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FROM DISSENT TO DISBELIEF
Gaskell, Hardy, and the Development of the English Social
Realist Novel

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Résumé

L'unitarienne Elizabeth Gaskell rejetait les doctrines anglicanes qui aliéneraient Thomas Hardy de sa religion. Elle était aussi championne de plusieurs penseurs qui exerceraient une forte influence sur les convictions d'Hardy. La continuité de la religion de Gaskell avec la vision du monde d'Hardy est évidente dans leurs écritures personnelles et aussi dans leurs romans. L'authenticité de voix que tant Gaskell que Hardy donnent aux caractères marginalisés, et spécialement aux femmes, provient aussi de leurs valeurs chrétiennes communes. Les convictions religieuses des deux auteurs et l'influence de la religion sur leurs travaux ont été abondamment étudiées, mais une comparaison entre elles doit encore être entreprise. Après avoir examiné les liens entre la foi de Gaskell et les convictions d'Hardy, je compare les attitudes des deux auteurs envers la classe dans *North and South* et *The Woodlanders* et leurs sympathies envers la femme tombée dans *Ruth* et *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*.

Abstract

As a progressive Unitarian, Elizabeth Gaskell rejected the Anglican doctrines that would later alienate Thomas Hardy from his religion. She also championed many of the thinkers who would exert a strong influence on Hardy's beliefs. The connection between Gaskell's religion and Hardy's worldview is evident in their personal writings and in their novels. The authenticity of voice that both Gaskell and Hardy give to marginalized characters, specifically to women, also springs from their common Christian-based values. Both authors' religious convictions and the influence of religion on their works have been extensively studied, but a comparison between them has yet to be undertaken. After examining the links between Gaskell's Unitarianism and Hardy's beliefs, I compare the two authors' attitudes towards class in *North and South* and *The Woodlanders* and their sympathies with the fallen woman as expressed in *Ruth* and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* to demonstrate their intellectual and artistic affinities.

Table of Contents

| | | |
|---------------------|--|-----|
| Introduction | | 5 |
| Chapter 1 | The Victorian Religious Landscape and its Influences on Gaskell and Hardy | 22 |
| | Gaskell the Radical Unitarian | 24 |
| | Hardy the Reluctant Anglican | 37 |
| Chapter 2 | The Implications of Belief: Class in <i>North and South</i> and <i>The Woodlanders</i> | 48 |
| | Gaskell the Unitarian Socialist | 52 |
| | Hardy the Darwinian Meliorist | 59 |
| Chapter 3 | Gaskell's and Hardy's Fallen Women: <i>Ruth</i> and <i>Tess of the d'Urbervilles</i> | 72 |
| Conclusion | | 100 |
| Works Cited | | 104 |

Introduction

Elizabeth Gaskell and Thomas Hardy have long been identified as English provincial novelists. This common categorization does not lead us to conclude that the earlier novelist had any influence on the later one. Indeed, there are many obvious differences between the two writers, professionally as well as personally. Gaskell was a chronicler of the industrial North, whereas Hardy is intimately associated with rural Dorset. She was an avowed Unitarian, whereas Hardy struggled with religious doubt. The two authors' works had very different receptions in their own times and have had different responses from critics since.

Gaskell, in her own time, rivaled Charles Dickens in popularity (Colby 1), but her reputation dwindled and many of her novels fell out of print in the early twentieth century. Those early twentieth-century scholars who did consider her work, such as Archie Stanton Whitfield and David Cecil, were careful to qualify their assessments: she was a notable but minor writer, not deserving of a place in the canon. The salvaging of Gaskell's reputation came late and happened slowly. According to Gaskell biographer Patsy Stoneman, Aina Rubenius's work *The Woman Question in Mrs. Gaskell's Life and Works* (1950) prompted the emergence of a new scholarship on Gaskell. Others such as Terence Wright, Enid Lowry Duthie, and W. A. Craik cite Edgar Wright's *Elizabeth Gaskell: The Basis for Reassessment* (1965) as an inspiration for their own interest in Gaskell. By contrast, Hardy was slow to gain popular success in his lifetime. Publishers

rejected his early novels, and his career as a writer began to flourish only when *Far From the Madding Crowd* (1874), the first of what are commonly referred to as the Wessex novels, was serialized under the editorial direction of Leslie Stephen of the *Cornhill Magazine*. Yet he immediately attracted sustained scholarly interest and reputation among critics.

The mid-Victorian Gaskell is also hard to place among her peers. Although a critical reassessment of her work is well beyond its infancy, there is still fragmentation, arising in part from the fact that Gaskell's oeuvre spanned many different genres. Some critics associate her with other mid-Victorian writers who were concerned with and wrote about the social problems of their day, such as Charles Dickens, Benjamin Disraeli and Charles Kingsley (Stoneman 11). Others object to grouping her with these didactic reformist writers. Kathleen Tillotson judges Gaskell to have a "wider impartiality, a tenderer humanity, and... a greater artistic integrity than either Disraeli or Kingsley" (212). Kingsley "wrote Christian Socialist tracts disguised as novels" whereas Gaskell's social problem novels define "the social and psychological implications of religion in society and to the individual," leaving the reader with a more nuanced view (Lansbury 103-4). Margaret Ganz acknowledges Disraeli as the only "significant precursor in [the] attack on social conditions by novelists" (50), but acknowledges Gaskell's treatment of social problems in *Mary Barton* as more effective. Rather than having a political *raison d'être* as Disraeli's *Sybil* did, Gaskell's *Mary Barton* had the greater appeal of being broadly humanitarian. Whereas Disraeli's "knowledge of social conditions was the result of planned research over a limited period of time, Mrs. Gaskell's grasp of the subject was the fruit of many years of personal experience with poverty in her husband's parish" (50).

Modern critics often distinguish Gaskell and Hardy from other writers contemporary to their periods. Though Victorian in educational and cultural formation, Hardy straddled the modern age. Hardy is not modern enough to be modern, and yet he was greatly influenced by diverse thinkers whose ideas would cast a long shadow over the modern era, such as Arthur Schopenhauer, Charles Darwin, Auguste Comte, and Henri Bergson. Hardy also shared many of the same preoccupations as the later moderns, and his last two novels *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure* (1895) in particular, though not to the exclusion of his other novels, deal with pertinent social questions that outlasted his own time: a preoccupation with women's place socially and politically, a questioning of marriage laws, a recognition of women as sexual beings, and the place of religious faith in public spaces. But these same preoccupations also appeared in Gaskell's works. Moreover, critics have noted that Gaskell, like Hardy after her, stands apart from her contemporaries in her accurate portrayals of the lives of the poor.

The most prominent member of "the gentleman's club of writers" (d'Albertis 7) with whom Gaskell was associated was Dickens. His working-class novel *Hard Times* (1854), set in the industrial North, was inspired in part by Gaskell's *Mary Barton*, yet it has been noted that he was out of his depth in setting, characterization, and portrayal of industrial politics. As Louis Cazamian notes, Dickens had none of the "first-hand knowledge" or acquaintance with the "appearance and manners of north-country workers" that Gaskell had and "interpreted so ably" in her industrial novels (167).¹ Because Gaskell made her home in Manchester, the heart of the industrial revolution, and lived and worked there during a period of great industrial unrest, economic depression,

¹ As Geoffrey Carnall notes in "Dickens, Mrs. Gaskell, and the Preston Strike," Dickens was also inspired to write *Hard Times* by his coverage of the Preston strike.

and poverty often referred to as the hungry forties, she brings realism to her work none of the others in this group could. As a Unitarian and a minister's wife, she was actively involved in the community of which she wrote. In short, Gaskell "lived close to what she described" (Gill 13). Both *Mary Barton* and later *North and South* give a more realistic picture of the struggles faced by working people than the characters of Dickens' *Hard Times*, Kingsley's *Alton Locke* or Disraeli's *Sybil* ever could.

When we examine the arguments for why both Gaskell and Hardy are set apart from their contemporaries, we discover much that they have in common. Thus critics emphasize Gaskell's realism, particularly in her depictions of working people, a quality long associated with Hardy, as we shall see. However, this is but one of the many features common to the two authors and their works.

Both Gaskell and Hardy were fully engaged in several debates of their day and yet they each were reluctant to declare any association or particular expertise on the subject of politics. Both authors read widely on social subjects. It is known, for example, that Gaskell read Adam Smith's *The Wealth of the Nations* (1776) before writing her first novel, *Mary Barton* (Cazamian 214). In the preface to *Mary Barton*, Gaskell takes pains to declare, "I know nothing of Political Economy, or the theories of trade" and then confutes her ignorance by adding "[t]o myself the idea which I formed of the state of feeling among too many factory-people of Manchester ... has received some confirmation from the events which have recently occurred among a similar class on the continent," referring to the working-class revolutionary activity in France, Italy, Hungary and elsewhere (Gaskell 6).

Although Gaskell wanted to address the human suffering of individuals, she also has the scope and understanding to describe the Chartist movement in *Mary Barton* and strike activity and trade unions in *North and South* and their implications for both the masters and men. Her innocence of “political economy” and the “theories of trade” seem disingenuous considering the contents of both these novels and her own reading, and it has been suggested by recent critics that Gaskell’s declaration of ignorance is a subversive act on her part. As Deidre d’Albertis states: “Retaining in conflicted form the moral authority associated with domesticity and the domestic women, Gaskell’s fictions also manage to undermine traditional bases for that authority in languages of class privilege and patriarchal Christianity” (13). Coral Lansbury agrees that Gaskell was astute about these issues, arguing that “Elizabeth Gaskell understood that a trade union was not a mere combination of workers confronting the employers, but a society that imposed its own standards of behaviour and loyalty” (123). Whether early critics can be excused for thinking Gaskell was a largely ignorant woman or not, Jill E. Matus notes that more recent critics “are... granting growing recognition to her intellectuality, [and] her familiarity with matters scientific, economic, [and] theological” (1). In *Mary Barton*, John Barton, Mary’s father, is a factory worker who tries to better his conditions by getting involved in the Chartist movement, a working-class initiative that sought political representation for the workingman. As a working-class character, he is given a central role and voice in the narrative. In *North and South*, Nicholas Higgins has a similar role. In an effort to inform her readers of the dire situation of the working poor, Gaskell details the strike itself and the consequences of such a political action on the poor and to the masters through the stories of Nicholas Higgins and John Thornton, respectively.

Hardy, too, displays a deep affinity for working people both in his novels and in his personal writing. In *The Hand of Ethelberta*, for example, he contrasts the merits of the working-class with the limitations of fashionable society (Pinion 333). While Hardy was never as active a reformer as Gaskell, in his essay *The Dorsetshire Labourer* (1883), he praises Joseph Arch for his efforts in setting up trade unions for agricultural labourers, while at the same time he warns of a breakdown in rural communities as labourers lose their sense of place and group affiliation due to the changes the increasingly industrialized world impose on rural communities (51-2). Shortly after the publication of this essay, he declined writing another as “he ... decided not to take a public stance on politics, saying that a writer was more effective if he appeared open-minded on strictly political questions” (Tomalin 199). Thus, though both authors may claim to be apolitical, and some critics have read them as such, these claims do not withstand closer reading. Although from different backgrounds and religions, both Gaskell and Hardy share great respect, sympathy and concern for the working classes in addition to portraying them in their novels in a realistic, non-patronizing way.

There is no question that Hardy directly took on the taboo subject of female sexuality. So did Gaskell before him. Taking *North and South* as an example, Lansbury reads the novel as a reversal of gender roles (116), Barbara Leah Harman as a demonstration of female sexual powers (11), and James J. Nelson as a call for equality between the sexes in marriage (207). E. Holly Pike and Duthie see the same novel as the depiction of a challenged social order (73-99 and 80-4), while d’Albertis views it as an example of females participating in the public sphere (45-71). D’Albertis reads *Sylvia’s Lovers* as a work “openly critical of the institution of marriage” (4).

If Gaskell and Hardy can be so readily compared (and I will give more arguments in support of this position below), the question naturally arises as to why there is as yet no study devoted to this task. Part of the answer is that Gaskell was not given serious critical consideration for more than a century after her novels appeared. Another reason is that the critical reappraisal, when it did come, was too focused on Gaskell's social problem novels. Finally, I believe that Gaskell's status and influence suffered less scrutiny than they might have because the lens of the feminist critics left a devout minister's wife and mother out of its focus.

The fragmentation in Gaskell criticism arises from an overemphasis on her social problem novels. A reader of many critics might never know that Gaskell was a prolific writer of (what are now called) novellas and short stories as well as a biography; that her most successful novel, *Cranford*, was an idyll; and that her most critically praised work, *Wives and Daughters*, has been compared to the works of both Jane Austen and George Eliot. Many critics are perplexed by *Sylvia's Lovers* because, as an historical novel, it is difficult to fit this work into any obvious grouping. The narrowing of critical focus is seen by d'Albertis as a dodge:

Elizabeth Gaskell represents an important challenge to late-twentieth-century prescriptions of Victorian culture. Whatever the critic's intellectual affiliations – whether she or he is a Marxist, post-structuralist, historicist, or feminist reader of literature – Gaskell still proves the exception to numerous scholars' theoretical accounts of the nineteenth-century English novel. (8)

The consensus of more recent scholars is that past scholars have unfairly judged Gaskell. In particular, d'Abertis claims that many feminist critics have (and I would argue critics of other persuasions have also) consistently come to Gaskell with preconceived notions about what they will find. D'Albertis praises Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar,

and other feminist critics such as Elaine Showalter and Nina Auerbach, for their work in bringing female Victorian writers to the fore. But she notes that Gaskell is not included among the authors in Gubar and Gilbert's seminal work, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, and suggests that this is because the critics prefer such traits of women authors as aesthetic objectivity, social independence, and even childlessness (10). Deanna L. Davis puts the case more strongly: "The manner in which she has been dismissed suggests that Gaskell's treatment by feminist critics has more to do with the psychology and politics of feminist criticism than with any real lack in Gaskell's fiction" (507). During the 1980s, many feminist critics apologized for Gaskell; they wanted to like her, but she does not fit into any stereotype of mid-Victorian female writers as mentioned above. As d'Albertis asserts:

By marrying, raising children, and endorsing a conservative interpretation of women's role in the family and society, Gaskell refused to reproduce in her life the paradigm of the writer's vocation that imitated a masculine one. Unlike Jane Austen and most of the Brontës, she married: unlike Eliot, she had children. According to prevailing criteria, Gaskell thus lacks the biographical prerequisites for full feminist approval, and her novels tend to rank as "substandard" efforts more often than not as a result of her life decisions. (9)

Gaskell's religion has been another impediment to an objective critical appraisal of her work. Ironically, an earlier patriarchal condescension on the part of Anglican establishment critics towards this radical nonconformist was superseded by a (still patriarchal) secularist objection to her excessive religiosity, and finally by a feminist objection to her wifely championing of the maternal role. Critics all along have too easily allowed their objections to Gaskell the woman colour their evaluations of her writing. Earlier critics such as David Cecil and Archie Stanton Whitfield judge her work with her faith in mind, and as Robin B. Colby points out, "[e]ven recent critics see Gaskell as

limited by conventionality and by religious orientation” (1). Lansbury also sees the secular prejudice working against Gaskell, noting that “religious doubt is generally taken as an indication of some complexity of thought, while faith is regarded as the attribute of an unthinking mind” (15). Perhaps this is why Cecil refers to Gaskell as “unintellectual”(198) and Whitfield speaks of her having “a certain weak sentimentality” (89). Her role as a minister’s wife has led to a stereotyping of the woman herself. Of course, Gaskell’s religion is central to her work as a novelist, but it is imperative that we examine it without prejudice and in context in order to overcome our preconceived notions of what this might mean to her qualities as a writer.

The fragmented approach to Gaskell continues, but it shows signs of coalescence. As mentioned above, for most critics Gaskell is a social problem novelist, and thus reduced to the author of *Mary Barton*, *North and South* and, to a lesser extent, *Ruth*. To others Gaskell is ineffective when she “explores . . . social and moral problems [or] violent passions.” Instead, “[t]he subject of a simple and tender love in an idyllic rural setting called upon powers over which the author had the greatest control” (Ganz 221). Thus *Cousin Phyllis*, *Cranford*, and *Wives and Daughters* become the focus, and the earlier works are seen as flawed. More recently, critics have come to realize that, although her work can seem disparate, there are many ways it can be appreciated and acknowledged as a whole. Colby, Stoneman, d’Albertis, Davis, and others have led the way in restoring Gaskell’s reputation and her contribution to English literature, but the critical effort is far from complete. E. Holly Pike astutely points out that “Gaskell’s work should not be condemned to the cursory treatment afforded to individual works of writers

of subgenres, but rather she should be treated as a realist novelist whose first works happen to have strong social themes” (16).

In agreement with Pike, this thesis treats Gaskell as a social realist novelist, but I would argue that all of Elizabeth Gaskell’s novels have strong social themes, and only that the social themes may seem less obvious as her writing becomes more finely wrought and less obviously religious in tone. As Edgar Wright states:

Mrs Gaskell was always concerned with how people lived and the social structure that groups of them formed. Her range embraces two extremes, at one end the shifting fabric of society in the Industrial England of the times, at the other end the traditional and stratified patterns of social classes which was still the accepted theory, and which existed in the country areas with little impact from industrialization. (10)

Wright’s remark seems especially pertinent to Gaskell’s *North and South*, where the contrast between traditional and industrial social structures is of central concern. If Gaskell did no more than accurately describe the lives of ordinary workers caught up in the shifting social tides, it would be enough to distinguish her from her contemporaries. But Gaskell does more. She examines the consequences of the inevitable clash of these contrasting social models and develops her own ideas as to how society might benefit from the conflict, as we shall see in detail in chapter two. For now it is enough to note that Gaskell’s careful veracity in her descriptions of working people not only sets her apart from her contemporaries, but it anticipates Hardy.

Like Gaskell, Hardy was also a social critic. A pervasive thematic concern in his work is, on the one hand, the changes brought about by industrialization and, on the other, an earlier England as portrayed in the Wessex novels, a world that was “rural, traditional, fixed in old country ways, ritual and speech” (I. Howe 1). His descriptions of both are replete with authorial commentary. Peter Widdowson observes, “how little

criticism there has been which has regarded Hardy seriously and historically as a social novelist concerned with the composition of the rural economy, with class, property and gender relations” (37). Both Gaskell and Hardy approach these social themes with an insider’s knowledge but an unconventional outsider’s perspective. They both had first-hand knowledge of their fictional environments, but were also outsiders to many of its conventions. In Gaskell’s case, this outsider’s status resulted from her religious dissent and in Hardy’s case from his rejection of mainstream religious belief. Their respective dissent and disbelief directly influenced their treatment of social themes, particularly their attitudes toward class and gender. Although the motivations for their unconventional social criticisms may have been different, they are in remarkable agreement in their social prescriptions. It is my goal in this thesis to show that this coincidence is less surprising than it may seem.

