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## **The trauma of condemnation and the embellishment of an illegitimate child as a source of regeneration in *Lizzie Leigh* and *Ruth***

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### **Abstract**

*This paper focuses on Mrs Gaskell's treatment of the erring girl in Lizzie Leigh (1850) and Ruth (1853) and the new elements that she introduces which brand the treatment as different. Contrary to her Victorian contemporaries, Mrs Gaskell stresses the role of religion, the use of biblical quotations on the treatment of the sinner, and the role of motherhood. The paper also shows how Mrs Gaskell makes the illegitimate child an incentive towards repentance and hope of reclamation. Through her motherly love and devotion to her child, a mother rises and grows in character and faith. Moreover, the paper demonstrates Mrs Gaskell's condemnation of the falsity of the traditional taxonomy of "illegitimate" or "fallen", and her assertion that social value lies in the inherent properties within the individual. It also highlights how she makes forgiveness for the sinner a duty which society has to fulfil, and maintains that if the charitable and the kind are forced "to lie" because of the existing social and moral attitudes, then it is imperative that they should be changed so that "lies" are unnecessary. It concludes by investigating the stormy reception and the controversy it created among readers.*

### **Introduction**

Charles Dickens, Mrs Gaskell and other Victorian novelists took an interest in the fallen woman issue and dedicated themselves to helping the lost souls of their time. Mrs Gaskell wrote to Dickens asking for his help in getting an unfortunate girl off to Australia. In his reply, Dickens expressed his admiration for her work and asked her to contribute to his periodical. In his letter to her he wrote: "[...] I do honestly know that there is no living English writer whose aid I would desire to enlist in preference to the authoress of "Mary

Barton” (a book that most profoundly affected and impressed me), I venture to ask you whether you can give me any hope that you will write a short tale, or any number of tales, for the projected pages.” (Hogarth & Dickens, 1880, p. 32) Mrs Gaskell responded with a number of tales and *Lizzie Leigh*, her first contribution, was distinguished by being assigned to first place, directly after the editor's “preliminary word”, in the first issue of the periodical.

### ***Lizzie Leigh***

In *Lizzie Leigh*, Mrs Gaskell tells the story of a girl sent into service while still young, seduced, and later abandoned both by her employer and family. Left with no one to offer help or advice, she takes to prostitution. Finally, through her mother's dedicated efforts and infinite love, she is sought out, repents and is saved.

In her treatment of Lizzie's fall, Mrs Gaskell shows two different attitudes towards “the erring girl”: the strict moralistic attitude represented by her stern and inflexible father who forbids his wife to search for her lost child and declares “that henceforth they” will “have no daughter; that she should be as one dead” (*Lizzie Leigh*, p. 4), and the sympathetic and tolerant attitude represented by her loving mother. In fact, we see that these two attitudes stretch further to include her brother and the girl whom he loves, Susan Palmer, so that we can arrange the characters in the story in two different groups: the men who seem to apply deep-rooted classification, and the women who take a more sympathetic and humane attitude. In Lizzie's taking to the street, Mrs Gaskell tries to show the dreadful consequences of a condemnatory attitude, and by contrasting it with the charitable and forgiving attitude of Mrs Leigh and Susan Palmer, she demonstrates its futility in dealing with the problem.

Mrs Gaskell's attitude towards Lizzie is sympathetic, and Mrs Leigh's answer to her son, who is afraid that the family's disgrace may affect Susan's consideration of him, can be taken as Mrs Gaskell's view of society and people at large: “If she's so good as thou say'st, she'll have pity on such as my Lizzie. If she has no pity for such, she's a cruel Pharisee, and thou'rt best, without her” (*Lizzie Leigh*, p. 32). Susan Palmer stands out as Mrs Gaskell's ideal of what a young girl should be. She need not be ignorant of evil in order to be pure or innocent. On the contrary (and she stresses this point later in *Ruth*), knowledge of evil is desirable to save girls from an initial lapse ““Mother told me thou knew'st all'. His eyes were downcast in their shame. But the holy and pure, did not lower or veil her eyes. She said, 'Yes, I know all—all but her sufferings. Think what they must have been!’” (*Lizzie Leigh*, p. 64). She

blames Will, the brother, for his cruelty and lack of sympathy. “‘Oh!’ she said with a sudden burst, ‘Will Leigh! I have thought so well of you; don’t go and make me think you cruel and hard. Goodness is not goodness unless there is mercy and tenderness with it’ (*Lizzie Leigh*, p. 64). Her attitude “may safely be taken as the one which Mrs Gaskell felt to be right” (Mews, 1969, p. 84).

