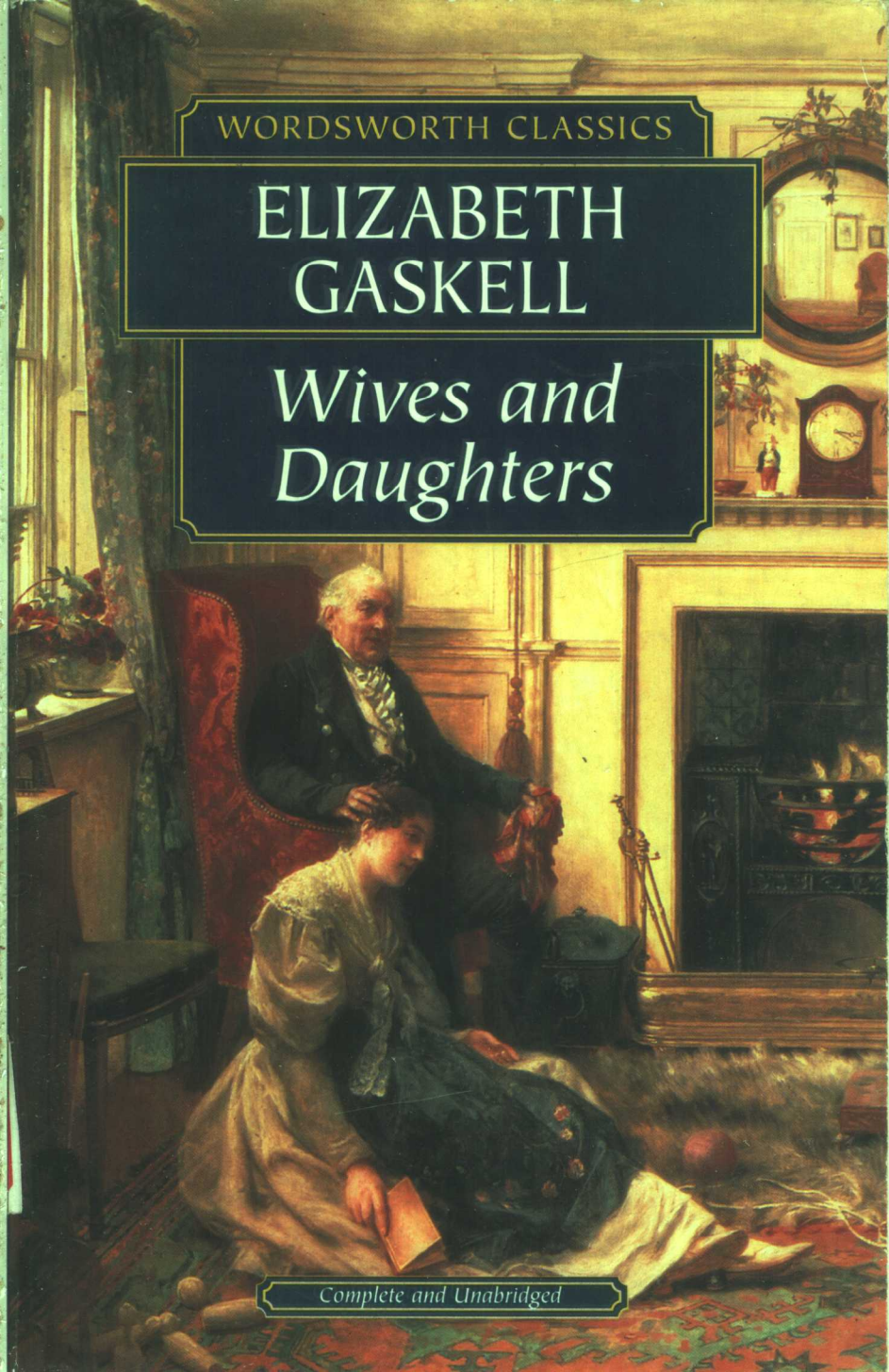
WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

ELIZABETH GASKELL

Wives and Daughters



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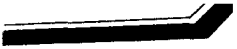