Although there is no direct evidence that Hardy read or was influenced by Gaskell, a number of critics have made links between the two authors. Laurence Lerner contends that both authors were realists in the sense that they “tell us what the world is like. . . . [They] have ears which are opened to tones of speech, eyes that see the exact shape of a gesture, pens trained to record; they are careful to tell no lies, above all no pleasant lies” (22). Shirley Foster notes that both authors employ the “skillful use of environmental detail” (156), while Linda K. Hughes asserts that both are regional novelists writing “highly complex multivalent narratives that address fundamental social conflicts reveal[ing] a deep awareness of historical change” (Hughes “Cousin Phillis” 91). In his introduction to *Mary Barton*, Stephen Gill writes of Gaskell:

Better than any other of the socially conscious novelists of the nineteenth century before Hardy, she is able to grasp what are the sources of tension

in a society and portray these imaginatively through the filter of human emotions. Just as in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* or *Jude the Obscure* one feels great moments of nineteenth-century history throbbing through the suffering of the seduced Tess or the anxious, hopeful Jude, and through the structure of the novels themselves, so in the character and structure of *Mary Barton* one can understand a tiny part of social history as it should be understood, on the pulses of the people who made it. (18)

In this thesis, I consider both Gaskell and Hardy as social realists. There are many definitions of literary realism and many scholarly discussions cite George Eliot's *Adam Bede* as the nascent English novel for this genre.² Interestingly, *Adam Bede* has often been compared to Gaskell's *Ruth*. Among other similarities, both novels deal with the theme of the fallen woman, although Hetty Sorrel's fall is a mere footnote when compared to Ruth's. Hardy's first successful novel, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, has also been compared to the works of Eliot, particularly "for their common treatment of peasant life and speech" (Chapman 25). I will use Ian Watt's conception of social realism as a narrative technique that conveys "a particularization of time, place, and person, a natural and lifelike sequence of action; a literary style that gives the most exact and rhythmical equivalent possible of the object described" (291). In short, social realist novels attempt to recreate the experience of individual characters in their natural settings. By describing a character's behaviour and allowing us to see him in his environment, we are able to get a sense of his experience. In the social realist novel, we are inevitably introduced to characters from a greater range of classes.

Both Gaskell and Hardy must be considered as social realist novelists with some qualifications. There is no doubt that they both lapse into sensation, incredible coincidence, and mishap. We only have to think of Mary Barton's discovery of the true

² For a discussion of George Eliot's use of realism, see, for example, Ioan Williams's *The Realist Novel in England*.

identity of the murderer from a scrap of paper found on a bush by her Aunt Esther at the site of the crime, or Angel's failure to find Tess's confessional letter before their marriage, to find credulity stretched and strained past the confines of realism. But the fact remains that both authors describe the experiences of working people and women in a way that allows us to consider them as social realists. As Ioan Williams points out: "[t]he Victorian social novel . . . is realistic in that it represents the actual state of society and embodies the idea of integrating social life on a moral basis. So it represents a step forward in the novel's history, demonstrating its capacity to deal with contemporary social experience and handle the widest economic and social questions" (117).

One way in which both Gaskell and Hardy demonstrate literary realism is their accurate use of dialect to portray both regional and class distinctions. In contrast, Charles Dickens' character Oliver Twist speaks with the accent and grammatical structure of a middle class boy which, given his early years in the workhouse and then as one of Fagin's gang of street urchin pickpockets, is quite unrealistic (Bayley 348). Early biographer Gerald De Witt Sanders devotes an entire chapter to Gaskell's use of dialect and notes: "in the writing of dialect [she] gave a great impulse to its use in fiction after her time, and suggested to subsequent authors how well it became novels dealing with persons uneducated and uncultivated" (145). In *The Language of Thomas Hardy*, Raymond Chapman also devotes a chapter to Hardy's use of dialect. He notes that Hardy's intention was "to give the impression of how the speech of certain characters differed from the educated norm" (113). Both Gaskell and Hardy were influenced in their use of dialect by the associations they had with others interested in dialect: she was influenced by her husband William Gaskell, an expert and lecturer on Lancashire dialect

(Sanders 153 and Easson, *Gaskell* 34), and he by William Barnes, the poet and author of *A Glossary of Dorset Dialect* (1883). Of his use of dialect, Hardy said, “[t]he rule of scrupulously preserving the local idiom, together with the words which have no synonym among those in general use, while printing in the ordinary way most of the local expressions which are but a modified articulation of words in use elsewhere, is the rule I usually follow” (Hardy, *Thomas Hardy’s Public Voice* 29).

Use of dialect is but one trait which marks Gaskell and Hardy as realists. Another is their treatment of death. In a letter to her then editor, Charles Dickens, Gaskell says of *North and South* that “a better title . . . would have been ‘*Death and Variations*’” (*Letters* 220).³ W. A. Craik asserts that by the mid-nineteenth century, the earlier literary convention of sparing the reader from too much tragedy by improbably saving a dying character just in time gave way to a more realistic depiction of the situation and that Gaskell is notable for leading the way in this regard. This is the reason that “there are more deaths [in this story] than in any of her other[s] – a feature that has always brought protests from her readers” (Craik 90). People had to die in Gaskell’s novels because they did so in real life with appalling frequency (99-100). Gaskell was not attempting to sensationalize but merely to portray the fragility of life.

Hardy’s novels too, are full of death. In *Tess*, for example, life’s injustices often result in death, as we see in the deaths of Sorrow and Tess. Like Gaskell, his contemporary critics bristled at the tragic situations in his novels. Frustrated “at the censorship exercised by squeamish editors” (Harvey 35), Hardy defended himself with his essay “*Candor in English Fiction*”, in which he complained of “the way . . . the truths

³ *Letters* followed by a number indicates a numbered letter from *The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell*.

of realism and the integrity of the writer's conscience are traduced by the compulsion to produce a *denouement* 'dear to the Grundyism'" (Hardy qtd. in Harvey 35).

To summarize, Gaskell and later Hardy both stood apart from their peers for similar reasons. One was a form of social realism in describing ordinary folk. Use of dialect and depiction of deaths are but two examples of Gaskell and Hardy's realism, since variations in speech and high mortality were everyday realities in the lives of working people and the poor. A second feature common to both writers that calls for elucidation is their frank acceptance of female sexuality. Gaskell is not always recognized as a precursor to Hardy in this. The judgment of Gaskell's works is clouded by the prejudices of her contemporaries towards her unconventional faith, as well as the contemporary secular prejudice towards faith of any kind. In consequence, Gaskell and Hardy's treatment of women and class is of particular interest to us.

Although the two authors' views concerning these issues have many similarities, they are by no means identical. Rather, as I have said, their views are on a continuum tempered by her dissenting faith, on the one hand, and by his disbelief, on the other. Both deplored what they saw as a double standard in sexual morality and an inequality in the treatment of the working classes, but whereas the optimistic Gaskell looks for solutions directed by her faith, Hardy finds the conventions of his (former) religion to be the source of the problem.

The main focus of this thesis will be to examine the commonalities of the authors' viewpoints as expressed in their novels and to demonstrate how their conceptions of class and gender were shaped by their respective dissent and disbelief. A convincing argument in favour of a continuity of belief between Gaskell and Hardy will require a close

examination of the backgrounds and beliefs of both authors. Thus, chapter 1 takes a mainly historical approach in surveying the religious context in Victorian England from Gaskell's time to Hardy's in order to lay the groundwork for a better understanding of the connections between the authors and their works. In so doing, I will trace the historical connection between Gaskell's radical version of Unitarianism and Hardy's own intellectual dissent. Biographical comparison shows that both authors were cultural and intellectual outsiders whose personal and intellectual experiences reinforced their outsider status. Chapter 2 examines the attitudes towards class relations in *North and South* and *The Woodlanders* with specific reference to the authors' belief systems, showing that the realism noted in both authors is traced to their first-hand knowledge of the working people they describe. The biographies also make clear that their concern for those who fell between the classes was in both cases born of personal experience. Chapter 3 compares the fallen woman as portrayed in *Ruth* and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. I argue that Hardy was greatly influenced not just by *Ruth* but also by Gaskell's intellectual arguments in favour of the social emancipation of women. By placing Gaskell's domesticity and religiosity in their proper contexts, we discover that she was equally radical in these spheres as she was in her fiction. A reading of the novels with the authors' biographies in mind makes clear that the reasons for their shared attitudes towards women and their common questioning of established morality arise in part from a commonality of experience. All these links between the authors speak to a greater continuity in their works than has been previously supposed. None of these arguments can be made successfully without a careful consideration of the historical contexts in which the novels were written. Since it is essentially the common moral outlook shared

by Gaskell and Hardy that is the focus of my thesis, I will begin with a study of the two authors' attitudes towards their respective religions.

Chapter One

The Victorian Religious Landscape and its Influences on Gaskell and Hardy

In *Gains and Losses: Novels of Faith and Doubt in Victorian England*, Robert Lee Wolff asserts that “of all the subjects that interested Victorians, and therefore preoccupied their novelists, none—not love, or crime, or war, or sport, or even money—held their attention as much as religion. And of all the subjects none is more obscure to the modern reader” (2). Assuming Wolff is correct, we “modern readers” of Victorian literature would benefit from a greater understanding of the religious landscape of Victorian England. This chapter will explore the religious climate of that time in order to place Gaskell and Hardy’s individual belief systems and experiences within their religious and historical contexts. The purpose is to better understand the respective authors’ social responses to and treatment of class and gender in their novels. More significantly, a closer study will demonstrate that Gaskell’s belief and Hardy’s growing skepticism came out of the same tradition and that this connection is more widely apparent in many of their novels.

Wolff’s analogy of the religious landscape in Victorian society is a useful guide:

A spectrum—a horizontal bar of rainbow colors—serves us as a metaphor. All the visible colors from violet at the extreme right to red at the extreme left represent the diverse gradations of religious opinion within the Church of England itself. Outside the spectrum to the right, outside the Church of England, in the ultraviolet are the Roman Catholics. Outside the spectrum to the left, and also outside the Church of England, in the infrared, are the Dissenters or Nonconformists, Protestants of many varying sects, who dissent from the Church of England and do not conform to its usages (8).

Within the spectrum of the Church of England, hereafter referred to as the Church, there were three main divisions from right to left. High Anglicans conformed to the traditional rules laid out in the thirty-nine articles established by the Church. As such, those who adhered to the High Church were therefore members of the establishment or, at least, aspired to be. The Broad Churchmen, who were influenced by many profound religious thinkers influential in the Victorian age, such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Julius Hare, Frederick Denison Maurice, and Thomas Arnold, tended to be more moderate and liberal. The Low Churchmen placed primary importance on the Bible rather than the human authority of the Established Church and preferred to be called Evangelicals. In short, the High Anglicans felt the Established Church was not Catholic enough, the broad Church was content with all the contradictions of the Church, preferring “balance and compromise,” and the Low Church thought the Church was too Catholic, disliking what was often referred to as popery, which in this context can be defined as an excessive display of ritualistic elements in the church service associated with Catholicism (Wolff 17-22).

Many of these Low Churchmen eventually left the Established Church and moved to Methodism, a dissenting religion favoured by the working classes. It was mostly the Evangelicals, both inside and outside the Church, who pushed for social reforms such as the abolition of the slave trade, prison reform, and the education of the working classes (18). Gaskell often found herself among these reformers on various committees and in social reform projects to which she was committed, and yet in fellowship she was more closely aligned with the Broad Churchmen, many of whom led the intellectual religious debates of the day. Hardy, too, as a young man was influenced both by the Evangelicals,

through his friendship with the Moule family, who will be discussed more later, and by Broad Churchmen such as Benjamin Jowett, whose ideas were to greatly influence his growing skepticism, as we shall see in more detail in chapter 3.

Gaskell the Radical Unitarian

Though by the 1830s much of England was embroiled in religious controversies that would continue throughout the century and into the next, it is not surprising that the North, which was undergoing such great social changes, became a nexus for dissent. The Manchester of 1832, where Elizabeth Gaskell first made her home after her marriage to William Gaskell, assistant minister at Cross Street Chapel, was a city undergoing tremendous change. It grew from 70,000 in 1801 to 300,000 in 1841, three-fifths of which were immigrants seeking work in the new factories of the Industrial Revolution (Karagon 2). The miseries suffered by this new urban class were made notorious by Friederich Engels' book *The Conditions of the Working Class in England in 1844*. Those same miserable conditions were described in Gaskell's *Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life*, first published in 1848. The new northern proletariat was not only rootless and multiethnic, it was also godless. The 1851 religious census revealed that "large sections of society . . . had little time for religious observance" and even "where churches had been erected in the new working-class areas, they had received but half-hearted following. . . . A fast growing Nonconformity which had been strongly reinforced by an enthusiastic Methodism was beginning to threaten the strength of the entrenched Established Church" (Pickering 383). By this time, all Christian denominations in England felt the urgent need for religious reform.

In the late 1830s, the Anglo-Catholic Oxford Movement (High Church) was peaking in its promise and influence. A similarly powerful Evangelical revival was being sustained within the Church of England and an increasingly confident array of dissenting communities were articulating their political and theological claims (McKelvy 296). Among the dissenting groups, the Unitarians, though small in number, held great sway in the industrial North.

The Unitarians of Manchester and surrounding Lancashire were predominately middle-class traders and manufacturers whose main business was cotton. As Anthony Howe notes: “the cotton masters . . . were the leading entrepreneurial group produced by the industrial revolution as well as the dominant group in Lancashire” (48). He further notes that among this group of Victorian businessmen “[t]he distribution of religious allegiances reveals an overall, but extremely marginal predominance of non-conformity, and the corresponding, too often neglected strength of Anglicanism. Within non-conformity, the dominance of the Unitarians is remarkable, amounting to 36 per cent of all non-Anglicans” (61).

The Unitarians were, in the main, reformers and their attitude to the lower classes was benevolently paternalistic. Neglect of the poor would have been contrary to their prescribed duty to improve society in general and to lead the way in social cooperation. As Howard M. Wach states, the Unitarians’ “practical example of social morality, or religiously inspired ethical ideas about social organization and social relations, provided a compelling model for addressing the problems of the urban poor” (2). Unitarianism itself was rooted in the Protestant Reformation. The word Unitarian was first used in England in 1682, and yet its definition is hard to specify, given the flexibility adherents were (and

are) granted in asserting their individual opinions. According to the *Catholic Encyclopedia*:

No definite standard of belief is recognized in the denomination and no doctrinal tests are laid down as a condition of fellowship. The co-operation of all persons desirous of advancing the interests of “pure” (i.e. undogmatic, practical) Christianity is welcomed in the Unitarian body. In granting this co-operation each member enjoys complete freedom in his individual religious opinions, and no set of doctrinal propositions could be framed on which all Unitarians would agree. The bond of union between them consists more in their anti-dogmatic tendency than in uniformity of belief. The authority of the Bible is in some degree retained; but its contents are either admitted or repudiated according as they find favor before the supreme, and in this case, exacting tribunal of individual reason. (Weber)

The emphasis on rationalism is crucial. There was no double standard in the Unitarian approach to revelation. Theological opinions and actions were as much as any others required to be based on reason and knowledge. In this sense, whereas other denominations were struggling to adapt to the new realities of Victorian life, the Unitarians could maintain a strong continuity with their heritage. “To the nineteenth century [the Unitarians] brought a doctrine of rationalism that spoke in terms of the enlightenment of the previous century” (Lansbury 12).

Theologically, the two essential differences between Unitarian and Church of England teachings were, first, that the Unitarians espoused a single personality of God as opposed to the Anglican doctrine of the Trinity (Father, Son and the Holy Ghost), and second, that the Unitarians emphasized the primacy of the New Testament of Jesus Christ, whom they regarded as a man and not a divine being (Easson, *Gaskell* 5). Moreover, in contrast to other dissenting religions as well as the Church, the notion of retribution in hell (Duthie 152-3) and the belief in the necessity of baptism, the Doctrine of Atonement (Duthie 159 and Easson, *Gaskell* 6), and other sacraments as prerequisites

for God's grace were discounted. As a result, Unitarians were much more interested in a practical active faith based on the here and now and the example of Jesus Christ, characteristics evident in the actions, writing, and personality of Gaskell.

Scholars such as Edgar Wright (25) and Angus Easson (*Gaskell* 10), among many others, stress the remarkable lack of sectarian bile within the Unitarian community. Their openness to other creeds and even to unbelievers was outstanding for the time. This characteristic was particularly true in the case of Elizabeth Gaskell, both in her personal life (as we shall see later) and in the characters represented in her pages. The most noted example is the scene in *North and South* where "Margaret the Churchwoman, her father the Dissenter, Higgins the Infidel, knelt down together. It did them no harm" (233). In *Mary Barton*, John Barton is another skeptic who wonders "why [the rich and poor] are so separate, so distinct, when God has made them all" (149). Gaskell frequently portrays characters of other faiths in her writing. For example, the mores and customs of the Quakers, or Friends, as they are sometimes referred to, are fully and sympathetically portrayed in John and Jeremiah Foster of *Sylvia's Lovers*. In *Mary Barton*, The Methodist Davenport family is also portrayed sympathetically. In *North and South*, Margaret's brother Frederick marries a Catholic. The Established Church is also represented in the characters of the Hale family, among others.

Both of Elizabeth Gaskell's parents were Unitarian. Her father had at one time been a Unitarian minister, but he gave up the pulpit "when he could not reconcile his faith with the acceptance of fees for preaching" (Lansbury 11). It has been suggested by biographers Arthur Pollard (115-16), John Geoffrey Sharps (220-1) Winifred Guerin (151), and Gerald De Witt Sanders (68) that this event may have given her the idea for

the sub-plot of Mr. Hale's doubts in *North and South*, though more recent criticism cites other sources, as we shall see in chapter 2. Elizabeth Gaskell was a first-hand witness to the struggles of faith and doubt through which so many Victorians suffered. Gaskell's mother, Elizabeth Holland, who died shortly after Elizabeth was born, came from a more illustrious family than her husband's. The Hollands "had been active in political and religious reform since the eighteenth century" and were related to other well-known Unitarian families: the Darwins, the Wedgewoods, the Turners, and Dr. Peter Gaskell, the medical and social reformer, all of them leading members of the community (Lansbury 11).⁴ Thus, although born into a dissenting family and therefore technically an outsider to the Anglican establishment, Gaskell was part of an alternate establishment, "securely ensconced in the complex web of relationships that made up the Unitarian cousinhood" (Cunningham 127).

As powerful and influential as the Unitarian community was, it still suffered prejudice as a dissenting group. Wach gives us a succinct account:

Prior to the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts in 1828, this small community shared the same civil and legal disabilities that burdened other non-Anglicans. After repeal their reputation as heterodox freethinkers continued to provoke hostility, among Trinitarian nonconformists as well as Anglicans. In Manchester, moreover, disproportionately large Unitarian participation in local politics and civic affairs of the 1830s occasionally triggered more localized outbursts of resentment. Only toward mid-century, and well after reform had removed the main juridical penalties attached to dissenting status, did Trinitarian antagonism—Anglican and otherwise—begin gradually to diminish. (541)

⁴ For a fuller discussion of the politically and socially prominent Unitarian cousinhood of Wedgewoods, Darwins and Gaskells, see Anna Unsworth's *Elizabeth Gaskell: An Independent Woman*.

