



## Journal of International Women's Studies

Volume 12

Issue 2 *Winning and Short-listed Entries from the  
2009 Feminist and Women's Studies Association  
Annual Student Essay Competition*

Article 5

Mar-2011

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### Recommended Citation

Langridge, Rosemary (2011). The Tearful Gaze in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth*: Crying, Watching and Nursing. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 12(2), 47-60.

Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol12/iss2/5>

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## The Tearful Gaze in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth*: Crying, Watching and Nursing

By Rosemary Langridge

### Abstract

Using the complex figure of Mary Magdalene, in her various guises as sexualised sinner, repentant weeper and observant watcher, this essay addresses the complexities and contradictions found in Elizabeth Gaskell's 1853 novel *Ruth*. Although presenting a largely sympathetic view of the 'fallen woman', the eventual catastrophic and puzzling demise of the protagonist casts a bleak picture of the likelihood of redemption for such women in nineteenth century British society. As several feminist critics have pointed out, the narrative is frequently disrupted by the unspoken presence female sexuality suggesting Gaskell's uncertainty about the nature of her heroine's fall; was Ruth's sexual encounter borne out of naïve ignorance, exploitation, sin, or - dare we say it - curiosity and pleasure. I argue that this uncertainty and ambiguity becomes apparent through careful interrogation of scenes of crying in the novel. These scenes also reveal the layers of significance tears hold, over and above their simplistic, and perhaps misleading, relation to the penitential tears of the Magdalene. Tears are also shown as affecting the gaze, bound up as it is in power and gender relations. Gaskell reveals a glimpse of the active and potentially subversive female gaze in her observant protagonist, but soon finds ways of occupying it with jobs that require careful 'watching'. I argue that this relates closely to the author's own project of observation of social injustice. The female author is empowered by her work effectively 'nursing' social ills, but the call to empathy that becomes the overriding feature of the novel, draws attention away from some of the more challenging questions raised by the tearful gaze.

*Keywords:* Elizabeth Gaskell, Mary Magdalene, the fallen woman, the gaze, empathy

### Introduction

Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth* is an exploration of the figure of the 'fallen woman'<sup>1</sup> and her attempts to reintegrate into mid nineteenth-century British society. The novel is a key contribution to an issue that had reached national prominence at the time of its publication, telling as it does the familiar tale of the vulnerable orphaned seamstress who falls into the hands of an unscrupulous seducer and is left abandoned with an illegitimate child. However, Gaskell's novel is neither a condemnation, nor a wholly progressive account, occupying instead a difficult, and at times contradictory, middle ground. By examining the archetypal fallen woman, Mary Magdalene, and her significance in Victorian society, I attempt to unpick some of the difficulties the narrative presents, starting with an exploration of the varying functions of tears in the novel. Tears are presented in a number of ways, often with paradoxical twists: they are suggestive of suppressed female sexuality; obscure the vision yet allow the crier to 'see' deeper emotional truths; disrupt conversation yet provide an alternative means of articulation and are shown to be fundamental communicants of empathy. Indeed, the novel can be

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<sup>1</sup> A catch-all term, widely used in the nineteenth century, to describe women who had engaged in sexual relations before, or outside, marriage. Commonly used as a euphemism for 'prostitute'.

read as a female bildungsroman<sup>2</sup> as Gaskell's heroine learns the 'right' times to cry, part of a wider aim of Victorian writers to 'emotionally educate' readers.

In addition to this, I explore the various gazes at work in *Ruth*, bearing in mind the Magdalene's role as a key witness at Christ's resurrection. I argue that Gaskell presents an idealized vision of repentance through work as her protagonist finds productive and moral employment to occupy a gaze implicitly mobilised by her sexual encounter. Indeed, Ruth finds a kind of salvation in her vocations as mother, governess and nurse, roles requiring both her knowledge of tears and her mastery of them. However, Gaskell's decision to kill off her protagonist at the end of the novel complicates this paean to the nurturing professions, a decision that infuriated many readers, including Charlotte Brontë who, on finishing the novel, complained: 'Why should she die? Why are we to shut up the book weeping?' (qtd. in Easson 125). Ruth's death paves the way for Gaskell's concluding statement about the power of empathy to change minds, and tears are at the very heart of this message.