WIVES AND DAUGHTERS

Elizabeth Gaskell

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INTRODUCTION

For Elizabeth Gaskell, serious writing began as an attempt to counter grief. She was thirty-four when her only son died as an infant of smallpox; a tragedy which left her prone to recurring bouts of depression, and which gave her that peculiar understanding of the pain of bereavement which colours much of her work. She had written persistently over the years, and a couple of her pieces had been published by her radical friends, William and Mary Howitt,[1] under the pseudonym of Cotton Mather Mills.[2] But her writing had been unsystematic, and very much a secondary affair in her busy life as a conscientious young mother and wife of William Gaskell, a prominent Unitarian minister in Manchester. The Howitts and her husband encouraged her to write at greater length, and in 1845 she began to work on her first novel, *Mary Barton, A Tale of Manchester Life*. This story of industrial strife evolves from the Chartist movement of the 1840s and is vividly informed by Elizabeth Gaskell's first-hand observation of the desperate poverty and degradation surrounding her in the slums of Manchester. The narrative includes an account of the life and death of a prostitute that reveals an all-embracing compassion. Originally published

1 William Howitt, himself a writer, included Gaskell's 'Notes on Cheshire Customs' in his volume *Rural Life* of 1839, and her 'Description of Clopton Hall' in his *Visits to Remarkable Places* of 1840. In 1847 he founded the short-lived *Howitt's Journal* (which claimed to be 'bound to no class'), where he published three of Gaskell's stories – 'Libbie Marsh's Three Eras' in June 1847, 'The Sexton's Hero' in September 1847 and 'Christmas Storms and Sunshine' in January 1848.

2 For the intriguing derivation of this name, see Jenny Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell, A Habit of Stories*, Faber and Faber, London 1993, p. 172.

anonymously in 1848, it is one of the earliest Victorian novels of social protest, and begs for a better understanding between masters and working men. Gaskell's forthright confrontation of such unlikely literary subject matter provoked a good deal of outrage and even more admiration; it was not long before her true identity became known.

Within a year, her literary reputation was established, and she formed enduring friendships among the literati of the day, including Dickens who asked her to contribute to his magazine, *Household Words*. She wrote short stories for this and other journals before launching into *Cranford* in December 1851. Here Gaskell drew again on her own experience, this time going back to her childhood in the small town of Knutsford in Cheshire (the model for Cranford), where she had lived with her aunt after the death of her mother. Serialised in *Household Words*, the sequence of vignettes linked by a tenuous narrative thread in *Cranford* reveals Gaskell's great sensitivity. Her gentle humour and her real love of Knutsford and the surrounding countryside are felt in the delightful picture that emerges of life in this small community. Public and critics alike were charmed, but with her next full-length novel, *Ruth,* Gaskell again aroused controversy.

Ruth boldly addresses the problems faced by an unmarried mother and her illegitimate child, a subject that Gaskell was to return to in *Lizzie Leigh,* a short-story written for *Household Words* in 1850. The hypocrisy and double-standards at the core of mid-nineteenth-century morality are exposed in the honest light of Gaskell's own humanity. *Ruth* is not one of Mrs Gaskell's best-regarded novels, but in 1853 it was undoubtedly instrumental in changing public attitudes towards what were termed 'fallen women',[3] and so constitutes a landmark in English social fiction. *North and South* followed *Ruth* in 1854, returning to the themes of *Mary Barton* but contrasting Gaskell's known world – the 'satanic mills' of the industrialised North – with the leisured life of London society and rural Hampshire in the South.

