Mrs. Gaskell's Cranford: "The Importance of Living the Truth" as its Unifying Theme

Donald Joseph Racky

Loyola University Chicago
MRS. GASKELL'S CRANFORD: "THE IMPORTANCE OF LIVING THE TRUTH"

AS ITS UNIFYING THEME

by

Donald Racky, Jr.

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School

of Loyola University in Partial Fulfillment of

the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

February

1962
LIFE

Donald Joseph Racky, Jr., was born in Chicago, Illinois, January 21, 1937.

He was graduated from St. Augustine High School, Holland, Michigan, June, 1954; attended Villanova University, Villanova, Pennsylvania, 1955 to 1958; and was graduated from Loyola University, Chicago, Illinois, June, 1959, with a Bachelor of Arts Degree in English. He began his present graduate studies at Loyola University in June, 1959.

From 1959 through 1962, the author has been teaching General Science and English at St. Rita High School, Chicago.
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. THEME AND UNITY IN A NOVEL</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. CRITICAL OPINION ON MRS. GASKELL'S USUAL THEME</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. THEME IN SELECTED NARRATIVES OF MRS. GASKELL</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. THEME AND UNITY IN CRANFORD AND &quot;THE CAGE AT CRANFORD&quot;</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

At first glance Cranford does not appear to be a unified novel. While there is only slight agreement among the critics of Cranford about the basic purpose of the book, all the major critics are united at least in hailing its worth. Cranford, they say, was Mrs. Gaskell's most representative, although not necessarily her best, work; it is worthy of study. From this one point of agreement, however, the findings of Mrs. Gaskell's critics begin to diverge. Most critics would rather say that in Cranford are Mrs. Gaskell's most representative works; they would stress the plurality of the word "works."

Whitfield claims to have the agreement of all in asserting that Cranford is without plot, purpose, or melodrama, without story -- and yet that it is not a mere collection of essays. Miss ffrench agrees that in Cranford there is not even an "attempt at either plot or story." Such judgments that


2 A. Stanton Whitfield, Mrs. Gaskell: Her Life and Work, London, George Routledge and Sons Ltd., 1929, 135.

3 Yvonne ffrench, Mrs. Gaskell, Denver, Alan Swallow, 1949, 13.
find in the book no narrative structure would certainly remove Cranford even from E. M. Forster's liberal ideal for the simplest of novels, which are characterized by story, "the fundamental aspect without which it [the novel] could not exist."^4

Sanders holds that Cranford is several works, that it depends on location, character, and incident, not on plot.^5 Sanders repeatedly labels Cranford as "sketches," as do Whitfield and ffrench. John Forster, the close collaborator with Dickens, referred to the "Cranford idea" as "social painting," even in his letters to Mrs. Gaskell. Later he referred to Cranford as "papers," not as narrative or novel. In a letter to Mrs. Gaskell, Dickens himself called the first installment of the book a "paper." Indeed, as Hopkins notes, he called all the "installments 'papers,' not 'chapters,' showing that he thought of them as not closely connected."^10

---


^5Gerald DeWitt Sanders, Elizabeth Gaskell, New Haven, Published for Cornell University, Yale University Press, 1929, 43.

^6Sanders, Elizabeth Gaskell, 45; Whitfield, Mrs. Gaskell, 135; ffrench, "Eliz. C. Gaskell," From Jane Austen, 137.


^8John Forster, letter, 1852, as quoted in Hopkins, Eliz. Gaskell, 352.

^9Charles Dickens, letter, December 21, 1851, as quoted in Hopkins, Eliz. Gaskell, 105.

Cranford has often appeared in special editions prepared as texts for high-school students. Since the introductions to these editions must possess very complete, exact terminology without ambiguity in order to reach the intended high school audience, statements often more forthright than those of hesitant popular critics are made. These introductions specify and emphasize the difficulty in Cranford only mentioned in passing by most of the critics. All of these introductions hold that Cranford is lacking in the unity of a novel; they usually hold that the book is not unified at all. Because these introductions go to such lengths to analyze exactly the structure of Cranford, a study of them in greater detail is rewarding.

Albert Hancock agrees with the opinions of Sanders and Dickens. There is even a similarity in choice of words. Hancock, however, can find some thread of narrative when he summarizes the unity of Cranford as follows:

Cranford is more than a series of domestic sketches, and yet, in the strict sense, it is not a novel. A novel is a prose presentation of character, in the form of fiction, with a carefully contrived arrangement of incidents into a plot. Cranford hardly has a plot. There is no play of contending forces, developing into a climax and a readjustment. We have a group of people associated by environment. There is a gradual concentration of attention upon one of them (Miss Matty) . . . . When Miss Matty is threatened with poverty, the possibility that Agn Jenkyns . . . . may be her brother introduces an element of suspense, which adds . . . . the faintest color of a plot . . . . There is no plot; only a drift of events. Cranford must be ranked under that literary type of which the De Coverly Papers is the most conspicuous example; the type of coherent sketches which shows the novel, structurally, in the germ. 11

H. E. Coblentz agrees that the chapters and incidents of Cranford are not closely related. Just as Hancock saw among them a "drift of events," however, so Coblentz sees in them a relationship of a sort. Coblentz attempts what none of the other critics have cared to do explicitly. In the following analysis, Coblentz is able to see, behind the periodic appearances and reappearances of people in Cranford, a pattern of events which lead to a satisfactory ending:

Strictly speaking, Cranford is not a novel. It has no complex organization; no complicating incidents at the beginning; no resolving forces at the end; and no marked unity in the several parts. The first two chapters ... are a sketch; the third and fourth chapters ... have a slight unity of thought in the central figure, Miss Matty; the fifth and sixth chapters ... drift toward the plot of Matty's brother, Poor Peter, and indicate that the author was beginning to think of the end; the seventh and eighth chapters return to the society at Cranford, and chronicle the coming of Lady Glenmire; chapters nine to eleven inclusive, dealing with the coming of Signor Brunoni and "The Great Panic in Cranford," hold our interest in plot by the slender thread of the story of the Signor and his adventures in the Far East, where Poor Peter went; chapters twelve and thirteen are concerned primarily with Miss Matty's misfortune ...; and, finally, "A Happy Return to Cranford," introducing Mr. Peter as the grand Aga of Cranford, the conquerer of the Cranford Amazons, and the restorer of peace between the warring factions of the aristocracy, gives us the climax of a series of sketches. 12

Although Coblentz thus all but grants Cranford the element of story, the minimum narrative unity, he is still unsure enough of his summary to

declare that Cranford is not a novel. He gives the reasons for this hesitation, as well as a comment on the idea of Cranford as mere "sketches," in the following words:

Yet, to call the book a number of unrelated sketches would be making an uncritical analysis of its structure. The brief outline given sufficiently indicates that the book has a movement and a forward-going action. But it does lack the unifying element of a hero and heroine, -- unless one wishes to neglect the first two chapters and to choose Miss Matty and Mr. Peter as the unifying persons, -- and it does want a great climax, though there are several minor climaxes which enhance the interest at critical points; and finally the book strongly suggests to the readers that the author merely meant, in the beginning of her work, to give a composite picture of life in an English village, in a rambling sort of way, but turned her sketches on a slight thread of continuous narrative.13

Of the three arguments that Coblentz uses to show the lack of unity in Cranford -- the lack of a central character, the apparent lack of intent on the part of Mrs. Gaskell, and the lack of a sufficient climax -- two must be set aside. Mrs. Gaskell's intent, conscious or subconscious, is of little concern in judging the unity of the work; Cranford itself must be examined. Unity of central character, on the other hand, does not demand a single human being as protagonist. A group of human beings or the whole village of Cranford may be the main character. Matty may after all be the main character, struggling against an opponent of whose nature Coblentz had no idea -- some other force for which he did not account. It is unfair, at any rate, merely to declare that Cranford lacks unity of central character when this

13Ibid., xx.
is decided by noting that no one person or even group of people seems to have a relationship to every incident narrated. The critic's job is to prove whether or not this relationship exists. To assume flatly that since it does not exist the work is not unified is both to beg the question and to belabor the obvious. Perhaps a thread of continuity has gone unobserved.

The only argument remaining is basically the same complaint of all the other critics: Cranford lacks a climax, does not have sufficient building up of a chain of related events to any significant final point. Cranford lacks a real, continuous conflict that leads to a single definite point. Thus, although Coblentz does not add any new criticism, he makes more explicit the basic charge of lack of narrative unity in Cranford. As he ends his analysis of structure in Cranford, Coblentz too sees in the book a unity of point of view.14

Franklin T. Baker holds that Cranford is an example of a book which attempts to show its characters "in the peculiar light and atmosphere of a given place."15 He then goes on to comment about the general structure of the book as follows:

Its unity is only in the slightest degree a unity of structure. Mary Smith tells the whole story. The old rector and his family are the central personages. The same characters appear and reappear, much as they do in the "De Coverly Papers." The customs and ideas of the village are the same throughout. The only semblance of

14Ibid., xxi.

a plot -- and it is rudimentary -- is in the story of Miss Matty as affected by the various events that closely concern her. . . .