### **Tears and the Magdalene.**

Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth* is a novel awash with tears; the tears of its author,<sup>3</sup> of its characters and of the countless readers who, like Charlotte Brontë, have 'shut the book weeping'. In the first edition, published in 1853, the novel was prefaced with Phineas Fletcher's 'Hymn',\* a poem rich with images of crying and the tear-glazed gaze. It powerfully invokes the biblical idea of repentance through tears and in so doing, connects Gaskell's fallen protagonist to Mary Magdalene,<sup>4</sup> a complex and mythologized figure who manages to straddle both the models of sexual sinner and devout atoner. From its earliest reviews, critics have struggled with the idea that Ruth can possibly fit either of these types as she is shown as committing her 'sin' out of ignorance and so surely has no reason to repent.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Angus Easson suggests that 'Gaskell's difficulties over Ruth's guilt, forgiveness, and social restoration lie partly in the original complex figure of the Magdalene' (Eason's notes in Gaskell 380), whose implicit presence in the novel, as we shall see, offers far more than a simple binary. Interestingly, the preface was removed in subsequent editions (Stoneman 73), perhaps as Gaskell sought to lessen the emphasis on the penitential value of Ruth's tears in favour of demonstrating their other varied and complex functions in the novel.

The figure of Mary Magdalene, implied in Fletcher's 'Hymn', is referenced explicitly twice in the novel (100, 288). Her absence would have been glaring to Victorian readers as she was a central figure in contemporary debate about the plight of the fallen woman.<sup>6</sup> Susan Haskins notes how she had become, by the mid-nineteenth century, 'inextricably linked to the [sexually] sinning woman, to the point where the euphemistic term for [prostitute], in medical and legal writings (...) was now 'Magdalene'' (318). *Ruth* was written in the years leading up to the rise of 'Magdalenism' (Mason), a movement for social reform which aimed to 'resocialize'

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<sup>2</sup> A genre of novel structured around the portrayal of the 'coming-of-age' of a central character. This usually involves several key episodes of disillusionment or revelation in which key 'lessons' are learnt, contributing to the general trajectory of the protagonist's moral or psychological growth.

<sup>3</sup> Gaskell writes that she had 'a terrible fit of crying all Saty night' (Gaskell 3).

<sup>4</sup> She famously washed Jesus' feet with her tears in Luke 7:36-50.

<sup>5</sup> See George Henry Lewes' review in (Easson 264-271).

<sup>6</sup> The issue reached a height of discussion in the mid 1850s. See (Anderson, 1993).

fallen women, believing them to be victims in need of help rather than perpetrators deserving punishment. Ruth's 'saviour', the clergyman Thurston Benson, is clearly a proponent of Magdalenism and this is revealed as he reasons with the conservative and condemning Mr. Bradshaw:

Is it not time to change some of our ways of thinking and acting? I declare before God, that if I believe in any one human truth, it is this- that to every woman, who, like Ruth, has sinned, should be given a chance of self-redemption- and that such a chance should be given in no supercilious or contemptuous manner, but in the spirit of the holy Christ. (288)

Benson here acts as a mouthpiece for Gaskell who was, herself, involved in projects helping facilitate such 'chances of self-redemption'. Indeed, inspiration for the novel was drawn from her direct experience helping a young prostitute named Pasley,<sup>7</sup> of whom she wrote: 'she looks quite a young child (she is but 16) with a wild wistful look in her eyes, as if searching for the kindness she has never known, - and she pines to redeem herself' (Anders 52). M.J.D Roberts points out that: 'part of that re-socialization process involved a re-sensitization to the reality of, and the duty to avoid, sin. Prostitution and sexual activity outside marriage thus retained a religious based stigma.' (201) Thus the fallen woman could not escape the expectation of 'repentance' (despite sinning in ignorance) and the analogy of Mary Magdalene was actively encouraged. Gaskell, if she was a believer in Magdalenism, perhaps held the view that fallen women, no matter how innocent, should still be obliged to 'repent' as they needed to learn to face the 'reality' of sin and their 'duty' to avoid it.

### **Tears and sexuality**

However, many readers still find it difficult to grapple with the severe treatment Ruth is dealt, and find Gaskell's position (outlined above) contradictory. After all, despite managing to successfully reintegrate herself back into society through her respected role as governess and later, her heroic actions as a nurse, Ruth is still eventually 'exposed' and brutally cast out of society, seemingly unable to shake her sinful past. Indeed, Gaskell even has her heroine die as a result of nursing Henry Bellingham, her erstwhile lover, who returns at the end of the novel as a reminder of Ruth's 'fall'. His return in the narrative, a strong figuration of the return of the repressed, reintroduces the spectre of female desire, and the scenes in which the two interact show Gaskell's narrative becoming most unstuck. This is perhaps due to the author's inability to address details of nature of their relationship. Patsy Stoneman's influential feminist reading puts the structural faults of *Ruth*, the 'gaps, false leads and inconsistencies in the narrative surface' down to 'the disruptive factor of female sexuality, which cannot be acknowledged in the ideological surface of the novel, but is repressed, emerging as a subtext of imagery and dreams' (67-68). We can add to this subtext the shedding of tears, not just because of their connection to the tears of the Magdalene. Importantly, tears are a method of expressing feelings that are verbally inexpressible (Lutz 21) and in *Ruth*, as Stoneman suggests, the key unspeakable emotion is female sexual desire. Instead,

