

**Social and Personal Paradoxes and Their Impact on the Lives of the
Protagonists of Elizabeth Gaskell's Novel *Wives and Daughters***

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Abstract

The literary career of Elizabeth Gaskell is roughly defined by two different areas on which she focused – she was the author of the ‘industrial novels’ such as *Mary Barton* or *North and South* on the one hand, while on the other, she was strongly attracted to the countryside and its people which were closest to her heart, and where the changes the society was undergoing had the strongest impact as it was reflected in *Cranford* or *Wives and Daughters*. Apart from the social changes, however, in *Wives and Daughters* Gaskell's interest focused predominantly on the relationships among the individual characters as they are the main driving force of the plot. The topics she tackled resonate strongly with those we are confronted with even today. Though unfinished, *Wives and Daughters* is an important novel offering the brilliantly realistic portrayal of life in Victorian England. At the same time it helps us see the differences and similarities between then and now. These were the main points we concentrated on while trying to analyse or compare the characters among which Molly Gibson functions as a unifying element on the one hand while on the other she helps to bridge over the widening gap between the old and outdated and the new and unknown.

Keywords: *Elizabeth Gaskell, society, prejudice, family, class, ambition, friendship*

1. Introduction

Elizabeth Gaskell (1810–1865) holds a specific position in British literature. Her works became recognized during her life by the most influential literary personages but later on there appeared voices which claimed that her literary work was over-valued. However, currently it can easily be claimed that she ranks among the best

women writers not only of the Victorian period but in the history of British literature. The fact that she wrote in and about the period she knew so well, allowed her to leave behind the legacy represented by a faithful portrayal of that society. As Davis claims, "...that humane Unitarian ... wanted more kindness in the world" (Davis 2008: 11) which is a property that represents a unifying factor of all her novels.

Gaskell's first novel, *Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life*, was published anonymously in 1848 and immediately became a sensation. Gaskell faithfully depicted the hard life of workers in the mills of Manchester where she lived with her husband, a Methodist minister, and thus had first-hand experience with inhuman conditions of the poorest and lowest standing members of the society. It is a novel which is generally defined as an 'industrial (social) novel'¹. Gaskell was not afraid of writing openly about such issues as the general poverty of workers or about inhuman working conditions in mills or mines. She got affected by all these realities after her arrival to Manchester. The immediate impressions were so deep also because they were in sharp contrast with the idyllic countryside where the author had spent most of her childhood. The truthful and unembellished portrayal of life in slums was often confronted with resentment of readers – members of the social class to which Gaskell and her husband also belonged because his congregation largely consisted of rich industrialists. These people were unwilling to accept such realities as "[t]hey felt the novel vilified the masters and glorified the workers..." (Uglow 1999: 214) but reality they were as Mrs Gaskell was familiar with the hardships of the poor through her husband's work. Her endurance and striving to help the poorest ones through her literary work helped her to win well-deserved acknowledgement

¹ Industrial (social) novel – all 19th century British novels are "industrial" in the sense that they were written during the Industrial Revolution, which made Britain the largest exporter of mass-produced goods in the world. (www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100002230)

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even of such esteemed authors as Thomas Carlyle² and Charles Kingsley³. Her authorship was discovered quite soon and the rough portrayal of spinning mills owners by the minister's wife caused even more annoyance among the congregation. "Many local people, including some of the rich manufacturers were outraged and mortified" (Uglow 1999: 214). However, Gaskell went on advocating the idea that it was every human being's duty to fight social injustice, thus causing another controversy with her next novel, *Ruth* (1853), a story of a single mother who is confronted with the hypocrisy of church and state and must fight for her honour, and for love of her son.

2. Urban Versus Rural

Alongside the novel *Ruth*, Gaskell worked on her other piece, the novel *Cranford*. She had decided to change the subject in response to the attacks from the members of the congregation which followed the publication of the novel *Mary Barton*. *Cranford*, "set among the ladies of a small town near Manchester, is small, well observed, gently penetrating" (Carrington 2002: 197), a story in which she concentrated on harmless peculiarities encountered during her youth spent in the country town of Knutsford. "Although Elizabeth Gaskell established herself as a major novelist by representing the slums of Manchester in *Mary Barton*," [from then on] "she was arguably more committed ... to depicting rural landscapes and ways" (Poplawski 2012: 468). When compared to the previous two pieces, *Cranford* definitely is different - it is a 'countryside' novel, a portrayal of life in a little provincial town, in which the author "imagined idyllic country villages as repositories of something ineffably essential to the nation, but soon to be lost" (Poplawski 2012: 468). As an excellent observer, she portrayed life of

² Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881) - a Scottish historian, biographer, philosopher, writer and essayist, one of the most important social commentators of the Victorian period.

