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## Exploration of Women's Relationships in Gaskell's Select Works

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.16782221>

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### ARTICLE DETAILS

#### Research Paper

Accepted: 16-07-2025

Published: 10-08-2025

#### Keywords:

*agency, domestic sphere, feminine, feminist, gender roles*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper works towards analysing how Elizabeth Gaskell's public identity as a writer was cultivated through her private identity as a wife and mother. With the emphasis she puts on the domestic sphere and its impact on the individual in her fiction, its goal is to explore how, through her depiction of the domestic sphere, Gaskell has created an extensive space within the house that not only allows women agency but also gives them time and space to heal and grow. This paper attempts to analyse how, through the traditional set-up of her novels, Gaskell challenges the conventional female role in the Victorian society and how she works towards representing the feminine as something strong and powerful rather than meek and without agency. For this purpose, two of her novels, *Ruth and Wives and Daughters* have been taken under study in which her representation of the relationships between her female characters will be investigated.

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### Introduction

Elizabeth Gaskell is a popular Victorian writer; she has written six novels, several short stories and the biography of her friend and author, Charlotte Brontë. Today, her works are not provided that space which has been given to the radical voices of the Brontës, Jane Austen and George Elliot. "Discussions of her talent usually suggest her marginal status, portraying her as a homemaker and an amateur, rather than as a serious professional writer" (Weiss 1). Popularly known as Mrs. Gaskell, she has a matronly image. She led a traditional life as a wife to a Unitarian minister and a mother of four, and while she enjoyed her



literary success, it was never her first priority. Her primary focus as a woman was her family life. Even in her novels, the focus was found to be on the female characters and the domestic sphere and many feminists found it to be conducive of the conventional role of women as considered by the patriarchal society that limited women to the house. Thus, she has occupied a very ambiguous space in the literary canon which Deanna L. Davis sums up in the introduction to her essay, "Feminist Critics and Literary Mothers: Daughters Reading Elizabeth Gaskell," when she says, "neglected by some critics because of her conservative values, uneasily respected by others for achieving literary and financial success...when seeming to warrant study at all, she has often bewildered feminist critics who do not find in her work the kind of protest that makes Bronte and George Elliot seem such modern woman" (L. Davis 1).

Elizabeth Gaskell is a writer whose novels are usually set in the feminine sphere, or the space occupied by women. Her focus is often on the women characters, and includes much more than their eventual marriage to a heterosexual partner. She writes about women's relationships and how these bonds lead them to be better at navigating the conventional male dominated world. Victorian novels often ended with a marriage between the heterosexual characters and while Gaskell also followed this conventional route towards the end of her own novels, at the same time, she didn't let the focus of her novels be just on the heterosexual relationships. Instead, she explored the experience of women and their relationships with each other because these were the relationships that lead to the eventual character and plot developments in her books.

In both the books under study, *Ruth and Wives* and *Daughters*, a lot of space is given to the relationships of women characters; whether it is Molly and Cynthia in *Wives and daughters* or Ruth and Jemima in *Ruth*, the intimate interactions between these female friends and the progression of their relationships take up a major part of the books. Not only do these women build bonds that go beyond the blood lines, but they also help each other steer a male dominated world, where social constrictions make it difficult for a woman to create her own space based on her own individual choices. Several critics have argued that these relationships between women were in fact very necessary to the development of these characters as well as for the development of the narrative. Since these relationships between women did not exist in reaction to masculinity, or only in contrast or opposition to men, these occupied a more important place in the narrative than the heterosexual relationships between men and women.



## Wives and daughters

Molly and Cynthia are two young girls whom their parents' marriage puts in a position where they are obligated to become a part of each other's lives. The step-sisters differ from one another on various points, yet these differences only make the bond between them more important. Molly, who is not particularly happy about her father's second marriage to Miss Clare, now Mrs. Gibson, doesn't hesitate to welcome her new step sister with open arms. In fact, at the time of Cynthia's arrival, she is more excited to meet her new sister than Cynthia's own mother, and the moment they meet, Molly "fell in love with her, so to speak, on the instant" (Gaskell, *Wives and Daughters* 216). In spite of being discomfited with the situation that brought them both together, both young women not only form a very close bond with each other based on genuine love and affection, but also the challenges they experience as one.