These prejudices against her own community doubtlessly gave Gaskell a greater understanding, and indeed sympathy, for others who found themselves more firmly outside of the establishment than she was herself.

Many of the social mores of the Unitarians in Gaskell's time ran contrary to the mainstream, particularly their attitudes to education and science, and their views on class and gender. Education of both sexes was of equal importance and Unitarian schooling was extremely progressive by Victorian standards. Those standards varied widely before the education act of 1870, when an attempt to unify and universalize the system was made. As Walter E. Houghton notes, most Victorian schooling had in common a focus on "the three R's and the rudiments of Latin grammar . . . [and for the] middle classes, there was no tradition of serious reading outside of divinity" (141). Methodology was largely confined to rote learning and the use of corporal punishment was a favoured method of discipline and control. Girls were often kept out of school altogether in favour of domestic work. Even in the higher classes, girls were more likely to be taught at home under the tutelage of a governess, where the emphasis was on the feminine accomplishments of needlework, musical recitation and perhaps some poetry. Insofar as working class education existed, it was largely unregulated, though the state was involved to some degree after 1833, when parliament made its limited Grant to Education. As Bruce Rosen explains, the modest goal was to render more working class people capable of reading the Bible.

By contrast, according to Lansbury, a Unitarian educational experience was markedly different when compared to mainstream education.

Unitarian schools flourished and their teaching methods of making learning a pleasure by means of games and dramatized scenes in the

classroom were the most advanced of the century. The ideal was not the moulding of Christian gentlemen but the creation of individuals who would each in his and her own way find fulfillment as an active member of society. (13)

Gaskell's schooling in particular was the best available to a girl at that time. Educated at home until the age of twelve, she was then sent to boarding school where the eight "extremely cultured and well-informed" Byerley sisters (relations to the Unitarian Wedgewoods) presided over the curriculum. After that, she was privately educated in the home of Reverend William Turner, "a highly respected and scholarly minister, who prepared students for the Scottish University" (Unsworth 15). Gaskell learned Latin, French and Italian, was well read in Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Dryden and Pope, and later read widely of her contemporaries, including Dickens, Eliot, and Ruskin (Easson 22). The Bible was a great influence, as is evident in her earlier writing.

In addition to the care taken in the education of their own children, the Unitarians were dedicated to education as a tool for social reform in the wider community. They founded Mechanics' Institutes, which provided adult education for skilled workers, including evening classes, lectures, and reading rooms. Gaskell's husband, William Gaskell, together with other prominent Unitarians, took an active part in the founding of the Manchester Society for Promoting National Education (1837), the Lancashire Public Schools Association (1847) and the National Public Schools Association (1856). Cross Street Chapel itself supported day and Sunday schools which taught children writing and arithmetic (Fryckstedt 69).

Outside of the schoolroom, Unitarian services and devotional literature stressed the cultivation of one's soul in a way that was not at all exclusive to men. "This emphasis on human potential applied to women in a particularly significant way, affirming the

possibility of self-knowledge and self-development” (Colby 11). Kathryn Gleadle cites the disproportionate number of female Unitarians among social reformers, women such as Harriet Martineau, Florence Nightingale, and Eliza Fox, as evidence that the women of this community had an unusual degree of participation in the public sphere and a greater freedom to speak their minds (8). The fruits of Gaskell’s Unitarian formation are everywhere on display. In an extensive study of references in Gaskell’s writing, Anna Unsworth finds allusions to and comments on the Bible, Shakespeare, Carlyle, Wordsworth, Ruskin, Montaigne, Dante, Ruskin, and Goethe, to name but some. In short, as Unsworth notes, “Gaskell’s writings exhibit an unusually extensive knowledge of both English and European literature” (27).

The centrality of rationalism in Unitarianism led to an enthusiastic acceptance of science. Lansbury remarks:

Their theology was an optimistic affirmation of man as a rational being who could ultimately attain a perfect state in this world without recourse to marvels and miracles. . . . [T]hey were untouched by the struggle between science and Christian doctrine. Indeed, in the contest between apes and the angels, they gladly espoused the cause of the apes, as further proof of man’s capacity to evolve by reason and by will. (11-12)

John Hedley Brook notes that “respect for the sciences was . . . central to a Unitarian identity . . . and that Unitarian families played a crucial role in establishing the Literary and Philosophical Societies, such as those of Manchester and Newcastle, in which sciences were prominent” (31-2). Gaskell grew to have many acquaintances in the scientific community, not least her cousin Charles Darwin, a man who came out of the same Unitarian tradition (*Letters* 99 and 100). Gaskell based her hero Roger Hamley, the natural scientist in *Wives and Daughters*, on Darwin (Hughes, *Modernity* 98). The novel itself is a testament to Gaskell’s optimistic embrace of technology and natural science,

which can also be traced to her faith. As Lansbury states, “[f]or Unitarians, Darwin’s perception of the evolutionary processes of life did not come as a blow to their faith, but as a confirmation of their belief in the power of human reason” (194). They were alone among Christian sects in this respect (194). Manchester College, the principal source of Unitarian ministers, had as a major part of its curriculum scientific instruction (Webb 130). Not just Darwin, but many of the leading scientists of the day were Unitarians. Charles Lyell, the geologist and author of *Principles of Geology*, George Boole, the mathematician who turned logic into a branch of algebra, and Reverend William Hincks, professor of natural history and founding editor of the *Inquirer*, the principal Unitarian newspaper from 1842 to 1847, were all products of the same tradition as Elizabeth Gaskell (130).

Given the freedom of intellectual thought accorded within Unitarianism, it is difficult to know exactly what Gaskell’s specific personal religion was. Many Unitarians tended to view society atomistically. Gaskell herself stressed “the role of the individual in effecting change,” but she also believed that “heredity and environment both determined the human personality” (Lansbury 161). What we do know is that the Unitarian tradition of individual intellectual freedom and a strong sense of purpose gave her the strength of will to write novels that offended her own religious group as well as the larger community.

Gaskell was often at odds with her own community. Both Lansbury and Unsworth make the point that Gaskell was not like other Unitarians. She criticized utilitarianism, a theory of societal organization popular with the Unitarian factory owners of Manchester. In portraying the working poor, Gaskell came under attack from the utilitarian Unitarians

who saw no moral conflict in employing young children in their factories. Her portrayals in *Mary Barton* of the dreadful suffering among the working class of all ages was a scathing attack on the conditions condoned on the basis of the utilitarian economic principles of the cotton masters, many of whom came from her own religious community. Unlike them, Gaskell refuted the facile argument of “the greatest good for the greatest number” as a means to justify or explain away the suffering of working-class individuals. As Valentine Cunningham notes, the Unitarian establishment “did not take kindly to interfering criticisms of the free-market forces of political economy” (132). The majority of congregants in Cross Street Chapel and the Unitarian cousinhood of Cheshire and Lancashire saw workpeople as “hands” and not “men” (the term Gaskell preferred) and thought *Mary Barton* a bad, dangerous book (133). Later, after the publication of *Ruth*, Gaskell once again met with protests from members of her own congregation, two of whom burnt their copies of that novel (*Letters* 150) in protest of its contents, this time for Gaskell’s treatment of the fallen woman.

In *Mrs. Gaskell: The Basis for Reassessment*, Edgar Wright concludes of Gaskell’s personal beliefs that “[her] religion [was] rationally as well as emotionally satisfying, its reasonableness residing in its connection with common sense and normally accepted decent behaviour and feeling, [and] not in intellectual subtleties or dogmas” (26-7). While Wright may overemphasize Gaskell’s lack of intellectual curiosity to the point of being blind to the contrary evidence in her works, he makes the point that Gaskell would not countenance discrimination against women and the poor, especially when it was justified by appeals to religion, including her own. (We shall see biographers of Hardy making the same claims for him.)

Because Gaskell's papers and diaries were destroyed at her request upon her death, we must rely on the large collection of her letters for insight into her personal religion. In one letter, Gaskell writes of her divided self (her 'mes'): "One of my mes is, I do believe a true Christian—(only people call her a socialist and communist)" (*Letters* 69). Unsworth argues that this is evidence of Gaskell's alignment with the Christian Socialist movement of her time (51). Another letter refers to her efforts to have distributed Christian Socialist tracts among the working classes (*Letters* 67). The tracts' authors were Frederick Maurice and Charles Kingsley. It is important to note that Christian Socialism was a movement rather than a particular sect or denomination. Its participants included Established Church members as well as Methodists, Unitarians, and nonconformist Evangelicals. Its aims were to practice the teachings of Christ with particular attention to the conditions of the poor, favouring cooperation rather than the competition preferred by the capitalist model ("Christian Socialism" *Concise Oxford Political Dictionary*).

Gaskell's friends among the Christian Socialists, including Kingsley and Maurice, were, like her, greatly influenced by the writings of Thomas Carlyle, yet another intellectual among Gaskell's large acquaintance. They heeded the essayist and historian's call for practical and personal action in order to ameliorate the dreadful chasm between rich and poor. Hardy was also influenced by Carlyle, as we shall see, but the continuity of ideas between the two authors is most evident when we consider Gaskell's role as a supporter and friend to the many leading intellectuals grappling with religious doctrine and belief. F. D. Maurice is a case in point. A former Unitarian who believed in the idea of "God as the 'ground' of society", echoing Carlyle's sentiments (Unsworth 95), he

converted to Anglicanism and then was dismissed from King's College, London for unsoundness on Eternal Punishment (Easson, *Gaskell* 13). What Maurice objected to was the notion of punishment in the after-life, an idea repugnant to Unitarians. Increasingly, those who were becoming agnostic came to that position not just because of evolutionary theory or the more sophisticated criticisms of the Bible, but also on ethical grounds. As David J. DeLaura notes in *Hebrew and Hellene in Victorian England*, there was a growing abhorrence towards the ethical implications of what had been taught as essential Christian doctrines: Original Sin, Reprobation, Baptismal Regeneration, Vicarious Atonement and Eternal Punishment (13). These Christian doctrines and the objection to them that many people were starting to have are some of the same issues which Gaskell, as a Unitarian, had already rejected. Under the influence of those intellectuals, supported by Gaskell, who were articulating their opposition to Church doctrine, Hardy would soon come to his own rejection of his Anglican faith. Both Gaskell and Hardy's opposition to Established Church positions had a profound effect on the issues explored in their novels, as will be seen in the following chapters.

In 1860, the highly controversial and influential *Essays and Reviews* was published. It was a Broad Church initiative promoting a rationalist view of religion consisting of seven essays by leading Church of England churchmen. Elizabeth Gaskell was a friend of two of its contributors: Benjamin Jowett and Mark Pattison (*Letters* 485). The most notorious of the essays was Jowett's "On the Interpretation of Scripture," in which he considered the potential misinterpretations of scripture and asserted that "[e]ducated persons are beginning to ask, not what Scripture may be made to mean, but what it does" (340). Jowett had Gaskell's full support during the furious attacks made on

him following the publication of *Essays* (*Letters* 485). Jowett's essay and its influence on the theme of the fallen woman will be considered in more detail in chapter 3. It is enough to mention here that the essay had a strong effect on Hardy. Through a volatile period of Victorian religious history in which clergymen were routinely losing their posts or renouncing them due to their publicized theological views, Elizabeth Gaskell was ever their staunch supporter. Easson notes "[her] extraordinary . . . fellowship with those passing beyond 'orthodox' Christianity or into its extreme forms" (*Gaskell* 13), and cites as an example Francis William Newman, who eschewed all forms of organized religion, but was welcome in the Gaskell house (15). We only have to look at her letters to see the frequent support she offered those undergoing persecution for their opinions, such as in the cases of Jowett and Newman.

It is quite clear that Gaskell's Unitarian religion and her own opinions that grew out of its traditions are central to her treatment of class and gender, just as Hardy's growing skepticism and eventual disbelief are central to his treatment of the same issues. The case being made here is for a connection between the two authors' values and beliefs. As we have seen above, the historical context of Gaskell's Unitarianism connected her firmly to reformist ideas in education and the status of women and fostered in her a heartfelt solidarity with the working poor. It also allied her on the side of dissenters within the Anglican faith as well as supporters of new scientific ideas. A closer look at Hardy's own relation to his faith will help us understand how he acquired (if not to say inherited) many of the same sympathies and opinions.

Hardy the Reluctant Anglican

Unlike Gaskell, Hardy, a rural Southerner born in Dorset in 1840, saw little of the gritty industrial world. Dorset is described by biographer Ralph Pite as “one of the most remote, backward and poor counties in England” (11). There Hardy was born to a High Anglican lower-middle-class family. Hardy’s community had an unproblematic relationship with the Christian faith. “It knew little about the fervors of piety,” such as we see in the character of the Methodist preacher Dinah in George Eliot’s *Adam Bede*, “and was deaf to the nuances of theology.” In short, it was a community that “accepted without question the language of Christianity” (I. Howe 4). Religion as practiced by the Hardy family was more one of social convention than one of spiritual dedication. There could be no clergymen in the humble family tree of builders and stonemasons. Their church attendance was strictly observed, however, and both Hardy’s father and his grandfather and various other relatives had played musical instruments in the weekly Sunday services at a time when local folk players rather than organs provided the church music (Pite 28).

During Hardy’s childhood, the whole family enthusiastically participated in the singing of psalms (Tomalin 20). Claire Tomalin sums up the Hardy family’s religious practice: “His parents followed the forms of religion, and he [Hardy] was brought up to believe in God, and in the devil and his pitchfork as the destination of sinners, but it was never a gloomy, conscience-searching family” (23). Most biographers agree that the ritualistic aspects of High Anglicanism had a powerful effect on the young Hardy (Tomalin 20-1, Turner 7, Pite 4-5), and Deborah L. Collins notes that “even as a child, he grappled with theological issues confounding to most grown-ups” (9-10). An oft-recounted biographical detail is the child Hardy’s costumed impersonation of a

clergyman reciting the Morning Prayer (Tomalin 20). Hardy's love of the music and rituals of the Church retained an attraction to him throughout his life, even as he moved on steadily towards disbelief.

Hardy's education began at home with music (which he both played and read), talk of modern politics, and books. He was an early and voracious reader, well supplied by his equally bibliophilic mother (Tomalin 28). Just as his church was firmly High Anglican, so was his first school. Attending the newly founded Church of England school in Lower Brockhampton from the age of eight, his was largely a traditional education focused on reading (which he had already learned at home), writing, arithmetic, and geography. Few boys of Hardy's background got more than a few years schooling, and it was mainly due to his mother's determination that Hardy, at the age of ten, continued on to Isaac Last's school in Dorchester (Tomalin 31).

That Isaac Last was a Nonconformist was unknown to Hardy's parents; the school was chosen for its fine reputation. Still, it is not surprising that Hardy would at this point leave the auspices of the Established Church. As we have seen earlier, there was little provision for higher education in the established tradition for a member of Hardy's class. The immediate implication for Hardy was less religion. Rather than the daily catechism of his former school, he was only required to recite the Ten Commandments on a weekly basis (Turner 54). The long walks to and from school through the countryside exposed Hardy not just to the natural beauties of his native Dorset, but also to the cast of rural inhabitants, met with in their own environment (Pite 8).

Hardy later followed Last to a new school he founded partly to provide his best students with more advanced study. Hardy's curriculum broadened, and he especially

excelled at Latin (Turner 54). He was keen to study the classics and for a time he entertained the thought of becoming a clergyman. Collins summarizes Hardy's early reading:

Hardy's pre-adult readings ranged from Horace and Ovid to the Greek New Testament, *Pilgrim's Progress*, John Bunyan's allegorical tale of a Christian soul's path to heaven, to *Ecclesiastical Polity*, theologian Richard Hooker's work on the proper governance of the Church, and Shakespeare to Newman. But during the same years that Hardy, then about nineteen years of age, was diligently studying and annotating his favourite passages from the Bible, and Keble's *The Book of Common Prayer*, he was also devouring two newly-published works: the classicist Benjamin Jowett's English version of higher criticism *Essays and Reviews* (1860), and Darwin's epoch-making *The Origin of Species* (1859). These texts flung the nineteenth century into an historically unprecedented religious crisis, radically transforming the 'soulcape' of the English-speaking world. (Collins 32-3)

While at Last's school, Hardy continued to attend church with his family, and he was eventually confirmed. Rather than follow his father and grandfather into the building trade, Hardy was apprenticed to an architectural firm in Dorchester. Although his formal education was at an end, he continued on a course of self-study, concentrating on the classics (Turner 7), with guidance and encouragement from a few influential teachers along the way. Hardy's love of the classics might well have created a stronger bond with his church, whose ordained members were uniformly schooled in ancient literature. But Hardy's affinity instead acted as a wedge, reminding him of the class bias that was so ingrained a part of his native institution. It was something already familiar to the young Hardy. As a ninety-year-old, he recalled with undimmed bitterness hearing a sermon given in his church shortly after he was apprenticed at Hick's, in which the Reverend Shirley attacked the presumption of members of the lower classes who aspired to join the professions. This was, according to Tomalin, Hardy's "first awakening of hostility

towards the Church, the beginning of his dislike of the narrow-mindedness, snobbery and cant of the clergy” (42-3).

If Hardy was offended by High Anglican snobbery and was beginning to share the opinion of the growing Nonconformist movements among the rural poor, for whom, according to Pite, “the Anglican church was seen as part of the establishment with the vicar assumed to be the ally of the squire and the landlord” (80), there were other Anglicans with whom he could still feel close affinity. An early friendship, which was to affect him deeply, was his association with the Moule family. As a young man, he spent a great deal of time in their company. In the Moule family, Hardy saw a different form of Anglicanism. Henry Moule, an Evangelical Anglican, was Vicar of Fordington. Much like Gaskell, a good part of the Vicar’s life was taken up with projects for social improvement. He had gained the respect of his rural parishioners when he refused to leave the area during an outbreak of cholera. His devotion to the poor was something that deeply impressed Hardy.

Of Moule’s seven sons, four held church positions, two were tutors, and one was the curator of the Dorset County Museum. Tutor Horace Moule was Hardy’s particular friend as well as an early critic of Hardy’s writing. In Horace, Hardy had a friend unlike any he had ever had. Horace was a formally educated gentleman who was both a teacher and a patron, one with whom Hardy could discuss books and ideas, “whether the Greek dramatists or modern developments in science and how they bore on religion” (Tomalin 53). It was most likely under Horace’s influence that Hardy grew to be aware of the formal public debate that was taking place about religion. According to Tomalin:

Horace introduced Hardy to the newest and cleverest of the weekly magazines, the *Saturday Review* . . . in which social issues were

discussed and religion treated with small respect. He bought himself books on geology and science that alarmed his father, because they cast doubt on accepted religious ideas, and handed them on to Hardy. Horace's upbringing had been more robustly Christian than Tom's but, making his way in metropolitan literary journalism, he could not miss the spread of skepticism, and he was too quick and intelligent to ignore it. Just one example he must have been aware of: two German philosophers, David Strauss in his *Life of Jesus* and Feuerbach in his *Essence of Christianity* had presented the Christian religion as a purely human invention with no divine element. (54)

That Jesus was human and that man created God were both ideas already being entertained by some Unitarians. Certainly that Jesus was not a divine being was a well-established principle among Unitarians and one that Gaskell believed. While these ideas were new and perhaps astonishing to Hardy, they would hardly have been a shock to her.