³ Charles Kingsley (1819–1875) - a novelist, historian and social reformer, a university professor.

middle classes in a little town, “concentrating on ... the community of single women, defined ... as the daughters of aristocratic families...” (Uglow 1999: 282), living in the patriarchal Victorian society.

Gaskell’s last (unfinished) novel, *Wives and Daughters* (1866), is a novel which is exclusively modern, dealing with issues that were topical in the time of the author’s life and most of which have remained topical until today, a “steadily built up exploration of family and provincial life shaped by historical contingencies...” (Alexander 2007: 287). As Poplawski claims: “... with omnipresent reminders of transformation in the city, it is hardly surprising that ... writers gravitated to the rural when wanting to grapple with issues of social, political and economic change” (Poplawski 2012: 468). On the other hand, however, the novel serves as a proof that certain deeply rooted values, norms, rules and principles - both of private and social life - had managed to survive unaltered for decades despite the otherwise rapid progress in all spheres of life. The novel “is an acute dissection of family tensions and a fine study of individual psychology, especially in its understanding of the pain and confusion of Molly, Mr Gibson and Squire Hamley...” (Uglow 1999: 581), i.e. three characters on which this paper concentrates most. Readers meet Molly Gibson, the central character, right at the very beginning of the novel. The opening chapters hold a special place in the novel because they are written in almost fairy-story-like style as if to underline the fact that Molly is still a girl, trying on that very day to make her dream (of meeting a “princess”) come true. Through Molly’s adventure, i.e. the events of one particular day, we meet the most important characters of the novel and learn the most important facts that will help readers to understand subsequent events in Molly and her father’s life, as well as her views and principles to which she firmly holds when the story moves several years forward and we meet her again, at the age crucial for and largely formative of her future, as almost an adult person. However, the much anticipated and looked forward to visit to the Towers (the family seat of the local aristocratic family of the Cumnors) ends in disappointment. For the first time in her so far sheltered life Molly is confronted with the rough reality of the world of adults and

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class distinctions though she fails to understand them yet. She is a highly sensitive and perceptive child, always responding to outer impulses with such intensity that eventually she finds the new impressions overwhelming. The negative experience is enhanced by Molly's being forgotten first by her companions, and later on by one of the future protagonists of the novel, Mrs Kirkpatrick. For Molly, this is the first encounter with her step-mother-to-be and gets stuck in Molly's memory as one of the most unpleasant experiences of the day (of her childhood): "Do you know, papa, I think lady's maids are worse than ladies" (Gaskell 2010: 29) is Molly's statement after being rescued by her father. In the novel's exposition Gaskell skilfully managed to combine the abovementioned fairy story of a little girl and her confrontation with rough reality of adult life. Thus the opening chapters of the novel can be perceived as a sort of foreshadowing of all the events Molly is to be confronted with in the future. When they meet again after some years, Molly's opinion on Mrs Kirkpatrick as a shallow and superficial person has been fixed. As far as her way of portraying the characters, Gaskell does not provide any details. She lets them act and speak, thus allowing readers to form their own opinion through witnessing their behaviour in different situations.