Though the story of Lizzie’s seduction and prostitution contains some familiar elements of the stereotypical tale of the seduced girl in the literature of the period, there are elements that had not appeared in previous treatments. One is the role of motherhood. Nancy in *Oliver Twist* (1837), Catherine Gray in *The Lieutenant’s Daughters* (1847) and Little Emily in *David Copperfield* (1850) were motherless and had no children, even Esther’s child did not live long and died in infancy, while Lizzie Leigh owes what happiness she finally gains to motherhood. It is through the unstained love of her mother that she is saved, and through her love for her child that she at last achieves her redemption.

In an exchange of free critical opinion Dickens wrote to Mrs Gaskell urging an alteration in the original version of the story in which Lizzie abandons her child, and suggested that she should put the child in the hands of Susan Palmer and from time to time send small gifts for its support. This change Dickens wrote, will “suffice to set [things] right .... rely upon it, it will do Lizzie an immense service ... I can’t tell you how earnestly I feel it” (Sharps, 1970, p. 95). Mrs Gaskell very sensibly yielded to his entreaty and made the change. Though Gaskell’s original plot sounds more probable, Dickens’s advice saved the story from what was going to be an unpleasant structural contrast between Mrs Leigh’s devotion to her daughter and her daughter’s treatment of her own child, and reinforced the emotional and dramatic effectiveness of the child’s death on Lizzie’s repentance. Though by the time Lizzie’s redemption starts to work out the child is dead, the redeeming power of motherhood is manifest in her desire to atone for her sin and to be worthy of heaven in order that she may be reunited with her dead child: “Could she speak? Oh, if God—if I might but have heard her little voice! Mother, I used to dream of it. May I see her once again—Oh mother, if I strive very hard, and God is very merciful, and I go to heaven, I shall not know her—I shall not know my own again—she will shun me as a stranger and cling to Susan Palmer and to you. Oh woe! oh woe!” (*Lizzie Leigh*, p. 65)

Mrs Gaskell makes the illegitimate child, which was commonly considered as its mother’s shame an incentive to repentance and a hope of reclamation, and in *Ruth* (1853) she asserts this view more frequently.

A second departure in *Lizzie Leigh* from the usual treatment of the fallen woman is the emphasis on the role of religion in the treatment of the sinner. The purifying process which the fallen undergoes is based on religious concepts and is reinforced throughout the story by the use of biblical quotations and references which underpin the important scenes such as the reference to Mary Magdalen and Christ's parables of The Prodigal Son and The Good Shepherd which help to shape the text and enhance the reader's response to it.

The idea of a possible reformation is hinted at in Susan's speech to Mrs Leigh: "for all that's come and gone, she may turn at last. Mary Magdalen did, you know" (*Lizzie Leigh*, p. 314). Yet Lizzie does not attain it before she has shown deep contrition and suffering. Lizzie is spared the once-traditional death; she finds refuge in her mother and the pair retire to live together in a cottage "in a green hollow of the hills" (*Lizzie Leigh*, p. 65), yet Mrs Gaskell's departure from the restrictions laid down by the literary conventions of her time is not complete. Despite the fact that religion has affected her reclamation, Lizzie never achieves the tranquility and happiness she enjoyed before her seduction. Her illegitimate child is not allowed to live, and is (in a sense) sacrificed on the altar of conventions; while she herself is "doomed to spend the rest of her life in grief and remorse" (Rubenius, 1973, p. 180) working for her eternal salvation: "Every sound of sorrow in the whole upland is heard there—every call of suffering or of sickness for help is listened to, by a sad, gentle-looking woman, who rarely smiles (and when she does, her smile is more sad than other people's tears." (*Lizzie Leigh*, p. 65)