Moule also encouraged Hardy to read *Essays and Reviews* (I. Howe 10). At the time *Essays and Reviews* was published, Hardy was a young man, and like the Oxford youth who, according to Gaskell, were "overturning everything in theory" (*Letters* 461), he was interested in the ideas debated in this revolutionary text. The book and his subsequent discussions of it with Moule had a great impact on Hardy's own thinking about religion. Tomalin and Irving Howe speculate that it was probably also Moule who introduced Hardy to Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* (54 and 10). Of this particular time in which Hardy was a young man, Irving Howe says:

[m]en like Horace Moule appear and reappear throughout the latter part of the nineteenth century. Brilliant, erudite and unstable, they are modern intellectuals somewhat in advance of modernity. Catalysts of the very disbelief toward which they hesitate to yield themselves, they are torn by the struggle between youthful pieties and mature intelligence, and they end by paying dearly for their heresies and doubts – Moule, like a good many other English intellectuals of the day, was given to bouts of severe melancholia. Upon Hardy his effect was to crack, once and for all, the surface of orthodoxy, thereby opening him to the harsher batterings of outright skepticism. Hardy's youthful idea of preparing himself for the church was now forever

abandoned. (10)

The above passage, though it describes Moule, could also describe Hardy himself, the only difference being that unlike these other pre-modern intellectuals, Hardy did not have the Oxbridge education and the gentleman's status. Despite Moule and Hardy's close relationship, Hardy was keenly aware of their class differences. When Hardy began to show Moule his writing, he was disappointed by Moule's lack of encouragement and felt that it might have been tainted by condescension towards the young autodidact.

Another close friend of Hardy's at this time was Henry Bastow, a fellow pupil at Hick's architectural firm. While studying together to be architects, the two pursued their mutual interest in Latin and Greek. Bastow was a devout Baptist, and it was during this time, and under Bastow's influence that Hardy became quite serious in his Evangelicalism, but his youthful devotion was not to last (Pite 67-75).

Perhaps the most influential teacher in Hardy's life was one whose school he never officially attended. The Reverend and schoolteacher William Barnes shared Hardy's modest background but had managed to educate himself and "get the degree which would allow him to enter the Church" (Tomalin 41). Like William Gaskell, Barnes was an enthusiastic dialect poet and philologist. As an author Hardy took great pains to set down the unique speech of the rural Dorsetshire people, just as Gaskell did with the northerners. Hardy shared Barnes' regret for the disappearance of dialect. The realist label that Gaskell and Hardy share is in part due to their equal interest in accurately recording the local speech of the common people. Their influences, William Gaskell and William Barnes, were themselves both inspired by the provincial poet George Crabbe.

Though Hardy did not officially attend Barnes' school, for he was already apprenticing for Hicks by this time, Barnes did serve as an informal teacher to Hardy. His methods were progressive and bore some similarities to the Unitarian model. Of his pedagogy, Pite says: "Unlike nearly all his contemporaries (Isaac Last included), Barnes hardly ever employed corporal punishment and his curriculum was unusually imaginative. Instead of dinning the classics into his pupils, Barnes taught them science as well" (69). Barnes' knowledge of languages, ancient and modern, and of the classics was formidable. Hardy made a habit of consulting Barnes on a regular basis on points of Latin and Greek grammar (Tomalin 46). But Barnes was more than an ideas man to Hardy; he also served as a role model for Hardy's ambitions. Barnes was a working class autodidact who had managed to become ordained at a time when Hardy himself was still considering ordination.

The early years of Hardy's adult life show a man striving for learning in a world where higher education was really the reserve of gentlemen. Many critics have noted the autobiographical nature of *Jude the Obscure*, in which Jude, the main character, tries to realize his ambition to take religious orders by designing a punishing regime of self-study. He is inevitably thwarted, partly by his own character but also by class prejudice. *Jude* is a record of the class prejudice that Hardy himself faced, but it is also a history of Hardy's own struggles with his failing belief. Before reaching the point of complete rejection of the Church as an institution, Hardy struggled to maintain some semblance of belonging. "Striving," as Nancy Cervetti writes, "for transcendence without God, Hardy wanted to restore church structures to fit the modern spirit. He resented Christianity's enslavement to custom and convention and analyzed many of his concerns through Jude's

changing relationship with Christminster” (92). At Christminster (Hardy’s fictionalized Oxford), Jude is dressed as a working man and keenly feels his rejection by the students, who “did not even see him, or hear him, rather saw him as though through a pane of glass” (*Jude* 86). The Church, with its exclusionary class bias, had rejected Hardy before he in turn rejected the Church.

Though the seeds of Hardy’s disbelief may be traced to *Essays and Reviews* and Darwin’s *Origin of Species*, Hardy, even as a child, did not see a benign God in nature. For the young Hardy, “Nature was never the scene of consolation that it was for Wordsworth. Nature’s apparently random cruelty to one creature meant prosperity for another . . . and so for Hardy this darkness of heart had edged into his soulscape long before he read the books that affirmed it” (Collins 33). It has also been observed of Gaskell that she never idolizes nature. In contrast to Dickens or Disraeli, whose portrayals of the rural landscape “lack the visionary quality of a Renaissance pastoral but share its basic unreality” (Lansbury 26), Gaskell is neither formulaic nor romantic. “She is always aware of the beauty of trees and flowers, the changing of the seasons, but she also knew that Caliban toiled on an island that seemed a paradise to strangers” (27).

Hardy too, is well known for his dark depictions of nature’s indifferent cruelty, most notably in his descriptions of the competing life forms of the wood in *The Woodlanders*. Yet Harold Orel in *The Final Years* makes the point that Hardy as a naturalist also describes nature with a sense of wonder (83) in what Collins believes duplicates “the spiritual essence of wonder which Carlyle advanced as the basis of worship and reverence” (49). We only have to think of the description of sheep shearing in *Far From the Madding Crowd*, the celebration of May rites in *Tess*, or the stunningly

beautiful description of Egdon Heath in the opening chapter of *The Return of the Native* to feel that “spiritual essence of wonder.” We see in a similar manner a reverence for nature in Gaskell’s descriptions. Witness Ruth eloping in North Wales with Bellingham:

brushing the dew-drops from the short crisp grass; the lark sung high above her head, and she knew not if she moved or stood still, for the grandeur of this beautiful earth absorbed all idea of separate or individual existence. She saw the swift fleeting showers come athwart the sunlight like a rush of silver arrows; she watched the purple darkness on the heathery mountain side, and then the pale golden gleam which succeeded. There was no change or alteration of nature that had not its own peculiar beauty. (Gaskell *Ruth* 65)

Both writers at times convey the cruelty of nature, but also are able to find spiritual consolation in it, as the romantics had.

Their shared attitudes in this instance point to something deeper than a common viewpoint arrived at through common influences. Although the literary influence of the Romantics is clear, both authors’ refusal to ignore the sinister in nature is more telling. Not only did Gaskell and Hardy both refuse to ignore unpleasant truths, they refused to let others ignore them. There is no question that a large part of Gaskell’s literary motivation was a desire to shock her readers out of their complacency. The fact that she shocked her fellow Unitarians as much as any other group indicates an adherence to a more personal conviction. Hardy, too, was no victim of Victorian prudery; his insistence on turning his readers’ attentions to subjects they were happier to ignore points to a kinship not just of conviction but also of personality with Gaskell.

To appreciate the power of Hardy’s personal convictions, and to better understand his progression towards disbelief, we must consider perhaps the most pivotal of influences in his life. As Pite asserts, Leslie Stephen, editor of *Cornhill Magazine*, which serialized Hardy’s first successful novel, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, was the man who

decisively altered Hardy's intellectual development.

Stephen was especially impatient with liberal attempts to disguise the clash between Christianity and the modern world. For him, with his Evangelical background still in his blood, either you were a Christian or you were not. It did no good to try and fudge the issue, as the Broad Church tried to do . . . Stephen's own standpoint was increasingly influenced by positivism – a philosophy developed by the French writer Auguste Comte. . . . Positivists could no longer accept the supernatural aspects of the Christian doctrine – the belief that Jesus Christ was the Son of God and that he had worked miracles; they nonetheless believed that people could act as Christ acted. Positivists looked for a human Christ. People could become Christ to one another in the moments when they behaved with selfless love. (212-13)

Increasingly it was positivism that Hardy came to adopt as his philosophical position, and its philosophy informed his views, his actions, and his storytelling. It allowed him to accommodate his religious doubt with a moral resolve. Gaskell did not live to see the popularity of positivism as a balm to the many Victorians who, like Hardy, were struggling with insurmountable religious doubts. Positivism was from her perspective an embodiment of the Unitarian disagreement with the doctrines of the Established Church. It is easy to imagine that she might have embraced its humanistic approach, since considering Christ as a person rather than a divine being was nothing new to Unitarians.

While Hardy followed Stephen's path in matters of religion, he would only go so far in accommodating the *Cornhill* editor's exigencies regarding literary propriety. Rather than follow the path to literary high society that Stephen smoothed for him, Hardy struck out on his own, refusing to compromise in his unvarnished portrayal of the lives of his Dorsetshire countrymen. To many readers, Hardy is thought of as an agnostic or perhaps even an atheist, railing against the cruelties of a godless universe. He is judged by many to be a relentless pessimist. Conversely, Gaskell is characterized as a religious, conservative optimist. Even though both of these notions have been exploded by the

critics, the old portraits have had sufficient staying power to preclude critical comparison of the two authors. In fact, Gaskell and Hardy had rather more in common than one would think. What ties them together is their humanity, their concern for injustices, their relentless pursuit of the truth, and their deep faith in the power of loving kindness. The evidence for this is as abundant in the pages of their novels as it is in their biographies, as we shall see in the following chapters.

Chapter 2

The Implications of Belief: Class in *North and South* and *The Woodlanders*

In examining the place of science in the works of Gaskell and Hardy, we must take special care to avoid applying the current secular-atheist/spiritualist binary. The split between science and religion in the nineteenth century, though gaining in momentum, was nowhere near what it is today (Larson and Witham). And yet hindsight allows us to see just how modern both Gaskell's and Hardy's attitudes were. We see them in retrospect as early adopters of what were to become prevailing attitudes. Analyzing the authors in their contemporary contexts, we see that Hardy's immediate acceptance of and response to Darwin in his fiction are presaged in Gaskell. The difference is one of impact: Darwin's theory, along with other new scientific ideas, merged naturally with Gaskell's dissenting faith, whereas for Hardy the new theory was another blow to his fragile beliefs, or even a reinforcement of his disbelief (Millgate *The Life* 132). For Hardy, Darwinism left individual human sympathy as the only realistic antidote to social injustice.

Gaskell's dissent from Dissent progresses chronologically through her novels. Early preoccupations of faith and reform yield to an ambitious critique of class and the Established Church in *North and South*. Finally, in *Wives and Daughters*, Gaskell attempted a state-of-the-nation novel in which religion is barely mentioned and where the male hero is a naturalist modeled on her cousin Charles Darwin. By contrast, Hardy's implicit criticisms of class inequity and the unjust treatment of women are constant

themes throughout his works. His acceptance of Darwin's theory changed the weft, while leaving the weave intact.

Darwinism as an underlying theme is inarguable in *The Woodlanders*, as Gillian Beer has pointed out (233). Class is another obvious theme, and any analysis of class in Britain will entail its concomitant, heredity. Hardy's ready understanding of the scope that Darwin's theory gave to heredity allowed him in *The Woodlanders* to approach the subject of class with a new, deeper perspective. Evolution helped explain not just what was happening in his own time, but what had happened in the past and, in a fatalistic way, what we might expect from the future.

Many early supporters saw in Darwin's theory a scientific justification of the traditional class hierarchy so dear to the British establishment. Hardy, as an outsider to the class of his birth and to that which he later belonged, was perhaps less susceptible to such a misreading. Hardy uses science to explain the inevitability of class strife and class change as people adapt to new social environments. Gaskell bears witness to the same strife but rejects its inevitability, calling on a progressivist blend of Christian solidarity and scientific openness to combat it and take us forward.

Regardless of their respective optimism (or lack thereof), Gaskell and Hardy shared a primary adherence to truth. For Gaskell it is an article of faith, as we have seen. For Hardy, it is a form of reckless nostalgia. It is reckless in that he risked his livelihood by alienating his readers, and nostalgic because he understood, better than the urban sophisticates or the rural people themselves, how quickly and completely so much of what he portrayed, including many of the rural traditions he so lovingly described, would cease to be. In what follows I will rely implicitly on the religious contexts in which *North*

and South and *The Woodlanders* were written. It is less imperative but still necessary to frame the scientific context.

The notion of change as an inevitable fact of existence was given scientific justification by Isaac Newton, an anti-Trinitarian at a time when denial of the Trinity was illegal (Wood 50). If not an official Unitarian, Newton's belief in God's supreme power (the God of dominion) meant that he denied the existence of the devil and demons, from which it followed that God's truth was perceivable undistorted to our senses. Space and time are aspects of God (Wood 48); the simplicity and regularity of nature's laws reflect the perfection of the sole deity. Newton's God is more than the "unmoved mover" of the ancients. He is both the reason for and the continuing cause of the laws of nature. By insisting on a sole God of dominion to whose truth and creation man has uncorrupted access, Newton ironically made it easier for those who followed his methodology to excise this last remaining spirit and enter into a clockwork universe of materialism. For those not willing to go so far, there was still a bulwark for faith in the supremacy of man's reasoning by his senses and an emphasis on truth, two articles of faith for Gaskell and other Unitarians, as we have seen.

Moreover, there was the calculus. Newton's method of fluxions expressed motion as a universal. Force is not the cause of motion, but of acceleration—a change in motion itself. The power and scope of this discovery underpinned every subsequent advance in the sciences. Nature's fundamental laws expressed as differential equations tell us not how things are but how they change. By the nineteenth century, the notions of force and acceleration had seeped into everyday consciousness. Newton's revolution had moved to the Continent (thanks in part to the superiority of the Leibniz notation that the British had

refused to adopt) and was informing German metaphysics. But just as Newtonian physics had kept its static backdrop of absolute space and time in which all change took place, so did the early naturalists maintain a static conception of the earth. This was not just because the story of creation could already be found in the Bible. The underlying forces that kept the earth and its creatures in constant flux acted so slowly in comparison with the span of a human life as to be utterly invisible. However, some geologists and naturalists were accumulating incontrovertible support for a new story of creation. The discoveries of the naturalists could not be hidden away. The fossil record was everywhere underfoot, and Darwin took special care to frame his theory with evidence familiar to anyone acquainted with animal husbandry. In Gaskell's and Hardy's day, the facts were out. The earth itself was in flux, along with all the forms of life upon it. While the laws that govern the changes in the planet would remain a mystery, Darwin had discovered the method by which life-forms alter over time in his theory of evolution by natural selection. This discovery remains intact at the foundation of a theory whose details were unknown to Darwin. Later discoveries in genetics and molecular biology only verify the accuracy of his original insight.

The fact that the Unitarians could claim Newton as one of their own would surely have served to blunt the threat posed by his science to their faith. Likewise, the Unitarians' exclusion from Oxford and Cambridge and generally from the intellectual establishment led them into closer contacts and closer sympathies with America and Europe (Unsworth 136). As Stoneman (145) points out, Gaskell was more likely, as a Unitarian, to have supported than condemned the French Revolution. Her sympathies with the French Enlightenment and the residual aristocratic salons of her day are clear,

and her retention of the feminine title of “Mrs.” was, according to Unsworth (145), a daring act of homage to, among others, the Mesdames de Sevigne, de Saussure, and de Stael. All this to say that we must be careful when approaching the subject of class in *North and South* not to search too hard for signs (common to many Victorian novels) of fear of an infection of Continental ideas leading to class warfare. In fact, I will argue that Gaskell’s solution to class conflict in the novel is a prescription akin to a radical reform leading to the effacement of class barriers, if not class distinctions. Furthermore, Gaskell’s optimistic acceptance of scientific progress warns us away from perceiving the ills of industrial life described in the novel to be concomitant with modernity.

The questions I would like to address in this chapter are: How are class and class conflict perceived in *North and South* and *The Woodlanders*? What remedies do the authors’ call for, and how do their proposed solutions reflect their respective beliefs? Finally, to what extent do the answers to these preceding questions indicate a continuity of belief from Gaskell to Hardy?

Gaskell the Unitarian Socialist

No critic has ever accused Gaskell of preaching to the choir, and we have seen the reasons for this. With her fellow dissenters burning her books, Gaskell had no choice but to appeal to an outside audience. In writing *North and South* Gaskell was aiming for the broadest possible readership. This is evident in the conventional format of the novel: a three-volume work with multiple subplots and a focus on love and marriage. Another theme of interest to the intended audience was the notion of the gentleman, and, more specifically, the debate as to whom was entitled to the appellation. The competing

conceptions varied from the Anglican-establishment definition of a gentleman as a God-ordained member of the ruling class, to more secular notions of the gentleman as a socially pleasant man. Some critics stressed breeding, while others emphasized education. Some stressed manners, and others talked of morals. Those in the breeding and manners camp tended to cite the ancients or the Old Testament, while the Christian example served as a model for those who stressed morality.⁵ However, there can have been no argument among contemporary readers about the status of Mr. Hale. He has the pedigree, the education, the profession, and the comportment compatible with the status of a gentleman. His lack of personal fortune emphasizes the current belief that being a gentleman depended on something besides money. Though in no way a two-dimensional character, Hale may be taken as a representative of the caste, allowing Gaskell to attract the interest of readers with social aspirations. Of course, her goal is neither to give tips on getting a husband nor to offer a manual on gentlemanly decorum. Following the conventions of popular novelists in her day, Gaskell lures her readers with privileged access to upper-class life. Then she turns the fantasy on its head. No sooner is the reader placed on a comfortable footing with the Hales than she or he is cast down with them in an anti-fantasy of descent: a penetration of the class barrier from above.

To define the class structure as presented in *North and South* I rely on David Cannadine's historical analysis, which shows that there were three popular models of social structure in Gaskell's time. The most particularly British was the hierarchical model, in which every Briton, from field hand to monarch, is ranked in a discrete linear order of status. In this model, there are no broad distinctions, no classes, since every

⁵ For a good selection of contemporary definitions of a gentleman, see Appendix C of the Broadview Press edition of *Great Expectations*.

member of society is connected by a small gap to others directly above and below. Though never extinguished in the popular imagination, this model received a major boost in the aftermath of the French Revolution, with the ruling establishment, through processions and pageants, seeking to secure allegiance by monopolizing ownership of British identity and tradition. Hierarchy is thus an antidote to the bipartite model of the radicals, whose “classes versus the masses” conception of social structure is a prerequisite to workers’ solidarity. Finally, there is the tripartite model, with individuals divided into one of three categories: working, middle, and upper class.