3. Molly and Mr Gibson

The novel covers but a relatively short period in Molly's life – "[T]he main action runs roughly from 1827 to 1830. The dates blur at the edges, partly from carelessness but partly because Gaskell wants to show how one era blends into another" (Uglow 1999: 580). With the gap of several years, we meet Molly and her father, the local doctor Mr Gibson "... a widower, and likely to remain so..." (Gaskell 2010: 33) again. Their father-daughter relationship is very strong, "...his domestic affections were centred on little Molly..." (Gaskell 2010: 33) and, perhaps more importantly, their household does not seem to be tied by social conventions. This, however, applies to their home but not beyond. Molly has been brought up as a typical young woman of the period. She was educated at home because Mr Gibson is a man holding very traditional views on men and women's social roles and

as such does not think it appropriate for women to get but elementary education:

Now, Miss Eyre⁴... remember this: ... Don't teach Molly too much; she must sew, and read, and write, and do her sums; but I want to keep her a child, and if I find more learning desirable for her, I'll see about giving it to her myself. After all, I'm not sure that reading or writing is necessary. Many a good women get married with only a cross instead of her name ... however, we must yield to the prejudices of society ... and so you may teach the child to read. (Gaskell 2010: 35)

Despite her traditional upbringing however, Molly is a modern young woman who does not see the running of household and doing needlework as the only purpose of her life. Her determination to live her life as different from the limiting rules as possible is understandable when viewed as the outcome of the rather unconventional arrangement of the domestic affairs because being busy in his job, Mr Gibson had no time to engrain the strict rules and limits in his daughter.

The real conflict arises when Mr Gibson suddenly realizes that Molly has grown and is now a marriageable woman. Appalled by this realization and having no experience with maturing young people, he does the only thing he is capable to think about and sends Molly away from home and out of the reach of possible threats represented by young men. Paradoxically, Molly is absolutely unaware of the real motives behind her father's decision to send her away. She is young and inexperienced and due to the absence of a female element in her life she is unprepared to face the changes brought upon her by life. Mr Gibson's actions in this respect are worth a closer look. Firstly, he was

⁴Molly had a governess, Miss Eyre. This choice of surname quite clearly suggests that its choice was not a coincidence - it can be perceived as Gaskell's tribute to her close friend, the writer Charlotte Brontë and author of the novel *Jane Eyre*.

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not ready to perceive (accept) Molly as an adult person. Secondly, his motives, perhaps subconsciously, were selfish – most probably he was afraid to lose his child and companion. However, Mr Gibson's actions do not end up the way he had hoped. By trying (from his point of view) to protect his daughter, he has failed to protect himself, has made himself more vulnerable and open to the dangers of exactly the same kind: "During this absence of [Molly] Mr Gibson was drifting into matrimony" (Gaskell 2010: 88). The woman to become the new Mrs Gibson is the very Mrs Kirkpatrick who had spoiled Molly's outing a few years ago. In her attempts to ensnare Mr Gibson she is helped, though unconsciously, by Lord Hollingford⁵:

Excuse me, Gibson, ... have you never thought of marrying again? ... if you found a sensible, agreeable woman of thirty or so, I really think you couldn't do better than take her to manage your home, and so save you either discomfort or wrong... (Gaskell 2010: 101).

Mrs Kirkpatrick is a typical representative of women of the period with all the negative effects the class-conscious society imposed on those who, due to unfavourable circumstances, were forced to look for appropriate ways of providing for themselves. As a widow left unprovided for by her late husband, "a poor curate" (Gaskell 2010: 13), she has never come to terms with the necessity of earning the living. She is a representative of thousands of women of the same fate - with no means to live on and forced to go out to work (again). In the 18th and 19th centuries, the number of professions suitable for unmarried or widowed middle-class women was very limited. Mrs Kirkpatrick is not an exception. She makes use of the opportunity and her charms, and skilfully manages to manipulate Mr Gibson into marrying her. While Lord Hollingford pushes Gibson towards Mrs Kirkpatrick unconsciously, Lord and Lady Cumnor's matchmaking is

⁵ Lord Hollingford – the heir to Towers, the representative of younger generation of old aristocracy in the novel.

more determined: "I say, my lady, what do you think of Gibson? He would be just the right age - widower - lives near the Towers?" (Gaskell 2010: 95). Here we reach one important point which takes us back to the initial incident. Before the festival Mr Gibson arrives at the Towers to be informed that: "...Clare is here; you remember Clare, don't you? She was a patient of yours, long ago" (Gaskell 2010: 13), to which Mr Gibson, evidently not remembering her, only utters: "'Clare!'" in a bewildered tone.'" (Gaskell 2010: 13). Lady Cumnor⁶ cannot resist the temptation to act as a match-maker when she offers an explanation:

...she was a silly little thing, and did not know when she was well off; we were all very fond of her, I'm sure. She went and married a poor curate, and became a stupid Mrs. Kirkpatrick; ... And now he's dead, and left her a widow ... and we are racking our brains to find out some way of helping her to a livelihood without parting her from her child. (Gaskell 2010: 13)

In her superior position it is impossible for Lady Cumnor to see that women who have not been as fortunate as she, may have not their ambitions limited just to always having to work to be able to live a decent life i.e. in her eyes, Clare had thrown away the comfortable and secure life with them and changed it for the insecure institution of a marriage to a 'poor curate'. Paradoxically, however, her protestations are eventually proved to have been right. At the end of the conversation Lady Cumnor prompts Gibson to look Clare up "... somewhere about the grounds, if you like to renew your acquaintance with her" (Gaskell 2010: 14), to which he responds quite dismissively: "Thank you, my lady. I'm afraid I cannot stop today. I have a long round to go..." (Gaskell 2010: 14). However, the day after the festival "Mrs Kirkpatrick ... made leisure enough to receive Mr Gibson, on behalf of the family; and assured him of her faithful remembrance of

⁶ Lady Cumnor - the mistress of Towers, mother of Lord Hollingford and Lady Harriet.

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his great professional attention to her in former days in the most winning manner" (Gaskell 2010: 30).

When Molly learns about her father's plan to re-marry, her entire world falls apart. In her momentary mental state Molly demonstrates a wide scale of emotions. She perceives her father's decision as a betrayal of all the affection they managed to build throughout the years as two people dependent solely on each other and tied together by a strong bond. But her response is laced also with a touch of jealousy: "So I was sent out of the house that all this might be quietly arranged in my absence?" (Gaskell 2010: 111). When Roger Hamley attempts to placate Molly with reasonable arguments in favour of her father and explains that "... this step may be greatly for your father's happiness ... and give him a pleasant companion" (Gaskell 2010: 115), Molly responds: "He had me. You don't know what we were to each other - at least what he was to me" (Gaskell 2010: 115). The reluctance to accept the fact that she has lost an exclusive position in her father's life is not the only reason why Molly fails to accept her father's new marriage and his new wife. Contrary to her father, Molly has first-hand experience with Clare Kirkpatrick. When she tries to talk her father out of the intended wedding, they have a serious argument. The argument is perhaps the first they have ever had but may easily be the last one because after the conflict "[Molly] silences her natural voice" (Uglow 1999: 595). The wedding is an actual turning point in the lives of the Gibsons. What worries Molly most, however, is the fact that the old confidentiality between father and daughter has disappeared, not that much because of their relationship getting broken or because of Molly's rejecting her step-mother, as due to new Mrs Gibson's own interference. Not only does Clare want to secure a comfortable life for herself as "[a] poor woman [who] would be welcomed into her husband's family to look after him and preserve his wage-earning capacity with healthy cooking and clean, mended clothes" (Picard 2005: 320), but she also has an ambition to run the doctor's household in such a way that would meet her ideas of a doctor's social standing and that would help her imitate the standards of living of aristocracy. Clare's "concealed materialism" (Uglow 1999: 581), selfishness and

insensitivity transpire on the very day of the return from their honeymoon. The exchange between herself and Molly reveals Clare's character better than any detailed description. Mr Gibson must immediately resume his duties of the doctor which Clare does not like at all: "I think your dear papa might have put off his visit ... for just this one evening." (Gaskell 2010: 171) to which Molly (perhaps for the first time) responds quite sarcastically (or, as Gaskell put it, bluntly): "Mr Craven Smith couldn't put off his dying" (Gaskell 2010: 171). However, Molly's sarcasm is lost on Clare who only comments: "... if this Mr. Smith is dying... what's the use of your father's going off to him in such a hurry? Does he expect any legacy, or anything of that kind?" (Gaskell 2010: 171). It does not take long for Mr Gibson to realize that he has got trapped. However, he is a principled man and knows that for him there is just one option available - to accept the situation as it is and to come to terms with having married a fortune hunter and social climber - "the differences about trifles arose every day... [but] he never allowed himself to put any regret into shape, even in his own mind; he repeatedly reminded himself of his wife's good qualities..." (Gaskell 2010: 176). To Molly, on the other hand, it is clear that if she does not want to lose her father's love, she has to stay quiet and accept the changes; "Watching her father become bitter in his marriage, she wonders whether silence is right ... Her strongest virtues are those that she is told to suppress: her anger and outspokenness" (Uglow 1999: 595). It is actually the changes that take place throughout the entire novel, sometimes clearly identifiable, sometimes in disguise, which serve as the main driving force of the plot. However, these changes seem to happen exclusively within the family and individual characters but not within the broader society.