Between *North and South* and her fifth novel, *Sylvia's Lovers,* Mrs Gaskell was asked by Patrick Brontë to write a biography of his

3 See Merryn Williams, *Women in the English Novel 1800–1900,* Macmillan, London 1984, ch. 8, p. 113.

daughter, her very close friend Charlotte Brontë, who had died suddenly at the age of thirty-eight. She was delighted to do this, but again, her uncompromising honesty caused a furore. Her account of the Brontë children's education at the Clergy Daughters' School at Cowan Bridge, and in particular her indiscreet allusions to Branwell Brontë's relations with a Mrs Edmond Robinson in whose house he was a tutor, resulted in threats of legal action which persisted for some time but never actually materialised. The biography has survived intact and is still widely acclaimed. It is interesting with relation to her fiction in that it demonstrates her abiding concern with the forces that shape personalities. *Sylvia's Lovers,* which was Mrs Gaskell's only historical novel, is most notable for its dramatic evocation of the cruelties of the press-gangs during the Napoleonic Wars. Like so much of her work (particularly *Wives and Daughters*), it is mainly about truth and love with an emphasis on the vulnerability of women.

When Mrs Gaskell suddenly died in November 1865, her sixth full-length novel, *Wives and Daughters,* was not quite finished. Instalments had been appearing each month in *The Cornhill Magazine* since August 1864, and though episodes that would run until January 1866[4] were completed, the conclusion was not written. This has never detracted from the novel's popularity, and *Wives and Daughters* is generally acknowledged to be Gaskell's finest achievement. More complex than anything else she wrote, it is a skilfully constructed work where interlocking plots are underpinned by a framework of different thematic strands and recurring patterns of imagery. Stunning natural descriptions and a wealth of details about everyday family life, dress, pastimes, houses, furnishings, meals, books, medicines and trivia are deftly worked into the rich, dense texture of the novel, justifying the subtitle, *An Everyday Story.* With its vast range of topical and timeless preoccupations, *Wives and Daughters* foreshadows George Eliot's *Middlemarch.* Issues such as truth, goodness, self-awareness, love, grief, education, marriage, and the many moral conflicts inherent in these, are explored by means of contrasts and with subtle humour. Here, Gaskell's beloved Knutsford is barely disguised as the small town of Hollingford. The action is placed forty-five years before the time of writing, making

4 *Wives and Daughters* was published in book form later in 1866.

the heroine the same age as the author, so that descriptions and details in the novel have the authenticity of personal memories. The milieu is predominantly middle-class, but the wide social range of the novel includes aristocracy, landed gentry and minor characters of peasant or servant class to create a full and lively picture of a small town community in the early nineteenth century.

A sharp focus is trained on relationships. Those most closely studied are between Molly Gibson and her father who is the local doctor, between Mr Gibson and his new wife, a former governess and schoolmistress employed by Lord and Lady Cumnor, and between Mrs Gibson and her daughter Cynthia. Other husband/wife and parent/child relationships are examined less minutely but with equal penetration in the households of the Hamleys who are of old yeoman stock, and the Cumnors[5] who are Whig aristocrats and so relative parvenus. These relationships are open to comparison, as are the individual characters that determine them.

The title of the novel is appropriate, for the story of Molly Gibson's passage from childhood to womanhood is essentially about the business of educating daughters to become wives, but its significance is richer than this implies. It would be hard to miss the echo of Turgenyev's *Fathers and Sons* which had been published in 1862 and would have been known to Mrs Gaskell in French translation. One chapter which concentrates on the complex relations between Squire Hamley and his two sons is indeed called 'Father and Sons',[6] which seems deliberately to draw attention to thematic links between the novels. Patsy Stoneman notes the difference, however, in the formulation of the titles and explains this with conviction:

> Turgenyev's novel shows a radical, scientific son reacting against a feudal, authoritarian father. Elizabeth Gaskell, also dealing with parent-child relations, cannot simply transpose the pattern across gender boundaries, however, because mothers and daughters are defined primarily not by their relation to each other but by their relation to men. Whereas a vigorous son eventually

5 The real-life prototypes for the Cumnor family were the Egertons of Tatton Park who dominated the town of Knutsford during Gaskell's childhood. See Joan Leach, 'Hollingford alias Knutsford', *Gaskell Society Newsletter*, 5 (March 1988), pp. 8–10.