The real unity of "Cranford" is of a different sort from that of "time and fable." It lies in the unvarying quality of the place and its people. Its feelings and ideas, its customs and characters, are so closely seen by the author that there is no false note. The ensemble is harmonious from beginning to end.16

Baker holds, therefore, that Cranford lacks "unity of fable," a unified story, although it has throughout the same narrator, the same central personages, and the same location. His position is quite similar to those of the other introductions for high school editions, except that he points out in addition that the characters seem to be static because of the lack of narrative structure. The real unity of Cranford, Baker stresses, is its author's clear insight into the people and place. There is unity of point of view. This view of Cranford as having slight plot or story but possessing unity by point of view, is very similar to the view of the foremost modern Gaskell critic, Annette B. Hopkins.17

All the above critics, to summarize, hold these two opinions: since Cranford is lacking in conflict, climax, and change of character, it is lacking in narrative structure and is not, therefore, a novel; and Cranford is not sufficiently unified to be classed as a single work of art.

Although such is the judgment of the more important Gaskell critics,

16 Ibid., xi-xii.

17 See below, pp. 8-10, where Hopkins' view is examined and where "unity of point of view" is shown to be inadequate to unify a narrative.
there are a few other viewpoints, slightly different. Both the famous A.W. 
Ward and George Sampson are anxious to call Cranford a "prose idyll." Since neither gives a personal definition, a prose idyll may be described as 
a prose tale stressing the picturesque phases of country life. Again, 
Haldane says that although Cranford came out in parts it "appears to us to be 
a complete conception." It is true that even these opinions do not afford 
Cranford the title of novel. They do, however, at least view the book as a 
single unified whole, which "unity of point of view" cannot accomplish. 
Ward goes even further, declaring not only that the book is unified, but 
also that, considered still as a prose idyll, it may not be added to or 
shortened. More recently, Annette B. Hopkins holds a somewhat ambiguous middle 
position as regards whether or not Cranford belongs in the same class as the 
"De Coverly Papers." Quite often she refers to the chapters of the book as 
"papers." When she confronts the problems of unity in Cranford squarely,
however, she begins to call the book a "story." As a presentation of her position, the following passage is interesting:

A natural question that might arise in the mind of anyone who knew nothing of Cranford beyond the fact of its publication at nine irregular intervals over the course of thirteen months, is whether the book did not suffer from this treatment in either form or spirit. The answer is an emphatic no. Cranford is practically structureless; this is part of its charm. The successive scenes pass before the reader as easily as if he were shipping different colored beads along a string. From the architectural standpoint, the only unifying elements are furnished by the place and the people. The action is all in Cranford and the neighborhood and is entirely about Cranford folk. What is remarkable, however, is that the more subtle unity of the story was not disturbed by the intrusion of other writing which Mrs. Gaskell was doing at the time in the course of its composition. The unity of mood, of spirit, fails nowhere. The tone -- the tempo, the slant of mind, once established, never falters, never betrays the author's preoccupation with themes that must often have pushed the world of Cranford far back in her consciousness.

Although Hopkins seems to be plain enough here about trying to show that Cranford is unified, the fact remains that throughout her own study she refers to Cranford as "papers," implying disunity. Further, even in the passage quoted here, she makes the statement that Cranford is "structureless." How the book can then be at the same time unified in narrative structure is very difficult to see, unless Hopkins means that the unifying structure is

23Ibid., 108.
the lack of any formal structure. Finally, she cites with approval the comments of Dickens and of John Forster as regards the apparent disunity of Cranford. Whatever may be the true feelings of Hopkins in this matter of deciding whether Cranford is one or many books in general, it is evident that she does at least consider that the narrative unity of Cranford is a problem, not a self-evident assumption.

Hopkins says the work is unified only in "tone," later defined as "slant of mind." This amounts to little more, even in the mind of Hopkins, than the fact that Cranford was written from a consistent point of view by a single author. To consider a work unified merely because it was written by a single author in the same frame of mind throughout is a difficult principle to accept. Such a consideration certainly does not show that the work has any narrative structure or is a novel. A single point of view, therefore, however unfailingly and cleverly maintained, cannot be said to be in itself pertinent to a discussion of whether or not a book is a novel, unless this unified point of view is such as to give a structure to actions. Otherwise, the book lacks that characteristic of dramatic action which distinguishes a narrative from other forms of expression.25

That Cranford is not a unified novel sums up, therefore the opinions of Mrs. Gaskell's critics. The book lacks a single conflict for its many incidents. It lacks any sure relationship among the events narrated. The

24 See above, p. 2.

25 See below, where this matter is discussed more fully in Chapter II, p. 16.
only thing that seems present in all the details of the book is the town of Cranford. Still, the events lead nowhere: there is no climax, no change of any character (so that a clear protagonist can be seen) or of the village. The only possible explanation for the book is that it describes Cranford -- and many critics will not even allow the book this unity as literary description.

It is the purpose of this paper to investigate the value of such a judgment about whether or not Cranford is a unified novel; it is the purpose of this paper to show, following further study of Cranford, of the theory of unity in novels, and of Mrs. Gaskell's usual technique, that Cranford actually is a unified novel.

The method to be used in this study of Cranford includes the following four main steps:

1. The claims of the critics show that, if Cranford does have a narrative structure, the relationship of the events to one another or to any significant climax is quite obscure. A brief inquiry will be made, therefore, into the theory of unity in novels to determine what unifies the details of a novel and how theme can be used to clarify the basic narrative conflict when this conflict and its climax seem obscure.

2. Research into the writings of those critics of Mrs. Gaskell who have analyzed her purpose will attempt to determine what is Mrs. Gaskell's theme in most of her works other than Cranford.

3. Research into selected works of Mrs. Gaskell should not only provide direct textual support for a proper evaluation of the judgments as
regards Mrs. Gaskell's themes, but also should indicate certain features of her method of treatment. This latter information could be used to provide easy recognition of and to supply external assurance for the meaning of parallel details in Cranford.

4. An examination and analysis of Cranford itself should provide the final evidence for a statement about the presence or absence of a theme and structure to supply the book with the necessary unity. The usual Gaskell theme, as can be determined from steps two and three above, may be used as a relatively safe indication of the probable theme of Cranford. This theme may provide information about the conflict of the book, the climax, main character, outline of main action, and unifying structure -- or the lack of these. A word of further explanation will be added here in an attempt to clarify the relationship of this step (which is the ultimate aim of the paper) to the second and third steps mentioned above.

The usual process in analyzing a novel is, of course, to discover the structure and theme by an inference based on the details of the novel. It might be objected that the method used in this paper would force the novel to fit an a priori structure and theme. Such a charge would, if true, tend to lessen the value of such a method considerably. As can be seen in chapter five of this study, however, this paper follows no a priori method of determining theme, does not try to make the facts fit the theory.

An analogy may be useful. The method used in this paper is similar in purpose to the method often used to solve a mathematical problem. The most proper method of working the mathematical problem would be to begin with
the facts given and to work through to the solution. Often, however, especially with a very difficult or confusing problem, it is found more convenient to begin by consulting the answer provided for this purpose in the back of the book. Such a procedure is not strictly necessary; the problem could still be solved by using only the "frontwards" method; the problem must, in fact, still be worked out from the actual facts given, step by step. Checking the answer first is merely a convenience, as this step provides a more likely target towards which to aim efforts at a solution. It suggests a way to save time, effort, and especially confusion; it also provides an added assurance that the proposed solution is accurate.

Similarly, to ascertain, prior to reading, the likely structure and theme of Cranford can help one to avoid much of the confusion that marks existing critical opinion as regards the form and unity of the book. The reasoning here is that, since Mrs. Gaskell usually makes use of a particular theme, she probably used that theme in Cranford. Nothing is proven, of course. The author may not have used her usual theme in this book, or she may not have used it well enough to make it basic to the book. The fact that Mrs. Gaskell may have used a given theme and manner of illustrating it in most of her works provides no definite assurance that such a structure and theme is present to Cranford. Answer books have been known to err. The problem must still be examined in the proper way, for the a priori hint only gives added assurance of correctness and a suggested direction to research, an hypothesis, a likely answer to the meaning of Cranford. Textual support must still be sought. The problem, to use the analogy, must still be worked out to prove the answer; that is, it must still be proven that the details
of the book are united in the proposed form, that they illustrate the sus-
pected theme.

There are certain limits to the amount of material to be examined for
this study. A number of critics who have discussed the unity of novels will
be examined. The number of such critics will be sufficient to establish the
meaning of unity in novels, as well as to determine the unifying element in
novels. No attempt at exhaustive treatment will be made in this area, how-
ever, as such is not the purpose of this paper.

Likewise, it would be impossible to examine every idea in Cranford to
illustrate the presence or absence of various ingredients. The main con-
flict, ideas, and motifs of the book will be discussed.

Finally, there remains the problem of how many works to select for
analysis to determine what is Mrs. Gaskell's usual theme--step three in the
method above. Not every work of the author is examined. Stebbins has
already given such treatment on a broad scale; 26 detailed analysis will be
given here only to a few representative works of Mrs. Gaskell. If the works
are to be truly representative, they should include both novels and short
stories. The following three types of works were selected:

1. Works closely allied with Cranford in background and mood. What-
ever is true of Cranford may also be true of these works, as regards
specific treatment and theme. These works include "The Cage at

26 Lucy Poate Stebbins, A Victorian Album: Some Lady Novelists of the
Period, New York, Columbia University Press, 1940.

2. Works generally judged to be the best works written by Mrs. Gaskell. These include Sylvia's Lovers and Wives and Daughters.27

3. Works chosen at random to avoid similarities which might easily occur in works of the above two categories. The works chosen at random are these: "Curious if True," "Right at Last," A Dark Night's Work, and Ruth.

