

A RECONSIDERATION OF ELIZABETH
GASKELL'S RUTH AS ROMANCE

by

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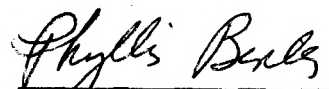
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Elizabeth Gaskell (1810-1865) was a remarkably versatile writer. In her seventeen-year writing career she produced six novels, the authorized biography of Charlotte Brontë, and dozens of short stories, which ranged from travelogues to gothic tales. Her novels fall into two major categories: social problem novels and domestic novels. The former includes Mary Barton (1848), Ruth (1853), and North and South (1855), while Cranford (1851-52) and Wives and Daughters (1865) represent the latter. Her fifth novel, Sylvia's Lovers (1863) is best characterized as historical fiction. Although interest in the social problem novels has revived, Cranford remains the most enduringly popular of Gaskell's novels. It was originally designed as a series of sketches for Dickens' Household Words, but the episodes were then tied together and published as a novel in 1853. Readers continue to be charmed by the gentle irony and loving nostalgia that characterize this tale of a provincial spinster society of an earlier time. Although Cranford may be charming, as many critics have noted, it has ultimately served to distort our view of Gaskell's overall achievement. Readers have tended to generalize, assuming that its strengths--its charming and perceptive view of human character--and weaknesses, viewed as a novel--its loose, episodic narrative structure--are characteristic of all Gaskell's novels. As Coral Lansbury notes in Elizabeth Gaskell, The Novel of Social Crisis, "Cranford remains the cracked touchstone that is used to define the subtle and various narrative strategies of the novels and short stories."¹

Gaskell first made her reputation as "the author of Mary Barton," a novel that details the sufferings of the Manchester working classes, and readers looked for more social novels from her, but many were unprepared for Ruth, a work that takes a fallen woman as its central protagonist. Their expectations were better satisfied by North and South, a novel that explores the conflict between factory owners and workers as seen through the eyes of its heroine from the rural South of England. Recently there has been a resurgent interest in these social novels, beginning in 1968 with the publication of Hazel Martin's Petticoat Rebels: A Study of the Novels of Social Protest of George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Charlotte Bronte. Other works published in the 1970s have explored the social themes in the works of Gaskell and her contemporaries, and Lansbury's work, Elizabeth Gaskell, The Novel of Social Crisis, is devoted exclusively to Gaskell. Generally these works give greater attention to the first and third of Gaskell's three social problem novels. Louis Cazamian, for example, writing in The Social Novel in England, 1830-1850, says that the social problems that Gaskell "deftly and finely dealt with" in Mary Barton and North and South "give them more substantial interest than all her other novels."² Apparently for such critics the particular "social problem" dealt with in Ruth, societal rejection of a woman who errs sexually, does not give it as much historical interest as the two Manchester stories.

Thus Ruth is sometimes relegated to its position as the intermediate of the three social problem novels rather than being valued for its own merits. Critics complain that it is flawed in the character-

ization of its heroine and in its narrative structure and also that its didacticism is excessive. While they concede that Gaskell's message about the fallen woman was courageous for its time, that message now sounds dated, as is the generally cited sentimentality, religiosity, and sexual prudishness of the novel. More specifically they complain that Ruth, who is an ignorant child when she is seduced by the dandy Bellingham, suddenly becomes a repentant and thoroughly virtuous woman when she becomes a mother. They object to what one critic calls the "tracts of the uneventful," particularly the long descriptions of the household of Thurston and Faith Benson where Ruth is given a home.³ And they wince at the religiosity particularly at the conclusion of the tale when Ruth serves heroically through a typhus epidemic and dies from tending her former lover.

In this study I propose first to discuss more fully than previous critics have the role of Ruth as a bridge between the other two social novels. I will demonstrate Gaskell's increasing awareness that she could use a female character as the focus for her social themes and I will examine her increasingly independent commentary on Victorian womanhood. Next I will suggest that much negative criticism of the novel arises from the application of inappropriately "realist" criteria to a work which presents its heroine and develops its themes more like a romance than a realist novel. More specifically, by showing Ruth to be a critique of some prevailing Victorian ideals for women and by explicating it as a romance rather than a realist novel, I will argue that the novel has greater thematic richness and structural unity than

has been heretofore recognized. In particular I will examine Gaskell's use of illness, marriage, and guilt as themes that highlight and comment on the central question of Ruth's fall and society's reaction to it. Then I will demonstrate the sophistication of form in this novel through a discussion of Gaskell's use of symbol and natural imagery as structural devices.

Ruth is not simply the intermediate one of the three social novels; rather it is an important bridge that shows the author's developing skill as a novelist and her increasing use of her female protagonists to explore her social themes. In addition Ruth develops ideas planted in Mary Barton and prefigures themes of North and South. The fallen woman was a figure to which Gaskell returned repeatedly in her novels and short stories. In the first novel this figure is Mary Barton's aunt Esther; though a peripheral character, she figures in the beginning and conclusion of the story and shows the reader the danger that Mary Barton herself runs in her flirtation with the wealthy mill owner's son, Harry Carson. Esther's fault is greater than that of Ruth in the later novel, in that she voluntarily leaves home and relatives to go away with her lover, and is seduced in part by her dreams of becoming well-to-do. She is the unregenerate fallen woman, having turned to prostitution and alcoholism. Ruth's story is the "what if" of Mary Barton--what if Mary, like Ruth, had lacked the support of family and friends and had succumbed to her own would-be seducer? In Ruth, Gaskell put the fallen woman at the center of the novel and found that she could use a woman as the focus for the exploration of

her social theme. In her first novel she had originally shaped her critique of the Manchester factory system around John Barton, Mary's father, but since Barton commits a murder, Gaskell was persuaded by her publishers that it would be unwise to name the novel for him. In Ruth Gaskell examines society through its reaction to her central female character, but in North and South she gives her heroine a more active role and examines society through the reactions of her heroine to it. Moreover, whereas Ruth is a victim of forces beyond her control, Margaret Hale, the heroine of North and South, serves as a conscious agent of reconciliation; she draws the opposing forces of mill owners and workers together and gives them a better understanding of each other. Here, indeed, Gaskell speaks through a female character who shares so many similarities with the author as to be partially autobiographical.

In each novel Gaskell becomes more creative with her female protagonists, moving steadily away from a conventional portrayal of women. Mary Barton is typically sweet and gentle with the conventional ability to accomplish heroic feats under stress--she races after a departing ship to retrieve the witness who will save her beloved. Ruth shares those qualities but has the sensational flaw of being "wanton" in the eyes of the community. In addition she undergoes greater hardships and surmounts greater difficulties than does Mary, and her character provides a subtle critique of the conventional ideals of Victorian womanhood. With Margaret Hale Gaskell created a heroine whose character poses an explicit challenge to this ideal.