6 Chapter 27

> assumes the authority of his father, a daughter is deflected into another subordinate role as wife, a role which also limits the role of mothers.[7]

Gaskell clearly held wives to be important, and was obviously concerned about daughters, having four of her own by the time she wrote the novel. Apparently happily married herself, she asserted her status by choosing to be known professionally as 'Mrs' Gaskell, thereby implying that the role of wife and mother was paramount in her life, and that it was from this stance that she wrote. Yet her work reflects views on marriage that were decidedly unconventional in the mid-nineteenth century. In *Ruth*, the heroine refuses marriage to the father of her baby (the man who has ruined her) because she feels he would be a poor moral influence on the child. Unlike most of her society, Gaskell neither sees marriage as necessarily the best solution nor single women as failures. Single women leading good, useful lives feature large in such stories as 'Half a Life-Time Ago', 'Libbie Marsh's Three Eras' and 'The Well of Pen-Morfa', where they have sometimes refused marriage in favour of more altruistic alternatives. In *Cranford*, where the town is 'in possession of the Amazons', spinsters are positively celebrated, and the Misses Browning in *Wives and Daughters,* though frequently a source of humour, are treated with great respect by the morally superior characters in the novel. When Molly hears Lady Harriet Cumnor calling them by comic nicknames, she is outraged and defies class-barriers to say so.

Writing to her friend Charles Eliot Norton in 1860, Mrs Gaskell shows herself as a balanced freethinker, unblinkered by traditional assumptions but well aware of women's most natural inclinations:

> I think an unmarried life may be to the full as happy, *in process of time*, but I think there is a time of trial to be gone through with *women*, who naturally yearn after children.[8]

And hence, marriage remains a central preoccupation in *Wives and Daughters,* where its problematic aspects are closely

7 Patsy Stoneman, *Elizabeth Gaskell* (Key Women Writers), Harvester Press, Brighton 1987, p. 171

8 J. A.V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard (eds), *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell,* Manchester 1966, Letter 453

scrutinised. Of the marriages depicted, none is ideal. The Hamleys are a couple with seemingly incompatible interests: he, the local squire, obsessed with his ancient lineage, is a bluff though kindly man whose interests are out of doors, on his land. His wife, a chronic invalid, is town-bred and cultured, 'gentle and sentimental; tender and good' and 'the ruling spirit of the house'. Her goodness extends to the motherless Molly with whom she forms a loving bond, but she is not the perfect role model. Her affinity with her elder son, Osborne, who is poet, classical scholar and handsome heir to Hamley Hall, has led her and the squire to indulge him to his detriment and to undervalue his brother, Roger, a natural scientist. Yet she is a warm, romantic woman who has sacrificed her own interests to those of her husband out of a very genuine love. Gaskell observes women making sacrifices throughout her work, but here there is an uneasy feeling that Mrs Hamley's undefined illness may derive from this. Thus Gaskell illustrates the perils of suppressing the self that Molly, advised by Roger Hamley 'to think more of others than of oneself', seems to sense instinctively. Molly sees a life of perpetual self-denial as no life at all:

> 'It will be very dull when I have killed myself, as it were, and live only in trying to do, and to be as other people like. I don't see any end to it. I might as well never have lived. And as for the happiness that you speak of, I shall never be happy again.'

Her spirited words are dramatically recalled when Mrs Hamley dies, and yet it is clear that mutual love, understanding and a shared if misguided concern for their sons form a sound basis for the Hamleys' marriage.[9] The squire's overwhelming grief at the loss of his wife and her significance in the household are most movingly conveyed:

> Her husband, who was often restless and angry from one cause or another, always came to her to be smoothed down and put right. He was conscious of her pleasant influence over him, and became at peace with himself when in her presence; just as a child is at ease when with someone who is both firm and gentle. But the keystone of the family arch was gone, and the stones of which it was composed began to fall apart.

9 Tessa Brodetsky, *Elizabeth Gaskell*, Berg, Leamington Spa 1986, ch. 9, p. 104

The squire never really gets over the death of his wife and is doubly devastated by the death of Osborne. His grief is compounded by acknowledgement of his own part in the damaged relationship he had with Osborne. Gaskell imbues her account of this loss with all the pain of her own, and it is one of the novel's many strengths.