Thus, this study has a wider scope than a mere examination of Cranford.

This paper is limited, however, in the completeness of its treatment of Cranford, in the number of texts used to examine unity in the novel, and in the number of works of Mrs. Gaskell in which an analysis of theme and technique is made.

27Sylvia's Lovers is judged to be Mrs. Gaskell's best work by Sanders (Page 127), and Whitfield, who says (page 66) that it is "her greatest effort . . . and most powerful book." Others generally agree with Hopkins that the latter book is Mrs. Gaskell's "crowning effort," as Hopkins states (page 277).
CHAPTER II

THEME AND UNITY IN A NOVEL

Since a novel is a form of narrative, for a novel to be unified it must possess unity of action. Forster makes unity of action the minimum requirement for a novel. The work must possess a sequence of actions, a story; perhaps the actions will be causally connected so as to give plot. There must be some summit to which all the apparently isolated details of incident and explanation lead. If the work is to be a unified novel, there must exist some climax, some point where the opposing forces meet and reveal their relationships to one another and to the action as a whole. Action is that characteristic which distinguishes a narrative from other forms of expression. If this action portrayed is not unified, the work cannot be a unified narrative nor, therefore, a novel. This necessary structural unity, this theme, need not, of course, be derived from external, physical action, as in the conventional novel; it may originate from such areas as characters, setting, point of view, reactions, or even from apparent structurallessness of action. The following comment of Samuel Johnson on unity of action for the drama is equally fitting for the novel:

It is necessary that of every play the chief action should be single; for since a play represents some transaction, through its regular maturation to its final event, two

---

Forster, Aspects of the Novel, 26, 86.
actions equally important must evidently constitute two plays.²

Cranford has not as yet been conceded the unity of a novel. The critics have all viewed its action as being isolated and unconnected incidents merely placed next to one another. The book would thus be an aggregate, a mixture, not a unified compound. Even those critics who emphasize realism in details of character and setting have been able to grant Cranford only a vague unity in tone or point of view, a unity that amounts to little more than a statement that the book was written by a single author whose point of view was consistent in its perception of environment. There is as yet no claim that the incidents may have any point of convergence, that any climax lies behind all the fragments, that some common meaning is supporting all the details of character, setting, and action, that any meaning binds together the loose ends of the book. Some such unifying thread must be found, however, if Cranford is to be considered a unified novel, if the book is not to have its only value in being, as some suggest, a mirror of its times.³

A piece of writing which merely reflects and transcribes life may have interest as a social document. It may be a rare piece of indirect mental autobiography giving insight into the thoughts of a famous writer. It is not, however, to be considered as a novel, since, as a mirror, it lacks a form of its own. As Lubbock notes, a book, to be a novel, must have some


³See pp. 33-35.
form or design, because a novel is a work of art, not some sort of outgrowth of nature itself.\footnote{Percy Lubbock, \textit{The Craft of Fiction}, Cape, 1921, 9-10.}

In proving that a novel must not be merely a transcription of life, Lubbock reflects that such a transcription is in fact impossible. The contents of the book are not something which a reader can find produced in nature; the book is only, physically, a collection of many words and chapters. This presence of words does not explain why the words and chapters have been gathered together because "for the broad and simple effect . . . the chapters of the book refuse to adapt themselves, they will not draw together and announce a reason for their collection." There must be some reason why these incidents were selected and gathered together and placed next to one another. It is not that the events actually happened in the way reported. The author's vision of the events has intervened. Otherwise, the novel would not be a novel, but history, journal, or autobiography. Lubbock goes on to ask for what end the author has, consciously or subconsciously, shown the panorama of life portrayed in the novel. Lubbock answers as follows:

\begin{quote}
The question . . . is not answered, it is only postponed if we say that the picture of life itself is all the moral, all the meaning that we are entitled to ask for. It is of the picture that we speak; its moral is its design, and without design the scattered scenes will make no picture.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, 52-3.}
\end{quote}
Another critic, John Holloway, sums up this idea quite clearly when he says:

With all the world before him, where to choose, choose the author must, and his choice almost inevitably has moral implications.\(^6\)

The same argument is repeated quite convincingly in many modern criticisms on the theory of the novel. A collection of criticism on "form" in the novel rejects, both explicitly and implicitly, novels that are mere transcriptions of life for the sake of transcription. Especially noteworthy for frank statements in this regard are the essays by William Van O'Connor, Mark Schorer, Allen Tate, Lionel Trilling, and C. H. Rickword.\(^7\)

Editor William Van O'Connor illustrates the critical tone of all five as follows:

\[ ... \text{he who makes us understand and feel differently is distinguished in his capacity for devising and probing a form in such a manner that his perceptions are not only objectified but enlarged and qualified through his having to discover the relationships of meanings within the limits of his form. The form, a symbolic structure, is not a transcript of life; it is a representation which equips us to understand more fully aspects of existence outside of art. Form is the objectifying of idea, and its excellence, it would seem, depends upon its appropriateness to the idea.} \]\(^8\)

Mark Schorer sums up the whole problem well when he says:

Modern criticism has shown us that to speak of content as such is not to speak of art at all, but of experience;


and that it is only when we speak of achieved content, the form, the work of art as a work of art, that we speak as critics. The difference between content, or experience, and achieved content, or art, is technique.9

Although his article goes on to show that more than theme and narrative outline must be included under the form of a novel, Schorer finally observes that some one idea or design is actually what is at the root of form or technique, when he says this:

Technique is really what T. S. Eliot means by "convention": any selection, structure, or distortion, any form or rhythm imposed upon the world of action; by means of which, it should be added, our apprehension of the world of action is enriched or renewed. In this sense, everything is technique which is not the lump of experience itself, and one cannot properly say that a writer has no technique, or that he eschews technique, for being a writer, he cannot do so. We can speak of good and bad technique, of adequate and inadequate, of technique which serves the novel's purpose or disserves.10

The action and other detail must, therefore, serve the purpose of the novel. Detail of any sort, if presented merely for its own sake, cannot be allowed as desirable. Form must unify.

A book does not contain real life; no artifact can or does. The writer has only an account of some events that may have happened in real life. He has excerpts from life. Why did the author choose what he did? What guided his choice? Why did he narrate certain incidents and omit others? If a pattern can be found in the incidents selected by the author, if it can be

10Schorer, "Technique as Discovery," Forms, 11.
established that the author chose certain types of incidents and omitted other types, then it must be assumed that the author chose\textsuperscript{11} to narrate what he did because he was trying to stress the common trait which all the narrated details have in common. The author's purpose in choosing what he did was to communicate thereby what he saw as a characteristic common to all the details he chose. Otherwise one must suppose that order can come about by chance and without purpose.

The author has selected certain things to narrate because, when taken together, these will convey some meaning which he is trying to communicate. Perhaps the author has made his selections subconsciously, as a result of an almost instinctive grasp of how to arrange materials so that they illustrate meaning. Selection has still occurred. Perhaps the author has not selected

\textsuperscript{11}The place of choice in the creation of a work of art is a rather involved problem. It should at least be noted, however briefly, that modern studies, some of them mentioned here, have proposed that some kind of selectivity is used in the creation of a work of art. The author may have decided, as mentioned earlier, to narrate everything visible; the portrayal of a lack of pattern in life may then be his structure. The author has, however, exerted his will, his power of selecting. He may even have done his selecting subconsciously; selection was still present. If the work should lose all pattern, even subconscious pattern, the work would certainly cease to be a unified narrative. It would have lost the distinguishing characteristic of a narrative. For a narrative some kind of patterned action is necessary. Lacking pattern, the narrative would become factual accounting of events; lacking action, the work would cease to be narrating anything.

Although Mrs. Gaskell could hardly have been aware of these clarifications of later critics, her writings should still show evidence of selectivity at work (at least subconscious selectivity), if the critical theories discussed here are correct and do indeed have a foundation in the timeless nature of things.
consistently, or consistently enough for the pattern to emerge. If so, he may have been deficient as an author; he may have failed to communicate his outlook. His work may not be unified. If it is to convey his message, however, the author's writing must have a pattern;\textsuperscript{12} that pattern indicates the meaning. The novel possesses theme and structure interrelated.

The author must be consistent in his selection as he represents his characters and what they do. He must behave consistently in selection and "use the facts in accordance with his purpose. He had a reason in taking them in hand, a design which he meant to express. . . ."\textsuperscript{13} The reason why the author has placed together in a novel incidents, characters, and other detail is that he has a message to convey through consistent selection -- dramatically, by the shape of the pattern of action (and other details). The author's outlook can be shown clearly to the reader when the reader is made to realize why the author chose to narrate this particular type of detail, when the reader generalizes to discover what all the details have in common, when the reader is made to realize that the author chose to narrate this particular type of detail because all the isolated facts had in common a particular characteristic, the importance of which the author was trying to show.