Margaret is deficient in the requisite feminine skills of playing the piano, singing, and painting, and she gives the impression of being outspoken and arrogant. In this novel there are two cardboard characters, Thornton's sister and Margaret's cousin, and they exist to show us the vapid kind of female that Margaret is not. Jemima Bradshaw, the industrialist's daughter in Ruth, is the precursor of Margaret Hale, for it is with her that Gaskell began to demonstrate that women who do not fit the mold of submissive blandness are much more interesting than those who do.

Ruth is indeed a bridge, but it is also a novel with a purpose, a purpose that lies at the heart of the story. The very sensational nature of her purpose in mid-nineteenth century England, to show the fallen woman in a sympathetic light, brought Gaskell greater public notice than any of her other works. It was, as Winifred Gérin notes in Elizabeth Gaskell: A Biography, "certainly the book in which she attempted most, risked most, and suffered most."⁴ It was a courageous tale for a female author in Victorian England to tell. Other novels, Dickens' Oliver Twist (1838) and Gaskell's own Mary Barton, had included prostitutes as secondary characters, but these representations did not arouse protests from readers, since the authors made no attempt to restore these characters to positions of social respectability. Similarly, one of Gaskell's first short stories, "Lizzie Leigh," which appeared in the first issue of Household Words in 1849, depicts a young woman who goes astray. Lizzie's child, however, dies, and Lizzie does not try to rejoin society but lives

instead in a secluded cottage where she ministers to the unfortunate. Ruth was the first Victorian novel to make a woman's fall and redemption its main theme.⁵ The public uproar that greeted Ruth was enough to impair the health of its author. The month after its publication Gaskell wrote to a friend:

I have been so ill; I do believe it has been a Ruth fever . . . I could not get over the hard things people said of Ruth. . . . I think I must be an improper woman without knowing it, I do so manage to shock people. 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.⁶

Gaskell was especially shocked that "women infinitely more than men" disapproved of the book, but gradually favorable reviews and letters began to appear.⁷ Her sensitivity to criticism is indicative of her awareness of her audience as she was writing. As she wrote to an admirer:

Of course I knew of the great difference of opinion there would be about the book before it was published. I don't mean as to its merely lit-

erary merits, but as to whether my subject was a fit one for fiction; and those who thought it was not were very likely to be disgusted at the plainness with which in one or two places I have spoken out a small part of what was in my mind . . . But from the very warmth with which people have discussed the tale I take heart of grace; it has made them talk and think a little on a subject which is so painful that it requires all one's bravery not to hide one's head like an ostrich and try by doing so to forget that the evil exists.⁸

Thus her didacticism is self-proclaimed and its relative importance is revealed by her reference to the book's "merely literary merits."

This didacticism has the greatest effect on Gaskell's depiction of Ruth, for her desire to elicit sympathy for the fallen woman caused her to abandon novelistic realism in this portrayal. In her desire to present the best possible case for the fallen woman, she stressed her heroine's youthful innocence at the time of her seduction and later made her excessively penitent and in every other way a paragon of Victorian womanhood. Critics have repeatedly condemned this unlikely congruence of saint and sinner in the same character. For example, Francoise Basch in Relative Creatures, Victorian Woman in Society and the Novel 1837-67 asserts that this combination "betrays Mrs. Gaskell's deep unease about sexuality, seduction, prostitution, and adultery."⁹

It can be argued, however, that whatever Gaskell's own prudishness may have been, she was keeping her didactic purpose clearly in mind. Her refusal to portray the London period, the interval during which Ruth is seduced and she begins living with Bellingham, reflects her concern about scandalizing her audience and consequently turning their sympathy away from Ruth. It would have been easy to avoid the topic altogether and begin her story after the birth of the child as she did in "Lizzie Leigh" and as Hawthorne did in The Scarlet Letter, but part of her purpose was to convince her audience that an innocent child could be the victim of a seduction, and thus she needed to portray the kind of person Ruth was before the seduction. The sentimental tone of the novel and the depiction of the penitent Ruth as being excessively good are similarly parts of Gaskell's didactic aim.

Didacticism is usually thought to be at odds with novelistic purposes, but that is perhaps less true of a romance, where the portrayal of a character may be representational and symbolic. Nor is the sudden shift from sinner to saint a failing by the standards of romance. As Richard Chase comments about romance in his study, The American Novel and Its Tradition,

in romances characters appear really to be given quantities rather than emerging and changing organisms responding to their circumstances as these themselves develop one out of another. For if characters change in a romance . . . we are not shown a "development"; we are left rather

with an element of mystery . . . or a simplified and conventionalized alteration of character.¹⁰

In Ruth we have this latter kind of change.

The first of Ruth's personas is drawn from the romanticism of the early nineteenth century and from Wordsworth in particular. The seduction of Gaskell's Ruth is similar to the wooing of Wordsworth's Ruth in a poem of the same name. His Ruth loses her mother and turns more and more to nature for comfort "as if she from her birth had been / An infant of the woods" (ll. 11-12). This lonely innocent is wooed not by a dandy but by a youth from America who wins her with tales of the idyllic life they will lead in the wilds. After they are properly wed (no seductions for Wordsworth), he abandons her to go live as freely as before. Gaskell's Ruth is similarly an innocent child of nature, and Bellingham woos her in part by providing an escape from the city back to her beloved rural world. Interestingly, it is precisely her quality of being a nature child that attracts him. He finds something "bewitching in the union of the grace and loveliness of womanhood with the naivete, simplicity, and innocence of an intelligent child . . . it would be an exquisite delight to attract and tame her wildness, just as he had often allured and tamed the timid fawns in his mother's park."¹¹ Ruth's "taming" begins when he takes her on an extended walk on returning from church, and she delights in nature, almost forgetting about him. She feels a slight uneasiness about the correctness of taking such a walk, but the pleasure she takes in the new spring world convinces her that it must be "innocent

and good" (40). Thus in her premoral state nature is part of her criterion for right and wrong behavior. On the fateful Sunday walk to Ruth's childhood home, Gaskell dwells on her delight in nature. She uses the device of dwelling on the childlike Ruth's sensuous delight in the world around her rather than alluding to any overtly sexual response. It is characteristic of Ruth's latent, undeveloped sexuality that her sensuousness is generalized rather than focused on a lover. Her response to nature, however, is very powerful. Anyone who has lived through a long northern European winter knows the near ecstasy that one feels in the first really warm, long days of early summer, and it is on such an extraordinary day that Ruth goes on her outing. The warm summer evening is intoxicating: "The evening was still and full of mellow light, and the new-born summer was so delicious that, in common with all young creatures, she shared its influence and was glad" (51). There is a lulling, narcotic effect in the cattle at the pond: "Their very motions were so lazy and slow, that they served to fill up the mind with the sensation of dreamy rest" (52). Ruth does enjoy Bellingham's company and his solicitude, but her greatest pleasure comes from her sensitivity to nature, and Bellingham serves as the agent that brings her back into contact with her pastoral world. Such is Gaskell's case for Ruth's innocence. She makes her heroine a premoral, unknowing child of nature, who, by the romantic definition, was an innocent lover.