Cynthia and Molly are very dissimilar to each other. While Molly is naïve and quite innocent, Cynthia is someone who "was very beautiful, and was so well aware of this fact that she had forgotten to care about it" (Gaskell, *Wives and Daughters* 217). Cynthia is not only beautiful but also aware of its effect on other people, both men and women, and she is not afraid to use her charm to get what she needs out of other people. Molly, on the other hand, while being attractive, is unworldly due to her sheltered living under her father, who has made sure to let her be educated at home unlike Cynthia, who has studied in France, away from any parental authority. When Cynthia talks about her upbringing she admits to Molly "I was a trouble, I daresay. So I was sent to school at four years old; first one school, and then another; and in the holidays, mamma went to stay at grand houses, and I was generally left with the schoolmistresses" (Gaskell, *Wives and Daughters* 220). Cynthia has lived a life being ignored by her own mother, who "didn't much care for parting with [her]" (Gaskell, *Wives and Daughters* 220) and so Cynthia is much used to depending on her own self to get her way in the world.

Molly's world has been limited to a small number of acquaintances in the town of Hollingford under the protection of her father, whom she loves dearly and has a good relationship with and though she is motherless, she was never at a loss for people to look out for her. Due to her careful upbringing by her father, shielded from the greater emotions and experiences, Molly has grown up to be a naïve, innocent and kind young lady who doesn't hesitate to put others' feelings before her own. Cynthia, on the other hand, has grown up thinking of herself first. She confesses to not finding it easy to loving other people, including her own mother-"I don't think love for one's mother quite comes by nature; and remember how much I have been separated from mine!" (Gaskell, *Wives and Daughters* 220). Cynthia admits that while



she is conscious of the fact that a lot of people love her, she doesn't find it easy to love them the same way but "I do believe I love you, little Molly, whom I have not only known for ten days, better than any one" (Gaskell, *Wives and Daughters* 219). At several instances in the book, the sisters confess their love to one another and it is a love that is not easily shaken despite circumstances including Cynthia's engagement to Roger Hamley, whom Molly loves and admires dearly. Regardless of her feelings for Roger, she is happy for Cynthia and Roger, and wants them to be happy. Theirs is a love that is unconditional and one that is not dependent on either of their character. Molly loves Cynthia the same when she finds out about her engagement to Roger or when the engagement is broken by Cynthia (an act Molly knows will hurt Roger deeply) or even when Molly finds out about Cynthia's previous engagement with Mr. Preston, whom Cynthia met while she was at school in France.

Molly and Cynthia are not just sisters, they are allies and this alliance between women has played a very important part in the feminist discourse. It has not only become a source of strength for them but also a means to subvert patriarchy. The sisters become each other's confidants; when Cynthia is being blackmailed by Mr. Preston to whom she was once engaged- to marry him or he would reveal the letters she wrote to him confessing her love for him to everyone- it is to Molly that she reveals her secrets and who comes to Cynthia's rescue by getting Cynthia's letters back from Mr. Preston while threatening to reveal his character to Lord Cumnor's family if he doesn't stop pursuing Cynthia and she does this while risking her own reputation to save Cynthia. We might even say that Molly has adopted the role of Cynthia's knight in the shining armour by saving her not only from an unhappy engagement but also the misery of marrying Mr.Preston.

Not only Molly, but Cynthia, who finds it difficult to love people, loves Molly so dearly and is there for her whenever she needs her. She shows her love not just with big gestures but small affectionate deeds such as plucking flowers out of her own bonnet and attaching them to Molly's. After the death of Osborne Hamley, when Molly comes back home after taking care of the squire, Mr. Hamley, she falls into a nervous fever. Cynthia, who is in London, comes back as soon as she finds about Molly's health to nurse her back to health. Not just that, Cynthia understands Molly's need to talk about the sorrowful incidents that had occurred in Hamley Hall, relating to the death of Osborne as well as the arrival of Osborne's wife and child, whom no one besides Roger and Molly knew to exist. "Cynthia instinctively knew that the repetition of all these painful recollections would ease the oppressed memory, which refused to dwell on anything but what had occurred at a time of feverish disturbance of health." (Gaskell, *Wives and Daughters* 586)



Such relationships "in the realm of literature which depicts woman bonding and woman identification as essential for female survival" (Rich 12) allowed women a space to communicate all those emotions with one another that were denied to men in the name of being rational beings. In her essay, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," Rich has used a term- lesbian continuum, which she means "to include a range- through each woman's life and throughout history- of women-identified experience...including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving of practical and political support" (Rich 27). While the emotional relationship between Molly and Cynthia allows them both to better navigate through their life's experiences with each other as a companion, Ruth and Jemima's friendship in Gaskell's *Ruth* makes it possible for Ruth to survive within the conservative strictures of the society as a fallen woman with a companion like Jemima standing by her side.

