the repetition of “no” highlights the changes in her characterization.

In *Sylvia's Lovers*, Gaskell unravels the complexities of female consciousness and the ways in which women must conceal their dissent and desires. This is evident when Sylvia is contained (or conscripted) in her marriage, and as a result, she must control her

emotions. Gaskell's narration emphasizes what is *unseen*; what is disclosed through the omission of sensory description. For example, after Philip lies to Sylvia by telling her that Kinraid is dead:

Philip saw her sad eyes looking into the flickering fire-light with long unwinking stare, showing that her thoughts were far distant. He could hardly go on with his tales of what he had seen, and what done, he was so full of pity for her. Yet, for all his pity, he had now resolved never to soothe her with the knowledge of what he knew, nor to deliver the message sent by her false lover. He felt like a mother withholding something injurious from the foolish wish of her plaining child. (*SL* 221)

Philip's behavior and actions here are yet another example of the ways in which he oppresses Sylvia through his emotional manipulation and misogyny. As a result, we can see how Philip's "madness" leans more toward enforcing cultural norms rather than on representing an actual disability. His lie to Sylvia capitalizes on female oppression as he continues to control her emotions and desires. Sylvia's reservation in this scene in her reaction to Philip's deceit is indicative of how women were "supposed" to behave and act during this time. The absence of sensory details reveals women's confinement within certain social expectations and patriarchal oppression.

Sylvia's refusal to display happiness at her marriage to Philip is pathologized and she is told that her unhappiness is a symptom of illness. By using physical "symptoms" to reveal internal emotions and consciousness, Gaskell makes visible the all-to-often hidden struggles of eighteenth-and-nineteenth-century women to assert their agency. Sylvia's suppressed anger and despair eventually do manifest themselves when she convulses

after the birth of hers and Philip's child. Gaskell describes, "But she lay speechless, and, as far as she could be, motionless, the bed trembling under her with the quivering she could not still" (*SL* 332). Although a doctor diagnoses Sylvia with "brain fever," what Gaskell is ultimately revealing through Sylvia's physical convulsions is her distraught consciousness and her justified rage at the patriarchy. Gaskell continues, "[Sylvia's] anger was rising, and [the nurse] caught sight of Sylvia's averted face. It was flushed crimson, her eyes full of intense emotion of some kind, her lips compressed; but an involuntary twitching overmastering her resolute stillness from time to time" (*SL* 332). Gaskell's innovative combination of physical and mental details capture a wide array of female experiences. As Thomas Fair suggests:

Gaskell often balances, either internally or externally (and with equal success), a rebellious individual with a conventional figure. Gaskell appears to be reinforcing the hegemonic paradigm when, in fact, she is subverting it to allow her rebellious heroines agency and the opportunity to fashion their own success from within the system that would attempt to contain them within its traditional boundaries. (Fair 218)

Sylvia's anger is made physically apparent through her convulsive movements and her "fever." She is "ill," but what makes her ill is the patriarchy. Being ill and being angry are not mutually exclusive; in fact, they are in dynamic with one another, as Gaskell reveals through Sylvia's justified indignation.

This is not to say that Gaskell would have us interpret Sylvia as hysterical. Although eighteenth- and nineteenth-century medical professionals were particularly compelled to diagnose women with hysteria, as Mary Wilson Carpenter explains in