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<sup>7</sup> She was also involved in the Urania Cottage project, a refuge for ex-prostitutes, with Charles Dickens. See (Uglow, 1999).

descriptions of bouts of crying are overtly ardent, physical and, at times, pleasurable. Indeed, there is also guilt attached to the solitary act of weeping which offers up parallels to the private act of masturbation. For example, when Bellingham falls ill for the first time during their stay in Wales, Ruth describes how she made great efforts not to 'indulge' in the tears that she 'longed for' (69). When she finally gets a chance to let go and release her emotions, she rushes to an (importantly) 'unoccupied' bedroom and:

Felt her self-restraint suddenly give way, and burst into the saddest, most utterly wretched weeping she had ever known. She was worn out with watching, and exhausted by passionate crying. (69)

After the 'passionate crying', she slumbers in almost post-coital exhaustion and awakes 'with a sense of having done wrong in sleeping so long' (69).

In *Crying* Tom Lutz explores the erotic aspect of tears with particular reference to Goethe and Wordsworth, the latter a favourite of Gaskell's and a clear influence on *Ruth*.<sup>8</sup> He quotes the following extract from Wordsworth's first published poem, 'On Seeing Miss Helen Maria Williams Weep at a Tale of Distress', from 1786:

She wept. - Life's purple tide began to flow  
In languid streams through every thrilling vein;  
Dim were my swimming eyes - my pulse beat slow,  
And my full heart was swell'd to dear delicious pain. (39)

Emphasis is placed on the fertile vitality of the tears ('Life's purple tide') flowing through the young woman. The effect of watching this brings tears to the speakers' own eyes and the 'delicious pain' he experiences in crying describes the age-old notion of cathartic release, suggestive of orgasm, of 'the little death'. This is what Ruth 'long[s] for' when she is separated from Bellingham during his confinement, the physical release of being overwhelmed by tears, which, as Lutz again describes, 'is in fact to be overwhelmed by bodily sensations' (237). Later in the novel, Gaskell describes Ruth's reaction to her first encounter with Bellingham since his abandonment of her. She writes that Ruth's 'tension did not give way immediately' and she 'tore off her gown' (224) before dramatically 'thr[owing] her body half out of the window into the cold night air' (225). The high level of physical and sensual description in this part of the book is rounded off by her 'passionate breathing' and a bout of crying: 'Of a sudden she crept to a chair and there knelt as in the very presence of God, hiding her face, at first not speaking a word (...), but by and by moaning out amidst her sobs and tears (and now for the very first time she wept)' (226). Thus Ruth's sexual frustrations are channeled into crying *and* religious devotion, a common practice for Victorian women.

### **Watching and the return of the gaze.**

Peter T. Cominos states that women had fewer 'outlets' for repressed sexual feelings than men and that those who could not work had fewer still. These feelings could thus be 'sublimated only through religion, "the only channel" through which the sexual

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<sup>8</sup> Hilary Schor writes: 'What Gaskell constructs in her novel is a Wordsworthian story of a daughter of nature' (158).

emotions could be expressed “freely and without impropriety” (163). Ruth seems to undergo this channeling of sexual desire early in the novel as she prays for her seducer’s recovery. Denying the release of tears she is able to sublimate her anguish through prayer: ‘She watched, and waited, and prayed: prayed with an utter forgetfulness of self’ (68). Here, Ruth replaces her tears with prayer and ‘watching’, an occupation as intimately, though less famously, linked with Mary Magdalene as crying. Interestingly the idea of the sexualized Mary Magdalene has risen from hagiology (literature about the lives and legends of saints): there is in fact no explicit statement of her sin being of a sexual nature recorded in the Bible (Haskins). As Susan Haskins notes, ‘all we truly know of her comes from the four gospels, a few brief references which yield an inconsistent, even contradictory vision.’ (3) What is agreed on is that she was present at Jesus’ crucifixion and witnessed his resurrection; indeed, according to John she was the sole witness:

Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came early to the tomb, while it was still dark, and saw the stone already taken away from the tomb. (...) Mary Magdalene came, announcing to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”. (John 20:18)

Mary Magdalene was a key witness and observer, traits subsumed by the Victorian version of the Magdalene as submissive penitent. Holman Hunt’s painting *Christ and the Two Marys*<sup>9</sup> is typical of Victorian depictions of the Magdalene with head bowed and gaze averted which noticeably contrasts with earlier representations that clearly show her looking directly at the crucified or risen Christ.<sup>10</sup> In *Ruth* the dual roles of weeper and watcher battle it out in the tense, emotionally charged encounter with Bellingham in chapter XXIV. The scene is full of references to Ruth’s alternately ‘honest, wet’ (246) and ‘hot, dry’ (249) eyes; indeed, Gaskell herself seems to lose track of the alternations saying at one point her tearless eyes ‘became as if she were suddenly blind’ (249) yet also noting her ‘constant flowing tears’ (250). Ultimately though, Ruth experiences a moment of spiritual revelation when the clouds part, revealing a beautiful sunset. Gaskell writes, emphasizing the gaze, that, ‘Ruth forgot herself in looking at the gorgeous sight. She sat up gazing, and, as she gazed, the tears dried up on her cheeks’ (250).

From the earliest point in the novel we are made aware that Ruth is a ‘looker’, in both the colloquial and the literal senses of the word, for as well as possessing ‘remarkable beauty’ (13) she is constantly engaged in acts of looking. We first encounter her springing to the window during a break at the seamstress’s workhouse ‘gaz[ing] into the quiet moonlit night’ (8), the first of many similar window scenes in the novel.<sup>11</sup> Critics have long pointed to the male gaze at work in *Ruth*,<sup>12</sup> applying feminist readings accordingly. These readings work on the established premise that the act of looking is

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<sup>9</sup> Hunt began the work as a young man - at a date roughly contemporaneous with the novel - but did not complete it until 1897.

<sup>10</sup> See for example, *Noli me tangere* by Duccio di Buoninsegna, 1308-11; *Isenheim Altarpiece* by Matthias Grunewald, 1432.

<sup>11</sup> The number of window scenes in the novel inspired a whole essay on the topic. See (Stiles, 2004).

<sup>12</sup> See Schor, Andres, Stoneman, Judd.

always gendered and bound up in power relations, ideas concisely expressed in Laura Mulvey's groundbreaking work , 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'. She writes:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female form which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. (2186)

Indeed, the masculine gaze is made very much apparent in descriptions of Bellingham's treatment of Ruth as he delights in watching her, decorating her and generally possessing her as a beautiful object (Schor 168). At one point his discomfort with meeting her gaze is expressed in this telling passage:

The night before, he had not seen her eyes; and now they looked straight and innocently full at him, grave, earnest and deep. But when she instinctively read the change in the expression of his countenance, she dropped her large white veiling lids; and he thought her face was lovelier still. (Gaskell, 24)

Gaskell does not explain what, exactly, the change in Bellingham's expression denotes and we are left guessing as to whether the returned gaze unsettles or arouses him. All we can go on is his preference for her 'veiling lids', suggesting an uneasiness with meeting an active returned gaze, which would force him, in Mulvey's terms, to occupy the position of the passive feminine object.

In addition to the possessing gaze of the sexually threatening male, Ruth encounters the disapproving looks cast at her from her employer, Mrs Mason, who fixes her with 'sharp, needle like eyes' (47) and the furious Mrs Bellingham who 'looked at her with cold, contemptuous eyes, whose glances were like ice-bolts, and made Ruth shiver up away from them' (73). The gaze directed at Ruth is like a weapon in its power and intensity. However, Gaskell is keen to emphasise Ruth's own active and participatory gaze, struggling with what Hilary Schor terms 'the problem of what happens when women begin to see' (166).<sup>13</sup> This occurs first when we are made aware of Ruth's attraction to Bellingham after their first encounter at the ball. Despite shyly avoiding his eye, Gaskell lets us know, with the ominous and highly atypical stand-alone line, that, 'Ruth, then had been watching him' (18). Thus, we can see the suggestion of Ruth's own desiring gaze, but it is this gaze that leads her into trouble. Indeed, Gaskell proceeds to demonstrate, over the course of the novel, the way in which Ruth learns to fill her wandering gaze, namely by devoting herself to occupations that require her careful, attentive observation.