The marriage between Lord and Lady Cumnor is treated in almost a purely comic vein, but this too shows a couple who are fundamentally united by common family concerns, despite the disparate nature of their less serious interests. The relationship at the heart of the story, which is contrasted with these two, is the second marriage of Molly Gibson's father to an attractive widow, Mrs Kirkpatrick. This is undertaken hastily: Mr Gibson is anxious to secure female protection and guidance for his growing daughter who, since the death of her mother when she was three, has lived with him, his pupils and a couple of servants. His bride has equally practical motives:

> . . . it was such a wonderful relief to feel that she need not struggle any more for a livelihood.

Devoid of real love from its outset, the marriage is not a success. Mr Gibson soon realises that he has misjudged the character of his egocentric, superficial wife, whose conversation consists of 'infinite nothings', and he devises his own mode of survival:

> He had grown accustomed to his wife by this time, and regarded silence on his own part as a great preservative against long, inconsequential arguments.

If this attitude recalls Mr Bennet from Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Mrs Gibson is cast in decidedly the same mould as Mrs Bennet. She has neither understanding nor respect for her husband's personal morality or his professional ethics. When Gibson discovers the unprincipled duplicity of his wife's behaviour towards the Hamley brothers, he is appalled and finally does confront her. She fails to see that she has done anything wrong, and her response is characteristically absurd:

> 'I think dear papa seems a little put out today; we must see that he has a dinner that he likes when he comes home. I have often perceived that everything depends on making a man comfortable in his own house.'

And so each partner operates on an entirely separate level making a travesty of the unity implicit in marriage.

Gaskell's father had remarried three years after the death of her mother, and her experience seems to have been miserable:

> Long ago I lived in Chelsea occasionally with my father and stepmother, and very, very, unhappy I used to be.[10]

This expression of misery has a marked ring of the fairytale. Gaskell's opening 'Long ago', her cadence, her repetition and the very word 'stepmother' evoke *Snow White* or *Cinderella*. The whole account of Molly's childhood also resonates with echoes of well-known childhood tales and myths (*Sleeping Beauty, Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, the Man in the Moon, and many more) so that, for all the novel's meticulous realism of detail and description, an allegorical level can be inferred. Molly Gibson, like many of Gaskell's heroines, enjoys an exclusively close relationship with her father. Her reaction to the news of his forthcoming marriage shares the sense of devastation felt in Gaskell's letter to her friend:

> It was as if the piece of solid ground on which she stood had broken off from the shore, and she was drifting out to the infinite sea alone.

The striking image of Molly floating into the unknown is straight from the children's storybook, effectively because the teenage Molly feels like an abandoned child. Gaskell's mode of narration has a charming, fantastic quality, but her understanding of Molly's emotion is heartfelt and rooted in a personal reality.

Yet Molly is not relentlessly unhappy after her father's marriage. Roger has advised her 'to think more of others than of oneself', and to put her father's happiness 'before her own'. Sustained by Roger's words, she bears with her stepmother's ill-concealed self-interest, her vulgarity, her affectations, her sycophantic snobbery and her self-deluding inability to distinguish right from wrong with fortitude and equanimity. She is rewarded by the arrival of her stepsister, Cynthia Kirkpatrick, whose charm and beauty is immediately captivating.

Molly is the central player in this novel: she participates in every part of the action and through her eyes much of it is viewed. Her

10 Chapple and Pollard, op. cit., Letter 616

introspection is revealing, but the extended comparison that is made throughout the novel between her and Cynthia and between her and Mrs Gibson is Gaskell's most effective means of characterisation. The contrast made between Osborne and Roger Hamley forms a parallel to the central study of the girls.

From the outset, Molly is associated with goodness, which she comes to see as 'the only enduring thing'. Her loving relationship with her father, firmly grounded in complete openness and trust, is carefully established at the beginning of the novel as a yardstick by which other relationships are measured. Lacking a mother, her upbringing is unconventional. Her father, who sees formal education as 'rather a dilution of mother-wit' and wants 'to keep her a child' sets the example of altruism through his tireless care of his patients and he encourages plain speaking and self-assertiveness through his down-to earth approach to life. His only real fault seems to be a classic male inability to express emotion.