Cannadine sees each model as supported and perpetuated by a political group. If the hierarchical model was the darling of the establishment and the bipartite the weapon of the revolutionaries, the tripartite model occupied the disputed middle, being claimed by both Whigs and Tories for their own ends. Both parties used the tripartite conception to forge a majority of support, with the Whigs seeking the broadest possible middle class support, and the Tories overcoming them with an upper-lower class alliance. To complicate matters further, no party shied from using any of the three models when it suited their interests. One need not agree with Cannadine’s final analysis to accept the fact that “these three idealized models, not always but often articulated in the language of class, have lain behind most popular perceptions and descriptions of (British) social structure since the early eighteenth century” (Cannadine 21).

Gaskell’s model of social structure in *North and South* is clearly tripartite, with the lower, middle, and upper classes represented by the Higgins, Thornton, and Hale families respectively. Within the Hale family itself there is a tripartite division in degrees of support for the barriers of class. Mr. Hale is from the outset the least supportive of

class barriers, to the point of being oblivious to them. His wife is at the other extreme; Mrs. Hale is constitutionally unable to alter her prejudices. She accuses her husband of wronging his wife and daughter merely by introducing them to Mr. Thornton, whose unsuitability derives from the fact that his father died in poverty. She literally cannot survive her husband's experiment of communing with the lower orders.

If Mr. Hale from the outset sees nothing insuperable about the barrier between the merchant middle class and his own, his daughter is more of her mother's opinion. In the case of Thornton, she wonders: "what in the world manufacturers [would] want with . . . the accomplishments of a gentleman?" (*North and South* 40). Mr. Hale's reply indicates his belief that a merchant may work his way towards a gentleman's status as a way for his sons to acquire the title outright. Though mother and daughter both scorn the "shoppy people" (20), they are quite willing to mingle with the poor, it being understood that the social chasm between them defines the contact as charity. The Higginses are so unattuned to this that they are puzzled that Miss Hale should ask where they live. Where the Hales see charity, Higgins sees condescension. The Higginses, along with other northerners, are not versed in the class rituals of the South. Their attitudes reveal a casting off of the illusory comforts of the hierarchical model.

Margaret's will to show more than charity towards the family is the first step in her education on the modern realities of class struggle, in which each group claims virtue for itself. Thornton extols the "decency and sobriety" (84) of the masters in contrast to the "self-indulgent, sensual" workers (85). He sees the upper class as a group of idle speculators, profiting from the thrift and labour of the tradesmen. Higgins sees the masters as cunning cheats, who "beat us down to swell their fortunes" (134). For him, the

virtue belongs to the workers: “We known when we’re put upon, and we’en too much blood in us to stand it” (132).

If Gaskell begins by taking the side of the workers (as she does in her earlier work *Mary Barton*), allowing her to further justify and maintain her disdain of the middle class, she ends by recognizing the portion of right in each class. The man who opens Margaret’s eyes to her inbred prejudice is Thornton, but both she and Thornton begin their tutorship under Mr. Hale. Hale is the trailblazer who shows them both the way with his impractical yet utterly moral guidance.

Mr. Hale is the personification of the sacrifice required for society to rid itself of class barriers. In giving up his comfortable Church living, he has left an institution that has failed to “attach class to class as they should be attached” (421) and refused to join any other because no such institution yet exists. Hale is in every way a gentleman. Yet he sees that he must give up being a gentleman in Margaret’s and Mrs. Hale’s views and choose rather to be a man in Thornton’s view, “a higher and completer being than a gentleman” (410). It is in this sense that Mr. Hale’s doubts, and the action he takes in response to them, mirror the main argument of the novel. Elizabeth Gaskell touches only briefly on Mr. Hale’s religious doubts at the novel’s outset. One can arguably interpret them as no more than a plot device, serving to displace the genteel southern Hales into the North and thus propel the main events and conflicts of the novel; Indeed, critics (Ganz 84 and Stanton 125) have gone so far as to deride the artificiality of this turn of events. A closer inspection reveals the intimate link between Hale’s doubts and the central theme of the novel.

Gaskell's inclusion in her plot of an Anglican minister leaving the Church was a worry to her publisher, Dickens, who wrote to Gaskell that he would have preferred that she avoid such a "dangerous subject" (qtd. in Easson, "Mr Hale's Doubts" 31). The nature of Mr. Hale's doubts is not made explicit. The fact that Gaskell's own father gave up his ministry steered Winifred Gérin and earlier biographers to assume that Hale's actions were modeled on William Stevenson's, attributing Hale's motive to be the refusal of a paid ministry. Easson has made a much stronger argument to connect Hale's doubts with Unitarian doctrine. In the novel, Hale quotes a restoration era dissenter, Mr. Oldfield, as sharing his motives for breaking with the Established Church. Easson has sourced this quote to a 1782 edition of Theophilus Lindsey's *Apology on Resigning the Vicarage of Catterick, Yorkshire*. As Easson writes: "this identification (of the source for Gaskell's quote) is more than a footnote, since it supplies a very particular and, in her own time, well-known context for Mr. Hale's resignation" (Easson, "Mr Hale's Doubts" 35). Lindsey was the founder of the Essex Street Chapel, London's first specifically Unitarian church.

Easson's explanation for the length devoted to "Hale's conversion to Unitarianism (for such it is, even if nowhere explicitly stated)" in the opening chapters is that Gaskell intended to make this a central theme of the novel, but then "she changed her mind or failed fully to achieve her purpose without ever revising the earlier section" (Easson, "Mr Hale's Doubts" 39). He argues that the structural significance of Hale's conversion to the novel is that Gaskell wishes to establish Hale as the moral compass, the one character in a chronicle of polemics who has won, through his own self-effacing adherence to higher ideals, the right to judge others. Though I would agree with Easson that Mr. Hale, despite

his weakness, is the true (Unitarian) conscience of the novel, I would argue that the lengthy emphasis on his doubts serves another equally significant structural purpose.

In *North and South*, Gaskell argues that social unity requires a rupture with the status quo and a reform of social intercourse in both commercial and personal life. Her description of the evils that follow from a too rigid separation of the classes, as well as the powerful healing effect when they connect, are epitomized by the coming together in mutual harmony of Higgins, Thornton, and Margaret Hale at Marlborough Mills. Gaskell calls for a rejection of the class-bound divisions that prevent people from recognizing the humanity in one another. Thus Hale's rupture with the Established Church serves as a parable for the central theme of the novel. He cannot accept the separation of one God into three distinct entities just as the author cannot accept Britain being separated into three distinct, separate classes. Moreover, the Hale family (leaving Frederick aside) serves as another tripartite parable, presaging the costs and consequences of Gaskell's proposed solution. The establishmentarian Mrs. Hale must perish; the future can no more accommodate her than she can accommodate the future. The effete, gentlemanly Mr. Hale is also a relic, to be replaced by a newly enlightened, manly Thornton. Margaret Hale alone survives the shattering of her orthodox Anglican social perspective and converts to a social Unitarianism, if not a religious one. Margaret's social conversion is all the more significant when we consider that Gaskell had chosen her name as the original title for the novel.

I have argued above that Gaskell's proposed solutions to the looming threat of class conflict and the social injustice inherent in excessive separation of the classes involved a Unitarian-inspired stitching together of the seams, a communion of competing

interests, as epitomized in the joining in prayer of “Margaret the Churchwoman, her father the Dissenter, Higgins the Infidel” (*North and South* 230). Gaskell’s call for greater social unity does not eschew an implicit rejection of established traditions, but it does promote a belief in the triumph of human understanding, in the power of competing groups to recognize the merits of reasonable accommodation. Gaskell’s hands-on Christianity, her openness towards progress, science, and other forms of belief, led naturally to her socialism.

Hardy the Darwinian Meliorist

Hardy’s perspective on class differed from Gaskell’s in both standpoint and context. His framing of the issues of class did not benefit from the optimism of revealed religion. At the same time, he could not share Gaskell’s equanimity at the prospect of abandonment of the Established Church. The Anglican Church played a crucial role in Hardy’s artistic and cultural formation, as we have seen. Hardy was an Anglican who became a skeptic. His outsider’s perspective as a lapsed Anglican had neither the consolation of a deeper faith nor the confidence of an established position that Gaskell could claim as a birthright. Hardy became an outsider to belief, but he was born an outsider to the upper class. Gaskell’s faith propelled her to a real intimacy with the plight of the working class. Hardy’s sympathy was in part sympathy with himself.

Hardy’s rancour towards the class system comes through in all his novels and class prejudice often provides impetus for tragic outcomes. Tess’s troubles begin when a clergyman in joking condescension addresses her father as “Sir John.” Jude’s rejection as a university candidate is ascribed to his inferior social status. Class may well be a theme

in *Tess* and *Jude*, but *The Woodlanders* is arguably a novel that is foremost about class, which the others are not. Hardy's concern for the vulnerability of the poor and his interest in social reform are markedly evident in *The Woodlanders*, as Tomalin (221) and William R. Rutland (211) have pointed out. To Rutland, Hardy's "grievance with that part of the social system which seeks to regulate sexual relationship" (214) that first appears in this novel, is a wholly unfortunate turn in Hardy's fiction, presaging "the later manifesto on marriage" (217) that was *Jude*. Rutland objected to Hardy's deliberate embedding of the marriage law controversies of his day into the plot of *The Woodlanders*. After suffering her husband's adultery and abandonment, Grace is offered false hope by a sanguine but ill-informed lawyer that an immanent reform in the marriage laws will allow her to divorce Fitzpiers and thus free her to marry Giles. The reader is left to imagine an alternative fate for Giles had such a reform truly been enacted. Rutland's harsh reaction to Hardy's daring to insert a direct appeal for social reform in his fiction, lingering a full half-century beyond the novel's first appearance, parallels the critiques and dismissals that Gaskell suffered before him.

Hardy acknowledges in *The Woodlanders*, as Gaskell did in *North and South*, that change is the norm. Their concern as novelists is to portray the effects of change, more specifically social change, on the lives of their characters. Yet social change is itself a moving frame. In taking us north, Gaskell points to the spot where the future most quickly approaches. In leading us along the road to Little Hintock, Hardy gives us a slow-motion image of modernity crashing over what was there before.

Little Hintock is not frozen in time. In fact, there is scarcely a character in the novel who does not undergo a change in his or her social status. We encounter Marty

South at the outset in the very act of losing status. Her hand is red and blistered, on the way to becoming rough and hard by the newly adopted labour of making spar-gads that her father's illness has forced her to learn. She is slipping from her birthright as the child of a "well-to-do villager, whose tenure was by copy of court roll" and becoming "a mere cotter" (9). Marty's ongoing degradation opens the novel. The barber, whom we have followed to her door, is there to deprive her of her hair at the behest of Mrs. Charmond, who has noticed the luxuriant beauty of Marty's hair and decided to have a wig made of it. By the end of the story Marty is marked by "poverty and toil" and has even lost the "contours of womanhood" (276), so complete is her downfall.

Mrs. Charmond herself has risen from dancer to widowed landowner, though her transition is complete before the main action of the story begins. Giles Winterborne, the other well-to-do villager, might with better luck have ended as wealthy and secure as Grace's father. Instead he misses by a day the chance to extend the life-lease on his property. Winterborne is in free-fall throughout the story, which ends with Marty in solitary vigil at his grave. Critics have agreed from the outset that these two characters "carry the book on their shoulders and are remembered when the rest of the story fades" (Tomalin 221). It is not surprising that Hardy's sympathy and artistry are at their most powerful when he is portraying the characters closest to his own family and class. In fact, Robert Gittings claims that Marty was partly based on Hardy's sister Mary (155).

Although less dramatically, the other characters are also in motion with respect to class. Melbury's business is growing and consolidating as others around him fail. He understands that a "homely blade" (66) such as he can rise no further and has transferred his ambition of bridging the class barrier to his daughter. Fitzpiers is on the other side of

this barrier, pressing down from above. He has the pedigree and education, but no wealth, whereas Melbury has wealth, but neither pedigree nor education.

Grace Melbury, with her wealth and education, but no pedigree, may well become “a little more than a buffer’s girl” (68) were she to marry the doctor. Her rise from “Grace” to “Mrs. Fitzpiers” is not the most extreme motion through the class lines—Mrs. Charmond trumps her there. Nor is it strictly tragic, unlike Giles’s and Marty’s fall. It is both melodramatic and self-consciously detailed, as one would expect from an author with intimate personal knowledge of this particular limbo between the classes. The only characters who are arguably static in respect to class are the rustics: Creedle, the Tim Tangses, the bark ripper, and the top and bottom sawyers. They have a stationary status that puts them a rung above the itinerant journey-workers.

Hardy is nearly always explicit in commenting on the relative social status of his characters. “Workmen” such as the Timothys and Creedle can be “lent” by Winterborne to Melbury (103). Meanwhile, “Giles was nobody to Fitzpiers” (89), and Melbury someone “he [Fitzpiers] could not call upon” (102). Mrs. Charmond’s lack of concern for family pedigrees makes her “a piquant contrast to her neighbours” (47). The reader is left to ask what type of class structure is it that everyone is so acutely aware of being a part of. There is hierarchy, but not that hierarchy of incremental gradations. There is more than a strict bipartite divide of upper and lower classes. Nor is there the same clearly tripartite divide that we encounter in *North and South*. There is certainly the well-defined barrier between the wealthy merchant and the upper class gentleman. Of course, here, instead of the gentleman’s daughter marrying the aspiring merchant, it is the merchant’s daughter who marries the gentleman. Also, whereas Thornton was quite happy to occupy

the limbo of wealth and education without pedigree and Margaret was brave enough to meet him there, Grace is continually tormented by her in-between status and Fitzpiers, determined that “there shall be no mixing with [her] people below” (139), chafes at the idea that he has “endanger[ed] his professional and social chances by an alliance with the family of a simple countryman” (130). Hardy’s perspective of the class divide between those who ought to act as stand-ins for dogs and view-halloo a fox and those who are mounted for the hunt conforms with the Anglican Establishment: you are one or the other. To fall between is to be torn apart and exist like Grace (and Hardy himself) as a hybrid being forced in the end to abandon a part of itself. Where Hardy sees a knife edge, Gaskell sees the promised land, a middle ground where the refinements of education meet with honest industry, where prejudices are abandoned and the “different species” of Fitzpiers’ view (136) are united in common humanity. However, Hardy’s world is not peopled with established dissent. For him there is no Edinburgh alternative to Oxbridge. Melbury’s shame at his ignorance of Homer’s *Iliad* (the book Hardy himself first tried in his failed attempt to self-master Greek) is an exclusionary shame. Neither he nor anyone in the novel imagines a world between his own and the gentry’s.

I have claimed that society in *The Woodlanders* is not strictly tripartite. Although there are three main classes of landlords, yeomen, and labourers, it would be fairer to affirm that Hardy gives us a quadripartite model of society divided into the gentry; prosperous farmers and merchantmen; established villagers and trades-people; and finally itinerant day-labourers. In contrast with the top two, the gaps between the other classes are permeable. Although Winterborne is Creedle’s “maister . . . though his father growed up side by side with me, as if one mother had twinned us” (57), Creedle still addresses

him as “Giles.” Melbury sits together with his workpeople at tea, sharing stories familiar to all. He understands his role as “maister” in a practical way. His wealth has allowed him to aspire for his daughter, but he does not rate himself socially superior to his neighbours. There have been Melburys among the “yeomen, copyholders and such like” (122) going back centuries, but such a claim can be made for most of the old woodland families, who are, at any rate, all related through intermarriage. The Melburys are “only Hintock-born, such as we,” says Fitzpiers’ landlady (137), reporting the common estimation of the locals. Likewise, for Melbury there is only one salient class distinction, a fact he makes clear by his wondrous reaction to Fitzpiers’ offer: “You can’t help being happy, Grace. . . . You’ll feel as if you’ve stepped into history” (122). Fitzpiers, of course, shares this bipartite view from the gentry’s perspective towards “the tribe without” (136).

Fitzpiers embodies the bigotry of the ruling class, seeing working men as “fellows” who are there to serve and their women as sexual playthings. One imagines that if he were still lord of the manor at Oakbury Fitzpiers, Edwidge may have been nothing more than a predatory landowner in the manner of Mrs. Charmond, demolishing cottages at the expiration of their life-leases and ruining men’s lives in revenge for having his carriage delayed. However, his lesser circumstances have forced him into acquiring a professional education, so that “he’s stooped to making himself useful like any common man,” as Grammer Oliver puts it (38). As Merryn Williams has remarked, thanks to an education, “Fitzpiers can, with a little effort, find a positive role in the community; Mrs. Charmond cannot” (161). Fitzpiers does, in fact, overcome his class prejudice to the point of honestly wooing Grace, and not just for the ready money that her father can offer. In

wrestling with the decision, he falls back on professional as well as philosophical arguments in favour of a plan that he understands to be socially imprudent. Below I will analyze this turn in the plot from the point of view of Hardy's conception of Darwinism, but I think it also speaks to his attitude towards education. Raymond Williams writes:

Hardy's fiction is more than just the country against the town, or custom against conscious intelligence. It is the more complicated and more urgent historical process, in which education is tied to social advancement, within a class society, so that it is difficult, except by a bizarre personal demonstration, to hold both education and social solidarity. (344)

Williams would have us apply this insight to Grace in *The Woodlanders*, even though her social advancement requires a social debasement for her husband, something to which his own education has made him more susceptible. Not only does Fitzpiers stoop to making himself useful, but he also, in the end, stoops to abandoning his superiority. The two educated characters, after many trials, end up in solidarity with one another.

We see what ambiguity arises when we attempt to slot Hardy's text into something as vague and accommodating as a model for class structure, however overlapping, even in the case of a novel that refers to class on every other page. Part of the reason for this difficulty is Hardy's refusal to shun any of life's messy realities. Hardy had no interest in stories "famishing for accuracy" (Hardy, "Candour in English Fiction" 97). If, in his own experience, the common people of Dorset simultaneously held the gentry in reverence and contempt, were sometimes excessively conscious and at other times indifferent to hierarchy, were both pagan and Christian, then that is how Hardy would describe them. A greater part of the reason is that Hardy had another model of social structure in mind, one that he saw as essentially underlying all other possible models.

Rutland is correct in seeing Hardy as “in revolt . . . against the fundamental conditions of existence” (214) and critical of his veering into a “quarrel with human society for its attitude towards sexual relationships” (214-15). The “fundamental conditions” are those social laws that follow from Darwin’s theory. Darwin claimed that we are animals whose goal and reason for existence is reproduction. This fact of animal existence predates “cognizance . . . [which] came unmeant / Emerging with blind gropes from impercipience” (Hardy, *The Dynasts* l 6018), and their consequences, as elaborated by Darwin, are the essential laws of social interaction. Added to and sometimes opposing these are “those laws framed merely as social expedients by humanity, without basis in the heart of things” (Hardy, “Candour” 97).