### **Watching and work as redemption**

Ruth manages to work her way back into society, quite literally, by immersing herself in work. As mother, governess and nurse, she becomes involved in occupations

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<sup>13</sup>Schor writes: 'In the tradition I have been sketching, women like Ruth 'exist not to observe but to be observed' (166).

which rely on careful surveillance and the active, productive use of her (potentially subversive) gaze. These jobs are a marked contrast to her earlier employment as a seamstress, which seemed both unable to contain her gaze (she frequently casts her eyes out of the window or studies the mural on the wall before her (9)) and damaging to it. In addition, the later roles she adopts are shown as being far more respectable than the physically and (it is implied) morally damaging sewing.<sup>14</sup> Gaskell notes the ‘deadened sense of life’ of the seamstresses, their ‘unnatural mode of living’ and the harm caused by ‘frequent late nights of watching’ (12).

As a mother, Ruth’s care involves “‘maternal thinking’- a process of observation and induction’ (Stoneman, 142). She relishes the responsibility of motherhood, seeming to draw strength simply from looking at her child: ‘If she grew tired, she went and looked at him and all her thoughts were holy prayers for him (...) these were her occasional relaxations, and after them she returned with strength to her work’ (148). Later, she transfers these skills into paid work as a governess, caring for Mr. Bradshaw’s children. In *Beside Seductions* Catherine Judd explores the notion of ‘the authority’ of a ‘controlling female gaze’, and demonstrates that mid 19<sup>th</sup> century domestic ideology ‘firmly claimed not only an innate feminine moral authority, but also a uniquely feminine ability to discern, control and manage environmental details’ (56). She is particularly concerned with the gaze of the nurse and notes: ‘(Florence) Nightingale believed that the female eye was a superior instrument for observation and the guarding of the sick’ (74). From Gaskell’s writings we know she admired the work of Nightingale (Gaskell, Chapple & Pollard xix), making her acquaintance before the nurse’s rise to fame following the Crimean War. Gaskell befriended the family and in a note to the Nightingale’s sister she proclaims: ‘all words are poor in speaking of her acts’ (383). She felt strongly about the good work that could be achieved by nurses and was among those who supported Nightingale’s ‘New-style nursing’ as respectable employment for women.

*Ruth* serves almost as an advertisement for nursing. When Gaskell’s heroine decides to take it up after her brutal dismissal by Bradshaw, she debates the decision with his daughter, Jemima, who feels she is ‘fitted for something better’ (318). But it is through nursing that Ruth finds ‘a use for all her powers’ (320) and an object for her gaze. She becomes an active social agent, with an increased and exclusive mobility, gaining access into the homes of Typhoid suffers when an epidemic hits the village. Indeed, she survives her time as matron of the typhus ward, emerging a heroine and fully redeemed in the eyes of the townsfolk.<sup>15</sup> Her success is grounded in her ability to ‘thin[k] of the individuals themselves, as separate from their decaying frames’ (320) and from having ‘enough self command to control herself from expressing any sign of repugnance’ (320). Indeed, over the course of the novel Ruth learns to ‘master and keep down outward signs of emotion’ (237) as part of her ‘repentance’ in an interesting subversion of the Magdalene’s penitential tear shedding. In order for Ruth to be admitted into polite society she has to learn how to suppress her instinctual desires which links directly back to her ‘sin’. Before her reeducation in the devout Benson household she had been weak, lacking control over her emotions, and, by association, over her sexual impulses. In order for her to assume the feminine ideal of mother, teacher and nurse, she had to remain in

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<sup>14</sup> There have been many studies on the links between the seamstress and prostitution/ fallen women. For a thorough and concise discussion see (Edelstein, 1980).

<sup>15</sup> Demonstrated by reactions at her funeral in chapter XXXVI



command of her body, and all its secretions. But, as we shall see, this learning curve is complex, for tears still form an important economy in the novel.

### **The tearful gaze**

Early in the novel, Ruth's tears had come easily and were cried out of 'weakness' (237). She cried when reprimanded by Mrs. Mason and is quick to tears when the sugared tones of Bellingham provide seeming solace: 'What tender words after such harsh ones! They loosened the fountain of Ruth's tears and she cried bitterly' (48). Her empowering gaze is shown to be complicated and hindered when she cries, her 'vision' (and foresight) becoming blurred, disabling her from making wise choices. Indeed, when Ruth makes the fateful decision to abscond with Bellingham, Gaskell emphasises that her vision is obscured by her childlike crying during the exchange:

Her eyes were so blinded by the fast falling tears she did not see (...) the change in Mr Bellingham's countenance, as he stood silently watching her. (49)

Bellingham remains silent after announcing to Ruth his imminent departure for London, but the spectacle of her floods of tears, her violent and uncontrolled crying, prompts him to act. The 'change in [his] countenance' that Ruth misses is the sudden realisation that he can take the girl with him. Gaskell, again, is restrained in giving details about Bellingham's motivation, so we are left unsure as to whether this decision was taken out of sympathy for the girl or out of a sudden, lustful insight into the full extent of her vulnerability – and his opportunity to exploit it. In effect, we are as blind as Ruth is, at this moment, to the real reasons for the sudden offer. Gaskell demonstrates that her gaze is arrested in by the act of crying, and it is this which leads her to make the perilous decision that will mark the rest of her life.