\textsuperscript{12}Thus, it would be inaccurate to say that any abstract idea suggested by the author as theme or any moral bias (or "moral," as might be distinguished from theme) expressed in a portion or whole of a work -- it would be inaccurate to say that these in themselves could unify a novel. It is still necessary that there be some sort of narrative structure, not necessarily chronological or conventional as explained earlier (p. 16 and p. 20), to unify the work.

\textsuperscript{13}Lubbock, The Craft, 57.
To say that a piece of writing is merely a "picture of life" or that it is a mirror of certain phases of a certain type of life is to judge that the piece of writing in question is description or some other form of writing, not narrative. To say that Cranford or other works of Mrs. Gaskell are unified novels because they faithfully transcribe life\(^1\) is to say that they are inartistic, lack form, are not narratives. A work may give the reader a picture of life, but if it does no more than this, it does not possess story, narrative structure with thematic unity, the work is not a novel. Characterization, even of a whole community, is not narrative. Tone is not narrative. The explanation of a region, geographically or psychologically, is not narrative. They may be parts of a narrative. If there is no action present, however, or if the incidents are just many actions without being part of an over-all sequence of action -- if only a "picture of life" is given, the work is not a unified novel, whatever else it may be.

A judgment that a work is merely a "picture of life" implies that the author has selected details in such a way as to illustrate the characteristics of a particular locale, or of life in general. Such a judgment also implies that in performing his selection the author's only concern as regards continuity and consistency was to make sure that all the details chosen described the particular type of place in question; the author was apparently unconcerned with any pattern when he narrated various incidents. The piece

---

\(^1\) See pp. 34-36. The insistence of many critics, especially as regards Cranford, necessitates a detailed investigation of the "mirror of life" theory.
of writing being examined does not have any design in the selection of any events narrated, only in details of description or of explanation. Such a piece of writing, if unified at all, would have only the unity of an idyll or of description, not the unity of a narrative. To hold, therefore, that Cranford or any other writing is merely a picture of life in a particular time and place is to hold that the book is not a novel, for it lacks unity in its action and theme. The good novel; the true novel, reveals by the selection of all the details an outlook on life. The novel has a theme unifying its action. The details of the book, especially the action, allow the reader to infer the theme; the theme shows the significance and relevance of all the action and other details presented.

Since the word "theme" is often used in different senses, clarification and definition of the term are necessary. Frequently one will find people speaking of "themes" in a work. C. W. M. Johnson, for example, does this in an essay on Proust. ¹⁵ Instead of saying that a narrative has a number of "themes," it would be more proper and accurate to use in such a context the word "motifs." A lesser and subordinate judgment on life, a minor idea repeated in a novel, should be called a motif, or perhaps an idea-rhythm if it is often repeated. It should not be called a theme unless it is the basic outlook or idea of the piece of writing. Theme may be defined as "the

¹⁵ C. W. M. Johnson, "Tone in A la recherche du temps perdu," Forms of Modern Fiction, 209.
dominating idea implicit in the whole composition." The author is embodying his ideas in "living form, instead of stating them directly," and "with every touch he lays on his subject he shows what he thinks of it." Every detail in the author's "selected fragment of life is purely the representation of his view, his judgment, his opinion of it." Theme is, therefore, that idea or outlook on life which the author (consciously or not) intends to convey to the reader by having that view on life serve as the criterion in the author's selection of what details are included in the narrative and how they are arranged. Obviously, if theme is to mean the dominating idea of the whole work, there can be only one theme per unified work. Otherwise, if one characteristic were to qualify some details for inclusion, and other characteristics should qualify still other details for admission, the matter presented would not have anything entirely in common; the unity of the work would be destroyed. If a work is allowed to have several themes, one is faced with the situation which Samuel Johnson indicated and to which the Gaskell critics have been reduced as regards Cranford; one must pronounce the writing to be works instead of work, wholes instead of whole, a disunified single attempt or several short attempts. "What was the novelist's intention in a phrase?" This is the unifying theme of the novel.

18 Ibid., 41-2.
In seeking to determine the theme of a novel, several methods may be used. The author may, as Hawthorne often does for example, clearly state the theme himself. The most usual method of determining theme, however, is to observe the basic action or conflict of the story. Even if the author does indicate his theme, in fact, the reader must still check this information against the story itself. If the theme is the reason for selection of everything in the book, one must be able to discover the theme by observing the central happening or conflict. What kind of force is struggling or contrasting itself against what other kind of force? Who wins? How? Who wins in every respect, on each level of the conflict, especially on the most important and significant level? One ought, then, to do what is necessary to act or to have the qualities of the winner -- or to act in some ways like one opponent and in some ways like the other, if the conflict was won on one level but lost on another. A statement to this effect would convey the theme of the novel, as determined by and determining the form of events in the novel.  

In a work where the basic conflict is obscured or where (as in Cranford) it seems so obscured as to be almost non-existent, however, such

---

19 The statements here, in this entire discussion, describe the process of finding theme rather baldly and in the over-simplified terms of clear-cut war and victory. The pages following examine what is to be done with works which refuse to tolerate such dissection.

20 This statement assumes, of course, contrary to the opinions of the critics, that Cranford does have a unity, a single basic action and a unifying theme.
a method for determining theme is of not much immediate value. If the theme can be discovered by some other method, however, one could reveal the basic conflict and narrative structure by performing the operation in reverse. One could argue that if the author is showing the truth or necessity of a certain principle, he must show victory or ascendancy in the narrative for a force or person illustrating that principle, a defeat or unhappiness for whatever does not follow the proposed maxim. Thus, from theme, one can reason to conflict and thence to narrative structure and unity 21 -- or, if the action refuses to fit in with the known theme, the book may be declared disunified. This separate method of determining theme ought, therefore, to be examined carefully.

Since theme is the principle by which the author, perhaps subconsciously, selects and presents his materials, it is possible to discover the theme by analyzing the small pieces of the narrative instead of the basic action alone. What do all of the incidents, characters, even tones of vocabulary and images, have in common? What these things have in common will show why the author chose them, however dissimilar they may seem at first glance. What is being sought here is a possible framework of meaning which may be inferred from the selectivity of the whole narrative.

The theme came first in the author's mind and determined his process of selection and treatment. Theme is, therefore, "implicit" in the work. Says

21 Such a process is carried on at length later in this paper, pp. 108-117.
Steinmann:

The new novel . . . often has what used to be called 'a moral' and is nowadays called 'a theme'; it has some sort of generalization -- usually moral -- to make about life. But in the new novel . . . the theme is not the subject of exposition -- for the new novel permits no exposition -- but it is somehow implicit or figured in the narrative or drama.22

For the reader this process is reversed. The reader does not begin with the theme ordinarily; theme is discovered in analyzing the selection involved in the inclusion of various details such as these: type of incident, general arrangement in the book, imagery, local contrast, obvious and thus intentional incongruity. The theme -- and therefore the basic unity of the work -- may not be obvious. The problem of finding the strand of thematic unity may be complicated because the author has made the theme quite implicit, hidden dramatically in the details; it must be carefully sought out by making inferences based on the noticed repetition of similar characteristics, on incongruities -- on whatever indicates selectivity at work in all the many and varied details of the narrative.

Theme can be found by searching out "unrealistic" absurdities which impress certain types of incidents, images, motifs, and so on, on the reader. In reading a narrative, the reader may find some normal situation repeated more often than reality could bear. The reader's attention is drawn to this distortion of reality; the author is using his right of selection, his

artistry, to produce the distortion. In such a situation the author is not reflecting life or raw experience. His vision has so ruled and shaped reality that in his selection the author has distorted the way things actually are by unrealistic repetition of a certain type of normal situation. The reader begins to seek an explanation for the unnatural frequency of what he has observed. He begins to wonder why he has been shown this unnatural repetition. Real life does not pattern itself so neatly. Holloway puts the idea in these words:

Its [the modern novel's] inevitable way to guide the reader in a devious or less obvious way, of course, is its structure, the author's selection and ordering of topics. With all the world before him, where to choose, choose the author must, and his choice almost inevitably has moral implication.23

Besides the unusual repetition of normal types of situations, the repetition of words, images, or groups of images may sufficiently distort bare reality as to call for an explanation. Just as the reader must look to something besides chance to account for the unnatural repetition of normal situations described above, so must he likewise search for the reason why the author should have so often repeated certain types of words or images. Again the answer is found in realizing that the outlook on life possessed by the author caused these distortions of reality by determining what the

author would select -- this time as regards wording. The wording of a narrative is just as important as characters or motifs, for "a novel, like a poem, is made up of words; there is nothing else one can point to." Taken by itself this statement is misleading. There are other things in the narrative to observe: meanings of words, the types of people, events of thoughts. What Leavis and Rickword are trying to show, however, is that words produce several responses in the reader. They may be conveying meaning in ideas presented or situations described and narrated. There may be patterns in the repeating incidents, motifs, and so on. But there may also be significant patterns in the very words which set forth these other aspects of the work. A word may be so often repeated that its true meaning is gone and it acquires another special significance for the story. The author may have bound "together his imaginative effects by subtly recurrent images of a thematic kind." So great may become the effect of the recurrence of words or imagery that the reader's attention is aroused. Such "iterative imagery" demands explanation as does any other distortion of reality in the book, for these things show the author's artistry at work as he makes