With this in mind, we can look again at social structure as portrayed in *The Woodlanders*. As we have seen, the socially imposed class structure, an essentially bipartite division of landowners and workers, is overt. The “physiological [read ‘Darwinian’] fact” of the relations of the sexes being the central concern for any “honest portrayal of life” (“Candour” 97) is implicit. I emphasize that two structures are not separate: much social convention accords with, and in fact arises from, human evolution, as Hardy understood it. When Roger Ebbatson, in *The Evolutionary Self*, describes the “entire range of characters” in *The Woodlanders* as “intersect[ing] through the socially indifferent force of sexual attraction” (14), he is in danger of confusing this point. The basis for Hardy’s realism is thus not in the absence of contrivance in the plot. (What could be more staged than the episode where the tipsy Fitzpiers rides behind Melbury on his horse, obviously confessing his regrets at having married Grace?) It is the careful exactness with which Hardy places his humans in their habitat.

The Darwinian hierarchy pertains specifically to characters in their reproductive stage of life. Insofar as it is of dramatic interest, it narrows further to those potential mates with multiple prospects. Thus with his three “wives”, Fitzpiers is a nexus of the story. In fact, *Fitzpiers at Hintock* was Hardy’s original title for the novel. Grace, Winterborne, and Suke Damson all figure next with two partners each. Mrs. Charmond might be added if we count her spurned lover. Marty has only Giles as a quickly dimming prospect. Both Marty and Giles are tragically fated to end their lives, being committed, as they are, to unobtainable partners. There is a virtual inversion of the social hierarchy of the women when we consider Hardy’s portrayal of their natural reproductive fitness. Suke Damson is at the top. She is all vitality, “a bouncing young woman with her skirts tucked up and her hair wild” (86). Suke can crack a nut as well as a squirrel. “O, I don’t know what an ache is, either in tooth, ear, or head,” she tells Grace (158). Fitzpiers cannot keep up with Suke during their mid-summer night’s chase, and it is she who leads him to her hiding spot. “In the moonlight Suke looked very beautiful, the scratches and blemishes incidental to her out-door occupation being invisible under these pale rays” (114). None of the conventions that rate a poorly dressed, uncoiffed, un-pampered natural beauty as less desirable has any effect. If anything, Suke’s disregard of these superficialities increases her attraction for Fitzpiers.

Suke Damson’s robust health and “red lips” (159) contrast with Grace’s “clear complexion, rather pale than pink” and her “small delicate mouth” (30). Grace is “sometimes beautiful, at other times not beautiful, according to the state of her health and spirits” (30). When Hardy associates her corporeal gentleness with a lack of “self-assertion,” he contrasts the Darwinian ideal of physical vitality with the Victorian ideal of

femininity, to the detriment of the latter. Fitzpiers may be initially attracted to Grace by the “vener of artificiality which she had acquired at the fashionable schools” (156), but his love for her springs from appreciation of her character, “so sympathetic, so responsive” (46), and especially her “curious susceptibility to his presence” (101).

Mrs. Charmond, at twenty-eight, cannot compete with Grace, whose “countenance had the effect of making Mrs. Charmond appear more than her full age” (48). In her efforts to compete with the youthful Grace, Felice hides in her darkened, tobacco-hazed rooms, her scalp dressed by Marty’s hair and her face concealed by “an extrinsic film” (176) of powder. To the hierarchy of social class, Hardy holds up a topsy-turvy mirror that reveals an inverse hierarchy of complexion.

Fitzpiers and Winterborne are also contrasted as to Darwinian fitness. When the two enter the field at midsummer-eve to claim Grace, Fitzpiers is full of confidence, “scorning to look upon Winterborne as a rival” (112). Fitzpiers steps forward and Winterborne turns on his heel, weakened in resolve by his recent calamitous financial failures. The stags have met and the bolder has claimed the field, triumphing not just over Winterborne, but also over Tim Tangs. Winterborne is too proud to stay in the fight. Tangs is duped rather than defeated, and he will try for revenge when he learns of the deception by setting a mantrap for Fitzpiers.

The triumph of Fitzpiers is central to the tragedy of the novel. Hardy takes pains to portray Giles Winterborne as superior to Fitzpiers by any traditional measure of manliness. Fitzpiers is a poor mount, unable to control the mildest horse. He cannot hold his drink, and he is only weakly handsome: “His face was rather soft than stern, charming than grand, pale than flushed; his nose . . . artistically beautiful enough . . . [but] devoid

of . . . power; while . . . his mouth was not without a looseness in its close” (78). Contrast this to the autumn god Winterborne, upon whose noble beauties of body and mind Hardy never tires of elaborating. The tragedy is that Fitzpiers is the fitter specimen for the times. Winterborne is adapted for a bygone era; his downfall is Darwinian.

If a pessimist is someone who sees no complete solution to life’s problems, then Hardy surely ranks as one. To his portrayal of the ills arising from hypocritical social conventions, Hardy offers as a supplement the inevitable tragedies arising from nature’s “unfulfilled intention” (41). As he concluded in his 1865 notebook: “The world does not despise us, it only neglects us” (I. Howe 23). The point for Hardy in contrasting Darwin’s laws with society’s was not to promote the former as a solution to our ills, but rather to indicate which ills we had a fighting chance to avoid.

Principal among the avoidable ills was the over-regulation of sexual relations. The marriage laws prevent the mismatch of Fitzpiers and Grace from being undone and thus fail to prevent both Winterborne’s and Mrs. Charmond’s deaths. Hardy has a prescription also for unavoidable ills, that he sums up in one word repeated in the text: loving-kindness. It is the feeling-in-action without which we cannot know the “true quality” of another (30). When Hardy attributes loving-kindness to Felice Charmond’s caring for the injured Fitzpiers, he emphasizes that it is an attitude/action that can be practiced outside of and in spite of moral conventions. Giles is a font of loving-kindness, practicing it with trees as well as people, just as Gabriel Oak practices it with his sheep. But Giles’s loving-kindness, like that of all the other lovers, is most strongly directed towards the love object. Of all the characters in the novel, Grace stands out as the one whose sympathies are nearly as powerful towards her rivals as towards her lovers. She respects love

wherever she finds it: in Suke and Mrs. Charmond towards her husband, in Marty towards Winterborne, and in herself towards her undeserving husband. Grace's love of love itself and especially her sympathy towards those who suffer in consequence of love make Grace into a Christian as well as a modern heroine. Grace's solution, imperfect as it is, is the best option. In a universe without a creator, in a natural environment indifferent to suffering, loving-kindness is our only consolation.

Hardy's belief in the possibility of the extension of human sympathy is the reason for his description of himself as a Darwinian meliorist. He believed that "the most far-reaching consequence of the establishment of the common origin of species is ethical" (Glendenning 79). He concludes that the inevitable consequence of evolution was that we must extend our sympathies to the entire animal kingdom. In nature, "the ivy slowly strangled to death the promising sapling" (*The Woodlanders* 41), but mankind could and should avoid indifference to one another's suffering. In Darwinism, the not-so-pessimistic Hardy sees a purer and more extended version of Christ's message. This helps us to understand why it was possible for Hardy to exclude God but keep his religion. He kept to his pew, hoping that the church would eventually evolve enough to meet him there. Pite quotes a letter from Hardy to his positivist friend, John Morley:

I have sometimes had a dream that the church, instead of being disendowed, could be made to modulate by degrees [. . .] into an undogmatic, non-theological establishment for the promotion of that virtuous living on which all honest men are agreed. (299)

For Hardy, as for Gaskell, the teachings of Christ the man conflicted neither with positivism nor with Darwinism. As different as their analyses of class conflict were, their intersecting beliefs led to similar remedies: a lifting up of workers through education

(more Gaskell's remedy than Hardy's) and a bonding of the classes through human sympathy.

The similarities in Gaskell's and Hardy's influences and outlooks are highlighted when we consider how critics have interchanged what others might consider their most salient differences. Pite sees Giles Winterborne as a humanized Christ figure in the sense of the positivist "religion of Humanity" (298-9), whereas Carol Martin sees the catalogue of deaths in *North and South* as portraits of failed Darwinian adaptation (92). Thus we find critical support for the argument that Gaskell was the Darwinian meliorist, while Hardy was the Christian socialist. My own argument does not preclude this hypothesis. However, it states that the reverse is also true, and that Gaskell and Hardy have more common points of comparison than was previously assumed.

Chapter 3

A Comparison of Gaskell's and Hardy's Fallen Women in *Ruth* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*

The English novel from its inception is replete with fallen women, beginning with Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722) and *Roxana* (1724). Crabbe's *Tales of the Hall* (1819), whose seduced girl is named Ruth, is the probable inspiration for Gaskell's *Ruth*, (Sanders 49), whose eponymous heroine stakes her territory among Charles Dickens' Nancy in *Oliver Twist* and Little Em'ly in *David Copperfield*, to name but two contemporary Victorian fictional characters.

In Victorian novels, fictional fallen women (women who engaged in premarital or extramarital sex) inevitably come to a bad end. They are ostracized from society and often turn to prostitution as the only means of support. The authors may have been ignoring the realities of actual women's lives, but they were not inventing the circumstances. Nina Auerbach contends that although historical data and first-hand accounts attest to the fact of the fallen woman in Victorian times, her depiction in Victorian literature has become so mythologized as to seem preposterous. In particular, she notes that the conventional ending of death to the character of the fallen woman arises "because death rather than marriage is the one implacable human change, the only honorable symbol of her fall's transforming power" (35). In reality very few fallen women died as a direct result of their fall, but her existence, separate from her fictionalized sisters, has some basis in fact. As William Acton, doctor and reformer, reported in his 1857 study *Prostitution, Considered in Its Moral, Social & Sanitary Aspects, in London and Other Large Cities*, 42,000 illegitimate children were born in

England and Wales in 1851. On that basis, he estimated that “one in twelve of the unmarried females in the country above the age of puberty have strayed from the path of virtue” (18).

Acton published his study to bring to attention the plight of women forced into prostitution as a way of survival. His work had the effect of spearheading a moral debate among reformers, many of whom thought that low wages and poor working conditions made prostitution too attractive an alternative for the working classes. Auerbach asserts that the imagined fates of the fictional fallen woman (destitution, social isolation, and death) was in response to this reality: “No doubt the Victorian imagination isolated the fallen woman so pitilessly from a social context, preferring to imagine her as a destitute and drowned prostitute or errant wife, cast beyond the human community, because of her uneasy implications for wives who stayed home” (33). Despite these Victorian imaginings, the prostitute and/or fallen woman was as much a part of the social context as any other group. In her study *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, Judith Walkowitz agrees with Auerbach: “The prostitute as hapless victim was . . . a restrictive and moralistic image, one that inhibited a more searching inquiry into the motives and self-perception of the women themselves,” but she concedes that “[a]t times . . . female repealers exhibited a social understanding of prostitution that transcended this kind of abstract moral coding” (146-7).

Though not a pamphleteer, Gaskell was a repealer. As Lansbury asserts, “Elizabeth Gaskell, as a prison visitor and social worker, knew more about prostitution than most writers of the day” (31). This was in the main because of her religion. “Unlike George Eliot, who looked back to St Theresa as the glory of womankind . . . Gaskell

revered her friend and fellow Unitarian Florence Nightingale, chiefly for her work among prostitutes during the cholera epidemic” (20).

Hardy was equally aware of the more nuanced realities of the life of the fallen woman and was as little interested as Gaskell had been before him in adding to the list of cautionary tales that portrayed the wretched fate awaiting women who strayed from the path of virtue. What concerned both authors was how the unequal state of women under the law made them vulnerable to exploitation. The issue for them is the inability of women to control their financial destinies. As Hardy saw it, a woman was enslaved by marriage vows that made her “the legal property of her husband” (Morgan “*Marriage*” 252), and yet marriage was at the same time the only true hope of economic security for most Victorian women.

Both Gaskell and Hardy had explored this connection of financial inequality and sexual promiscuity before writing *Ruth* and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* respectively. In the character of Mary Barton's aunt Esther, Gaskell portrays a prostitute who, at least at times, has lived far better than the more virtuous Bartons. When Esther meets her brother-in-law John Barton after a long absence, she tells him of her “three years of happiness” (209) before she is deserted by her lover. The parallels between Esther's life and the maid in Hardy's Poem “The Ruined Maid” are clear. Out of desperation for a more comfortable life, both women have traded on their looks and sexual attractiveness. Hardy describes a woman who deliberately “ruins” herself in exchange for pretty clothes and life without toil. While Hardy's Amelia seems triumphant in her predicament as a ruined maid, the consequences of Esther's life, both good and bad experiences, are more fully examined. As Merryn Williams points out in *Thomas Hardy and Rural England*:

Hardy's heroes, like Clym and Jude and Henchard, are able to struggle actively with their destiny, form plans for opposing it, try to hew out a recognized place in the world. The women in his novels have no such outlet, and this makes their situation potentially more tragic. They are limited to a very few, easily recognizable social roles, and they are always subject to sexual domination and destruction from men. (90-1)

These unpalatable truths regarding the status of women are closely examined in the works of both Gaskell and Hardy, and Gaskell's female characters, particularly those of the working classes, have limited options for survival. In both authors, there is a frank recognition that the trading of sexual favours for a measure of financial security, whether by prostitution or marriage, is one of the only career options available to women.

Given the frequency of the theme of the fallen woman in literature, we may ask what is remarkable about *Ruth* and why it is a worthwhile exercise to compare it to *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Part of the answer is that many critics have made preliminary steps in this direction. W. A. Craik did so when he acknowledged the debt owed to Gaskell by later authors:

Without *Ruth*, one feels there would no Hetty . . . in *Adam Bede*, no Tess Durbeyfield for Hardy, and no Esther Waters for George Moore. Elizabeth Gaskell did not invite them to imitate, but by stripping all the conventions away from a very conventional situation, as old as matrimony, she showed them where to look, and suggested how they should look. (49)

Archie Stanton Whitfield states of *Ruth*:

Here we have the beginnings of the psychological novel which almost becomes an obsession with George Eliot; in which we get an analysis of motive which is the prelude to the modern problem novel. A tempting speculation is that there was an unconscious note in *Ruth*, which was later echoed in Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. (141-2)

Dale Kramer provides a more deliberate and thorough reading of the similarities between the two novels:

The portrayal of sexuality and chastity in *Tess* makes it difficult to think that Hardy was not remembering Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth* . . . while planning the history of Tess and Alec, particularly concerning their situation in their second meeting. Chapter 24 . . . of *Ruth* has many details, usually somewhat modified, in *Tess*. (27)

Kramer is alone in claiming direct influence, which is not surprising given that we have no clear proof that Hardy ever read *Ruth*. That there are many similarities in the plots is hardly remarkable, given the frequency with which the fallen woman appears in English literature and well-worn story lines associated with her appearance. Family and circumstances betray the pure Ruth and the pure Tess: both are seduced by men of higher status; both are initially deserted to face a hostile society friendless and alone; and both come to tragic ends. If this is where the similarities between the novels ended, I would be happy to consider the subject exhausted, howsoever lightly the link had been addressed. But there are many more similarities, which, when considered together, indicate a much stronger link between the two authors than has so far been acknowledged.

Both novels reflect the authors' belief systems, which are deeply rooted in a moral Christianity exemplified by the actions and teachings of Christ. Gaskell, as we have seen, rejected many mainstream Christian conventions, as did Hardy as he drifted from the traditional Anglicanism in which he was raised. Nevertheless, Christ's example, as witnessed in the gospels, remained central to both authors. As mentioned in chapter 1, an essay that greatly influenced Hardy's rejection of much traditional Anglican doctrine was Benjamin Jowett's "On the Interpretation of Scripture." Rutland notes of this essay, that "[the] insistence upon doctrines often scarcely supported by Biblical authority was contrasted with the entire neglect of other precepts repeatedly and clearly given by our Lord" (51). Indeed, writes Jowett: "[t]he conduct of our Lord to the woman taken in

adultery affords a painful contrast to the excessive severity with which even a Christian society punishes the errors of women” (qtd in Rutland 51). One cannot help but think of Tess’s experiences in light of this passage. But before the shock of *Tess*, there was the shock of *Ruth*.

Both contemporary and modern critics acknowledge *Ruth* as innovative and boldly unconventional. No other novel in Victorian times, until the publication of *Ruth*, had made a fallen woman the central character (Rubenius 178). As Craik notes:

When something entirely new hits the reading consciousness, the consequence is always a shock. *Ruth* is entirely new. Elizabeth Gaskell took the seduced girl and her child through the whole course of the girl’s life from seduction to her death, and the child’s from birth to maturity, and made them her whole concern. *Ruth* therefore was inevitably a shock to readers, and in one sense intended to be so. (48)

Alan Shelton, in his introduction to *Ruth*, agrees with Craik in attesting to its innovations, and goes further by likening it to *Tess*.

Mrs. Gaskell’s anxieties about *Ruth* . . . would seem to be exaggerated if we consider them in light of contemporary reactions. Nevertheless it is fair to say that by devoting her novel explicitly and exclusively to the issue of the fallen woman she was challenging her readership in a distinctly provocative way. When mid-Victorian fiction draws attention to sexual frailty it invariably does so in ways that confirm the existing stereotype of feminine behaviour: this is as true of George Eliot’s *Adam Bede* (1859), for example, as it is of Dickens’ more theatrical considerations of the topic. What was new about *Ruth* was not only that she confronted the issue head-on, but that in doing so—however awkwardly—it presented the reader with a woman whose psychology as well as whose situation demanded more than conventional sympathy and understanding. Not until Hardy’s *Tess*—like Ruth Hilton, ‘a pure woman, faithfully presented’—do we have a heroine who challenges the reader in the same way as does the heroine *Ruth*. (x)

Gaskell had provoked her readers by breaking new ground. Hardy, with *Tess*, would repeat the provocation, pushing it one step further.

Though Gaskell disliked negative criticism—and she had fully anticipated a negative reaction with *Ruth*—she felt compelled to speak up on behalf of those who had no voice. It was this full and central treatment of the fallen woman that so many contemporary readers found unbearable, and which Hardy would repeat with *Tess* nearly forty years later. In placing the reaction towards *Ruth* in the context of the time in which it was written, Whitfield notes:

It is hard to regard *Ruth*'s youthful folly as an unmitigated sin, but we must accept Mrs Gaskell's representation of a not uncharacteristic attitude of her contemporaries towards such matters. *Ruth* was withdrawn from certain London circulating libraries as being unfit for family reading. *Sharpe's London Magazine* decided that the subject was not one for a novel, and protested against such a book being received into the family circle. (142)

We only have to look at the critical reaction that the publication of *Ruth* caused to understand how deeply contentious the theme of the fallen woman was in mid-Victorian England.

The contemporary criticism of *Ruth* was deeply divided along seemingly moral positions. A great number of the reviews focused on the implausibility of the dissenting minister Benson telling a lie in order to protect *Ruth* from her fate as an unmarried woman with child, while other critics championed the idea of Benson's lie as the lesser of two evils. Still, that a man of the cloth would preach truth from the pulpit but live with a lie was morally inconceivable to many of the critics both contemporary and modern. In an unsigned review of *Ruth* in the *Athenaeum* (1853),⁶ the author writes of *Ruth*'s protector Benson: "A good man . . . preaching Truth in the face of his congregation . . . could not have connived at an actual lie" (Easson, *Critical Heritage* 206). The reviewer

⁶ This review has been attributed to Henry Fothergill Chorley. See Easson's *Critical Heritage*.

goes on to say that he does not object to this on the grounds of “respect for conventionalism . . . but from the belief that to practice one virtue, another must not be compromised” (206). In another review in *Sharpe’s London Magazine* (1853), the writer concurs in stating: “no Gospel minister who knew and valued truth *could* have done this” (209).