Health, Medicine, and Society in Victorian England, “the science of woman had also developed an ideology of the female body as inherently ‘unwell’” (Carpenter 157). Gaskell resists defining Sylvia as an hysterical woman and instead focuses on Sylvia’s experience of emotions and her anger. Gaskell is not afraid to bluntly describe the patriarchal imprisonment that impacts Sylvia’s overall mental and emotional health. Gaskell uses Sylvia’s experience as “prisoner” to reveal how these patriarchal gender roles of the eighteenth- and nineteenth centuries can indeed be *disabling* for the women they affect. A prisoner in her marriage and a prisoner in her own mind: Sylvia finds herself held captive by the deceitful Philip and their new life together. We now see Sylvia’s characterization become even more depressed and her emotions continue to change. Gaskell writes, “But, by-and-by, the time came when she was a prisoner in her own house; a prisoner in her room, lying in bed with a little baby by her side—her child, Philip’s child” (SL 328). The absence of joy and energy in this statement is noticeable by the matter-of-fact tone Gaskell uses here, and mirrors Sylvia’s emotionless mindset earlier. Sylvia is now stuck in her home, trapped in her thoughts, and left alone with her child. It is worth noting that Philip is actually the cause of Sylvia’s convulsions. Any sound, indeed any *sense* of Philip near Sylvia initiates the fever so much so that “For many days, nay, for weeks, [Philip] was forbidden to see Sylvia, as the very sound of his footstep brought on a recurrence of the fever and convulsive movement” (SL 333). By focusing on Philip as the cause of Sylvia’s “illness,” Gaskell offers a critique of men and of the marriage plot. Moreover, Gaskell uses Sylvia’s seclusion to comment on the isolation new mothers often experience, especially in the eighteenth century, where strict gender hierarchies and norms often confined women’s experiences. By using sensory

detail and persuasive tone, Gaskell challenges her readers to consider the ways in which history needs to be re-evaluated. Readers are not supposed to feel happy for Sylvia in her marriage to Philip or in the birth of her child. We are supposed to feel sad for her, and perhaps more importantly, to be angry with her.

Through Sylvia's rage, Gaskell reveals the ways in which women struggle to attain agency during and after the Napoleonic Wars. Sylvia's characterization reminds us of Ruth from my analysis in Chapter 2; however, unlike Ruth, whose momentary burst of fury toward Mr. Bellingham is temporary, Sylvia remains angry towards Philip throughout the entire novel, and rightfully so. She publicly denounces Philip and wants everyone to know that she's upset and unhappy. Whereas Kinraid has the possibility of being set free from his conscription, Sylvia is permanently trapped, and she knows it and wants everyone to also recognize it. Sylvia bluntly defies marriage when she exclaims to Philip, "I'm glad enough I've gotten a baby,' said Sylvia, 'but for aught else I wish I'd niver been married, I do!'" (SL 342). Although Sylvia is born into her conscription by the patriarchy by virtue of her birth, Gaskell enables her readers to think critically about female autonomy and to look deeply at the ways in which a patriarchal social order can psychologically damage and socially disable women, just as the conscription of male sailors (like Kinraid) can take away his autonomy. Gaskell offers a dynamic thinking-through of disability via the gender roles she explores with Sylvia's characterization.

In *Sylvia's Lovers*, Gaskell considers the ways in which various social and cultural forms of oppression (like misogyny) can be disabling. Though blurring this distinction between an actual impairment and a social stigma or barrier may seem problematic, it in fact highlights how Gaskell uses her characters to challenge

representational methods of disability in her novels. Gaskell's thinking about disability deepens and gets more complicated in order to show her readers that women's anger cannot and should not be ignored. In *Sylvia's Lovers*, Gaskell asks her readers to look again at history by bringing a cumulative effect to our understanding of disability to the core of the text by merging sensory narration with Sylvia's anger. This is especially noticeable when Kinraid finally returns, and Sylvia is made aware of the lie Philip has told her. When Kinraid reappears, he finds Sylvia and asks, "'Did not your cousin—Hepburn, I mean—did not he tell you?—he saw the press-gang seize me,—I gave him a message to tell you—I bade you keep true to me as I would be to you'" (SL 355). This turn of events not only triggers another outbreak of Sylvia's "fever" (her anger), but it also shocks the novel's readers and reminds them of Gaskell's previous explorations of disability:

[Philip] heard her cry; it cut through doors, and still air, and great bales of woolen stuff; he thought that she had hurt herself, that her mother was worse, that her baby was ill, and he hastened to the spot whence the cry preceded. On opening the door that separated the shop from the sitting-room, he saw the back of a naval officer, and his wife on the ground, huddled up in a heap, when she perceived him come in, she dragged herself up by means of a chair, groping like a blind person, and came up and stood facing him. The officer turned fiercely round, and would have come towards Philip, who was so bewildered by the scene that even yet he did not understand who the stranger was, did not perceive for an instant that he saw the realization of his greatest dread. But Sylvia laid her hand on Kinraid's arm, and

assumed to herself the right of speech. Philip did not know her voice, it was so changed. (*SL* 355)