24 It should have become obvious by this time that these "unrealistic absurdities" are not being condemned; as explained earlier, they are a necessary ingredient to art, the way art differs from experience or reality.


selections to suit his pattern. The "story becomes, indeed, a dramatic poem, and to read it properly one must assess the role of language precisely as one would if public form of the work were poetic." There are varying degrees of carrying on this repetition of words or images, of course -- from the hammering of a single word to the weaving of Heilman's "dramatic poem."\(^\text{27}\)

Finally, the author may draw attention to his theme not only by repetition of normal reality or of wording, but also by placing before the reader an incongruous situation for which a realistic or literal interpretation is impossible. In this case, it is not repetition (or repetition alone) of a normal type of situation that distorts reality and poses the demand for a further explanation; rather the reader is presented with a situation which is somehow unbelievable literally, even though it may only happen or be narrated once. Holloway describes this method well in these words:

Many novels need a special mode of reading. The incidents in them which strike us as improbable or strained or grotesque invite (this is not to say that they always deserve) the kind of response that we are accustomed to give, say, to the Dover Cliff scene in *Lear*. Admittedly the author has local failures; but incidents like these are intrinsically at one remove from the probable and realistic. Almost, it is necessary for them to be unrealistic in order that their other dimension of meaning, their relevance to the larger rhythms of the work shall transpire. Again and again, it is these larger rhythms of the work which finally expand into the total movement of the novel, transmitting the author's sense of life,

\(^{27}\)Robert B. Heilman, "The Turn of the Screw as Poem," *Forms of Modern Fiction*, op. cit., 213. In this essay Heilman illustrates thoroughly this approach as it was used by Henry James.
the forces that operate through it, the values that chart it out and make it what it is.\textsuperscript{28}

Some kind of distortion of reality impresses on the reader that the words of the novel are meant to have a larger meaning than their mere face value. There is more going on than an account of incidents or of people. There is a pattern to the incidents, a fate for the people. The necessary hints reveal that the basic meaning of the words and incidents must be expanded, as Forster states:

Expansion. That is the idea the novelist must cling to. Not completion. Not rounding off but opening out. . . . and when we have finished does not every item . . . \textit{[of War and Peace, or any good novel]} lead a larger existence than was possible at the time?\textsuperscript{29}

What has been said in this chapter about the nature and function of theme can be used with value in a study of \textit{Cranford}. The book is not considered to be a unified novel. This chapter suggests some ideas on the relationship of unity and theme. A focus may be found in a novel for the many scattered incidents, motifs, images, traits of character, and other detail. This focus is the deeper meaning of the novel, the theme, which must be present, unifying the main action and every detail, if the novel is to be at all unified and valuable as a work of art. This theme is discovered by the reader in several ways, usually by observing the outcome of the main conflict. It may also stand revealed when the reader is forced to make a

\textsuperscript{28}John Holloway, "Hardy's Major Fiction," From \textit{Jane Austen}, \textit{op. cit.}, 245.

\textsuperscript{29}E. M. Forster, \textit{Aspects}, 169.
generalization on realizing that the author has exercised selection to produce unrealities -- repetitions of normal types or of distortions, some patterns of motif or movement -- unrealities that force the reader to interpret the novel in the way the author intended. For these unrealities are actually a higher and truer reality, the artistic form or design, the vision of life, the outlook which the author wanted to convey and because of which he selected what he did and arranged the details in such a fashion. Theme is the generality which, emerging from the particulars, unifies the work, brings together the scattered incidents and all other particulars so that a general structure is made to come forth. Once this theme is discovered, any previously concealed dramatic outlines should become clear. The theme should indicate whether or not there is any relationship uniting the incidents set forth, whether or not any novel does possess a sequence of actions proceeding to any significant point. This chapter provides an apparatus for judging whether Cranford is unified.
CHAPTER III

CRITICAL OPINION ON MRS. GASKELL'S USUAL THEME

As already observed, it is better to do some preliminary work outside the book itself before one attempts to examine Cranford for theme. It is better to determine first what Mrs. Gaskell's usual themes are, for she may have used one theme throughout most of her works, and again in Cranford. In trying to find Mrs. Gaskell's usual theme, one useful method of approach is to investigate what her critics have had to say in this regard.

Most critics have expressed, at least briefly, what they feel to be Mrs. Gaskell's basic theme, the thought central to most of her writings. A. W. Ward holds that the "experiences which came very near home for her were transmuted into kindly lessons of resignation and of charity for all men."\(^1\) A. C. Ward has her holding up "the Human Ideal directed by pity, charity, simplicity, justice, and love."\(^2\) Florence McLoughlin agrees that in the artistic development of the stories, especially in the portrayal of servants, Mrs. Gaskell is trying to "symbolize practical Christianity" at

---

\(^1\) A. W. Ward, *CREL*, XIII, 412.

E. A. Baker holds that "Mrs. Gaskell had been heart-struck by the atrocious results of unrestrained individualism, and exposes errors, frauds, and injustices in the contrasting light of her humane picturing of character and personal relations." Coblentz decides that Mrs. Gaskell's main concern is to be faithful to herself and to her subject.

Ffrench explains more fully Mrs. Gaskell's theme. She sees Mrs. Gaskell as preaching a sense of fairness and "belief in the ultimate triumph of moral values," preaching "the idea of understanding . . . which fired her early stage of social indignation and mellowed her later period of detached and observant humor."

They [her writings] embody her own remedy for the attainment of human happiness. Her prescription . . . was . . . compounded from three basic elements. It contained Faith, Hope, and Charity. To her as well, the greatest of these was Charity.

Again, merely shifting the approach to this "understanding theme," Ffrench holds that Mrs. Gaskell's "Englishness" is her chief quality. Ffrench

---


6 Ffrench, Mrs. Gaskell, 78, 107.

7 Ffrench, "Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell," From Jane Austen, 140-1. Notice that this term "Englishness" does not imply insularity, but merely "the cult of the English village, in its 'olde worlde' sense" (141).
explains that this Englishness can be partly ascribed to a universal wish to share the charmed and protected existence that has vanished from the civilized world. For security in an ordered society is the mainspring of Mrs. Gaskell's own convictions: thus she writes the more willingly on this theme. 8

Hopkins echoes the same opinion, that Mrs. Gaskell's greatest writing is on a "rural theme, life, and characters." Mrs. Gaskell is a portrayer of village life like Goldsmith, Crabbe, and Austen, except that there is an "extra spiritual aura" that shows Mrs. Gaskell's own communion with nature -- a Victorian realism. 9 Again, Franklin Baker likes her "old-world quaintness," and faithful rendering of the rural community, but especially her lovableness, tenderness, and essential goodness that "makes one in love with life." 10 Finally, Haldane finds Mrs. Gaskell as being in some way an interpreter of the "average bounds of human life . . . interpreting it and showing its true pathos," "depicting the truth just as she sees it." 11

All these critics have, thus, a slightly different opinion of just exactly what is the basic theme of Mrs. Gaskell's writings. All insist that there is a common message running throughout her writings, however. All these critics place this theme somewhere in this vague area: Mrs. Gaskell gives a sympathetic and Christian sense of understanding humanity as she

8 Ibid., 140.
9 Hopkins, Eliz. Gaskell, 323.
11 Haldane, Mrs. Gaskell, 305, 307.
reflects a quaint way of life. For several reasons such a judgment is hardly satisfactory as a theme.

First, the judgment of these critics cannot be accepted because it is merely another way of presenting the mirror-of-life argument discussed in the last chapter. To say that Mrs. Gaskell is some sort of mirror, no matter how sympathetic and flattering a mirror, is not of much aid in trying to place Cranford or any other work as a unified novel; nothing is thus said about theme and narrative structure. All these critics, in some degree, see Mrs. Gaskell's works as photographs of whatever quaint ways Mrs. Gaskell happened to witness. Haldane emphasizes that Mrs. Gaskell is kind enough to snap the picture, however, only when the subject is in its best pose. The other critics differ from Haldane and from each other mainly as to just when the subject is in its best pose; that is, they differ basically in how much emphasis is to be placed on Mrs. Gaskell's understanding and sympathetic temperament. But all such discussion is inconsequential. Temperament may be the basis for a manner of forming thoughts and of telling about the subject. Temperament does not, however, make these judgments about the subject matter. Temperament alone does not propose theme. To hold that any work of Mrs. Gaskell is merely a photographic panorama of Cranford or English village life and people would be to return via a different route to the original condemnation; it would be to hold again that Cranford (this time together with all of Mrs. Gaskell's works) is not a single narrative work of art worthy of any merit.

With such opinions as regards the theme, it is no wonder that these critics saw Cranford as disunified. What is interesting is that they found
only Cranford disunified and not many of the other works as well. A natural question arises here, therefore, as to why the unity of Cranford needs defense when these critics find no problem in according Mrs. Gaskell's other works unity. If the critics have chosen the wrong theme, how does their theme satisfy them when they examine the structure of the other works, but not when they analyze Cranford? There is only one answer possible for such a question: either Cranford is actually not unified, or in Cranford Mrs. Gaskell's artistry has done its most clever job in indirectness. In the other novels sufficient obvious indications were evident for the reader to form an easy judgment about meaning, even though Mrs. Gaskell might have buried in some of these works a deeper meaning which the superficial reading neglected. In Cranford, however, the reader can draw no satisfaction as regards meaning until he has searched the clues again and again. As mentioned earlier, the apparently incongruent unrealities can force the reader to search for a deeper meaning. If Cranford is unified, Mrs. Gaskell must have made use of just such a type of artistry in the book. If in analyzing the book one could find that this subtle, indirect manner of revealing structure and theme has been used well, then the confusion and aimlessness of the critics at this point would have proved quite helpful, for resulting from the confusion would be a recognition of a Cranford whose artistic worth had been enhanced considerably.