The story can be seen as a very strange one. In one sense it is extremely simple, since it is a direct plea for love and forgiveness. What it makes very clear is that the prejudice or bitterness towards fallen women is seen as coming from men. It is allied with a strange wish to stand well in respectable working class society. It belongs to a harsh world in which men are dominant, and women suffer. Even the death of little Nanny, Lizzie's child, in the story is shown as the result of the demands of a drunk and irresponsible father on Susan, the dutiful daughter, rather than as a mere tragic accident. It is both conventional and unconventional. It did not attract the attention of reviewers. Readers, however, were impressed by it "not only as a story but also as an attempt to influence public opinion" (Rubenius, 1973, 181). Leigh Hunt wrote to Mrs Gaskell: "I am sure you are not the woman to be custom's slave. Witness your brave and lovely good word in behalf of the unhappiest of your sex" (Waller, 1935, p. 28), while Dr. Arnold's widow wrote her a letter of sympathetic praise, ending with the solemn wish "[m]ay the sinful and the sorrowful and the oppressed be taught and cheered and helped

by you as they severally need; and may the hard be softened, and the careless aroused” (Ward, 1906, p. xxv).

*Lizzie Leigh* can be looked upon as an advance on the story of Esther in *Mary Barton*, in that Lizzie herself survives, even though her child dies and she spends the rest of her life in sorrow and repentance. As a work of literature, it seems almost immature. Its didactic purpose is too obvious. But it marks a stage in the development of the treatment of “the fallen woman”.

The favourable reception of *Lizzie Leigh* and the sympathetic letters which she received from readers must have encouraged her to devote a larger work to this subject. *Ruth* is Mrs Gaskell’s second full-length novel after *Mary Barton*, and her first extended work on the subject of “the fallen woman”. Though the stories of Mary’s escape from seduction and of Esther’s fall are important parts of the plot of Mrs Gaskell’s first novel, we notice that the fallen woman remains a shadowy figure in the background. Her problem is referred to only within the social frame of the book in which she tries to show class differences and to expose the social-conditions of the working classes. By devoting a whole book to this subject and by making Ruth, a seduced girl and unmarried mother, the heroine of the book, Mrs Gaskell has been said to have been “the first novelist in nineteenth-century England to take a fallen woman as her central character” (Easson, 1979, p. 114).

In bringing the subject to the foreground of the story, and in discussing her problem with a distinctive openness while excluding all unrelated elements of the plot or pushing them into the smallest space in the background, Mrs Gaskell made an audacious attempt to give voice in literary form to her views on a problem which had engaged her attention for years. At the age of 21 she collected quotations in a book the pages of which were covered with the lyrics of deserted maidens, faithful wives and lovers who have parted from their mistresses (Rubenius, 1973, 179). In a letter addressed to her sister-in-law she wrote: “I have spoken out my mind in the best way I can, and I have no doubt that what was meant so earnestly must do some good” (Chapple & Pollard, 1966, p. 221).

Her choice of the heroine’s name is not accidental; indeed, it is deliberately chosen. It harks back to the Biblical “Ruth”, the sad, docile and unselfish creature, and it was used over and over again by many 19th-century writers and poets. Wordsworth wrote the sad story of “Ruth” (1800), Keats referred to her in “Ode to a Nightingale” (1819), Thomas Hood wrote a poem entitled “Ruth” (1827), and George Crabbe wrote his poem “Ruth” in *Tales of the Hall* (1819) which, as A.W. Ward, in his introduction to the Knutsford edition of *Ruth* writes,

suggested the name to Mrs Gaskell so that the association of this archetypal name might evoke a beautiful and faithful creature, who was to some extent unfortunate. Mrs Gaskell combined in the creation of her character all these elements and added some of her own invention which enabled her heroine to convey her message.

### ***Ruth***

*Ruth* can be considered as a protest against the manner in which “the fallen woman” was regarded, spoken of, and treated. Mrs Gaskell wanted to show the falsity of the opinion which condemned the fallen woman and regarded her as vicious and irredeemably corrupt; and tried to show that “one false step does not necessarily destroy a woman’s purity” (Rubenius, 1973, p. 1840). Though Ruth does fall, she does not become a prostitute. She “rises” again, becomes a useful member of society, and at last, regains her self-respect. Not only that, but Mrs Gaskell seeks also to show her as an innocent girl whose fall should be looked at as “a misfortune rather than a crime” (Pollard, 1965, p. 88). To achieve this, Mrs Gaskell endows her with many of the favourable and admired qualities of a heroine and endeavours consistently throughout the book to manipulate the reader into a sympathetic attitude towards her.