In the moment where Sylvia's fever-anger is most audible and visible, Gaskell describes Sylvia as a physically disabled person. Sylvia is seen "huddled up in a heap" where she then "dragged herself up by a chair, groping like a blind person" (*SL* 355). These words may be familiar to us from Gaskell's previous social problem novels like *Mary Barton* and *Ruth*, or perhaps remind us of Philip's chair-dragging from his first attempt to get closer to Sylvia at the novel's outset. The array of sensory narration combined with repetition from Gaskell's previous social problem novels invites readers to look differently at disability and at women's experiences in an historical context.

“violent bodily action”: Rethinking Masculinity and Disability

The consequences of the truth being revealed to Sylvia, however, also highlights a necessary reconsideration of not just women's experience in an historical context, but also experiences of masculinity and disability. Sensory narration allows us to do this. Gaskell carefully details Philip's characterization after Sylvia learns the secret that he has been keeping from her about Kinraid:

The sight he saw in the mirror was his own long, sad, pale face, made plainer and grayer by the heavy pressure of the morning's events. He saw his stooping figure, his round shoulders, with something like a feeling of disgust at his personal appearance as he remembered the square, upright build of Kinraid; his fine uniform, with equalette and sword-belt; his handsome brown face; his dark eyes, splendid with the fire of passion and indignation; his white teeth, gleaming out with the

terrible smile of scorn. The comparison drove Philip from passive hopelessness to active despair. (*SL* 361)

The sight of Philip's appearance asks readers to examine the ways in which masculinity is described in this historical context. The juxtaposition between Philip's sallow appearance and Kinraid's strong representation creates the binary opposition that readers are supposed to notice through these visual details. By tracing the use of sensory narration throughout the novel, Gaskell imagines the complicated ways in which masculinity takes shape during the Napoleonic Wars.

Philip's experience in battle demonstrates the fragility of masculinity and the instability of able-bodiedness as Gaskell re-introduces us to the disabled male figure. For example, Philip reminds us of other male characters in Gaskell's social problem novels, like Mr. Benson in *Ruth*; however, Philip's representation contrasts with Mr. Benson. Unlike Philip, Mr. Benson becomes the initial heroic figure in *Ruth*, who saves Ruth from her metaphorical "fall." Consequently, Gaskell re-writes narrative tropes commonly associated with masculinity and disability through Mr. Benson's characterization. He is certainly a departure from the sentimentalized and "stone blind" Mr. Rochester in *Jane Eyre*, for example. Comparatively, Philip cannot do anything to achieve his goals and to assert his masculinity within the framework of this historical novel. Mr. Benson therefore represents an important counterpart to Philip. Through Philip's characterization, Gaskell explores the ways in which historical understandings of gender and ability/disability are complex. While Mr. Benson is the hero that initially saves Ruth from her "fall," Philip is the false hero of *Sylvia's Lovers*.

Gaskell authorizes able-bodiedness, masculinity, and male sexuality through Philip's journey to heroism. This reminds us of when Mr. Benson saves Ruth, and perhaps indicates that Philip could also turn into the outstanding male protagonist of this novel. Indeed, the only way in which Philip can "prove" himself to Sylvia in order to win her back is to fight and to go to war, as Philip reflects, "His only relief from thought, from the remembrance of Sylvia's looks and words, was in violent bodily action" (*SL* 363). Although Philip's decision to go to war completely transforms him both physically and mentally, for a brief moment, he becomes the masculine conqueror he strives to be. This is especially noticeable when Gaskell inverts the gendered roles that Philip and Kinraid have been in when Philip rescues Kinraid from battle, "Kinraid lay beyond the ravelins, many yards outside the city walls. He was utterly helpless, for the shot had broken his leg. Dead bodies of Frenchmen lay strewn around him; no Englishman had ventured out so far" (*SL* 402). With his broken leg, Kinraid is now the helpless disabled male. Here, readers are again reminded that able-bodiedness is temporary. Philip then arises as the able-bodied champion; however, Gaskell also uses this scene to remind her readers of the very real, very dangerous, and very violent consequences of the Napoleonic Wars. As Gaskell has previously achieved in her social problem fiction with realistic and graphic description, she again employs this narrative strategy here while describing, "Dead bodies of Frenchmen lay strewn around [Kinraid]" (*SL* 402). Through this graphic and vivid battle scene, Gaskell offers a dual critique at the intersections of disability and masculinity.