## Ruth

Ruth is an unmarried woman who has a child with a man who abandons her. Taken in by the Bensons, Ruth adopts the identity of a widow. For several years, she manages to live a respectable life as a governess and a dedicated mother to her son, Leonard. But one day, her secret is revealed along with the illegitimacy of her son. Throughout the book, we see a close bond between Ruth and Jemima, who is the daughter of Mr. Bradshaw. Ruth is hired as a governess for his kids, who finds Ruth to be of good and sensible moral character. Ruth struggles to get past the sin she had committed in ignorance and tries to do penance for it. Jemima sees Ruth almost as an elder sister and admires her for her beauty and loveliness. Jemima is also in love with her father's business partner, Mr. Farquhar who also has affections towards her. Mr. Bradshaw also wants Jemima to marry Mr. Farquhar and often interferes in their budding relationship rather than letting it bloom in its own course. Jemima resents his interference, which she retaliates by being stubborn and headstrong and taking her frustration of her father on the blameless Mr. Farquhar. He misunderstands her attempts to rebel against her father to mean that she doesn't want him as his husband and so he starts to alter his affections towards Ruth, whom he thinks to be a very noble woman and suitable for him to marry. Jemima is fully observant of the change of his affections towards her and their transfer to Ruth; hence she begins to feel resentment towards Ruth.

Jemima is also the first person to figure out the secret of Ruth's past from Mrs. Pearson, a new dressmaker in town, who talks about Mrs. Denbigh (Ruth's current identity) and a young woman she used to know in Fordham who "was so remarked for her beauty" but "the more so, on account of her vicious conduct afterwards" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 263). After figuring out that the young woman Mrs. Pearson is



talking about is none other than Ruth, Jemima tries to make sure this story about Ruth's past doesn't spread in town even though it would have led to a change in Mr. Farquhar's affections towards Ruth. Jemima refuses to take this secret as an opportunity to have her own way and instead warns the dressmaker that "Papa, I am sure, would not like your connecting Mrs. Denbigh's name with such a- story as you have been telling me....Don't tell any one the story you have told me this morning" (Gaskell, Ruth 265).

After the shock of this news wears off, she thinks of Mr. Farquhar and how the revelation might change his intentions about marrying Ruth but even in her mind, Jemima shrinks of the possibility of ever disclosing Ruth's secret to him to make him turn away from Ruth. Regardless of her agitations with Ruth and her complicated feelings for Farquhar, Jemima never thinks to oust her from the society by revealing her wantonness. When Ruth's secret becomes known to Mr. Bradshaw, he comes charging into the kids' room to confront Ruth and while Ruth stands there "speechless, motionless" (Gaskell, Ruth 278), Jemima lends voice to Ruth. She refuses to be silent in front of her father's tirade against Ruth despite being ordered to utter "not a word" and says "Father! I will speak. I will not keep silence. I will bear witness to Ruth" (Gaskell, Ruth 278). She stands up with Ruth, for Ruth and when Ruth and Leonard have been shunned by the people and are leading life on the fringes of the society due to the revelations of Ruth's past throughout the town, it is Jemima, and Mr. Farquhar whom she marries, who stay on good terms with them. This position is one that Rich urges women to have; to have each others' back, to be there for one another so that the emotional intimacy that cannot be found in heterosexual relationships can be established by women within their own sex. We see how Gaskell has managed to exhibit with the key focus being on the women characters and their relationships with each other as they navigate life in a male-dominated world that shuns a woman if she dares to step out of the established moral line, which it allows a man to cross without severe consequences.

## Conclusion

Elizabeth Gaskell may be admired above all as a feminine writer, but through her portrayal of the feminine, she has never worked towards undermining the agency of her women characters. She has proved to be much more open minded than the society she lived in as she offered an alternative to a girl like Ruth, seduced and abandoned, that didn't lead to prostitution; she allowed Molly and Cynthia room to grow as young women in *Wives and Daughters*, while being an observer and not a judge of their actions. As a woman and a writer, being fully aware of the Victorian strictures and respecting them in her



own life, Gaskell through her fiction transformed the domestic space in which her female characters lived into much more than what it was traditionally thought to be and through it, let them develop their individuality as well as depend on one another as companions.

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