A slightly different interpretation is offered by Brian Crick in his article, "Mrs. Gaskell's Ruth: A Reconsideration." Agreeing

with others that Gaskell is unable to deal with the seduction in a realistic manner, he hypothesizes that the book begins in a fairy tale-romance vein, that Ruth is Cinderella.¹² She suffers under the cruel regime of the "stepmother," Mrs. Mason, the owner of the sewing shop where Ruth is apprenticed; when she is among the seamstresses permitted to observe the shire ball, she is entranced by the beauty of the scene; and later she is carried away with admiration for Bellingham, who resembles a "prince charming" when he rides up and saves a drowning child. After the episode in Wales, however, Crick finds that Gaskell reverts from romance to realistic novel. I believe, on the contrary, that the romance vein continues throughout the novel. Whether we begin with romantic nature child or with fairy tale heroine, we are clearly in the realm of romance. Then Ruth undergoes a sudden "conventionalized alteration of character," such as Chase describes, and she becomes another symbolic figure, this time the paragon of Victorian womanhood.

In accordance with the ideal Ruth is pious, selfless, and submissive. These qualities are noted and admired in particular by Mr. Farquhar, business associate of the industrialist, Mr. Bradshaw, and suitor to his impulsive daughter Jemima. Ruth's

shy reserve, and her quiet daily walk within the lines of duty, were much in accordance with Mr. Farquhar's notion of what a wife should be . . . he was drawn toward sweet, lovely, composed and dignified Ruth--one who always thought before

she spoke . . . who never was tempted by sudden impulse, but walked the world calm and self-governed" (239).

In addition to her gentle demeanor Ruth demonstrates her selflessness through her unfailing concern for others. This selflessness was normally demonstrated through a woman's nurturing role as mother and homemaker. She was responsible for creating a welcoming haven for her husband to return to each day and also for cultivating the proper environment in which to raise their children. Since Ruth is denied the role of housewife, she fits the model through her role as nurse. Her desire to nurse others emphasizes her selflessness, and Gaskell makes reference to it throughout the novel, in part bridging the gap created by Ruth's character shift. Nursing is not just a lowly job that Ruth turns to when all else is closed to her, but an activity for which she has been preparing throughout the story. Even in Mrs. Mason's house Ruth longs to nurse her sick friend Jenny, thinking to herself that "hands, unskillful in fine and delicate work, would be well enough qualified to tend the sick" (28). In Wales, living with Bellingham, she wants above all to nurse him when he becomes ill. After he abandons her, her instinct to care for others prevents her from committing suicide. She is drawn away from her resolve to drown herself by the cry of pain from the crippled minister Thurstan Benson, who has followed her in the hope of averting a suicide. Thus when Ruth does run to the pool, she goes to get water to revive the fainting minister rather than to end her life. Later when Elizabeth Bradshaw,

one of the Bradshaw children whom Ruth supervises in her job as governess, falls ill, Ruth begs to be allowed to share in the nursing. Ruth's character as nurturer shows even in this minor event which exists only to prepare the way for Ruth to meet her former lover in the wild scenery of the coast. When she does meet Bellingham, now a candidate for Parliament using the name of Donne, he refers to her nursing him in Wales in an attempt to regain her sympathy, and it is one of his more successful ploys. Benson uses a similar sort of persuasion when Ruth proposes to leave Ecclestone to spare her son the shame of his connection with her: "And if you go away, he may be unhappy or ill; and you who . . . have . . . the power to comfort him, the tender patience to nurse him, have left him to the care of strangers" (353). And finally there come the culminating events--her nursing of the poor and the typhus victims, including Donne.

In emphasizing Ruth's selfless character Gaskell elicits sympathy for her heroine and makes her appear to be a paragon. But the paragon has one fatal flaw that negates all her virtues in the eyes of the community; for in losing her virginity outside of marriage Ruth has committed the greatest sin for a woman in the Victorian era. Whereas the Romantics had tended to blame society and/or the male for premarital sexual activity, by mid century the blame was placed squarely on the woman.¹³ The Victorians placed an obsessively high value on a woman's chastity, and they gave her all the responsibility for preserving it until her wedding night. Thus the characterization of Ruth as a paragon with a hidden, unforgiveable flaw adds complexity to Gaskell's

creation of a symbolic romance heroine, allowing her to comment subtly on the ideal. Her characterization of Ruth points up the superficiality of the ideal, the simple insistence on physical chastity. It also points up the rigidity of people's thinking, since Ruth's loss of her virginity negates for them all of her admirable qualities. The people of Ecclestone, and, presumably, many of Gaskell's readers, insist on perceiving Ruth simplistically as all good or all bad. They cannot believe that a woman who lapses sexually can possibly be virtuous. Furthermore, Gaskell points up the irony of the ideal of complete selflessness. Ruth's desire to nurse Bellingham during the episode in Wales is finally satisfied at the conclusion of the story when she gratuitously sacrifices her life for him. This irony and the commentary that Gaskell makes on the ideal of Victorian womanhood give Ruth increased interest as a character and take her beyond the level of traditional romance heroines.

In one way Gaskell modifies the ideal, for Ruth is a working woman, having been responsible for earning her own living from the age of fifteen. She works first as a seamstress, then as a governess for the Bradshaws, and finally as a nurse. The latter two occupations keep her away from her child for days at a time. Gaskell assures us that Ruth misses her child during these absences, but she never apologizes for Ruth's leaving her child in order to earn money. Motherhood awakens sterling qualities in Ruth, but it is through working in the community that she redeems her reputation, which is a necessary part of insuring her son Leonard's future. Thus Gaskell provides her own variation on the theme of Victorian paragon, for while she

shared the current belief in the centrality of motherhood and the home in a woman's life, she also believed in the need for social activism in the community beyond the home.