To repeat, these critics maintain that Mrs. Gaskell's usual theme is that she gives a sympathetic and Christian sense of understanding as she reflects a quaint way of life. The second reason why this statement cannot be accepted is that such a statement simply cannot be a theme because it
does not lend itself to being what, by definition, a theme must be. This statement, with what it suggests, is not a generalization. This statement is an account of Mrs. Gaskell's manner of looking at life; it describes her usual mood and point of view; it is not the judgment she pronounces on what she is beholding. Haldane seems to sense this, and she tries to stretch her statement with vague wording. The result of this effort, however, is inconclusive. We are not told what interpretation Mrs. Gaskell does put on the "average bounds of human life." The only interpretation offered is that Mrs. Gaskell has given "the truth just as she sees it"; we are only offered a mass of particulars, no generalization.

The critics making this assessment of Mrs. Gaskell's usual theme are, nevertheless, only being consistent. As observed already, these critics insist that Cranford lacks sufficient unity to be a novel. They insist that Cranford does get unified somehow by point of view. Here they are merely calling this point of view the theme (this time of all Mrs. Gaskell's works). Once again, such a type of unity is irrelevant if one is searching for essential unity in the work. It does not give the "dominating idea implicit in the whole work." It gives only the author's manner of looking, both in real life and on paper, at that about which she is going to make her judgment. It gives only one of her ways of expressing theme, not the theme itself.

To give these critics' statements about Mrs. Gaskell's usual theme some real value, one must put them into a more workable form. One may infer from

---

12 See above, p. 24.
their statements what these critics would have thought was Mrs. Gaskell's judgment about life -- if they had pressed the matter far enough to arrive at such an opinion. McLoughlin comes closest to making a criticism representative of all these writers when she suggests that Mrs. Gaskell advocates a "practical Christianity." The usual theme of Mrs. Gaskell would then be this: man must be a Christian who applies his faith fully to everyday living. Such an opinion of Mrs. Gaskell's usual theme is really the old mirror-of-life argument once again. There is little difference in saying that Mrs. Gaskell's purpose is to portray the various ordinary Englishmen or various common rural villagers, and in saying that Mrs. Gaskell's goal was to describe various people who lived their Christianity. In either case Mrs. Gaskell is not an artist selecting; she is merely a mirror, reflecting one thing or another -- Englishmen who are Christians or Christians who live in English villages. No clarification has been obtained. The trouble with such a statement of theme, as with all mirror-of-life "themes," is that it is too general until it becomes too specific. Man should be a "practical Christian"? This is good advice, but what does it mean? When the critics try to explain what they mean by this, they lapse off into vague and impossible catalogues of all the virtues -- charity; faith, hope and charity; pity, charity, simplicity, justice, love, resignation, tenderness, essential goodness. This is merely a drift back into the mirror-everything way of looking at the novels. Man should be this individual person or that kind of specific character? This could hardly be the theme. Such advice can hardly be called a dominant idea running through the whole work. If the suggestions of these critics are to be of practical use, something more exact must be
found, some specific moral rule which Mrs. Gaskell is urging. The Christian
life in general will not do. Which virtue or aspect of the Christian life
does she especially promote as man's course? She is certainly not suggesting
merely the Christian life as such, or these many critics would have been able
to decide just what that means, without falling back on the mirror idea. The
Christian life cannot mean being just like Mattie or Ruth or Dr. X. If this
is all that Mrs. Gaskell proposes, then much effort has been wasted on her by
many of her interpreters. If the judgment of popular history is more accur-
ate, however, then Mrs. Gaskell has a more pointed message to deliver.

Clara Schnurer has treated at length many of the major aspects of
Mrs. Gaskell's writings. Compared to the other critics mentioned above, she
has had much more to say about them in general. In summarizing her conclu-
sions, Schnurer finds that Mrs. Gaskell's main preoccupation was with the
ills dividing the "two nations," rich and poor England. Mrs. Gaskell had
decided that the main cause for all the dissension was non-conformity in
three main areas: in religious loyalties, in standards of morality, which
were always shifting (especially for the two sexes), and in attitudes towards
lying. Mrs. Gaskell's cure for the evil thus diagnosed is love. She believ-
ed in the doctrine of consequences -- that the results of good and evil are
unavoidable. The good man will find happiness, while the evil man will be
punished. The punishment was often that of conscience, although it usually
came in a quite emphatic external way also. 13

Schnurer goes on to show that since offenders cannot escape punishment, there is no need for one member of society to hate another for his evils and to try to punish him. Love should replace this hate. Socio-economic ills, religious antagonisms, shifting standards of morality all exist because neither side is willing to understand the other. Understanding requires love and trust. All men are capable of responding to kindly treatment and friendly advances. Trust will breed trustworthiness, if someone first has the courage to break out of the old ruts. 14 Love and its consequent trust, irresistible then, will do away with divisive religious antagonisms and the need for petty lying both in word and in social convention.

Schnurer can be said to present not so much a proposal of theme different from that proposed by the other critics, as a clarification of the vagueness noted in the others. While the others claim that Mrs. Gaskell has an "understanding mind," Schnurer proposes that Mrs. Gaskell is concerned with bringing about an understanding between the factions of a divided society. Here we begin to see purpose, and eventually theme. At times Schnurer echoes the words of the other critics as she explains that

13 Clara Schnurer, "Mrs. Gaskell's Fiction," Unpublished Doctor's Thesis, Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh, 1932, 133-139. It would be well at this point to interrupt Schnurer and to take note of the brief statement of Whitfield about theme, for he had already proposed the idea which Schnurer begins to develop. Whitfield bears Mrs. Gaskell announcing that accordingly as people are courageous and kind they will share in inward happiness, and that lacking these their lives will be miserable (Whitfield, Mrs. Gaskell, 212).

14 Schnurer, "Mrs. Gaskell's Fiction," 133-139.
Mrs. Gaskell's solution is nothing more than the Golden Rule. Christianity is the thing which will wipe out civilization's ills with its healing love and trust. This is not a nameless, faceless Christianity as in the others, however; Schnurer differs from the other critics in that she names the characteristics of Christianity which Mrs. Gaskell stresses -- or rather, the qualities which for Mrs. Gaskell are typical of Christianity, and how they will reshape things to produce the desired result.

After she has set forth so clearly her opinion of Mrs. Gaskell's usual theme, Schnurer goes on to consider what she calls one of the "subservient themes," lying. She admits that the idea of lying preoccupied Mrs. Gaskell often, especially in some of the more famous works, Cranford, North and South, Sylvia's Lovers, and Ruth. The problem of the exact place of lying in the thinking of Mrs. Gaskell, however, seems to puzzle Schnurer. This is not at first evident, but one begins to notice this difficulty on an examination in greater detail of Schnurer's explanations.

First, Schnurer observes the following:

Mrs. Gaskell does not condemn all prevarication. She recognizes various degrees of lying. There are justifiable hoaxes and excusable subterfuges. Serious intentions to deceive, however, -- even when they are unselfish, -- self-seeking lies, which affect the relationship of two or three individuals, and more far-reaching lies, which grow beyond the control of the perpetrator, she denounces.

---

15 Ibid., 108.

16 Schnurer gives the matter about one-fourth of the space devoted to a discussion of theme in all the works of Mrs. Gaskell.
Deliberate hoax is fine, and it is a "valuable weapon" in the "good humored war on stupidity." Being so preposterous as to be harmless -- and Mrs. Jamieson is fair game -- Peter's gift for exaggeration about his Indian adventures is acceptable; the falsehoods are acceptable both to pacify Mrs. Jamieson and to bring peace to Cranford. The little subterfuges of the Cranford ladies to hide poverty are also humorous and harmless enough, and they are so transparent that they deceive no one.17

Yet Mrs. Gaskell, Schnurer finds, often condemns a lie. "In North and South Margaret Hale tells a falsehood in order to protect her brother. The circumstances mitigate the enormity of her crime; nevertheless, Margaret suffers profound self-reproach." Lying is the tragic flaw in Margaret's character, although she is not self-seeking. Philip Hepburn's lie is a selfish one, however. His suffering is, therefore, greater. Sylvia's reproach and resentment blinds her from the realization that she has come to love him. "A graver offense is the lie told in Ruth, for it grows into a tissue of lies."18

Schnurer's examples show that Mrs. Gaskell sometimes allows, but usually strictly condemns, lying. As she sums up, however, Schnurer changes position. She claims that a lie never remains hidden, that the punishment is all the more severe if it is delayed. Then, approvingly quoting Ruth, Schnurer offers the following as Mrs. Gaskell's basic attitude towards lying:


18 Ibid., 128-9.
Nothing you can say can upbraid me like my own conscience, no degradation you can inflict, by word or deed, can come up to the degradation I have suffered for years, being a party to a deceit--even for a good end."19

Thus, Schnurer asserts, both here directly and later indirectly in saying that evildoers are always punished, that Mrs. Gaskell sometimes allows but always condemns lying!