4. Social ambition - Clare Kirkpatrick - Gibson

Clare Gibson is tradition in the proper sense of the word, a typical representative of impoverished middle-class women of the period under the constant "combined pressures of class and culture" (Uglow 1999: 585). Her options were quite limited - she could either get a well-off (new) husband who would provide for the family or an

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acceptable job which most often meant to become a governess in wealthy upper-class families. Even though she has made her living by working with children, she has never had any warm relationship with children, not even with her own daughter. For her, then, a new marriage is the only acceptable option. Clare does not want to work, she wants to be provided for, looked after. She wants to be a housewife and play at hostess. In this respect, her ambitions are in complete accord with the social norms of the Victorian society and the ideas of women and their social role:

The middle-class male Victorian's ideal of married life was that he went out into the rough world to earn the family income, and the wife stayed at home making it beautiful, and comfortable for him when he came home from his exhausting day. She should never trouble him with domestic worries or anxiety about the children... (Picard 2005: 321).

Clare Gibson is an excellent manipulator, ready to do anything to achieve her goals, thus making Mr Gibson an ideal object of her machinations. Mr Gibson is unaware of Clare's real motives, he does not share Molly's experience from several years ago. When Mrs Kirkpatrick starts ensnaring the doctor, Molly is not available to warn him. However, it is quite justified to suppose that he would not listen to his daughter's arguments not only because he still sees her as young and inexperienced, which she undeniably is, but for her father, Molly's views as those of a woman, would be irrelevant. Readers know from the beginning that Molly has reasons not to trust her step-mother-to-be, "... the recollection of her last day of misery at the Towers [was] fresh in her mind as if it had been yesterday" (Gaskell 2010: 125). We may suspect Molly of being jealous, of seeing Clare as an intruder in the arrangement of things, "...she had not watched and loved him so long without believing that she understood him better than anyone else: though how he had come to like Mrs Kirkpatrick enough to wish to marry her, was an unsolved problem" (Gaskell 2010: 126) but it transpires very soon that Molly has been right in not

trusting Clare. She takes Clare for what she really is – shallow, superficial, frivolous, vain and selfish. Clare is so self-centred that she cannot bear even her daughter's presence. Her perception of her daughter is twisted. Cynthia's youth and beauty remind Clare of her own age and she sees Cynthia as a rival. For this reason she not only refuses to have Cynthia as bridesmaid at her wedding to Mr Gibson, she refuses to have Cynthia present at the wedding at all because she "... had felt how disagreeable it would be to her to have her young daughter flashing out her beauty by the side of the faded bride, her mother" (Gaskell 2010: 121). On the wedding day when they are all joined by Mr Preston⁷ Molly explains, when asked about new Mrs Gibson's daughter Cynthia that "...papa wished her to be at the marriage very much indeed." (Gaskell 2010: 155) to which Mr. Preston replies: "And her mother prevented it? – I understand" (Gaskell 2010: 155).

Another paradox we come across in the novel is related to the effects the changes introduced by Mrs Gibson have on the doctor's domestic life. It must be acknowledged that as far as running the household is concerned, they are almost entirely positive though not all of them welcome by either the Gibsons or their servants. The chaos is gradually replaced by order and rules. The young girl who has so far been used to making her own decisions whether about the household or herself may profit from the company of a woman who, though being shallow and selfish, is experienced in life and knows how society works. One of the first important changes is the one about Molly. As the bridesmaid "Molly ... was almost startled when she looked into the glass, and saw the improvement in her appearance. 'I wonder if I'm pretty,' thought she. 'I almost think I am – in this dress I mean, of course'." (Gaskell 2010: 151). Despite her personal flaws Clare manages to create a - material - home which the doctor and his daughter have not known for years. Her personal ambition is to get the family actively involved in the town's social life while the choice

⁷ Mr. Preston – one of the minor characters, Lord Cumnor's steward, playing a crucial role in unmasking Cynthia Kirkpatrick's deeds.