Philip's brief moment of triumph prior to his disfigurement illustrates the fleeting nature of able-bodiedness, while the broader context of his experience in war ties able-

bodiedness to the violence inherent in masculine identity. For example, violence and graphic sensory detail lead us through the ways in which Gaskell describes Philip's characterization in order to explore the costs and consequences of achieving masculine "hero" status through war. Now regarded as Stephen Freeman, Philip takes on a completely new identity, one which he attains due to an accident during the war:

All this time Stephen Freeman lay friendless, sick, and shattered, on board the *Theseus*. He had been about his duty close to some shells that were placed on her deck; a gay young midshipman was thoughtlessly striving to get the fuse out of one of these by a mallet and a spike-nail that lay close at hand; and a fearful explosion ensued, in which the poor marine, cleaning his bayonet near, was shockingly burnt and disfigured, the very skin of all the lower part of his face being utterly destroyed by gunpowder. (*SL* 406)

Brutal and graphic, the detailed descriptions of Philip (Stephen Freeman's) burnt and disfigured body resonates with Gaskell's readers and reiterates that no one is impervious to disability, not even the masculine and able-bodied "heroes" like Philip and Kinraid. Moreover, given that Philip's wounds incur from an accident rather than from an epic battle, Gaskell also reminds readers that disability is commonplace and can occur to anyone at any time. In *Sylvia's Lovers*, Gaskell asks her readers to rethink what we know about ability, disability, and gender, especially during times of war.

Philip's burnt and disfigured body allows us to ask probing questions about the medical model, male sexuality, masculine authority, and the effects of war. Gaskell offers graphic sensory detail and third-person narration to describe the impacts of Philip's disablement. She writes:

They said it was a mercy that his eyes were spared; but he could hardly feel anything to be a mercy, as he lay tossing in agony, burnt by the explosion, wounded by splinters, and feeling that he was disabled for life, if life itself were preserved. Of all that suffered by that fearful accident (and they were many) none was so forsaken, so hopeless, so desolate, as the Philip Hepburn about whom such anxious inquiries were being made at that very time. (*SL* 406)

Sensory narration, particularly seeing and feeling, fuse this scene together to create the image of Philip's disfigured and disabled body. Interestingly, Gaskell points out that his "eyes were spared"; however, Philip could not feel anything anymore except that he is "disabled for life" (*SL* 406). In contrast to Philip's hysteric characterization at the outset of the novel where he feels everything with such fervor, Gaskell lays the foundation for approaching Philip's physical disability through the absence of feeling. His physical disablement leaves room in the narrative for not a sympathetic (or romantic) portrayal of male disability, but rather a realistic and historically accurate one.

Conclusion

Previous examples of disabled male characters throughout social problem fiction and Victorian romance novels would likely include Mr. Benson from *Ruth* and Mr. Rochester from *Jane Eyre*. Most noticeably, Philip can be understood as the opposite of Mr. Benson, while he is a revision of Mr. Rochester. Gaskell adds Philip to this fictional oeuvre as a dynamic extension of these previous examples through a mixture of graphic, sensory narration and sympathy. This is especially apparent when Philip sees himself in the mirror at the end of the novel after his disablement:

In the small oblong looking-glass hung against the wall, Philip caught the reflection of his own face, and laughed scornfully at the sight. The thin hair lay upon his temples in the flakes that betoken long ill-health; his eyes were the same as ever, and they had always been considered the best feature in his face; but they were sunk in their orbits, and looked hollow and gloomy. As for the lower part of his face, blackened, contracted, drawn away from his teeth, the outline entirely changed by the breakage of his jaw-bone, he was indeed a fool if he thought himself fit to win back that love which Sylvia had foresworn. (*SL* 436-437)

Upon seeing himself in the mirror, Philip is struck by his disfigured appearance. The graphic narration Gaskell employs helps readers to notice and perhaps even to sympathize with Philip in this scene. What is more, readers may also recall that immediately following his disablement, Gaskell comments that Philip's "eyes were spared" (*SL* 406). Gaskell intentionally saves Philip's sight so that he can ultimately describe his own disabled reality at the novel's close.