Ruth is a young orphan girl of great natural beauty and a docile nature, “little accustomed to oppose the wishes of anyone, obedient” unsuspicious and “innocent of any harmful consequences” (*Ruth*, p. 60). Unlike Margaret Hale, the young woman of resolution and determination in *North and South*, Ruth is presented as a Wordsworthian child who takes refuge in dreams and who has an instinctive love of nature. While the other apprenticed girls of Mrs Mason’s establishment avail themselves of the half-hour interval which she allows them in the early hours of the morning to stretch and relieve their muscles, Ruth “sprang to the large old window, and pressed against it as a bird presses against the bars of its cage. She put back the blind, and gazed into the quiet moonlight night” (*Ruth*, p. 4). She is influenced by natural beauty and shows an innocent appreciation of it. She likes the Camelia flower which Bellingham gives her, not because of the fact that he has given it to her, but because of its exquisite beauty: “I wish it to be exactly as it is—it is perfect. So pure!” (*Ruth*, p. 18) Ruth’s mother had died before giving her “any cautions or words of advice respecting the subject of a woman’s life” (*Ruth*, p. 43). Even Mrs Mason, her mistress, who should have fulfilled a mother’s role, fails to do so, and Ruth is left alone with little experience and no one to give her guidance or advice. Her total ignorance of “the facts of life”, makes her

vulnerable. She drifts into Bellingham's trap much as Maggie Tulliver does into the fatal boat ride with Stephen Guest in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*.

Mrs Gaskell insists throughout the book on Ruth's innocence, even though she has fallen. She has been happy for a while. She does not seem to feel any natural revulsion at the loss of her chastity, nor is she, oddly enough, aware that she is living in sin until the knowledge is forced upon her. Even when she utters the fatal "yes" to her seducer's suggestion that she accompany him to London after her dismissal from her employer's service, she says it in pure ignorance of its "infinite consequences" (*Ruth*, p. 57). Her infantile purity and ignorance are made to account for her fall, and if she is branded as sinful, then Mrs Gaskell tries to make her sin seem mainly the sin of ignorance.

After her abandonment by Bellingham, Ruth, like Martha and Esther, goes through the blackest moment of her ordeal. Desolate and deserted, she crouches "like some hunted creature, with a wild, scared look of despair, which almost made her lovely face seem fierce... her dress soiled and dim, her bonnet crushed and battered by her tossing to and fro on the moorland bed" (*Ruth*, p. 95). Deep in heart, she felt that "there was no pity anywhere" (95), and "her only hope was to die" (93). She is saved from suicide by Mr Benson, a dissenting minister who comes to her aid. In his loving and forgiving attitude towards the fallen Ruth, and in his unhampered efforts to help her achieve her redemption, Benson stands as a model upon which Trollope seems to have moulded the character of Mr Fenwick in *The Vicar of Bullharnpton*.

Leonard – the child – is from his birth, if not before, the strong catalyst for Ruth's change from a thoughtless girl into a mature and virtuous woman: "Did he say I should have a baby? .... Oh, my God, I thank Thee! I Oh, I will be so good" (*Ruth*, p. 117). While an affair could be concealed, an illegitimate child represented an extreme social stigma and an inconvenient testament to its mother's behaviour. In making Ruth rejoice over the birth of her child, Mrs Gaskell made a further departure from literary convention and a decided move away from the accepted moral standards of her time. This unconventional swing seems to have encouraged Elizabeth Barret Browning who, three years later, shocked the sensibility of many righteous readers in *Aurora Leigh*, in which the fallen Marian Erle also rejoices in her maternity, and through the birth of a bastard child is brought to maturity and saintliness.