A second indication of Schnurer's difficulties arises as she examines the lie motif more closely. Schnurer finds that Mrs. Gaskell deals not only with the consequences of falsehood but also with what causes lying. Especially in *Ruth*, Schnurer finds Mrs. Gaskell condemning the society which encourages lying by its rigid adherence to mere empty conventions. Conventions that have no purpose, that are meaningless--such are just another kind of lie, this time with actions instead of with words. Divided society, empty of the necessary love and trust, causes men to live by these vain habits of conformity, causes men to live what is not the truth. For this reason Schnurer decides that lying is just subservient to the greater theme of condemning society. But again here, not all lies are bad; the artificial social conventions of Cranford may be tolerated since they are harmless.20

Once again, Schnurer finds an example of lying that is not punished.

To organize the problem here, we may say that there are three major difficulties with Schnurer's original and excellent criticism. First, if

20Schnurer, 130-2.
lying is only a subservient "theme," a motif, why has the critic devoted to it such a disproportionate amount of space? Secondly, Schnurer contradicts herself several times when she tries to estimate what for Mrs. Gaskell was the guilt involved in lying. Finally, Mrs. Gaskell is seen as condemning society because it forces people to lie by following dead conventions, while approving of supposedly "harmless" social conventions of Cranford. Yet with all this, Mrs. Gaskell is supposed to be proclaiming the inviolability of the doctrine of consequences of acts.

What is the reason for this triple ambiguity in Schnurer's position? If the reason is that Schnurer did not fully understand the importance of lying in the thinking of Mrs. Gaskell, the difficulties can be explained as follows.

First of all, Schnurer may have given so much space to the lying motif because she sensed that the idea was somehow more important than she could immediately see. In other words, lying may not be just "subservient to the greater theme" of attacking the evils of society. Mrs. Gaskell may be attacking lying directly as the fault in society's conformism. The value of living the truth may be Mrs. Gaskell's major preoccupation, and thus entitled to the space Schnurer gave it. Social injustices, their causes and results could be considered as one form falsehood in living may take. Several things would lend credence to this theory. Even Schnurer allows that Mrs. Gaskell could easily have had an interest in lying separate from its social implications. This interest could have arisen from the popular theology of the day and from Mrs. Gaskell's pious Unitarian household
training. Lying could thus, in Mrs. Gaskell's mind, not only be of vast importance as being both a cause and a result of the social problems; falsehood in living could be the social problem. Schnurer could have pushed further her own conclusions to show that just as a lack of love and trust destroys understanding and makes people lie, so too falseness itself makes the necessary love and trust impossible -- makes personal relationships based on such untrusting foundations into a kind of living lie themselves. If Mrs. Gaskell's attitude towards lying were consistent instead of ambiguous and changing as Schnurer claims, there would be justification for such an analysis and for Schnurer's unexplained emphasis on the problem. Thus, an investigation of Schnurer's accusations concerning the consistency of Mrs. Gaskell's attitude in specific cases is now necessary.

The only examples Schnurer gives of Mrs. Gaskell's approving of "white lies" are from Cranford. Here Schnurer finds Peter's early capers presenting him with no trouble -- but she leaves unexplained and apparently forgotten Matty's many difficulties without him and the hardships of his own many years of exile. Schnurer finds his tales to Mrs. Jamieson uneventful and acceptable, but they are told only a page or two from the end of the book. There is hardly enough time given for their consequences to become evident. Finally Schnurer finds the lying of social artificiality in Cranford harmless, while in all the other books she had found it tragic. In the face of this alone it would not be improper to suppose that there was no sudden

---

deviation and fault in Mrs. Gaskell in this one book; instead it would be more likely that Schnurer has not fully understood the meaning of *Cranford*, and missed the author's condemnation of falsehood.

With *Cranford* thus interpreted, Schnurer's difficulties would be easily cleared up. There would be no approbation of lying, but an uncompromising disapproval of it throughout the writings of Mrs. Gaskell. Also, if we grant this firm and unambiguous attitude towards lying on the part of Mrs. Gaskell, we might consider lying rather as a dominating idea in Mrs. Gaskell's works - a theme rather than a mere confusing and ambiguous motif.

Ffrench also notices this concern of Mrs. Gaskell with truth and falsehood. She too relegates this concern to the position of a lesser "theme" (i.e., motif), which often recurs throughout Mrs. Gaskell's writings, as do such other motifs and plot elements as disappearing brothers, loyalty of servants and love opportunities missed. Ffrench notices that lies and their consequences play a definite part in the moral aspect of her work, but lying for its own sake and a deliberate analysis of its motives is constantly enlarged on, is not necessarily followed by retribution and is treated objectively and psychologically.

---

22 See Chapter V also, where the exact meaning of *Cranford* is more fully analyzed. There it is shown that lying is condemned throughout the book.

23 Ffrench, *Mrs. Gaskell*, 38-41, 54-7, 75, 80-1, 100-1. These pages all treat of repetitions, parallels, and recurring motifs of which Mrs. Gaskell was unusually fond. None of these others, however, can be said to trigger the main action of any plot. The importance of living the truth is an idea which structure makes much more important than these other repetitions.

This, of course, is much the same position as that of Schnurer as regards both the importance of lying and Mrs. Gaskell's judgment on it.

To prove her point, ffrench then examines the case in *Ruth* of Faith Benson's enjoyment of her lie. Ffrench must admit here, however, that the results are "ultimately catastrophic." Ffrench finally observes that lying is

... not so much the prerogative of the unregenerate as the indulgence of lively imaginations. The importance of telling the truth is of course never minimized, not the consequence of its failure ignored. Yet the impression received, if not one of moral justification, comes occasionally very near to being so.25

Once again one is faced with an ambiguous position with regard to Mrs. Gaskell's attitude towards lying. Either she does condone falsehoods to produce some "good" end, or she does not. Ffrench cannot be allowed to have things both ways, especially when judging one important idea within the same novel.26 Two things also applicable to the same problem in Schnurer, may be said to clear up this matter. As for proof of the facts, only the novel itself can decide the facts. Ffrench must have seen that the lie, even in *Ruth*, is punished. That Mrs. Gaskell allows the teller of falsehoods a short term of prosperity does not mean that she will allow the telling of lies. As ffrench admits, the results of the lie are ultimately catastrophic


26While declaring that Mrs. Gaskell's "attitude towards falsehood" is "at first a rather contradictory aspect of her moral philosophy," ffrench actually goes on to introduce contradiction in the critical estimate of that attitude.
and leave no doubt but that the lie is thought of as a wrong course of action. Secondly, that Mrs. Gaskell is, as usual, sympathetic to Faith Benson or to any other character should not be interpreted as an approval of some evil action that such a character might perform. Ffrench and Schnurer have probably confused Mrs. Gaskell's love even for the liar with an acceptance by her of the lie itself, an acceptance Mrs. Gaskell would never dream of giving. As stated above, Mrs. Gaskell shows the tragic evil of deception. The dramatic action speaks its own piece, no matter how sympathetically events are viewed. The confusion on this point is but one more example of a critic confusing mood and point of view with theme and meaning.

There remain two critics, however, who can find in Mrs. Gaskell's works something more substantial than the platitudes of the first group of critics and less contradictory (or at least, less confusing) than the statements of Schnurer and Ffrench. Sanders, the earliest of these critics, expresses his view in the following way:

In *Wives and Daughters*, as in each of her other long novels, Mrs. Gaskell stressed truthfulness as one of the chief virtues. The theme of the story almost is Molly's saying, "Tell the truth, now and evermore!"

This insight leads Sanders to say that a concern for the truth was what gave Mrs. Gaskell her celebrated gift of sympathetic understanding and provided, thus, the motivation for her social novels. This concern for living the truth and for consequent understanding, it is held, led Mrs. Gaskell to suggest in her last work a supreme understanding through love (the world's only good in her eyes) as a remedy for all human ills.27

---

27 Sanders, *Elizabeth Gaskell*, 137, 139.
This criticism by Sanders fits in especially well with the ideas suggested at the end of the study of the opinions of Schnurer.²⁸ Like Schnurer, Sanders proposes love as Mrs. Gaskell's remedy. Unlike Schnurer, Sanders subordinates, as suggested above by the present author, the message of love to adherence to truth, which is made the dominating theme. Sanders even holds that the lack of a concern for truth is what Mrs. Gaskell saw as the cause for the social evils of her times. This again contrasts sharply with the opinions of the other critics, who had seen a preoccupation for the social problem as triggering all the other interests of Mrs. Gaskell. Sanders, therefore, provides a further help in recognizing Mrs. Gaskell's usual theme. It is unfortunate that he did not devote more space to developing more fully this original approach and to supplying examples of it.

A second major critic who searches quite deeply for Mrs. Gaskell's usual theme is Stebbins. Stebbins does not hesitate to say that Mrs. Gaskell's chief moral (ethical) "preoccupation was with the Lie in its various forms,"²⁹ usually as concealment. Mrs. Gaskell chose this theme because she believed that "deception was the greatest obstacle to that sympathetic understanding which was her panacea for individual and class quarrels." Stebbins spends the greater part of her study proving her point

²⁸See the suggestions offered to solve the complications in Schnurer's criticism, above, pp. 46-48.

and illustrating it by viewing the theme of almost every long and short tale of Mrs. Gaskell -- except Cranford.  