For Gaskell's social problem fiction, Philip becomes the revised version of Edward Rochester. Gaskell has been both friend and critic of Charlotte Brontë, as is noticeable in *The Life*. Moreover, Coral Landsbury has pointed out that Elizabeth Gaskell "always had reservations about the novels of Charlotte Brontë" (Landsbury 128). Philip, then, becomes a new representation of the disabled male figure.¹⁰ In contrast to Philip, Mr. Rochester is left "stone blind" and unable to see or describe his own appearance at the end of *Jane Eyre*. Jane, then, is left to detail Rochester's physical appearance to the

¹⁰ Philip is characterized after the real-life Mr. Nicholls, who had an obsession and love for Charlotte Brontë. Gaskell establishes a "creative link" between Mr. Nicholls and Philip Hepburn (Landsbury 159).

novel's readers. Jane's viewpoint offers a singular narration of disability, one that overshadows the perspective of the disabled character. Although Philip does not become the hero of *Sylvia's Lovers*, by giving him space in the narrative to see himself in the looking-glass, Gaskell rewrites typical tropes of masculinity and disability that have all too often depended on the perspectives of able-bodied characters to narrativize disabled experiences and disabled identity. Through Philip's character development, what Gaskell is doing differently is considering the ways in which disability, masculinity, and autonomy take shape. By exploring Philip's characterization in comparison to that of Mr. Rochester's, we can see how Gaskell's understanding of disability has been refined. As a result, Philip's observations and self-reflections imagine new approaches to traditional concepts of disabled male characters in Victorian literature.

A whole new ethics arises as *Sylvia's Lovers* comes to a close. Gaskell brings meaning to everything she has already established in her earlier novels: class, gender, disability, and workers' rights. This is especially apparent in the narrative strategies Gaskell employs in the final scenes of the novel, where her writing shifts to an epilogue form. She writes, "the conversation fell to Philip Hepburn and the legend of his fate" (SL 469). In describing Philip's narrative as a "legend," Gaskell asks her readers to remember, to rethink, and to reconsider Philip's narrative trajectory. His story begins and ends with disability, as his characterization leads to new developments in understanding gender and disability across the eighteenth- and nineteenth- literary imagination. The "legend" continues, "'Hester Rose! have yo' niver heard of Hester Rose, she as founded t' alms-houses for poor disabled sailors and soldiers on t' Horncastle road? There's a piece of stone in front to say that 'This building is erected in memory of P.H.'—and some

folk will have it P.H. stands for th' man as was starved to death'" (*SL* 470). This final passage recalls Gaskell's Unitarian work in her community while also asking readers to consider their position in relation to Philip and his storyline. By situating Philip as the "legend," his characterization reminds readers of Gaskell's previous characters we have seen, plots we are familiar with, and narrative strategies we can appreciate.

Because Disability Studies tends to focus on more recent historical and cultural phenomena, the historical genre of *Sylvia's Lovers* ultimately deepens our knowledge of the literary history of disability. Through "the legend of P.H.," *Sylvia's Lovers* is the culmination of Gaskell's earlier social problem novels: *Mary Barton*, *Ruth*, and *North and South*. In fact, *Sylvia's Lovers* "is in many ways a necessary preface to *Mary Barton* and *North and South*" (Landsbury 160). For this reason, *Sylvia's Lovers* makes sense as the concluding chapter in this project, as it allows us to look back at Gaskell's earlier social problem novels with new understanding. From her first social problem novel, *Mary Barton* to her final work of historical fiction, *Sylvia's Lovers*, Gaskell is continually adding to and deepening her exploration of disability. What is happening in *Sylvia's Lovers* more so than in any other novel by Elizabeth Gaskell is that her work is not just thinking about disability differently, but it's also thinking about ability differently. All four of Gaskell's novels, then, can be situated as essential to disability activism and advocacy as part of the core features of Disability Studies.

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