We find elements of romance not only in Gaskell's symbolic characterization of Ruth but also in her structuring of Ruth's story, which follows the archetypal pattern of descent and ascent. This pattern is described by Northrup Frye in his study of the structure of romance, The Secular Scripture. The pattern often begins, he says, with "a sharp descent in social status, from riches to poverty, from privilege to a struggle to survive."¹⁴ Ruth's story is the story of Christianity--the fall from grace and the struggle for redemption. This structural pattern is prefigured in the imagery used early in the story. At the hilltop inn just before Mrs. Mason's dismissal of Ruth begins the fateful chain of events, Ruth stands on the road at the summit, looking "at the view before her. The hill fell suddenly down into the plain, extending for a dozen miles or more." In the distance at the end of the plain "the view was bounded by some rising ground in deep purple shadow against the sunset sky" (52). Ruth's story follows the typography indicated in this early scene. Her fall will be sudden and precipitous; then there will be a long struggle for redemption ending with social and divine acceptance at the close of her life.

Frye describes the pattern of ascent as consisting of "escape, remembrance, or discovery of one's real identity, growing freedom, and the breaking of enchantment."¹⁵ A common mode of escape is a

change in identity, and this is what Ruth uses to escape the consequences of her seduction. There is irony in the opposing patterns created by her personal progress and her position in the opinions of the townspeople. She enjoys the acceptance of the community as Mrs. Denbigh, but the shedding of the false name is a part of her personal ascent, however much she may suffer for it, for she is a more complete person when her true identity is known. Another part of ascent is the release from enchantment, something that Ruth achieves only through Donne's return. Her confrontation with her former lover marks the dramatic climax of the story, for here we have struggle and victory, the vanquishing of her betrayer, her devil. Frye concludes his description of ascent: "In traditional romance, including Dante, the upward journey is the journey of a creature returning to its creator."¹⁶ Thus Ruth's death, which has often been seen as a gratuitous martyrdom, can also be seen as the completion of an archetypal pattern, the ultimate ascent of our folk heroine.

The overt structure of Ruth is determined in part by its tripartite publication format, but this structure in turn reinforces the pattern of descent and ascent. The first section concludes with Ruth's departure from Wales, marking the completion of her descent. The second part ends with her rejection of Donne, which is an indication of her release from the spell binding her to the past and to her error. This scene is followed closely by Bradshaw's confronting Ruth with her true identity, and now, having shed her false identity, she is ready to complete her ascent. The denouement follows swiftly

with Jemima's reconciliation with Farquhar, Mr. Bradshaw's humbling through his son's transgression, and Ruth's final heroic efforts in the typhus epidemic. Far from being a rambling narrative, Ruth is a clearly structured tale that keeps the main story in the foreground and uses secondary plots to further our understanding of the central issue.

Another aspect of romance is described by Daniel Hoffman in his essay on "Fable as Reality": "In narrative method the romance tends to employ metaphor as a structural device."¹⁷ Such is certainly the case with Ruth, for theme and imagery contribute much to the coherence of the plot, giving it greater unity than critics have heretofore conceded. Gerald Sanders writes in his chapter on Ruth in Elizabeth Gaskell, "Mrs. Gaskell's technique is often weak. All her earlier novels bear evidence of faulty construction, and in Ruth she is at her worst"; he complains that main events lack motivation and depend on coincidence, that scenes shift too often, and that outside matters impair the unity of the story.¹⁸

W.A. Craik, in his book, Elizabeth Gaskell and the Provincial Novel, comments that there is not enough material there for a full length novel and that omitting the moral reflections and such digressions as the Bensons' servant Sally's tale of her marriage proposal would make the work more powerful.¹⁹ Arthur Pollard, author of Mrs. Gaskell, Novelist and Biographer, objects to the "tracts of the uneventful" that connect the few dramatic scenes. In contrast to Craik, he would not shorten the novel but would prefer to see other avenues explored,

in particular the triangular relationship of Ruth, Jemima, and Farquhar.²⁰ Writing in The Themes of Elizabeth Gaskell, Enid Duthie notes that the plot of Ruth is simple and its linear quality leads to a "certain monotony."²¹ Looking beyond the apparent simplicity of Gaskell's tale reveals that she drew her themes from the great well of folk culture and that, in the romance tradition, she bound her episodes together through the use of theme and imagery.

In Ruth Gaskell uses illness both as symbol and unifying theme, and as a device to mark the abrupt shifts in people's lives and perceptions, as is typical in romance. Ruth's illness in Wales after being cast off by Bellingham marks a turning point for her from being an orphan to finding surrogate parents in Thurstan and Faith Benson, from living in ignorance to living in the safety of moral guidance. It also marks the end of her fall, purging her of past associations and opening the way to her long ascent to social acceptance. Leonard's illness, which follows close on his mother's traumatic reunion with Donne, is symbolic of the brush with evil that Donne's return to their lives represents. On another level this illness marks Leonard's passage from childhood to youth. Also, from the inception of the typhus epidemic, Gaskell connects it with vice. Like the sexual vice which taints Ruth, typhus "is never utterly banished from the sad haunts of vice and misery," but then it spreads "not merely among the loose-living and vicious, but among the decently poor--nay, even among the well-to-do and respectable" (420). It comes last of all to Donne (the well-to-do) and Ruth (the respectable). Readers can also

draw a connection between the disease and the societal vices of prejudice, refusal to forgive, and inability to perceive one's own failings. As Gaskell shows through her portrayal of the public reaction to the discovery of Ruth's fall, no one is immune to such vices, and it is the innocent such as Ruth and her son who are hurt by them. The typhus epidemic itself, however, marks a passage for the community of Ecclestone into greater understanding and appreciation of Ruth. In contrast to the other cases of illness in the story, Donne's illness does not lead to any enlightenment although his illness is an answer to Thurstan Benson's questions earlier in the story as he nurses the abandoned Ruth: "Where was her lover? Could he be easy and happy? Could he grow into perfect health, with these great sins pressing on his conscience . . . or had he a conscience" (116)? No, answers Gaskell, he cannot grow in perfect health; he cannot grow at all. Donne's vices, this time medical rather than moral, ruin Ruth, and he comes through unscathed. Such is the double standard. Finally Ruth's illness marks a reverse passage--a reversion to childhood, giving us a last reminder of her innocence--and then of course it is her passage to death, which Gaskell is certain is a passage into another life.