On the other hand, there were those contemporary critics who had no objection to what was seen by many as the problem of the lie. John Forster, in a review of *Ruth* for the *Examiner*, wrote: “No one doubts that it is one, but the question of art remains whether it is one that such a man would be likely to commit. It seems to us that it is. There is . . . a just expression of the frailty of the best of us in the sketch of the rise and progress of the error on Mr Benson’s part” (222). Living up to its name, the *Nonconformist* (1853) gave *Ruth* a favourable review and suggested that those critics who objected to Benson’s lie were lacking an understanding of the author’s portrayal of “truth and nature” (228). Finally on the side of those who defended *Ruth*, critic George Henry Lewes (partner of George Eliot) observed in the *Leader* (1853) that Gaskell was “open(ing) a new mine,” instead of “working the old one” (215), thereby attesting to the groundbreaking treatment of the material. Of Benson’s lie, Lewes said: “it is really no *improbability* that even a virtuous Dissenting minister should tell a ‘white lie,’ . . . the very best of men may be found to have done so.” He defended the plot contrivance as a way to deal with “human nature” and not “with ideal abstractions” (216).

Not to be outdone by the critics, the reading public and Gaskell’s own friends and acquaintances were equally vocal in response to *Ruth*. Charlotte Brontë asked why Gaskell had to make *Ruth* die (200) and George Eliot wrote: “Mrs Gaskell seems to me

to be constantly misled by a love of sharp contrasts—of dramatic effects” (231-2). Closer to home, a copy of *Ruth* was burned by members of Gaskell’s own congregation (Whitfield 143). In a letter to her friend Anne Robson, Gaskell wrote of the negative criticism that many saw *Ruth*’s story as “an unfit subject for fiction. I knew all this before; but I was determined, notwithstanding to speak my mind about it; only how I shrink with more pain than I can tell you from what people are saying, though I wd do every jot of it over again to-morrow” (*Letters* 148). In another letter to friend and fellow Unitarian Eliza Fox, an early campaigner for female emancipation, Gaskell wrote: “I have been so ill: I do believe it has been ‘*Ruth*’ fever. I was so poorly! And cd not get over the hard things people said about *Ruth*” (*Letters* 150).

As Whitfield notes, societal standards for the fallen woman had changed very little when Hardy wrote *Tess* nearly forty years later: “the antagonistic trump which greeted *Ruth* was blown again upon the appearance of *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*” (144). Like Gaskell, Hardy would not shy away from a truth that needed to be told. In the explanatory notes to the first edition, Hardy writes:

The story is sent out in sincerity of purpose, as an attempt to give artistic form to a true sequence of things; and in respect of the book’s opinions and sentiments, I would ask any genteel reader, who cannot endure to have what everyone nowadays thinks and feels, to remember a well-worn sentence of St. Jerome’s: If an offense come out of the truth, better it is that the offense come than that the truth be concealed. (Hardy, *Personal Writings* 26)

Like Gaskell, Hardy felt the need to expose the double standard between men and women in Victorian society; in insisting on the truth, even at the cost of offending the moral conventions of Victorian society, Hardy exposes his didactic impulses as well as his desire to “give artistic form to a true sequence of things” (*Personal Writings* 25). In the

preface to the fifth and later editions, Hardy says that the experiences of fallen women have “usually been treated as fatal to her part of protagonist” and that “there was something more to be said in fiction than had been said about the shaded side of a well-known catastrophe” (*Personal Writings* 26). If Hardy had read *Ruth*, he would have had one example in which the fall was not fatal to the part of the protagonist.

Hardy’s contemporary critics, though more positive in their reception of *Tess* than Gaskell’s critics were of *Ruth*, were not all approving of the novel. Among those who criticized the story were those who, like the detractors of *Ruth* before them, saw the subject matter of *Tess* as immoral. Mowbray Morris, in *Quarterly Review*, said of *Tess*: “Hardy has told an extremely disagreeable story in an extremely disagreeable manner” (Cox 219). And he called Hardy’s invocation of St Jerome in the preface “pure cant” used to justify his gratuitous choice of subject material (220). One of *Tess*’s most damning critics, and one whom Hardy specifically addresses in his preface to the fifth edition of *Tess*, was Andrew Lang of the *New Review*. Lang had taken Hardy to task for the increasing ungodliness of his Wessex universe, and especially disliked Hardy’s summing up of Tess’s fate in the closing chapter, in which “the President of the Immortals has ended his sport with Tess” (Hardy, *Tess* 396), the implication being that God is a vengeful creature. Lang asked: “If there be a God, who can seriously think of Him as a malicious fiend?” (Cox 196). Hardy replied to this criticism neither by defending nor by denying his Christian faith, but rather by quoting Gloucester’s lines in *King Lear*: “As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods / They kill us for their sport” (*Personal Writings* 28). By invoking Shakespeare as an inspiration for his own words, Hardy defended himself by deflecting Lang’s accusations of ungodliness.

That Hardy felt the need to defend himself speaks to the kind of sensitivity we associate with Gaskell. We know from Gaskell's letters that she worried about *Ruth* both before and after it was published. In a letter to her daughter Marianne, she writes: "I dislike its being published so much. I shd not wonder if I put it off another year" (*Letters* 136). In a letter to friend Anna Jameson, who was a woman of letters and a feminist, she expresses surprise that "women infinitely more than men" should disapprove of what she had written and "express that disapproval at considerable pain to themselves, rather than allow a 'demoralizing laxity' to go unchecked" (*Letters* 153). What she was railing against was the double standard in Victorian society. It is useful here to cite Walter E. Houghton's definition of Victorian prudery to put the controversy in historical context:

The term has come to be used loosely and broadly to cover all efforts to conceal the facts of life: the demand for expurgated editions of the English classics, the drawing up of indexes of books or authors not to be read, especially by girls, the powerful condemnation (and hence in effect prohibition) of any candid treatment of sex in literature, the insistence that conversation be impeccably proper, even to the banning of any words that could conceivably carry a sexual suggestion, and the chilling disapproval of the slightest approach to levity—all this is called prudery, and treated today with ridicule. (356)

We find Gaskell and Hardy, two authors hypersensitive to criticism, actively opposing prevailing attitudes and standards of conduct for the sake of defending exploited women.

In an attempt to allay the backlash, Gaskell admitted in a letter that *Ruth* was a book intended for adults rather than for young people (*Letters* 148). Hardy, too, suggests that certain reading material could be restricted rather than censored in order to allow the author full artistic expression ("Candour" 101-2). Both Gaskell and Hardy believed that the sexual double standard was an issue that needed to be exposed and given a fuller

treatment, and neither their mutual sensitivity to criticism nor the fear of censure would stop them from exposing a truth that needed to be told.

I have argued so far that *Ruth* and *Tess* were similarly unconventional in their portrayals of the fallen woman; that the two authors had similar motives for breaking with convention; and that they both braved the anticipated criticism and published their works regardless. But the goal of my thesis is to discover a reason for this coincidence of motive and action. If *Ruth* anticipated *Tess* it is because Hardy, by the time he sat down to write his novel, had arrived at a state of moral conviction that was very nearly coincident with Elizabeth Gaskell's professed religion.

Indeed, by the time he wrote *Tess*, Hardy was observing a moral code steeped in Christian tradition, but which transcended many of its conventions, strictures and doctrines. His morality without the religion, as we have seen in chapter 1, was based on a synthesis of ideas best summed up by Collins:

In Hardy's temporal world, redemption is gained through an introspective progression toward self-discovery and self-forgiveness, and it is necessarily the result of that self-acceptance transformed into action by the compassionate exercise of freewill. If a man denies brotherhood, extorts sympathy or profiteers grace, despises his own identity or seeks absolution in another's, he has unequivocally damned himself to a fate which has nothing to do with purblind Doomsters. (171)

This loving kindness in action, exemplified by Christ, is all too familiar. Hardy's increasingly humanistic philosophy of life is closely related to Gaskell's own beliefs and practices.

Gaskell practiced a religion where one's actions towards others were a measure of one's devotion to a godly life. In both Gaskell and Hardy's novels, we see a deep awareness of the human condition tempered by the practice of loving kindness. In their

treatment of the fallen woman, we see a practical rationality tempered with a love of humankind, a charity promoted by Christianity and the teachings of Jesus Christ, yet not always practiced by those calling themselves Christians. As Enid Lowry Duthie remarks “[b]y making Ruth the central character of her second novel, Elizabeth Gaskell showed the difference, in their attitudes to the seduced girl, between those who, in Victorian society, genuinely tried to put their Christianity into practice and those who, consciously or not, were far more concerned with social convention” (155). It was these members of society “concerned with social convention” at the expense of kindness towards others that both Gaskell and Hardy opposed.

Hardy’s prolonged publishing battles surrounding *Tess* led him to write his essay “Candour in English Fiction,” in which he criticized the ‘Grundyists’ responsible for the “charlatanry pervading so much of English fiction” (99). He addressed writers having to compromise the content of their stories if they touched on “broken commandments deemed questionable by prudes” (99). If the Bible influenced Hardy’s thinking, and it did, it was the New Testament and the teachings of Jesus that impressed him. The Ten Commandments he recited weekly at Isaac Last’s school were replaced by Jesus’s two: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matthew 22:37-40). If Hardy had given up the first commandment as his doubts grew, there is little evidence that he gave up the second.

In contrast to Hardy, Gaskell very much ascribed to Jesus's first commandment. It is in his second commandment, however, that both Gaskell's and Hardy's moral views find common ground. As Collins says of Hardy:

Christianity, he argued again and again, was never intended to be systemized into a canon of doctrines which demand belief in the supernatural, and while Hardy admired the moral and altruistic teachings of Christ, he rejected the notion that he was suprahuman in any way. The consummate value of Christ's example lay in his very humanness. (27)

Collins could just as easily have been speaking about Gaskell and other Unitarians, as we have seen in chapter 1. It is anything but coincidence, then, that the authors reacted so similarly to one of the most pervasive social injustices of their era.

In *The Fallen Woman in the Nineteenth-Century English Novel*, George Watt writes of the two categories of women as perceived by the middle-class Victorian male: "the pure one to be married, the other to be used" (8). According to Watt, both Gaskell and Hardy "question the absolute nature of the two groups of women . . . and through the study of their sexual falls are able to highlight the intense and complex problems of Victorian women from all classes, expose the sham respectability which personifies the patriarchy, and give themselves a role of social reformer in the process" (7).

By the time Hardy began writing, he believed, like Gaskell, that conventional Christianity as espoused by the Church and bolstered by its doctrines was being used to disenfranchise people rather than support them. Hardy was among the growing number of agnostics that were joining the Unitarians in questioning conventional Christian doctrine, and both authors make specific links in their treatments of fallen women to the deleterious consequences of the Church doctrines of original sin, baptismal regeneration, and eternal punishment.

As for the differences between the two novels, Hardy's disbelief inevitably takes Tess to a darker place. Whereas Ruth finds her loving kindness in the bosom of the dissenting Bensons', Tess is betrayed on some level and at some point by virtually everyone with whom she comes into contact. Moreover, there are similarities in plot that accentuate the difference in outlook between the authors. In both novels, the initial impetus for the heroine's fall is parental neglect. Gaskell makes clear that Ruth's misfortunes are predicated on the bad behaviour of her parents and guardians. It is not a malign fate that condemns Ruth; it is a failure of those around her to live up to their professed Christian principles. Hardy, while no less forgiving of Tess's parents' inadequacies, interprets the result as so much bad luck. Tess suffers because God is not there and Nature does not care.

Ruth's mother had also been orphaned and considered herself "thankful to marry a respectable farmer" (36), a situation which highlights the precarious situation of a woman without the protection of marriage. Ruth's father is never able to make a success of his farming and is subject to such a "series of misfortunes" that "if he had been in any way a remarkable character, one might have supposed him to be the object of an avenging fate, so successive were the evils which pursued him" (36). Implicit in the author's assessment of the father's fate is not only the idea of material misfortune but the idea of a weak will. We see this again later, when after the death of his wife, "his mental powers deceased" and "his worldly affairs went even lower down" (37). Ultimately, the father's weak will leads to Ruth being orphaned and cast out. After the death of Ruth's mother and then her father, Ruth is left utterly unprotected with a guardian she scarcely knows. The choice of guardian seems to have been made with no other consideration than the guardian's

financial standing in the community, but his wealth is no guarantee of Ruth's security or prosperity. Wishing to have his duty dispensed with, the guardian "arranged all with [Mrs. Mason] in two short conversations" (38), and Ruth is apprenticed to the dressmakers' shop for five years, where her position amounts to little more than indentured slavery. Mrs. Mason, like the factory owners Gaskell criticizes in *Mary Barton* and *North and South*, does not care about her charges' moral or material well being outside of the workplace. As Gaskell describes the situation, "[o]n Sundays *she chose to conclude* that all her apprentices had friends who would be glad to see them to dinner, give them a welcome reception for the remainder of the day" (my italics 34). Orphaned and friendless, in a place not her home, Ruth is left to her own devices, adrift with neither sustenance nor company, and it is this vulnerability that contributes to Ruth's fall. Mrs. Mason's primary interest is in keeping her business's reputation in good moral standing with the community of wealthy women for whom she makes dresses. Assuming the worst, Mrs. Mason casts Ruth out of her apprenticeship when she meets Bellingham and Ruth walking out on a Sunday. Mrs. Mason betrays Ruth in failing to exercise "tender vigilance and maternal care" (53).

Hardy similarly emphasizes Tess's vulnerability in the absence of responsible guardianship. Of Tess and her siblings, Hardy writes:

All these young souls were passengers in the Durbeyfield ship – entirely dependent on the judgment of the two Durbeyfield adults for their pleasures, their necessities, their health, even their existence. If the heads of the Durbeyfield household *chose* to sail into difficulty, disaster, starvation, disease, degradation, death, thither were these half-dozen little captives under hatches compelled to sail with them – six helpless creatures, who had never been asked if they wished for life on any terms, much less if they wished for it on such hard conditions as were involved in being of the shiftless house of Durbeyfield. (my italics, 56)

We are used to Hardy examining the idea of individual helplessness in the face of an indifferent Nature, but here he goes further. The heedless promiscuity of the adult Durbeyfields has condemned their innocent children. Hardy blames “Nature’s holy plan” (56) and gives Tess enough awareness to question her mother “for thoughtlessly giving her so many little brothers and sisters, when it was such trouble to nurse and provide for them” (68). Like Gaskell, Hardy describes parents who are weak-willed and neglectful of their obligations, but unlike Gaskell, he does not see any solution.

In describing Their respective heroines, both authors take great pains to emphasize their innocence and blamelessness. Their innocence is both a function of their young ages and an indication of parental neglect. In the case of Ruth, “she was too young when her mother died to have received any caution or words of advice respecting *the* subject of a woman’s life” (44). In the case of Tess, parental neglect takes on a more sinister hue. Tess’s parents look to Tess in order to sort out their financial problems, and they quite literally send her away with the idea that she will be able, with her beautiful looks, to marry into this richer family. Mrs. Durbeyfield explains Tess’s departure to her other children: she is “going to work . . . for our rich relations, and help get enough money for a new horse” (80). After Tess has gone, Mrs. Durbeyfield feels a twinge of remorse and says to her husband, “if ‘twere the doing again, I wouldn’t let her go till I had found out whether the gentleman is really a good-hearted young man and choice over her as his kinswoman”. To this she adds, the remorse now quickly dissipated, “Well, as one of the genuine stock, she ought to make her way with’en, if she plays her trump card aright,” her trump card being her beautiful face. “And if he don’t marry her afore he will

marry her after” (82). Tess’s virginity is overtly being sold for the welfare of the family, and her parents are her agents.

In addition to their social dislocation, both Ruth and Tess are also dislocated from their natural rural settings. In the dressmakers’ shop, Ruth “sprang to the window, and pressed against it as a bird presses against the bars of a cage” (4). Ruth is trapped, and she longs for her old rural life within the bosom of family. Later when Ruth has gone to Wales with Bellingham, her joy in their seemingly innocent love is paralleled in her joy in the beauty of the natural world, far away from the dressmakers’ shop, conjuring up Eve in the Garden of Eden. Ruth has fallen, but the image is of Eve before the fall: “[T]he lark sung high above her head, and she knew not if she moved or stood still, for the grandeur of this beautiful earth absorbed all idea of separate and individual existence” (64). This oneness with the earth emphasizes Ruth’s essential goodness and her universality as a character. Tess too is a child of nature, but in Hardy’s world nature can be as cruel as it is beautiful. The description of the village Marlott situates Tess in her natural setting, a place of painterly beauty which is “secluded” and “untrodden” (44) and yet deeply entrenched in history (45). When Tess gets into trouble, the natural world belies its “serene dissociation” from her difficulties (63). The timelessness and natural beauty of these two scenes locate Ruth and Tess outside the bounds of temporal moral conventions.

Gaskell and Hardy are in mutual agreement at the unfairness of the sins of the parents being visited upon the children. By Gaskell’s logic it is avoidable, and by Hardy’s it is inevitable. As for their heroines’ own children, both authors use the circumstances of Leonard’s and Sorrow’s births to attack conventional Christian doctrine. After having

taken the orphaned and the abandoned Ruth into their home, Thurston Benson and his sister discover that Ruth is expecting a child, which puts an additional strain on Thurston Benson's scheme to protect Ruth from the cruelties of society towards fallen women. Faith, taking a more conventional view of Ruth's condition, feels that Ruth "is not seeing things in a moral light" (118) and fears the situation before them is a test of "temptation" (119), whereas Thurston Benson sees the news of Ruth's impending child as a reason to "rejoice" (118). When Faith refers to Ruth's pregnancy as "a badge of shame" (119), Thurston admonishes Faith, saying, "let me beg of you not to speak so of the little *innocent* babe." Of Ruth, he says, "[i]n the eyes of God, she is exactly the same as if the life she has led had left no trace behind" (my italics, 119).

Thurston Benson, a seemingly conventional dissenting minister, cannot reconcile his own sense of morality with more conventional treatments of illegitimate children and fallen women. That an "innocent" baby could be considered anything but a reason to "rejoice" is repugnant to him. For Thurston Benson, that Ruth or her child should be treated any differently after her fall is wrong because they are the same in the eyes of God. In Thurston, we have the personification of a more flexible approach to Christianity. Reflecting a Unitarian sensibility, he has none of the Old Testament belief of God as punisher. Yet, his decisions to shelter Ruth, and then Leonard, have serious implications, particularly considering his position as religious leader of a community.