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of the 'appropriate' company remains in her hands. In this respect she is authoritative and sticks to her ambitions also when trying to choose 'suitable' suitors for Cynthia and Molly. Her priorities are clear - what Clare wants for both young women is social position and property. The girls' views or inclinations she dismisses as irrelevant. This is the point which shows Clare's character in its entirety as to achieve her goals she is willing to use any means, i.e. also to act dishonestly. Such is the case when she wants to join her daughter Cynthia with the family of the local squire Hamley. As many others, judging just from their class, Clare wrongly thinks the Hamleys are wealthy which is enough for her to try to put together the heir presumptive with her daughter. From the beginning ruthless Clare focuses her efforts on Osborne, the elder of the Hamley brothers: "I do like that Osborne Hamley! What a nice fellow he is! Somehow, I always do like eldest sons. He will have the estate won't he? ... He will be a very good, very pleasant acquaintance for you and Cynthia. The other is but a loutish young fellow ... there is no aristocratic bearing about him" (Gaskell 2010: 180). She is so pragmatic and amoral that she exceeds the limits and abuses medical secret. When she finds out that Osborne is fatally ill, she readily turns her favours back to Roger, the younger son without explanation. Whatever she does, Clare Gibson only pursues her personal interests no matter how ardently she keeps declaring that she is acting on behalf of her two daughters. She is a typical social climber. The only person who can afford to control over-ambitious Clare is Lady Harriet who is entitled to this by her privileged social position. Lady Harriet thus interferes when it becomes evident that as far as her manipulations are concerned, Clare has gone too far. In this respect Mrs Gibson resembles mothers in Jane Austen's novels, more particularly Mrs Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* or Mrs Dashwood (*Sense and Sensibility*). But where Austen's mothers were driven by the sole ambition to secure better future for their daughters, Clare is different. She does declare that she only acts in the interests of her daughters but she fails to make anyone believe her.

Due to her style of writing, more particularly that of *Wives and Daughters*, Gaskell is often compared to Jane Austen. According to

Carrington the novel “has a stylish prose and structure which approaches the sophistication of Jane Austen...” (Carrington 2005: 197). The lives and literary careers of these two writers are separated by half a century. From the point of view of historical and social developments, these five decades were marked by dynamic and significant changes in class and social stratification, and related shifts in values. On the other hand, there were certain aspects of life which had remained unchanged. The position of women, the way they were perceived, and their perspectives in life remained practically unaltered. From this point of view there do exist certain parallels between Gaskell’s and Austen’s literary works. Contrary to Austen, however, Gaskell’s life was not limited to just one class and community in which she found inspiration. Her different way of life and experience, as well as different level of education provided Gaskell with a wider scope of topics and she fully used this opportunity. Gaskell’s novels and stories offer a detailed reflection of life in different layers of the society thus serving as a sort of a chronicle recording life in the current society and reflecting the social changes and their impact on lives of people across the social spectrum.

5. Class and Racial Prejudice – Squire Hamley

In the early stages of the story, Molly is sent away from home to stay with the Hamleys – the old family of squires to keep company to Mrs Hamley. Though unequal both in terms of social position and age, the two women strike a firm friendship. The old woman takes Molly as a daughter who she has lost and Molly finds a substitute mother. However, life at Hamley Hall is far from idyllic. Although squire Hamley is an attentive and polite host, his hospitality has its limits. He is full of prejudice – social, class, racial and religious. He is trying to give his sons what he himself has been denied in his life. More importantly, he puts all his hopes of better future in Osborne, the elder son and heir as he expects him to be able to save the declining family property. In accordance with traditional view of social norms and rules the father expects his son to marry a woman of adequate lineage and wealth. “[M]oney ...weaves into all ... strands,

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the psychological drama, the analysis of class, of the role of women ... truths and lies. Money has always been a force in Gaskell's novels" (Uglow 1999: 586).