In the early part of the novel, Ruth's tears go hand in hand with the 'child of nature' image that Gaskell creates, to enhance the idea of her innocence (Schor) and on a couple of occasions they are described as being as natural as rain.<sup>16</sup> However, as it becomes apparent that Ruth's only route to salvation is one of hard and diligent work, the tears dry up as the crier cannot fully attend to her work, putting her in breach of the fundamental Protestant work ethic of the time. This idea is conveyed in Thomas Hood's famous poem 'The Song of the Shirt', written a decade before *Ruth*, in which a young seamstress holds back tears for fear they will interrupt her stitches:

"A little weeping would ease my heart,  
But in their briny bed  
My tears must stop, for every drop  
Hinders needle and thread."  
(Victorian web)

Indeed, tears hinder Ruth from her work in the Benson household and she is found crying over her work several times (134, 144). The Housekeeper Sally offers the advice that she should:

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<sup>16</sup>'Her tears fell fast and soft like summer rain' (Gaskell 144).

‘try for a day to think of all the odd jobs as to be done well and truly as in God’s sight (...) and you’ll go through them twice as cheerfully, and have no thought to spare for crying or sighing.’ (147)

She is dealt a yet more severe lesson from Sally when she is found crying over her baby (“‘My bonny boy! Are they letting the salt tears drop on thy sweet face before thou’art weaned! Little somebody knows how to be a mother- I could make a better myself” (145)). Sally’s blunt attitude to Ruth’s ‘mithering’ (134) is contrasted to the more delicately nuanced understanding of Faith Benson, the minister’s sister, who acts as a guide for conduct, the model of the sympathetic, controlled, respectable middle-class woman. The maid, who herself ‘could not abide crying before folk’ (116), is impatient with Ruth’s tearfulness, whereas Faith ‘loved and respected [Ruth] all the more for these manifestations of grief’ (134). This demonstrates the complexity of Ruth’s emotional education: she can cry, but not too much.

Indeed, this idea of there being ‘acceptable’ and ‘unacceptable’ levels of emotional response is something that Gesa Stedman explores in *Stemming the Torrent*, a study of Victorian discourses on the emotions. According to her, ‘Many nineteenth century authors use feelings as a pivot for their project of creating a middle class habitus’ (122). The use of the sociological term ‘habitus’, drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of individual agency being contingent upon objective structures of society, is particularly apt for discussion of the fallen woman’s fate in the community. As Stedman notes, this involved playing off representations of a dangerously impassioned and immoral lower class with a cold, pitiless aristocracy, revealing the middle ground, occupied by the middle classes, as the ideal.<sup>17</sup> Gaskell’s text (though different in its presentation of the less ‘finely’ attuned, overly stoical, working-class Sally) encourages this middle ground as it details Ruth’s emotional education at the Bensons’. Indeed, at times her crying is actively encouraged and is shown as being healthy and necessary – for example in the pseudo-scientific remark that, ‘she was sadly crying by this time, but Mr Benson knew the flow of tears would ease her brain’ (291).

In less subtle manifestations, ‘emotional education’ was offered in conduct manuals and popular publications such as the following: an extract from an article called ‘The Physiology of Tears’, written by ‘Miss Peake’ for *The Lady’s Newspaper*. She advises her readers to:

‘Cast not away those pure and precious drops upon the minute sands of daily miseries but reserve them for a holier and a better cause: and when some heart that yours has clung to has gone astray, and your gushing tears, which flow not on frivolous pretences, carry with them conviction of the wrong, you will bend to the Providence that has given you this eloquence above words, and another tear will yet steal down your cheek in silent gratitude.’ (Gale group)

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<sup>17</sup> Stedman notes that writers became involved in this creation of a ‘middle class habitus’, portraying ‘feeling rules’, in reaction to a perceived surge of people ‘thought to have gained political and cultural influence’. It grew alongside other forms of didactic literature that sought to control the masses (122).