While illness is both a symbol and a unifying theme, marriage--or the absence of it--is a central issue in the novel, and Gaskell explores this theme through a number of secondary characters. At times she comments ironically upon the ideal of marriage, pointing out the shallow motives from which some marriages derive, and showing

how unsatisfactory some supposedly ideal marriages are. All of these situations reflect on Ruth, whose chief fault--in the eyes of Gaskell's contemporaries--lies in her not being married to Bellingham. In fact some readers commented that it was wrong of Ruth to reject his offer to make Leonard legitimate. In Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice we have an example of the view that a marriage certificate could right all wrongs. In this earlier novel Elizabeth Bennett's younger sister Lydia runs off to London with a young man. She is "ruined" only until, after several weeks of cohabitation, the man is given enough financial inducement to marry her; from that point Lydia is guaranteed the life-long social security of being Mrs. Wickham. When Ruth, the child, is seduced by Bellingham, she would certainly have married him. Her later rejection of him reflects her moral growth and her increasing awareness that he is not acceptable as a husband, or, much less, as a father to Leonard. It is a clear statement of the change from child to woman and a statement as well that Ruth the woman, although she is being held responsible for her actions as a child, would no longer make the same mistake. It is also an indication of the superficiality of social morality, which is in conflict with Ruth's higher sense of morality.

The tale of Sally's proposal, far from being a digression, as described by some critics, places the servant's motive for marriage on a trivial level, which by contrast ennobles Ruth's motives and concerns in rejecting Donne's proposal. In his proposal Jerry Dixon uses his possessions and annual income as incentives and then adds a final

enticement, a pig that will be slaughtered. Sally is tempted by the prospect of being able to cure ham as she wishes, an indirect reference to the greater freedom that she might enjoy as a wife; but her dislike of the man and her loyalty to the Bensons confirm her desire to remain single. Her chief emotion in the exchange is vanity, the wish to be found desirable enough to merit a proposal. Sally's tale provides comic relief and its banality serves to heighten the drama of Ruth's rejection of Donne.

Faith Benson is another character who rejects marriage. She sacrifices what appears to be a desirable marriage in order to remain with her crippled brother, who, it is assumed, will never marry. She performs roles of homemaker and hostess for Benson, and then when Ruth and Leonard enter the household, Faith's maternal instinct is finally satisfied. The dwarfish minister, the two spinsters, the fallen woman, and her bastard child form a strangely idealized family. In this unconventional menage one finds mutual support and understanding and enlightened guidance for Ruth and her child. It is a surprisingly radical statement for Gaskell, the dutiful wife and mother, to make: that Ruth and her child are better off in this home than they would be under the legal and social protection of Bellingham as husband and father. It is also a feminist statement. Faith and Sally dominate the household, and frequent references are made to Thurstan Benson's feminine nature. Gaskell is suggesting that these "feminine" protectors are preferable to the legally sanctioned masculine provider.

Such virtues of support and mutual understanding are not so apparent

in the conventional Bradshaw household. Here we have a supposedly "ideal" marriage, but Gaskell explores its inadequacies in detail. Mrs. Bradshaw's marriage is marked by total submission to her husband's overwhelming domination. She cannot even entertain confidences from her children because she feels herself forced to report everything to her husband. Although she has spent her career trying to mitigate his harshness on their children, she has had little success. She finally revolts when her husband is threatening to have their son prosecuted, but her revolt only dramatizes her pathetic lack of independence. She owns some money through inheritance and wants to offer it all to Benson, but she does not even have control of her own money: "You shall have it all. If I can't give it you now, I'll make a will, sir" (403). Gaskell thus offers a critique of the legal inequities in marriage, which made all a woman's possessions the property of her husband. It is only in death that Mrs. Bradshaw will have enough control to determine how this money can be used. Hers has been a life of helplessness, which has resulted in indifference and in escape through novel reading, "For castle-building, after the manner of Minerva Press, was the outlet by which she escaped from her prosaic life, as Mr. Bradshaw's wife" (187). Here is another view of marriage, and perhaps it is close to the relationship Ruth might have had with Donne, who would have been impulsive, self-indulgent, and selfish. Because she rejects Donne and is disqualified from marrying anyone else, she retains her independence at the same time that she appears to outsiders to be an ideal candidate for marriage, given her youth,

her beauty, and her docility.

Jemima's is the only successful marriage in the story, and she nearly rejects it because she so strongly resents her father's attempts to manipulate her into the relationship. Since Farquhar is her father's business associate, she is aware that the match is financially desirable and she resists the idea of being part of a mercenary transaction. Bradshaw thinks that the match will keep her close enough that he can continue his domination of her, which he calls his "education"; "I should have you under my own eye, and could still assist you in the formation of your character, and I should be at hand to strengthen and confirm your principles" (219). Marriage will remove her at least from Bradshaw's house and she will have Farquhar rather than her ineffectual mother to intervene between her and her father. Ultimately, proof of her suitor's love convinces Jemima that she does want to marry. But it is not just love that she has been seeking. She finds in Farquhar a respect for her independence and the tacit assurance that she will not be smothered as her mother was. When Jemima finally declares her love for Farquhar, she begins their relationship with openness and the assurance that she will defy him should he forbid her to see Ruth, but she has not been so foolish as to choose an autocratic bigot for a husband. Her independence and stubbornness in coming to terms with her suitor contrast markedly with Ruth's vulnerability and naivete when she was seduced.

In summary, marriage in this novel is depicted as being far from the happy ideal with which so many Victorian novels culminate.

Gaskell uses Sally's story to show that marriage can be entered for the most trivial and mercenary reasons and without any degree of affection between the prospective partners. Through Faith Benson she shows that matrimony may be rejected for noble and unselfish reasons. From the Bradshaw marriage we learn that a marital relationship can be truly destructive, causing a woman to abandon reality and to seek refuge in fantasy. Only in the confused but defiant young Jemima, who rejects the ideal of docility both to her father and her suitor, do we find the promise of a rewarding marital relationship. All of these statements made through the characters surrounding Ruth subtly mitigate the dishonor of her own unmarried state and confirm the correctness of her rejecting Donne's proposal.

Gaskell mitigates Ruth's guilt also by examining the guilt of most of the other characters in the novel. She demonstrates that no one is without fault and that wise people forgive the faults of others by recognizing similar impulses in themselves. Ruth's "guilt," so terrible by Victorian standards, is simple ignorance, both social and religious. She is made aware first of her social transgression, coming later to religious repentance. She hears first in Wales from a child that "she's not a lady. She's a bad, naughty girl" (71). Thus Gaskell's first statement about intolerance is that we learn it at an early age. Benson witnesses the scene, and he, in contrast to the child, feels sadness for Ruth rather than condemnation. Next Ruth faces Mrs. Bellingham's scorn, yet still when she is abandoned "she had no penitence, no consciousness of error or offence: no

knowledge of any one circumstance but that he was gone" (93).