In other words, much as he may like her, Squire Hamley is not happy about the idea of Molly's meeting either of his sons: "... to be in the house with Osborne! Roger, too, will be at home. ... it's a very dangerous thing to shut two young men ... up in a country-house like this with a girl of seventeen ... I told you particularly I didn't want Osborne, or either of them ... to be falling in love with her" (Gaskell 2010: 79). It is through Molly that family secrets begin to unravel before readers; "Molly is our detective in a novel of secrets..." (Uglow 1999: 595). It transpires that Osborne will never be able to meet his father's expectations because he is already married and has fathered a son. Osborne, in whom his father puts all his hopes, has broken all the rules and has married well below his own class: "... his wife was a good woman and he loved her dearly; but she was a French Roman Catholic, and ... she had been a servant once" (Gaskell 2010: 547), i.e. Osborne has committed three 'sins' against his father's wishes. It is then natural for him to keep his private life secret - he is afraid of his father's anger. Moreover, he is fatally ill. Osborne's behaviour is in contradiction with everything what has been expected from him and young men of his class in general - everything that was foreign, every foreigner (read French), was received with diffidence, scepticism and scorn. Squire Hamley is the embodiment of prejudice: "...of course, they must not visit at houses to whose sons the Squire could not or would not return alike hospitality. ... his prejudices were immovable. As regarded his position as head of the oldest family in three counties, his pride was invincible" (Gaskell 2010: 247). Even his friendship with the doctor and his daughter has its limits. When he becomes suspicious of growing attachment between his younger son and Molly, the squire interferes and prevents what he sees as an unacceptable match for a man of his son's social standing thus causing a temporary rift in the friendship with the doctor: "Your Molly is one in a thousand, to my mind. But then, you see, she comes of no family at all - and I don't suppose she'll have a chance of much money"

(Gaskell 2010: 386). His treating of people who he sees as his inferiors and of his sons who he expects to obey him and subject to his authority is typical of a man who is proud of his class affiliation, unwilling to accept that the world and the society, though slowly, are changing as is his situation. When Osborne ... “claim[s] the right of choosing [a] wife ... [is] subject to no man’s interference” (Gaskell 2010: 424), his father replies with determination:

...ne’er a penny will you get from me, my lad, unless you marry to please me a little, as well as yourself a great deal ... I’m not particular as to beauty, or as to cleverness, and piano playing and that sort of thing. ... I shouldn’t much mind her being a bit older than you, but she must be well-born, and the more money she brings the better for the old place. (Gaskell 2010: 424-5)

Squire Hamley’s pride suffers a real blow after he learns the truth about Osborne who later dies without reconciling with his father. Although his bereavement is deep and sincere, the squire is unable to overcome his pride and prejudice. The blow even intensifies when he learns his daughter’s-in-law true identity. His response is again authoritative and non-compromising. In his limited world perspective, Hamley does not respect other people. He decides (rules) that he would keep his grandson and bring him up on his own: “... we’ll have him here, and get a nurse for him; and make his mother comfortable for life in her own country” (Gaskell 2010: 556). His motives are far from the feeling of family solidarity. He views the child only as his heir – the means of keeping the dynasty alive. In his narrow-mindedness, Hamley resolutely refuses any possibility of a compromise in the matters of social position, class or race. Squire Hamley is a victim of his self-delusion and not even his son’s death and subsequent revelations make him see the inevitable.

6. Molly and Cynthia Kirkpatrick

Another paradox in Molly’s life is her relationship with her new step-sister. They become friends from the moment they first meet