While the dead child of *Lizzie Leigh* could affect its mother's reclamation and incite in her a desire for a reunion in heaven, Leonard, living, becomes Ruth's source of strength and the instrument of her regeneration. Through her motherly love and devotion to her child, Ruth

risers, starts to educate herself for the sake of teaching him, and so grows in character and faith that: “Six or seven years ago, you would have perceived that she was not altogether a lady by birth and education, yet now she might have been placed among the highest in the land, and would have been taken by the most critical judge for their equal.” (*Ruth*, p. 207)

The appearance of Bellingham, Leonard’s father, stirs a conflict between Ruth’s heart and mind; between the romantic and dreamy girl of the past, and the mature woman of the present: “If I might see him! If I might see him! If I might just ask him why he left me; if I had vexed him in any way; it was so strange—so cruel It was not him; it was his mother [...] He did me cruel harm. I can never again lift up my face in innocence [...] Oh, darling love! Am I talking against you?” asked she, tenderly, “I am so torn and perplexed! You, who are the father of my child!” (*Ruth*, p. 270)

The mention of her “child” threw “a new light into her mind. It changed her from the woman into the mother—the stern guardian of her child” (*Ruth*, p. 270). Here the conflict moves to a new stage. It splits Ruth between her love for Bellingham and her love for Leonard: “He left me. He might have been hurried off, but he might have inquired—he might have learned and explained. He left me... and never cared to learn, as he might have done, of Leonard’s birth. He has no love for his child, and I will have no love for him.” (*Ruth*, p. 270-1)

Her love for the child triumphs over her own. She decides to renounce the cruel father in the interests of her child. Her devoted love and motherly protective instinct to keep Leonard away from him make her refuse Bellingham’s offer of marriage: “If there were no other reason to prevent our marriage but the one fact that it would bring Leonard into contact with you, that would be enough” (*Ruth*, p. 300).

Ruth’s refusal of Bellingham’s offer of marriage is her own decision taken without advice or consultation. A loveless marriage with Bellingham could not undo the wrong on his part, nor the wrong to the child. Though Richardson had already indicated the folly of such a match in *Clarissa*, Ruth’s decision does not stem from concern for her own soul, but from fear for the future of Leonard. This refusal, according to Francoise Basch, is not only a “challenge to the social conventions” but it also “asserts Ruth’s moral superiority over both the father of her child and over her judges” (*Ruth*, p. 248). In presenting the fallen woman as a loving mother and in stressing her maternal devotion, Mrs Gaskell is anxious to arouse compassion for her and to show that the inherent goodness of the heart cannot be touched by seduction.

Mrs Gaskell is clearly more interested in the female victim than the male seducer. Like Little Emily in *David Copperfield*, Ruth's seduction is not related at length, and it takes place between chapters. Apart from the acquisitive desire to possess a remarkably pretty young girl, Bellingham's motivations are not fully dealt with; he remains a flat and one-dimensional character without redeeming characteristics. Like Henry Carpenter in *The Lieutenant's Daughters* seduction has no effect on him. Mrs Gaskell casts him as a villain and there is no attempt "to slur over the guilt of the dissolute lover" (Thomson, 1956, p. 133). Mr Benson, in the closing chapter of the book, tells Bellingham: "Men may call such actions as yours youthful follies! There is another name for them with God" (*Ruth*, p. 450).

In addition to its attack on the double standard of the morality of the time, the book is also a protest against the falsehood that this prevalent morality makes necessary. Although Benson and his sister Faith show what Gaskell clearly believed to be the true Christian approach, they have to lie in order to protect Ruth's reputation. Their pretence that she is a widow — a white lie — protects Ruth in her plight from the harsh "biting world", gives her time to recover, and it also helps her to work out her regeneration and redemption. When Ruth achieves this, the pretence is unmasked and both Benson and his sister Faith suffer and pay for it. In *David Copperfield* and also in *Ruth*, the presence of exaggeratedly self-sacrificing and loving odes to the fallen woman's recovery (Benson and Peggotty, Christ figures, seeking their lost sheep) suggest the tremendous effort needed to rehabilitate such sinners, and to influence the attitudes of righteous readers who see moral matters in black and white. Despite the objection of some critics at the time to "the lie" as a grave fault of the book, it serves to illustrate an important view which Mrs Gaskell tries to project: If the charitable and the kind are forced to lie because of the existing social and moral attitudes, then it is imperative that society should be changed so that lies are unnecessary.