Thurston thinks very deeply about the moral implications of concealing Ruth's past. In hiding her and giving her a new identity, he contravenes the ninth commandment: "thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour." When his sister Faith questions his morality, he replies with much agitation: "I am trying more than ever I did in my life

to act as my blessed Lord would have done” (120). It is in Benson’s character that we see the kind of Christianity Gaskell herself tried to practice. This is contrasted with the behaviour of Faith, who in her concern about what others will think, vows, “if once I get clear of this girl, I’ll wash my hands of such cases again” (118). It is in the character of Faith, who cannot accept Ruth’s situation, that Gaskell questions the Christian doctrine of sin. The notion that Ruth’s sin is Leonard’s sin allows Faith to behave in a morally conventional way, refusing to acknowledge the problem of illegitimacy by using the doctrine as a justification for her judgment.

Though Gaskell explores the implications of illegitimacy for Leonard’s future by developing the character to manhood, Tess’s baby Sorrow dies in infancy, but not before Hardy uses his death to castigate the doctrinal convention of baptismal regeneration, in which a soul’s salvation is dependent on the act of baptism. Leonard’s baptism in *Ruth* is deferred for six months in the custom of English Unitarians at this time (explanatory notes in *Ruth* 466), and not undertaken until Mr. Benson “had done what he could to make the ceremony more than a mere form, and to invest it . . . with the severe grandeur of an act done in faith and truth” (*Ruth* 178). By contrast, little Sorrow’s baptism is performed in haste and without the aid of the parson, since Mr. Durbeyfield’s “sensitiveness to the smudge which Tess had set upon” the family compels him to declare “that no parson should come inside his door” (121). It is not with joy or pride that Tess, witnessed by her siblings, performs the baptism herself, but out of fear that Sorrow, now near death, will be denied salvation. She can accept that “she should have to burn for what she had done”, but she cannot bear the thought of Sorrow having to do the same (121). Anglicans, in contrast to Unitarians, believed that without baptism a soul is

consigned to hell, and it is the cruelty of this religious doctrine of the Church that Hardy rails against. After Sorrow's death, Tess wonders if the baptism she has performed is "doctrinally sufficient to secure a Christian burial for the child" (124). Hardy forces us to ask whom God loves if not an infant whose life has been cut short by illness. Tess's efforts at saving her dead child's soul are finally thwarted when the Vicar refuses to give Sorrow a Christian burial. This is the context in which Tess rejects her faith in the Church. Sorrow is buried in unconsecrated ground in a "shabby corner of God's allotment where He lets the nettles grow, and where all unbaptized infants, notorious drunkards, suicides, and others of the conjecturally damned are laid" (125). The reader is not left to wonder whose part Hardy has taken.

Attacks on the Church aside, it is clear that both Gaskell and Hardy blame society for its condemnation of vulnerable women. The principle accusers of Ruth and Tess are, respectively, Mr. Bradshaw, the man of faith, and Angel Clare, the rationalist. Gaskell's characterization of Bradshaw has many parallels with Hardy's characterization of Angel. Mr. Bradshaw is a wealthy member of Benson's congregation and as such he is effectively Thurston Benson's employer. The situation is further complicated because Ruth is Bradshaw's employee as well, acting as governess to his children. Gaskell contrasts Benson's loving kindness towards Ruth with Bradshaw's conventional moral rigidity towards fallen women. In these two characters she presents the very best of practicing Christians and the very worst of them. When Ruth's history becomes known, Benson pleads for Bradshaw's understanding telling him, "[Y]ou, sir, know how terribly the world goes against all such as have sinned as Ruth did" (348-9), to which Bradshaw replies:

[M]y acquaintance has not lain so much among that class of sinners as to give me much experience of the way in which they are treated. But, judging from what I have seen, I should say they meet with full as much leniency as they deserve; and supposing they do not—I know there are plenty of sickly sentimentalists just now who reserve all their interest and regard for criminals—why not pick out one of these to help you in your task of washing a blackamoor white? (349)

The image of “washing a blackamoor white” invokes a refusal to follow Jesus’s example. Gaskell could assume her readers’ familiarity with Christ’s response on the night before his crucifixion, when he was asked by his disciples for the reason why he was washing their feet: “If I then, *your* Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another’s feet” (John 13:14). In casting his stone at Ruth, Bradshaw exposes himself as a Pharisee—his self-righteousness being the very antithesis of Jesus’s teaching.

Hardy’s character Angel Clare also displays a hypocritical double standard towards female sexuality, but it is not a consequence of any religious conviction. Hardy takes pains to portray Angel’s intellectual courage in matters of faith. Angel resembles the young Hardy, and even more closely Henry Moule, Hardy’s friend, tutor and fellow skeptic, in his questioning of Church doctrine. Pite makes the credible assertion that the Clare family is loosely based on the Evangelical Anglican Moules (86-7). Angel Clare’s brothers have followed the path intended for them—Cambridge and ordination—but Angel cannot subscribe to Article Four of the Thirty Nine Articles, “which professes the literal resurrection of Christ” (Collins 133), though he professes to “love the Church as one loves a parent” (*Tess* 142). Reverend Clare asks, “[W]hat is the good of your mother and me economizing and stinting ourselves to give you a University education, if it is not to be used for the honour and glory of God?” To which Angel replies, reflecting Hardy’s own beliefs, “[W]hy, that it may be used for the honour and glory of man, father” (142).

Angel's struggle with his doubts includes a period of youthful rebellion and an affair with an older woman. Angel knows that he is a mirror of his wife's transgressions, and yet he still cannot forgive her. Hardy's title for the fifth "Phase" of the novel, which begins with Angel's reaction to his wife's confession, is "The Woman Pays." The title can be read as a summary of the forthcoming action, but also as the author's comment: it is the woman who pays for such a transgression, whereas the man does not. It is easy to judge Angel for his failure to move beyond conventional Victorian male behaviour, especially when the author has removed any religious prejudice by which Angel might justify his behaviour. Irving Howe sees him as an insufferable prig and "a timid convert to modernist thought who possesses neither the firmness of the old nor the boldness of the new" (122-3). Other critics are more lenient, seeing tragedy in Angel's conflicted self. For example, Merryn Williams concludes: "Custom and conventionality—the dead weight of Victorian intellectual hypocrisy—is what brings about the disaster" (179). George Watt says:

We would miss Hardy's point if we merely saw Angel as priggish or inconsistent or even hard to credit. He tries not only to see the world through different eyes, but also to frame a new way for the future. Unfortunately he cannot wholly reject his cultural self which is a mixture of conscious and subconscious prejudices, hopes, beliefs and needs which are 'lyrically, dramatically and even historically' part of his past, and therefore part of his whole personality. (152)

The implication here is that, in Angel, Hardy portrays a Victorian man's struggle to move beyond the prejudice of his Age and documents the tragedy that results from his failure. But perhaps these critics are missing something.

I believe that Hardy meant to portray not a tragic failing of Angel's personality but an intrinsic failing of all men. When Hardy reminds us that "the woman pays," we should not immediately assume that he is critiquing, or even referring to, his own society.

To say that the woman pays is to state the obvious: she is left with the consequences of sex. Her burden is inevitable, whereas the man has a choice. As a Darwinian, Hardy understood the consequences of this fundamental imbalance in nature. The benefit of the woman's burden is that her offspring is guaranteed to be her own. The price of a man's freedom is losing this certainty. The social conventions of marriage are designed to remedy this conflict, as it had long been understood. When the philanderer James Boswell claimed that a husband's infidelity is much less serious than his wife's, Dr. Johnson assured him that he is right: "The difference is boundless. The man imposes no bastards upon his wife" (Boswell 412). The problem, of course, is that while the man may not introduce "bastards" into the marriage, he still introduces them into society. What is important to men is that no one has been fooled. In *Tess*, Hardy shows us the consequences of society's obsessive pandering to male sexual insecurities. Still, he may argue against the extreme measures taken to remedy the problem without arguing the problem out of existence. Angel has rejected the conventional prejudices that justify the victimization of women, but he still cannot free himself of his own sexual insecurities. It is a testament to Hardy's honesty as a man that he refuses to conjure a 'modern' era in which this intrinsic male insecurity has been overcome.

We recall from chapter 2 that contemporary critics were unhappy with Hardy's neglect of poetic justice being rendered towards Fitzpiers. Hardy does not treat Angel Clare with the same leniency. Both Bradshaw and Angel are made to suffer for their harsh judgments of Ruth and Tess respectively. Bradshaw is chastened when it is revealed to him that his own son has sinned by committing forgery against no other than Benson. When the forgery becomes public it is Bradshaw's turn to be humiliated, all the

more so when he witnesses again Benson's Christian example of forgiveness through his participation in Richard Bradshaw's rehabilitation. Angel does not escape without both losing Tess and knowing that he could by his own actions have prevented his loss and her suffering.

Both Ruth and Tess die at the end, as do most fallen women in Victorian novels. Is this no more than the necessary poetic justice that readers of the day demanded? It has been suggested by a number of critics that Ruth's death is inconsistent with Gaskell's overall plea for the fallen woman. Her friend Charlotte Brontë asked: "Why should she (Ruth) die? Why are we to close the book weeping?" (Brontë 43). As Edgar Wright states, "[I]f Ruth was so pure then it was false morality to require her to die in the process of redemption. One suspects that Mrs. Gaskell was aware of the necessity of reconciling moral principles with the realities of social practice" (72). Eason concurs with Wright, stating, "Gaskell's purpose was partly to show that the fallen woman could lead a full and useful life, yet she couldn't escape the conventional idea that Ruth, the heroic dignified expansive creature, is also a victim, who must have her tragedy" (125). As I have tried to show throughout this thesis, there was nothing remotely conventional about Elizabeth Gaskell. Moreover, she did not look to society to reconcile her own religious-moral position with anyone else's. Clearly, we must look further for a reasonable explanation.

More recent critics have arrived at a number of theories. Terence Wright, for example, sees Ruth not as a victim, but as a martyr, and makes a case "for viewing her death as something of a triumph" (93) rather than a tragedy. Ruth leaves Bellingham with a debt that he can never repay. Thus "[h]er victory over [Bellingham] is . . . an expression of a certain kind of female possessiveness and power" (94). Patsy Stoneman sees Ruth's

death as a failure of the redemptive process. She argues that Ruth is unable to either forget or continue the sexual bond that was imposed on her by Bellingham and thus she “effectively commits suicide” in entering the sick room, not just by exposing herself to typhus, but also by acknowledging rather than repressing her irreconcilable sexual bond (115). Although these more modern theories are intriguing, Gaskell was not in the habit of making her characters martyrs any more than she would have them commit suicide. Easson argues further that in *Ruth* Gaskell “has not yet grasped fully, as she was to in *Sylvia’s Lovers*, that to live can be more tragic than to die” (*Elizabeth Gaskell* 125). I disagree with this and submit that Gaskell had, in fact, “grasped fully” the inevitability of tragedy leading to death as a part of life.

As Duthie observes of Gaskell’s fiction, “[d]eath is always seen . . . as part of life” (169-70). Mortality is given a place in her work, but she is not unduly disturbed by it nor does she sensationalize it. Ruth, having caught typhus after nursing Bellingham and others to health, “displayed no outrage or discord, even in her delirium” (*Ruth* 443). Having been “lost and gone astray,” Ruth “was happy and at peace” (448). In an interesting analysis of earlier critics, Ganz makes a point about Gaskell that many others have missed. She notes that few Gaskell critics “sensed her temperamental inclination to a rather somber appraisal of earthly life,” and further adds that “the complexities and paradoxes in her nature and in her work [have] not as yet been sufficiently emphasized” in this respect (21). With these observations in mind, we might say that Ruth’s tragedy was her life rather than her death. Finally, in agreement with Craik and my own general assertion that Gaskell was a realist, Ruth’s death, rather than being evaluated as a convention or as an appeasement to Victorian morality, is perfectly tenable. “[T]hat

[Ruth] should nurse [Bellingham] is a moral choice, [and] a matter of character which requires no manipulation of plot. That Ruth should die, strained, overworked and exhausted by nursing during the epidemic is not only credible, it is all too probable” (Craik 53). In ending the story with Ruth’s tragic death, Gaskell is not so much allowing her conventional reader to forgive Ruth as she is compounding the degree of injustice meted out to her character by unforgiving social conventions.

Tess’s tragic end is made inevitable by her murder of Alec, which itself is a concession to poetic justice. But by this time it would seem a departure from the story for her not to suffer a terrible end. The relentlessly grim events in Tess’s life are those to which so many early critics objected. Tess and Angel’s escape to Stonehenge evokes a pre-Christian, pagan time, the meaning of which has been subject to a number of interpretations, the most obvious being that Stonehenge is a place of human sacrifice. Again, we sense that Hardy is condemning the cult of virginity not just in his own time but for all time. The salt in the wound, however, is contemporary religion. Tess, never having consistently strong religious convictions but often subscribing to them when she fears reprisal, as we have seen with her baptism of Sorrow, clings to the possibility of an afterlife. She asks Angel, “[D]o you think we shall meet again after we are dead? I want to know” (393). To which Angel replies with a kiss and silence, prompting Tess to say, “I fear that means no . . . not even you and I, Angel, who love each other so well?” (393-4). Here Hardy is adamant in his refusal to console the reader by having Angel lie about an afterlife in which he does not believe in order to comfort Tess. The author leaves it to the conventional believer to supply Tess with the answer that she will live on in hell. In the

preface to the fifth edition of *Tess*, Hardy addresses those critics and readers who object to *Tess*'s subtitle, "A Pure Woman Faithfully Presented":

The more austere of these [critics] maintain a conscientious difference of opinion concerning, among other things, subjects fit for art, and reveal an ability to associate the idea of the sub-title adjective with any but the artificial and derivative meaning which has resulted to it from ordinances of civilization. They ignore the meaning of the word in Nature, together with the aesthetic claims upon it, not to mention the spiritual interpretation afforded by the finest side of their Christianity. (Preface to *Tess*, 36)

Hardy makes plain that *Tess* is (in part) his attempt to rescue the notion of "pure" femininity from the cult of feminine "purity" or "virtue". Although he acknowledges that the male prejudice towards femininity is rooted in civilization itself, he sees, as does Gaskell, a countervailing message in the teachings of Jesus.

The ultimate test of probity of any social convention for both Gaskell and Hardy is that it not stand in opposition to the exercise of charity and compassion, "of loving-kindness fully blown" towards our fellow beings (Hardy "A Plaint to Man" 306). Both authors preach Christian charity in its most straightforward sense. The problem addressed in *Ruth* and *Tess* is not how we should judge, but how we should act. Both authors criticize the Victorian feminine ideal as unnatural, and both expose society's attempts to impose this unnatural ideal as contrary to their common view of the true spirit of Christianity.

Conclusion

Much has been done to restore and revive the reputation of Elizabeth Gaskell, and yet I believe there is still today a lingering stereotype of her conventionality born of prejudice towards those who are too demonstrably religious. Conversely, Hardy is credited with being in the vanguard of nonbelievers for his time. When I started reading the early works of Gaskell, I noted how deeply religious she was and immediately assumed her to possess all the conventional prejudices that we tend to associate with devout Victorians. On further reading, I had to seriously question my own prejudices. Reading Hardy, I remember wondering why a confirmed atheist would load his prose so abundantly with biblical allusions, especially in *Tess* and *Jude*.

My intention throughout this thesis was to keep both authors' attitudes towards religion and morality in the forefront in reading their works. To do so is to discover a continuum from the dissenting Unitarian faith as practiced by Gaskell to Hardy's rejection of Anglicanism. What became clear to me was the degree to which both Gaskell and Hardy looked to the New Testament and the teachings of Jesus for a model upon which to put their respective moral beliefs into practice. What also became clear was that they arrived at virtually the same moral conclusions. Throughout their works, both authors appeal for greater respect and equality among the classes and between the sexes.

To discover common opinions shared by two authors is not proof of a direct connection or even influence. I was surprised as my studies progressed to discover so many writers and thinkers who were actually known to both writers, not to mention the many more whose works with whom they were both familiar and by whom they were

influenced. It was particularly gratifying to find Gaskell in direct contact with both Darwin and Jowett, two of the greatest influences on Hardy.

Despite the tremendous amount of work done on Gaskell in the last thirty years, there is still a dearth of work comparing and linking her with other Victorian writers. Given Thomas Hardy's reputation, it seems somewhat audacious to compare him with the lesser known and seemingly more conventional Elizabeth Gaskell, and yet this is precisely what needs to be done if we are to be serious about reassessing Gaskell's oeuvre. It needs to be said that they are very different writers, and yet there are many ways in which we might compare the two authors.

According to Françoise Basch, Gaskell was the first major Victorian writer to explore in detail the subject of female labour (180). In her works we find nurses, dressmakers, factory workers, and prostitutes, among others. Hardy describes in detail women at work in rural Wessex, from making thatching spars, milking cows and tending fields, to operating the heavy farm machinery that came with mechanization. So often in reading other Victorian novels I have found myself asking what, besides domestic service (and here I include the work done as teacher/governess) did women who had to work do? Both Gaskell and Hardy's novels are full of these details, and an interesting study could be made comparing the working conditions of urban and rural women in their novels.

In addition to realistic depictions of labouring women, both Gaskell and Hardy had an abiding interest in regional dialects, and both were greatly influenced by notable philologists. The first edition of *Mary Barton* came with a dialectical dictionary compiled by William Gaskell, and some older scholarly works include information on Gaskell's use of Lancashire and Yorkshire dialects. Hardy's relationship with Wessex poet and

philologist William Barnes is well documented. There is as yet nothing in the criticism that compares the use of dialect in Gaskell and Hardy.

Both novelists wrote a large number of short stories and, veering away from their realist tendencies, they wrote ghost stories; like many Victorians, they had a strong interest in the supernatural. While profit may have been the motive for both authors, it would be interesting to see if the plots and themes in their ghost stories give us a better notion of their respective beliefs. Also, both authors had a well-developed sense of tragedy and a few scholars, such as Shirley Foster and Terence Wright, have noted in passing the similarities between Gaskell's *Sylvia's Lovers* and Hardy's tragedies. Gaskell's aforementioned work has been badly neglected, possibly because it does not fit well into any of the standard categorizations of her novels. No one has as yet looked closely at these purported similarities.

Gaskell and Hardy both comment on marriage in their novels, particularly on its lack of gender equality and its finality. We can read much about Hardy's unhappy marriages, including critical speculation on the impact of his marriages on his writing. Critics are far less interested in Gaskell's marriage, perhaps because she appeared to be happily, or at least functionally, married, and yet I find myself quite intrigued to imagine Gaskell, unescorted by her husband, visiting the Paris salons and German duchies, with or without her daughters in tow. Hers seemed to have been a marriage in which she had an unusual degree of independence, even by Unitarian standards. This view is further supported by the fact that in a time when married women were not able to own property, Gaskell had contrived to buy a house as a surprise present for her and her husband's retirement, shortly before she unexpectedly died.

Many prominent critics have noted a basis for comparison of Gaskell and Hardy without taking the point any further, as I noted in my introduction. This was the initial motivation for the choice of my thesis. As I progressed in my reading, I found more points of comparison than I could properly address. However, it is not just that there is more that could be done in comparing Gaskell and Hardy. There is more that should be done. Gaskell's work needs to be reassessed for the merit of its influence as much as for the merit of its art. A comparison with Hardy is a step toward achieving this. Moreover, Hardy's pivotal role in bridging the Victorian with the modern novel calls for a careful consideration of his precursors.

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