Then Ruth says only a few days later, upon discovering she is to be a mother, "I have deserved suffering, but it will be such a little innocent darling" (123). It is a statement that reflects on her child-like innocence when she was seduced, but it is also an assertion of Gaskell's conviction that the illegitimate child has done nothing to deserve scorn and ostracism. When Ruth reaches the Bensons' house, she reddens with shame when Faith Benson gives her a wedding ring to wear, and on her first Sunday there she holds a small child in her arms, reflecting on its innocence and the fact that she has "gone astray" (150). Later that same day she goes to church and seems to confront the religious implications of her error, becoming abjectly contrite.

Gaskell makes her case for accepting Ruth by showing that no one is qualified to throw the first stone. Sally's career actually mirrors Ruth's. As a young girl she was tending the young Thurstan Benson when he took a fall that was thought to be the cause of his deformity. She has spent her life making up for that accident by dedicating herself to his service. The fall may have been the result of her carelessness or ignorance, or it may simply have been an unavoidable accident. In any case Sally believes that a lifetime of service is necessary to compensate for the event. Her salty personality contrasts with Ruth's humility and gentleness, but both are living their lives according to the same principle.

Mrs. Mason is also guilty, although Gaskell avoids oversimplification by explaining her financial situation and the need to support her

large family. Still Mrs. Mason treats her young seamstresses callously and fails to provide them with any guidance. When she sees Ruth before the inn with Bellingham, she is hardly in a position to condemn, for she has just learned of her own "ne'er-do-well" son's misbehavior. The indulgent mother turns her anger on the hapless Ruth instead, condemning behavior in others that she forgives in her son. It is another allusion to the double standard.

But the earnest Thurstan Benson, the spokesman for Gaskell's ethical view, must deal with his sense of guilt for telling a lie. His more pragmatic sister proposes the lie to pass Ruth off as a widow, and she continues to plead its necessity. Even when the lie is discovered, and they must face Bradshaw's outrage, Faith argues that Ruth has needed the eight years of social acceptance in order to grow and be able to endure society's condemnation. Benson, on the other hand, feels relief when the truth comes out, even though it causes Ruth and her son such hardship. It was a central tenet of Gaskell's Unitarian belief that one must have faith that the truth is always the best course, but it is a difficult concept to follow without exception. Margaret Hale, the heroine of North and South, also tells a lie for good reasons and then regrets her action. Here, the lie provides an imperfection for Benson to cope with.

Benson's self-righteous parishoner Mr. Bradshaw also has to live with a lie. He pretends he doesn't see the election bribery that he knows is taking place, and he rationalizes the dishonesty by trying to convince himself that the goal of getting his man sent to Parliament

justifies the means. Like Mrs. Mason he is especially harsh in his attack on Ruth because he is smarting at the moment from the discomfort of his own dishonorable behavior. This policy backfires on him, for then he feels compelled to deal just as harshly with his son Richard when his embezzlement of Benson's funds is discovered. This dilemma permits Benson, whom Bradshaw urges to prosecute Richard, to discuss his criteria for culpability: premeditation, repetition of wrongdoing, and the additional question of whether punishment will blight the culprit's life. This discussion underscores the injustice of Ruth's situation, for her error lacked premeditation and was never repeated, yet it blocks her from ever being totally reintegrated into society. And Bradshaw is the most representative member of that society. Self-made businessman, public spirited citizen, and a member of progressive religious denomination, he is the one who is most rigid and unenlightened in his response to Ruth. Gaskell intends for her prosperous bourgeois readers to see themselves in Bradshaw--and to wince.

Richard Bradshaw's duplicitous nature is important only as it reflects on others. It demonstrates the failure of his father's dogmatic inflexibility, for the lesson that Richard has learned is that he should present a pious facade at home but can do as he likes elsewhere. In Richard we find the flowering of his father's hypocrisy: "he was as severe a judge as his father of other people's conduct, but you felt that Mr. Bradshaw was sincere in his condemnation of all outward error and vice, and that he would try himself by the same

laws as he tried others; somehow, Richard's words were frequently heard with a lurking distrust, and many shook their heads over the pattern son" (210). In a conversation with Jemima Richard alludes to the double standard, which extends to all areas of life: "many things are right for men which are not for girls" (211). Richard Bradshaw fits in the same category as Bellingham and Mrs. Mason's son. His experience also shows the value of forgiveness, which actually permits his life to be salvaged.

And finally there is Jemima, who is cruel and unforgiving to Ruth for an imagined wrong but comes to her support when her real transgression becomes known. Gaskell's treatment of Jemima's reaction to the news is skillful. The young woman is appalled at the violation of the moral and social code as she has been taught to be, but she ceases to be jealous of Farquhar's admiration for Ruth, and she even pities her. Another aspect of her reaction is to question all of her perceptions; since the truth is so hard to believe, she wonders if she can ever be sure again of knowing who is good and who is not. Ruth causes her to question the meaning of guilt, the difference between good and evil. Jemima sets the example for the rest of the community and, Gaskell hopes, for her readers. Discovery of Ruth's past causes Jemima to look inward and question the morality of her own behavior. Whereas the Bensons know the situation from the beginning and work to help Ruth re-enter society, Jemima learns the truth much later and realizes that she has been deceived. Her reaction, rather than to be outraged like her father, is to feel pity, to try to understand, and

to admit to her own failings. Her discovery also reestablishes and even strengthens her bond with Ruth. The relationship had begun with fervent admiration on Jemima's part until she suspected that Ruth might be helping her father to manipulate her into marrying Farquhar. The loss of Jemima's affection was painful for Ruth, but it was even moreso for Jemima who had no other adequate confidante. In addition to withdrawing from Ruth, Jemima began to treat Farquhar perversely, causing him to shift his attentions to Ruth. When Jemima discovers Ruth's secret, she suddenly has the means to end Farquhar's admiration of her rival, but she cannot bring herself to such a self-serving action: "if, after having striven back thus far on the heights, a fellow-woman was to throw her down into some terrible depth with her unkind, incontinent tongue, that would be too cruel" (323)! Even at this point, Jemima feels pity for Ruth, and her compassion is only increased when Bradshaw ostracizes her. She has the perception and empathy to realize that she too could have made the same mistake had she lacked the defences of family and home; in fact, given her rebellious nature, she thinks she would have been more likely than Ruth to go astray. Jemima courageously defies her father in order to speak in Ruth's defence and in the two succeeding years she tries to help Ruth and Leonard by sending Farquhar as her emissary to the Benson household. The two young women have a mutually enriching and supportive relationship in spite of all the barriers that rise between them.