Ruth's sin becomes known to the world and she starts to demonstrate her redemption publicly. An epidemic strikes the town, and while the usual staff and nurse shrink "away from being drafted into the pestilential fever-ward" (*Ruth*, p. 421), Ruth volunteers. She goes to live among sickness and disease with a calm and bright face. Her heroism accomplishes her social rehabilitation. An onlooker says about her: "Such a one as she has never been a great sinner; nor does she do her work as a penance, but for the love of God, and of the blessed Jesus. She will be in the light of God's countenance when you and I will be standing afar off." (*Ruth*, p. 425)

The device of the epidemic which Mrs Gaskell contrives helps to exhibit Ruth's redemption. She is readmitted into society without disguise or falsehood and she is accepted and respected. Even Bradshaw the inflexible Pharisee and the "embodiment of conventional standards" (Pollard, 1965, p. 99), who denounced her as "fallen and depraved" and expelled her from his house as "contaminating", forgives her. We close the book with him leading Leonard and comforting him for his mother's death) showing a genuine and sincere tolerance, and to his old friend, Mr Benson, he cannot speak "for the sympathy which choked up his voice, and filled his eyes with tears" (*Ruth*, p. 454).

*Ruth* comes in line with Mrs Gaskell's other works if we look at it as a didactic novel written for a purpose. Yet we may find it different not only from them, but perhaps from the other didactic novels written at that time if we look at the new ideas which Mrs Gaskell put in it. In *Mary Barton* she tries to excite a feeling of pity and sympathy for the "fallen woman and pleads for tolerance and forgiveness, while in *Ruth*, she makes forgiveness for the sinner a duty which society has to fulfil. Mrs Gaskell's view can be seen in Benson's words to Bradshaw: "not every woman who has fallen is depraved [...] Is it not time to change some of our ways of thinking and acting" (*Ruth*, p. 347). Even the shadowy elements of the plot which lie in the background emphasize this view. Mr Benson's attitude towards Dick, Bradshaw's son, who commits forgery, is made to exhibit the ideal and charitable attitude which society should take against the vile wrong-doer, and confirms the book's message and urges "the enforcement of the cardinal principle of the religion of love—the keynote of Christianity—the duty of the forgiveness of sin" (Ward, 1910, p. 459).

The other thing which makes *Ruth* a different book is Mrs Gaskell's attack on "the fallacy of the Victorian classification of women as 'pure' or 'fallen'" (Rubenius, 1973, p. 191), and her attempt to refute the unexamined traditional assumptions that contact with the fallen woman corrupts. Ruth proves to be a healing angel who brings comfort and happiness to the sick. Far from being corrupted or contaminated, Jemima Bradshaw gains from her contact with Ruth maturity and insight. She revolts against her father's rigid self-righteousness and fixed principles. It is Jemima, who tells Mr Benson: "I have been thinking a great deal about poor Ruth's... It made me think of myself, and what I am. With a father and mother, and home and careful friends, I am not likely to be tempted like Ruth." (*Ruth*, p. 361) Ruth's reclamation is, in every sense, redemption. By the end of the book she is unmistakably a saint. Though her, Mrs Gaskell undertakes to demonstrate that "a woman can be both fallen and good" (Cunningham, 1978, p. 32).

## Reception

The stormy reception of the book and the controversy it created among its reviewers is also one of the features which makes *Ruth* a different book. The praise and admiration that Mrs Gaskell received from Kingsley (who wrote to her praising the work as “too painfully good” and showed his admiration of its authoress: “May God bless you, and help you to write many more great books as you have already written” [Ward, 1906, p. xiii]) and a few other friends could not soothe the pain that she felt at the reception of the book. In her letter to Anne Robson, she wrote: “I am in a quiver of pain about it. I can’t tell you how much I need strength.... I had a terrible fit of crying all Saty night at the unkind things people were saying.” (Chapple & Pollard, 1966, p. 221)

It produced some outraged reaction from reviewers. Miriam Allott sums it up as “the enlightened thought Mrs Gaskell too timid, the unenlightened were horrified” (1960, p. 21). In his introduction to the book, A.W. Ward quotes Greg’s criticism of it: “She has first imagined a character as pure, pious, and unselfish as a poet ever fancied, and described a lapse from chastity as faultless as such a fault can be; and then, with damaging and unfaithful inconsistency, has given in to the world’s estimate in such matters, by assuming that the sin committed was of so deep a dye that only a life of atoning and enduring penitence could wipe it out. If she designed to awaken the world’s compassion for the ordinary class of betrayed and deserted Magdalenes, the circumstances of Ruth’s error should not have been made so innocent, nor should Ruth herself have been painted as so perfect. If she intended to describe a saint (as she has done), she should not have held conventional and mysterious language about her as a grievous sinner.” (Greg, 1859, pp. 166-167)