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although they are incompatible – so different are they as persons. Molly is thoughtful, reflective and self-sacrificing. Cynthia, on the other hand, is very much like her mother – frivolous, vain, superficial, selfish but – contrary to her – she is also nice, friendly and amiable. Both girls have had just one parent but while Molly has always had a close relationship with her father, Cynthia would always have to depend on the favours of strangers. She and her mother have never had a close relationship because for Clare motherhood has been a burden and as Cynthia claims “...she never seemed to care to have me with her” (Gaskell 2010: 460). Emotionally deprived Cynthia openly admits that she is not capable of loving anyone and expresses a wish she “... could love people as you do Molly” (Gaskell 2010: 216) because no one has ever wasted any emotions on her. But she does like Molly within her limits. She would never hurt Molly deliberately while with her selfish behaviour she keeps hurting her repeatedly and gets her in serious troubles. The point is that Molly and Cynthia are equally inexperienced in life, they are both young and confused but contrary to her step-sister, Cynthia lacks Molly’s sober view of the world, her sense of self-sacrifice, modesty, thoughtfulness and moral principles. Moreover, Cynthia has past secrets which catch up with her. Due to the lack of parental authority in her childhood she is unable to face up to the consequences of her actions: “*Wives and Daughters* suggests that moral principles are learnt at home (as Molly imbibes them from her father, and Cynthia does not from her mother)...” (Uglow 1999: 589). Her emotional instability also affects her relationships with men. She is an incorrigible coquette, flattered by the attentions of men, aware that every man falls for her beauty and charms. Molly, on the other hand, is Cynthia’s opposite – though equally beautiful and sociable, she lacks the capacity which Cynthia inherited from her mother – to attract all the attention in all circumstances. It becomes a kind of rule that every man who was originally interested in Molly, sooner or later falls for Cynthia; “[Molly] is a perpetual third, a constant messenger” (Uglow 1999: 595). However, to be objective it is necessary to state that in her superficiality and selfishness Cynthia is unable to see how much she is hurting Molly when she fancies herself in love with Roger

Hamley. Molly does not suffer only because of her unrequited love. She suffers for Roger himself because no matter how much she loves Cynthia, she does not trust the sincerity and intensity of her feelings and she knows that one day Cynthia will hurt Roger. Roger acts as a typical young man who succumbs to Cynthia's charms and is blind to her inner emptiness. Molly knows that on Cynthia's part a solid and lasting relationship is impossible. It is important to emphasize now that it is not jealousy on Molly's part. Despite her sisterly love she is just being rational and knows that Cynthia cannot love anyone permanently and that she is not worth Roger's affection. Molly never shows her emotions, no one has any idea of what is going on in her soul. The love triangle clearly demonstrates the conflict between the traditional world represented by Mr Gibson, Clare and Cynthia on the one hand, and the new perspective represented by Molly, on the other. Even though Mr Gibson will never stop seeing women in their traditionally defined role, Molly, despite being his daughter, is a counterpoint to this traditional perception. It is to her that Uglow's words apply when she writes: "Women's minds are too often starved, while ingrained assumptions can make the most loving parent an oppressor" (Uglow 1999: 589).

Conclusions

Literature of the Victorian period has largely been defined as realistic. Most of the authors of the period retain their importance even today and it is not difficult to see why. They were preoccupied with topics which are timeless – society, class, love, friendship, money, marriage, relationships i.e. the same topics which we encounter in society and literature all around the world even today. Human relations will largely stay the same regardless of which part of the world we are in or concentrate on. Though unfinished, the novel is extensive, populated with a lot of different characters most of whom endure a variety of trials. The author tried to emphasize "that underlying moral code of human purposiveness that the Victorians were, variously, losing, scared of losing, trying to retain, seeking to modify or to escape, wondering how to place" (Davis 2008: 33). Thus,

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one faces the dilemma of what to concentrate on, which characters, their deeds and which events provide readers with the best and most valuable information if one wants to understand what it was like to be a Victorian. Undeniably it is Molly Gibson who is the linking point. She is central to the novel's plot, as well as to the individual characters and their lives and fates. This is why we concentrated on those who were closest to her (Mr. Gibson, Roger Hamley) or those whose impact on her personality and formative process was the most profound (Cynthia, Clare Kirkpatrick-Gibson, the Hamleys). Due to the limited space it was inevitable to leave out some other characters who, though minor as for their appearance in the story, did have their share in shaping Molly's character. Molly herself, however, best conforms to Davis' claim that "... what moves Mrs. Gaskell is not how her characters could imaginably get out of the temporary givenness of their situation but rather how they recommit themselves to staying within it and making something of it" (Davis 2008: 11). These words illustrate what novel writing in the Victorian period was about and what the individual authors were after. "That is what is powerful about Victorian literature: the constant shift between vulnerable person and necessary function, in the world that must find its formal changes achieved even through informal and contingent means" (Davis 2008: 12).

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