Thus Gaskell defines three categories of people by their response to Ruth: the hypocrites who condemn, the true humanitarians who

forgive, and those who are too insensitive and self-centered to care. Bellingham of course fits in the last category, being the most culpable of all. That he is untouched either by society or by his own conscience is difficult to believe, but this too is a part of Gaskell's statement: young women were ruined every day, and the double standard went unquestioned. Gaskell lays guilt at the doorstep of anyone who accepts that standard.

An exploration of the themes of marriage, illness, and guilt demonstrates Gaskell's masterful thematic patterning while an examination of her use of symbolism and natural imagery demonstrates her skill in image patterning and the sophistication of form in this novel. Commentators have frequently applauded Gaskell's handling of natural imagery in Ruth, particularly as it is used to reflect the heroine's psychological states. In addition, however, Gaskell emphasizes through symbol and imagery Ruth's innate purity and her powerlessness. Furthermore, the use of natural imagery serves to link important events and, by comparing these events, to heighten the sense of Ruth's moral growth.

Gaskell uses symbolism and natural imagery throughout the story to reinforce the idea of Ruth's purity. At Mrs. Mason's house Ruth comments on the "soft pure, exquisite covering" that the snowstorm brings, and in the much quoted description of the floral painting on the wall we find "stately white lilies, sacred to the Virgin" (6). When she is in Wales with Bellingham she wears white and he fetches white water lilies for her, making a crown of them in her hair.

Thus even as Ruth lives with Bellingham, the symbolism argues that she is innocent through her lack of worldly knowledge. Subsequently when she keeps vigil outside Bellingham's room, she can see the white roses in the garden throughout the light summer night. Their pure whiteness and their stand outside the building are a symbolic echo of Ruth's character and her activity of standing watch outside the door.

Hamlet's advice to Ophelia to "Get thee to a nunnery" describes essentially what Ruth does when she enters the Benson household.

In Protestant England it provides a close substitute. There Ruth's hair is cut, and she puts on plain clothing and receives informal religious training. Even in death she wears a wimple-like cap, which again suggests a life of chastity.

Water imagery is used throughout to depict Ruth as a helpless victim caught in forces that are beyond her control. The first reference occurs as Ruth stops to watch a child play in the river, when "both he and his boat were carried away slowly, but surely, by the strong full river which eternally moved onwards to the sea" (21). Bellingham rushes up and saves the child in a dramatic rescue scene which establishes his acquaintance with Ruth. She pictures him as a savior, rescuing her from tedium and loneliness, but ironically he pulls her out into the swift current of life and sets her adrift. On their Sunday excursion just before they reach Ruth's old home they come to a great mill wheel standing "in Sabbath idleness, motionless in a brown mass of shade, and still wet with yesterday's immersion in the deep transparent water beneath" (44). This is the quiet water near the

shore--she is still safe, but she is on the brink of danger. The Sabbath quiet also attends the two ponds beside the inn where events finally capture Ruth and carry her away. Next the two are in Wales where Ruth goes out "to the circular dale, into which the brown foaming mountain river fell and made a deep pool" (60). She tries to cross the rushing stream, but finds a great gap in the middle and gets across only with the help of Thurstan Benson, who seems to appear out of nowhere. This incident is a symbolic prefiguring of the rest of the story: Ruth is saved from destruction because Benson turns up and offers her a helping hand. The following day when she goes on an outing with Bellingham there is an ominous note to the imagery. They come to a steep descent and go bounding down it at an ever increasing speed. There they find themselves in a "green gloom: and in the middle of the pond the sky was mirrored clear and dark, a blue which looked as if a black void lay behind" (73). The pool lingers in Ruth's mind and comes to the fore when she contemplates suicide. Even after Benson deters her, he is haunted by thoughts of the "siren waters" (99). He has nightmares of her fleeing from him, "relentless, to the deep, black pool" (101). As Ruth prepares to leave Wales, she records the sights and sounds of the setting, and "the sound of running waters she heard that quiet evening was in her ears as she lay on her deathbed; so well had she learnt their tune" (130). She is marked for life by the events that have taken place there.

Because it is symbolic of Ruth's relationship with Bellingham, there is no more water imagery until her lover and nemesis reappears.

Gaskell goes to considerable trouble to arrange their meeting on the seashore, and with appropriate irony, Donne's first question to Ruth is, "Are you fond of the sea" (266)? It is here too that she has her dramatic confrontation with him, and Gaskell's use of the setting is masterful. The "impetus of her descent" down the hill carries Ruth far out onto the sands and she goes to the very edge of the shore and turns to confront Donne. When he appears she turns again and looks seaward, but "the tide had turned; the waves were slowly receding, as if loth to lose the hold they had, so lately, and with such swift bounds, gained on the yellow sands" (292). It is the turning of the tide in her life as well. Her renunciation of Donne shows her growth to maturity since the time of her seduction. She now renounces even Donne's offer of marriage although it offers her wealth and respectability. Although she has rejected Donne, she still fears for her child and is haunted by dreams that return her to this seashore:

She dreamed that she was once more on the lonely shore, striving to carry away Leonard from some pursuer--some human pursuer--she knew he was human, and she knew who he was, although she dared not say his name even to herself, he seemed so close and present, gaining on her flying footsteps, rushing after her as with the sound of the roaring tide. Her feet seemed heavy weights fixed to the ground; they would not move. All at once, just near the shore, a great black whirl-

wind of waves clutched her back to her pursuer;
 she threw Leonard on to land, which was safety;
 but whether he reached it or not, or was swept
 back like her into a mysterious something too
 dreadful to be borne, she did not know. . . (307).

Wanting desperately to spare Leonard her victim's role and also to keep him safe from Donne's corrupting touch, she does everything in her power to shield him. The dream is an ironic echo of the earlier scene in which Donne rescues a boy from the water. Donne has shifted in Ruth's mind from savior to ominous pursuer.

When Bradshaw confronts Ruth with her "deception," the water imagery returns:

It was no use; no quiet, innocent life--no profound
 silence, even to her own heart, as to the Past;
 the old offence could never be drowned in the
 deep; but thus, when all was calm on the great,
 broad, summer sea, it rose to the surface, and
 faced her with its unclosed eyes and its ghastly
 countenance. The blood bubbled up to her brain,
 and made such a sound there, as of boiling waters,
 that she did not hear the words which Mr. Brad-
 shaw first spoke. . . (333).