Greg was not the only writer who showed his dissatisfaction with the book, there were also those who criticized the conventional end of the story and accused Mrs Gaskell of yielding to the moral climate of her age. Ruth’s death at the end, a “sacrificial death” as it seems to be, provoked a protest from Mrs Gaskell’s fellow women writers, such as Charlotte Bronte who wrote to Mrs Gaskell: “Yet—hear my protest! Why should she die? Why are we to shut up the book weeping?” (Shorter, 1908, p. 264). Elizabeth Browning wrote to her “was it quite impossible, but that your Ruth should die? I had that thought of regret in closing the book (Waller, 1935, p. 42). Critics of our own time, such as J.G. Sharps, wrote: “Since Mrs Gaskell (and Mr Benson) rescued Ruth from suicide only to attend at her death-bed, the novel 1st virtually confesses her failure to improve upon the Goldsmith’s advice to

the lovely woman who stoops to folly and finds too late that men betray.” (Sharps, 1970, p. 154)

## Conclusion

The critics and writers who protested against Ruth’s death may have a point against Mrs Gaskell. If we consider *Ruth* as a didactic book through which Mrs Gaskell wanted to “change” society’s way of thinking and acting, then it may be an error to resort to the “traditional” end of killing the heroine. Perhaps the novel could have achieved a moral and artistic triumph if it had ended with Ruth’s redemption and social rehabilitation. In the same letter to Anne Robson, Mrs Gaskell wrote: “I could have put out much more power, but that I wanted to keep it quiet in tone, lest by the slightest exaggeration, or overstrained sentiment I might weaken the force of what I had to say.” (Chapple & Pollard, 1966, p. 221)

By avoiding “exaggeration” or, in other words, by deviating from the expected “logical” end of the story, Mrs Gaskell wanted to make her book convincing and win public approval. But her compromise did not silence the public or the regret of some of her friends. In her letter to Eliza Fox she wrote: “Now *should* you have burnt the 1st vol. of *Ruth* as so *very* bad? Even if you had been a very anxious father of a family? Yet two men have; and a third has forbidden his wife to read it; they sit next to us in Chapel and you can’t; think how ‘improper’ I feel under their eyes.” (Chapple & , 1966, p. 223). Artistically, it is a blemish that she wrings every drop of sentiment she can out of Ruth’s death, Leonard’s suffering, his pride in her, and his adoption by the local doctor who also happens to be illegitimate. But it reinforces the didactic point of her work.

The novel, of course, is not simply about Ruth herself. We always feel the pressure of society on her. Yet the behaviour of those around her in society is unrelentingly shown. Bellingham is a hypocrite; Bradshaw is a political hypocrite; Bradshaw’s daughter is shown to be even more passionate in nature, and more thoughtless than Ruth, although her problems are resolved; Bradshaw’s son is a thief. It is this which helps to give form to the work.

George Eliot was critical of *Ruth*, and in her letter to Mrs Alfred Taylor she wrote: “‘*Ruth*’, with all its merits, will not be an enduring or classical fiction—will it? Mrs Gaskell seems to me to be constantly misled by a love of sharp contrast—of “dramatic” effects. She is not contented with the subdued colouring—the half tints of real life. Hence, she agitates one for the moment, but she does not secure one’s lasting sympathy; her scenes and characters do not become typical.” (Haight, 1954, p. 86)

In *Adam Bede*, published six years later, Eliot tried carefully to avoid all the objections she raised against Ruth. Unlike Ruth, Hetty Sorrel, the fallen woman at the centre of the story, is not presented as a pure and pious girl who is lulled passively into the trap of seduction by a sophisticated libertine, nor is she given any of the extenuating circumstances that Mrs Gaskell and earlier writers concocted for their heroines. Writing in 1859, Eliot was well aware that the time had past when she could or needed to write about the subject in the terms that Mrs Gaskell or Dickens had used. She would need to say something different if she wanted to deal with this issue.

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