Here, the writer suggests a distinction between things that are worthy of tears and the ‘frivolous pretences’ that are not. Tears must only be shed sparingly as they are ‘precious’, suggesting a certain profligacy to those who cry ‘too much’. Indeed, a moral and religious tenor pervades the writing, notably in the implication that a deeper emotional response, that of thankfulness to ‘Providence’, belies tears of personal sorrow. In this respect, the crying advocated by Miss Peake is always shared, between the crier and God. These lessons are the very same learnt by Ruth throughout the course of the Gaskell’s novel; she learns when to cry, and with whom it is appropriate.

### **Communicative crying.**

The idea that crying can, at times, provide ‘eloquence above words’, as suggested by ‘Miss Peake’ above, is also explored in *Ruth*. Tears are shown to aid communication in moments where it becomes too difficult to express sentiments with words: ‘[a]s she looked, her eyes filled slowly with tears. It was a good sign, and Mr Benson took heart to go on’ (291). Indeed, in the second half of the novel an alternative language of tears emerges in which shared experiences of weeping forge sympathetic relationships and engender empathy, qualities that Mary Lenard deems essential to the author’s artistic vision (109-133). This is shown in the passage we have briefly touched on, in which Ruth cries over her child. In it, we see the contagious effect of tears and their propensity for the non-verbal communication of empathy. As the baby catches sight of his mother crying, ‘his little lip began to quiver, and his open blue eyes to grow over-clouded, as with some mysterious sympathy with the sorrowful face bent over him’ (145). This scene of shared crying is markedly distinct from the solitary acts of weeping displayed by Ruth earlier in the novel. The tears are quieter and calmer, forming a bond between the two criers that is somehow ‘mysterious’, outside of the rationalism of speech.

Gaskell’s communicative crying scenes suggest the influence of Charles Bell who wrote, in the conclusion to his influential ‘Anatomy and Philosophy of Expression’ that, ‘Upon the whole (...) the expression of the passions are constituting a language of natural signs, a means of communication, and a source of sympathy betwixt all mankind’(85). This idea of the uniting force of emotion, and particularly in the *expression* of emotion, explicates Gaskell’s emphasis on tears in latter part of the novel, when the tearful gaze, rather than suggesting ill-judgement, becomes the symbol of shared compassion and the potential for change in the community.

Gaskell’s contemporary George Eliot championed the efficacy of invoking empathy as a means of encouraging social reform. She writes that:

He is the most effective educator (...) who does not seek to make his pupils moral by enjoining particular courses of action, but by bringing into activity the feelings and sympathies that must issue in noble action. (Eliot qtd. In Lowe, 117)

Gaskell surely agreed with this approach common to the feminized social reform discourse of the time. Taking aim at its critics, she has her bastion of patriarchal power, Mr. Bradshaw, snap ‘it’s your sentimentalists that nurse up sin!’ (332), in response to the calm compassion of Benson. Later, however, Bradshaw himself falls to the power of

empathy, as he comes across Ruth's illegitimate son Leonard in the final pages of the book, lying by his mother's grave. The boy's 'eyes sought those of Mr. Bradshaw (...) as if to find comfort for that great loss in human sympathy (...) and at the first word, he burst out afresh' (374). In the face of the crying child, Bradshaw's stubborn disapproval crumbles, and when he later goes to make amends with Benson he finds himself speechless 'for the sympathy which choked his voice, and filled his eyes with tears' (375). Here, Bradshaw himself is shown finally to be moved to tears, unable to express himself vocally, sharing this moment of grief with his old friend. The penitential tears of the Magdalene, cried solely by the repenting fallen woman, are transformed into tears shed by the whole community surrounding her, in shared grief for the strictures under which she must languish.

However, by ending the novel with characters, and quite possibly readers, in tears over the death of her heroine, Gaskell can easily be accused of failing to deliver. She avoids the responsibility of following through the optimistic narrative of 'redemption through work' to its conclusion, and does not have to deal with the near impossible problem of representing the fully redeemed fallen woman, living peacefully and respectably with her illegitimate child. Returning to Brontë's criticism of the ending, we can perhaps understand this sense of being 'let down', even emotionally manipulated, by an ending that has the reader in tears, rather than marching for immediate social reform. But, as we have seen, the importance of empathy in the novel takes precedence in a vision of reform through shared emotion.