Together with her father and Roger Hamley, Molly represents absolute honesty, loyalty and decency in the novel. A sharp contrast is drawn between the rigorous integrity of these three and the duplicity of Mrs Gibson with her 'webs' and 'distortions of truth', and of Cynthia with her habit of concealment. Molly is often described as 'rough' and needing refinement (her inability to lie often does seem rude), but as the story progresses we see this as a symbol of her honesty which is juxtaposed with the 'silkiness' of her stepmother, whose speeches that are like 'soothing syrups' signal a duplicitous nature. Significantly, Roger Hamley too 'has a good heart' but is 'a little rough sometimes' in contrast to the 'tender manner' of his brother, Osborne.

Many of Gaskell's novels concern lies, or the perpetration of a lie through secrecy.[11] In *Wives and Daughters*, the action of the plot hinges on two secrets. One concerns Osborne Hamley, whose concealment of an unsuitable marriage places him in the ranks of the devious with Cynthia, Mrs Gibson and Mr Preston who is Lord Cumnor's unscrupulous land-agent. The other is Cynthia's secret of a clandestine engagement, made when she was only sixteen, to Mr Preston, who has subsequently resorted to blackmail. Molly who hates secrets inadvertently becomes party to both of these.

11 This is especially crucial in *Sylvia's Lovers*.

In an incident which illustrates the vulnerability of girls and the constant pressure they are under to conform, Molly innocently jeopardises her own reputation by helping Cynthia to disentangle herself from Preston. Preston, his sexuality superbly conveyed, is a social climber and dangerously predatory, 'tigerish, with his striped skin and relentless heart'. But, a handsome bachelor newly arrived in town, he has charmed the ladies of Hollingford and is naturally a source of interest to Mrs Goodenough, Mrs Dawes and the Misses Browning. When Preston and Molly are spotted together, Molly, who has been known to these good ladies all her life, is swiftly condemned, though Preston escapes censure. Only Lady Harriet and Miss Phoebe Browning are strong enough to weigh their personal knowledge of Molly's character against appearances. The episode serves as an indictment of gossip and of the widespread tendency to accept public opinion rather than exercise personal judgement. It also underlines an issue which Gaskell had exposed more fully in *Ruth* – the prevailing double-standard in the moral code applied to men and women.

Silence has an important role in the novel where it is identified early on as an indirect form of lying. During Molly's first childhood visit to Cumnor Towers she is mortified by Mrs Kirkpatrick (soon to be Mrs Gibson) who remains silent when Lady Cuxhaven assumes that Molly has made herself ill by eating the entire contents of a tray of food that Mrs Kirkpatrick has actually devoured herself. Osborne Hamley never directly lies to his parents (he is flawed but not dishonourable), and neither does Cynthia, but while her insistence on keeping both her engagements secret leads to all sorts of complications, it allows her, insidiously, to keep her options open. Molly's father's silence on the subject of his marriage is seen as an evasion of truth, and Molly, who has questioned his wisdom in this regard, now has to remain silent herself. Fortunately, she never discovers the third secret of Osborne's ill health, which Mrs Gibson accidentally overhears. Mrs Gibson's silence is distinctly underhand as she tries basely to turn her secret knowledge to her own ends, yet this secret is a counterpoise to the others. The episode justifies Mr Gibson's habit of silence by stressing the benefit of it in this instance, and the binding requirement for it in his profession. Silence can be protective, and this aspect, seen against the dangers of gossip which are well illustrated in the novel, provides another effective contrast. Mrs Gaskell's own rigorous standards ensure that she always

presents a balanced view, and *Wives and Daughters* fulfils her didactic purpose by demonstrating the importance of integrity, truth and openness, and the destructive force of deception and secrecy, especially within families.