She had thought to have returned to the calm waters that preceded her going away with Bellingham, but her "sin" lurks beneath the

surface. The water imagery invades her mind and dims her senses. It is an aspect of her role as victim that she could not control events when she was seduced, nor can she limit the suffering that that event continues to cause her and those she loves. Thus Gaskell uses water as a multi-faceted symbol and avoids assigning it a merely mechanical and allegorical significance.

The natural imagery also serves to link important events in Ruth's story. When she is abandoned and fails in her attempt to run after the coach, she lies down by the side of the road; "yet afterwards . . . she remembered the exact motion of a bright green beetle busily meandering among the wild thyme near her, and she recalled the musical, balanced, wavering drop of a skylark into her nest, near the heather-bed where she lay" (93). Then years later when she first recognizes Bellingham, she experiences an emotional crisis and struggles to walk up the hillside, abruptly sitting down "where larks' nests abounded, and where wild thyme and heather were now throwing out their sweets to the soft night air" (267). The similar details of setting subtly unite the two events--her separation from him and now her unexpected reunion with him. Ironically, because Ruth has grown so much--she is quite simply another person--the latter event is almost as traumatic as the former, and the trauma is heightened by the presence of sights and sounds that she remembers from her earlier experience. Her turmoil and confusion are expressed in the apt oxymoron, "a strange, sick, shrinking yearning" (269). Her mind goes back to a "climbing, winding road, and a little golden breezy common, with a rural

inn on the hill-top far, far away" (269). That hilltop represents the watershed of her life; had she gone back down the hill to the farmhouse, rather than heading down the other side to London, her entire life would have followed a different course. She is now on another metaphoric hilltop feeling the pull of her conscience in one direction and her old attraction in the other.

Thus in Ruth, the least appreciated of her social novels, Gaskell marshals theme, symbol, and natural imagery to carry her message about the fallen woman and to strengthen the narrative structure of her story. She takes a tale of a social problem very much rooted in reality but treats it in terms of symbol and folk tale, using the conventions for creating character and developing narrative structure of the romance rather than the realist novel. Ruth has suffered in the past because critics have chosen to judge it according to the usual criteria of Victorian fiction rather than on its own terms. Seeing Ruth as a romance does not free it from all standards of judgment, but it does present us with a different set of criteria. For Robert Louis Stevenson "moral significance" was "the essence of romance."²² It would be difficult to read Ruth without seeing and responding to its moral significance. In describing the penchant in romance for "the marvelous, the sensational, the legendary, and in general the heightened effect," Richard Chase poses the critical question: "To what purpose have these amiable tricks of romance been used? To falsify reality and the human heart or to bring us round to a new, significant and perhaps startling relation to them?"²³

Using these criteria, I submit that Elizabeth Gaskell's Ruth succeeds to a high degree.

Notes

- ¹ Coral Lansbury, Elizabeth Gaskell, The Novel of Social Crisis (London: Paul Elek, 1975), p. 7.
 - ² Louis Cazamian, The Social Novel in England 1830-1850, trans. Martin Fido (Boston: Rutledge Kegan and Paul, 1973), p. 214.
 - ³ Arthur Pollard, Mrs. Gaskell, Novelist and Biographer (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966), p. 91.
 - ⁴ Winifred Gérin, Elizabeth Gaskell, A Biography (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), p. 140.
 - ⁵ Hazel Mews, Frail Vessels: Woman's Role in Women's Novels from Fanny Burney to George Eliot (London: Athone Press, 1969), p. 85.
 - ⁶ "To Eliza Fox," ? February 1853, Letter 150, The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell, ed. J. A. V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967), 222-23.
 - ⁷ "To Anna Jameson," Letter 153, Letters, 226.
 - ⁸ "To Lady Kay-Shuttleworth," Letter 153, Letters, 226.
 - ⁹ Francoise Basch, Relative Creatures. Victorian Women in Society and the Novel 1837-67, trans. Anthony Rudolf (London: Allen Lane, 1974), p. 250.
 - ¹⁰ Richard Chase, The American Novel and Its Tradition (New York: Doubleday, 1957), p. 22.
 - ¹¹ Elizabeth Gaskell, Ruth (New York: AMS Press Inc., 1972), pp. 32-33.
- All further references to this work appear in the text.

- ¹² Brian Crick, "Mrs. Gaskell's Ruth: A Reconsideration," Mosaic, No. 9, (1974), p. 87.
- ¹³ Donald D. Stone, The Romantic Impulse in Victorian Fiction (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 150.
- ¹⁴ Northrup Frye, The Secular Scripture (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 104.
- ¹⁵ Frye, p. 129.
- ¹⁶ Frye, p. 156.
- ¹⁷ Daniel Gl. Hoffman, "Fable as Reality," in Pastoral and Romance, ed. Eleanor Terry Lincoln (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1969), p. 279.
- ¹⁸ Gerald DeWitt Sanders, Elizabeth Gaskell (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1929), p. 50.
- ¹⁹ W. A. Craik, Elizabeth Gaskell and the Provincial Novel (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1975), p. 55.
- ²⁰ Pollard, p. 91.
- ²¹ Enid Duthie, The Themes of Elizabeth Gaskell (London: Macmillan, 1980), p. 182.
- ²² Robert Louis Stevenson, as quoted in Edwin M. Eigner, "The Bad Tradition and the Romance of Man," Pastoral and Romance, p. 258.
- ²³ Chase, p. 21.

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A RECONSIDERATION OF MRS. GASKELL'S RUTH
AS ROMANCE

by

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Elizabeth Gaskell's Ruth (1853) has received less critical attention and approval than have her other five novels. This neglect stems in part from a general insistence on judging the novel according to the criteria appropriate for a realistic novel rather than for a romance. In its methods of both characterization and narrative structure, Ruth conforms to the patterns of romance. Gaskell's heroine has the symbolic quality of a romance character. By depicting Ruth before her seduction as a Wordsworthian nature child and afterwards as a paragon of Victorian womanhood, Gaskell offers a critique of current ideals for women. The patterns of romance are also apparent in the narrative structure of the tale, for Ruth's story follows the archetypal pattern of descent and ascent. Another characteristic of romance is the use of metaphor as a structural device, and Gaskell uses symbolism and natural imagery to comment on her story and also to link events. Thus she marshals theme, symbol, and natural imagery to strengthen the narrative structure of her story and to carry her message about the fallen woman.