Catherine Judd, in her discussion of Brontë's approach to writing, suggests that the role of the author was analogous to nursing (77): employing a specialized, sympathetic eye to the task of observing, noting and 'healing' social injustices. Gaskell, surely, is involved in just such a project, although she offers up no scene of 'recovery'. Significantly eyes themselves occupy an important place in *Ruth*<sup>18</sup> and the novel could simply be described as a critique of the judgemental eye of man (as opposed to that of God) which she believed should be more sympathetic to figures such as Ruth. Almost all the characters' eyes are described at some point in the novel and it is a mark of their moral standing if they make eye contact, symbolic of empathizing, with another character. In Benson there is 'something of a quick spiritual light in the deep-set eyes' (59) which the perceptive and sympathetic Ruth notices. Contrasted to this is Bellingham's belief that 'a man's back- his *tout ensemble* - has character enough in it to decide his rank' (21). Perhaps Gaskell shared the view held by her contemporary Leigh Hunt, and many others, that 'the eyes are the window to the soul' (248) and that in order to gain a better understanding of the issue at hand, the subject had to be confronted, unflinchingly, face to face. Indeed, over the course of the novel she enjoins the reader to look Ruth squarely in the eyes, eyes which, 'even if you could have guessed [...] had shed bitter tears in their day, had a thoughtful spiritual look about them, that made you wonder at their depth, and look- and look again' (173).

The idea of the reader being reduced to tears is fitting for a work which celebrates the power of empathy to induce change. But a side effect of Ruth's death, for the observant reader, is the full revelation of the double-standards that apply to men and women who engage in extra-marital sex. This was a truly progressive statement for its time and claws back some of the novel's feminist credentials.

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<sup>18</sup> As we have already seen, above, in the description of Pasley's eyes in Gaskell's letters.

## Conclusion

This essay began with an exploration of the figure of Mary Magdalene in Victorian society, showing that she leant her name both to a reformist movement and to a synonym for prostitution. 'Magdalenism' proposed that all women had, incumbent upon them, a duty to avoid sin which helps explain, to an extent, the contradictory position Ruth occupies, having to repent heavily for a sin she commits in ignorance. For the Magdalenists, this was in order to awaken her 'duty' to avoid sin, but as we have seen, Gaskell appears ambivalent in her support for this position.

By tracing the use of tears and their disruptive and unsettling somatic interjections in the text, I uncovered a subtext of female sexual desire in the novel. Indeed, Gaskell comes perilously close to addressing the fundamental issue at stake in debate so concerned with, yet so silent about, women's sexual lives. If we can say that Ruth's incredibly physical bouts of crying are sexual in the novel, and that there is an implied, desiring female gaze at work, we can perhaps uncover an alternative reading of her encounter with her lover, one that involves her own curiosity and pleasure. However, it was ideologically impossible for this to appear openly in the text, and in the second half of the novel, Ruth is encouraged to 'master' her tears and her gaze through dedication to work. She is required to stop 'indulging' in crying alone and to start applying her observant eyes to the tasks of mothering, governessing and nursing.

Gaskell's apparent uncertainty over the nature of the sexual encounter explains the issue of the mixed treatment of her protagonist, who finds a kind of compromised salvation in her work. Her death partly undermines the idea that work can redeem the fallen woman, but, as I have argued, it is crucial for the novel's message of empathy that the community be reduced to tears by her plight. Tears are transformed and transformative in the novel: no longer do they simply belong to the repenting fallen woman but they are shared by the members of the community who experience moments of mutual mourning. It is significant that the novel ends with Mr Bradshaw, the bulwark of conservatism, moved to tears, apparently a changed man. Gaskell thus advocates the 'tearful gaze', the sympathetic reading of the social-problem novel, which could change opinion gradually through winning over the individual mind.

The call to empathy shifts focus from the more subversive elements in the work and Gaskell's role as a 'nursing' author confines her to passive 'observation' of social ills. But what the ending does facilitate, for the observant reader, is a full exposé of the disparity between the treatment of men and women in mid-nineteenth century British society. The novel remains a vital contribution to literature about the 'fallen woman', its complications and contradictions providing fertile ground for the uncovering of subtexts and subversive suggestions.

\* Phineas Fletcher's Hymn, 1633, as quoted by Gaskell (3).

*Drop, drop slow tears!  
And bathe those beauteous feet,  
Which brought from heaven  
The news and Prince of peace.  
Cease not, wet eyes,*

*For mercy to entreat:  
To cry for vengeance  
Sin doth never cease.  
In your deep floods  
Drown all my faults and fears;  
Nor let His eye  
See sin, but through my tears.  
Phineas Fletcher*

### **Biographical Note**

Rosemary Langridge was an undergraduate reading English at the University of York at the time of writing this essay.

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