Gaskell's portrait of Cynthia is a triumph that illustrates the Unitarian principle of the absolute importance of nurture and education in shaping character. It is interesting also for its complexity. Cynthia has several sides to her character, and in conveying her fascinating charm and her magnetic sexual attraction, Gaskell makes her faults appealing. Molly is soon to learn that, though far more intelligent, Cynthia, like her mother, 'was not remarkable for unflinching morality'. The relationship between Cynthia and her mother is tense. Since her father's death when she was a small child, Cynthia has been packed off whenever possible so that her mother could get on with her life unhampered. Gaskell is not wholly unsympathetic to the plight of the widow struggling to survive, but shows selfishness always as Mrs Gibson's overriding motivation.

Unlike the straightforward communication between Molly and her father, conversation between the mother and daughter, usually about clothes, is deceptive, and Molly is aware of 'allusions in their seeming commonplace speeches'. Cynthia sees straight through Mrs Gibson's affectations and 'is always ready with her mockery to exaggerate any pretensions of her mother's'. Though her contempt is usually hidden in front of Mr Gibson, it is quite evident to Molly, 'indeed she [Cynthia] received much of what her mother said with a kind of complete indifference that made Mrs Gibson hold her rather in awe; and she was much more communicative to Molly than to her own child'. Mrs Gibson is 'unconscious of any satire in Cynthia's speech', and is merely annoyed rather than genuinely hurt by the 'Lilliputian darts Cynthia flung at her'. While Mrs Gibson is proud of Cynthia's beauty, like the fairytale stepmother, she is jealous too, and excludes her daughter from the wedding party so as to avoid unfavourable comparisons. An element of sexual rivalry between mother and daughter is also hinted at in connection with Mr Preston.

Although Mrs Gibson is discomfited by Cynthia, neither one seems really able to hurt or be hurt by the other. Cynthia says to Molly, 'I don't think love for one's mother quite comes by nature.' She justifies this apparently unnatural detachment more specifically:

> 'Somehow, I cannot forgive her for her neglect of me as a child, when I would have clung to her. . . A child should be brought up with its parents if it is to think them infallible when it grows up . . . I have grown up outside the pale of duty and "oughts".'

This extended examination of a mother/daughter relationship is unique in Gaskell's work where idealised relationships between fathers and their motherless daughters predominate.[12] Her correspondence with her own daughters suggests mutual love and trust at every level, and yet her portrayal of the undercurrents of distrust that surge between Mrs Gibson and Cynthia carries extraordinary psychological conviction. If Molly is the product of love, Cynthia is the result of neglect.

Cynthia has lacked love, as she has lacked stability and good example, but she arrives in the Gibson household with a fair degree of self-awareness, a desirable quality which is a goal to be achieved in much Victorian fiction. Cynthia's self-awareness is manifested by her constantly comparing herself with Molly and Mr Gibson. It also serves as a satirical foil to the repeated instances of her mother's lack of self-awareness. When she criticises herself, as she frequently does with the same clear objectivity that she applies to her mother, Cynthia is notably accurate, and this self-knowledge grows during the course of the action. She is devoted to Molly, whose goodness is a source of wonder to her, and she admires the wisdom and the good parenting of Mr Gibson:

> 'Oh, how good you are, Molly! I wonder, if I had been brought up like you, whether I should have been as good. But I've been tossed about so.'

Reprimanded by Mr Gibson when her flirtatious behaviour leads to a sudden proposal of marriage from his old pupil, Mr Coxe, Cynthia sees her own fault as her mother never can, and the reason for it:

> 'I've never lived with people with such a high standard of conduct before; I don't quite know how to behave.'

Later in the novel she describes herself as 'a moral kangaroo', and observes cooly:

12 Tessa Brodetsky, op. cit., ch. 9, p. 104

'I am not good and I never shall be now. Perhaps I might be a heroine still but I shall never be a good woman, I know . . . '

When Cynthia questions the likelihood of her marriage to Roger Hamley, she is absolutely realistic and acts as part of an anti-romantic, pragmatic strain in the novel that is usually identified with the straightforwardness of Molly, Roger or Mr Gibson. Gaskell paints Cynthia with subtle ambivalence, as she does Osborne and Mr Hamley, who are also an interesting mixture of good and bad. Cynthia is the product of Gaskell's profound perception. She has 'not the gift of love' and is incapable of returning Roger's love because 'she had had too little true love in her life, and perhaps too much admiration'.

The 'roughness' that Molly shares with both Roger and her father has already been mentioned, but there are other qualities common to certain characters in the novel that act as pointers to their natures. Good looks, elegant clothes and polished manners align Osborne Hamley with Mrs Gibson, Cynthia and Preston, and so imply both a shallow nature and a metaphorical veneer beneath which secrets are hidden. Roger, we are repeatedly told, is plain, and Lord Hollingford, another scientist and 'good' character, is not only 'plain in face', but 'awkward in person'. The novel makes a clear distinction between behaviour and manners. Enjoyment of outdoor activity is another factor that seems to denote moral health in *Wives and Daughters*. Mr Gibson goes everywhere on horseback and advocates fresh air for his patients, while Mrs Gibson prefers a closed carriage; Molly loves to ride and walk every day, is an avid gardener, climbs trees and picks blackberries, whereas Cynthia avoids such exercise when she can. Roger's whole life is concerned with nature, but Osborne, like his poor invalid mother, is always closeted indoors, to the distress of Squire Hamley.

A series of references to eyes and sight acts as a further demarcation between the characters. Mr Gibson, the altruistic, caring doctor, has 'keen observant eyes' that match his moral clear-sightedness, whereas Mrs Gibson is 'an unperceptive person except where her own interests were dependent on another person's humour'. Roger Hamley has 'bright keen eyes 'which 'are always wandering about and see twenty things where I [Mr Hamley] only see one'; Osborne is short-sighted and 'too indolent to keep an unassisted conscience'. Roger cannot define the colour of Cynthia's eyes, perhaps because they have 'a sort of childlike innocence and

wonder about them which did not quite belong to Cynthia's character', but the clarity of Molly's grey ones coupled with the directness of her gaze is frequently noted. Even at the beginning of the novel, though sometimes confused, Molly shows extraordinary insight. Discussing self-sacrifice with Roger Hamley, she perceives a basic truth:

> 'we are ourselves, you know, and this is now, not some time to come, a long, long way off. And we are not angels, to be comforted by seeing the ends for which everything is sent.'

Much later in the novel, Mrs Gibson's observation that 'one would calculate one's behaviour at the present time so much better if one only knew what events were to come', is in one sense similar to Molly's, but it reveals no wisdom at all and ironically reflects only her manipulative inclinations. Accounts of Mrs Gibson's transgressions are almost always satirical, and as the novel develops, she becomes less of a threat and increasingly a source of farcical amusement. There is something of farce too in the sheer number of Cynthia's lovers, and it is a mark of Gaskell's mature skill that she incorporates serious themes with such lightness of touch.

'Mrs Gaskell's life impinged upon that of some of the most interesting people of the period',[13] and hence her novels reflect some of the most advanced ideas of her time. In a letter to her publisher, George Smith, where she outlines the plot of *Wives and Daughters*,[14] we learn that her portrait of Roger Hamley is based on her cousin, the naturalist, Charles Darwin. Like Darwin, Roger is 'tempted by a large offer to go round the world' for purposes of research. Both Gaskell's father[15] and her husband[16] were at the forefront of the debate about education which reached its height during the 1860s, promoting the importance of Science as opposed to Classics in the curriculum. This argument is of crucial relevance to *Wives and Daughters*, where Roger Hamley, Mr Gibson and Lord Hollingford,

13 Chapple and Pollard, op. cit. (Introduction), p. xix

14 Ibid., Letter 550

15 See William Stevenson, *Remarks on the Very Inferior Utility of Classical Learning*, 1796.

16 Gaskell tells Norton that her husband is organising a meeting of The British Association for the Advancement of Science; see Chapple and Pollard, op. cit., Letter 485