Stebbins gives a number of very convincing examples of the Lie theme at the heart of almost all Mrs. Gaskell's works. "A Dark Night's Work," for example, traces how a girl loses her lover because of a concealment. The tragedy in Sylvia's Lovers is brought on by the loose and deceptive-lover character of Kinkaid and by Phillip's concealment. There are various levels of direct lying, concealment, deceptive action, and action lacking in full integrity in Cousin Phillis. Finally, Stebbins notes, one must be careful lest in a "casual reading the sophistry of her real theme, the Lie, might pass undetected." 

This last statement is quite important. Mrs. Gaskell is an artist. She does not, at least in her better works, so set forth the theme that it haunts the reader and gives him no choice but to recognize it. This is not, as noted earlier, the way of true art, which hides its generality subtly in the particulars.

If the true theme is, as Stebbins suggests, so carefully hidden that only a careful investigation of the dramatic structure reveals it, we have an explanation for the difficulty experienced by so many of the critics in agreeing on precisely what Mrs. Gaskell's usual theme is and in establishing

---

30 This is neglected, perhaps, because Stebbins was unable to fit the loose Cranford in with her theory.

31 Stebbins, Vict. Album, 116, 123, 118.
a theme for Cranford. Most of the critics give a discussion of Mrs. Gaskell's usual theme only a paragraph or two -- hardly sufficient space if the matter is so complex. The evidence gathered in the latter part of this chapter -- opinions of Sanders and Stebbins, the hypotheses to explain the difficulties and contradictions of Schnurer and ffrench -- tends to show that the evaluations of these critics may be gathered together into a single statement, the apparent contradictions having resulted from insufficient explanation or incomplete delving into the problem. It now becomes important to look at the novels themselves to see whether or not their themes substantiate the ideas developed here from a reading of the critics.

What are these conclusions that may be drawn from investigating the critics to discover Mrs. Gaskell's usual theme? Although at first glance the many opinions may appear to be quite contradictory, one opinion is, as observed above, merely an outgrowth of another, a fuller, more precise statement of Mrs. Gaskell's main judgment on life as expressed in her works. Most of the critics hold that Mrs. Gaskell is asking man to lead a Christian life. This is what she asks; she gives more specific indication of what this means, however. Schnurer says that Mrs. Gaskell demands mutual love and trust as a cure for social divisiveness. Again this is true, but again Mrs. Gaskell is more specific. Mrs. Gaskell attacks the trait that is the cause of the lack of love and trust, and that is the manifestation of the evil of her society. Various forms of lying, direct lies, concealments, deception of both self and others either in thought or by words or actions with doubtful or no meaning -- the evils of numerous forms of aberration from truth, the value of fidelity to truth, its rewards, the evils of
falsehood -- these are the major preoccupations of Mrs. Gaskell. Live the truth is her usual theme. Bit by bit, a study of the critics, their opinions and their contradictions and difficulties suggests this.

An investigation of the novels themselves demonstrates conclusively the validity of this point.
CHAPTER IV

THEME IN SELECTED NARRATIVES OF MRS. GASKELL

A careful reading of Mrs. Gaskell's works should reveal to the reader Mrs. Gaskell's concern with the forms of truth and falsehood, if such is, as suggested in the preceding chapter, really her usual theme.

In "Curious If True" the basic tension is the unrest in the mind of the narrator. He is disturbed by those with whom he finds himself, especially by a man who strangely "knows how to judiciously add to, or withhold facts." The cause of the narrator's disturbance is that he does not have the "degree of moral courage" necessary to clear up the fortunate mistake in identity by which he finds shelter and welcome when lost in the forest. Because his concern for self-comfort will not let him halt the deception, the narrator is plagued by what is, after all, only a harmless dream. 1

"Right at Last" has many layers of falsehood, with concealment of knowledge of concealment. Crawford, the servant, almost wins freedom from a deserved charge of serious theft because Brown is concealing from his wife Margaret that his Brown's father had been at fault and received a jail

sentence for forgery.\(^2\) Thus, the father's deceiving as regards his true identity when forging documents results in the son's deceiving his wife as regards his own full identity and family history. At the beginning of the story the reader is impressed with the fact that Brown has not told of his ancestors. This causes some concern to the Frazers, who are unsure of whether or not he is, as a result, an acceptable son-in-law. The author assures the reader, however, that this concern of the Frazers with a concealed ancestry was only false show; the concealed ancestry should not have made Brown any more "vulgar," for the Frazers themselves had lying relatives with spotted histories.\(^3\)

Margaret has learned her husband's secret, but she does not ease his mind by telling him that she knows. Thus, a four-fold chain of deception has been forged. Brown is about to conceal the criminality of his servant because Margaret had concealed knowledge of Brown's concealment of his father's deception -- quite an entanglement, yet not one of character, but only of external happenings. What is the result of this series of deceptions? Not only does Brown's effort to conceal end in his anguish of conscience in allowing a criminal to escape, but even before this his concealment together with Margaret's had darkened their whole life, as Margaret notes: "You have


\(^3\)Ibid., 278-80. Note this word "vulgar," which will appear again quite frequently in \textit{Cranford}. 
been rendered morbid, dear husband, by having something all your life to conceal.

The difficulty of conscience, as well as the unhappiness caused by all this deception, is finally resolved by Margaret's advice that failure to prosecute the guilty servant would be further deception on their part -- a deceiving of society. They may be visited with even worse consequences if they do not now make things "right at last." When they honestly prosecute and suffer the necessary ills of exposure of this and of their previous deceptions, the living of the truth gives them their first solid marital happiness and dispels their moodiness; this is shown in the homey scene with which the story ends. Deception is, therefore, the factor necessary to the conflict of this story and to its resolution.

In "Mr. Harrison's Confessions," the falseness is of a somewhat different nature. It is not a repressing of harmful facts, external as in the above two stories, but a deceiving as to the kind of character Mr. Harrison is -- a concealment of true personality, not of information.

Mr. Harrison comes to rural Duncombe to share the practice of the old village physician, Dr. Morgan. Instead of continuing the frank, forthright actions of his youth, Harrison immediately succumbs to the town's many social conventions; merely to serve convention (an arbitrary standard of conduct not based on a person's true nature) and to better his own position and reputation.

---

4 Ibid., 298.
5 Ibid., 298-9.
(without truly earning such), he begins performing acts in which he does not believe. In fact, social servitude is the reason Harrison came to Duncombe in the first place, for he had thought at first to be a ship's surgeon, but found that if he did so he would "rather lose caste" in his profession.  

As soon as he arrives in town, Mr. Harrison falls into some minor insincerities. Neighbors, as is customary in the town, send to inquire how he feels after the long trip. He must answer that he is "pretty well" or "not bad," and so on. If he told them how he really felt -- full of energy, quite rested, very happy and snug -- their "tender interest" in him would, he feels, be shattered.  

If he had answered truthfully, his real personality might have been revealed before there was time for harmful concealment. Instead he begins his stay in town with some half truths.  

During his first morning with Dr. Morgan, Harrison seals his fate. He listens to several laments of the older doctor about the need to put on a professional appearance. What was before only a slight weakness when he decided to come to the town and to tone down his answers to inquiries becomes a major fault, as Harrison entrenches a bad habit through repeatedly betraying his true self with minor variations from the strict truth. The word "professional" is used so often that the reader cannot miss the message the

---


7 Ibid., 395-6.
author implies as to the ironic value of the word. Again and again the older
doctor hammers in his point. He is obviously shocked at seeing Harrison's
customary morning dress: loose shirt, slippers, etc. After Harrison had
dressed for the morning visits, Morgan notes: "These coats [cut-aways], sir,
give a man rather too much a sporty appearance, not quite befitting the
learned professions." "We are sticklers for propriety . . . in Duncombe; and
much depends on a first impression. Let it be professional." After this
emphatic warning, Harrison takes off the coat and assumes the jacket which,
though out of line with his own robust personality, is more pleasing to
Morgan and town proprieties. He also purchases an old nag suggested by
Morgan, instead of the lively hunting horse he had intended to buy. Harrison
confides then that Morgan's plan was to establish "me in a house of my own,
which looked more respectable, not to say professional, than being in lodg­
ings." Morgan suggests a widow housekeeper who "is a lady-like woman . . .
and may really be of some help to you in the little etiquettes of our
profession; the slight delicate attentions which every man has to learn, if
he wishes to get on in life."8 Bit by bit Mr. Harrison is selling himself
for reputation.

Morgan insists that Harrison strive after the manner of a gentleman,
who happily radiates kindness and protection to all the town's rich widows
and old maids, since this habit is "peculiarly befitting our profession."

8 Ibid., 396-401.
Morgan concludes the day's torture with this observation: "It is, in fact, sir, manners that make a man in our profession." He might have added that by becoming a slave to manners Harrison can find the unhappiness of losing his real self.

When finally left time to consider, Harrison puzzles out to himself the meaning of the morning's teachings in the following way: "It seemed a cruel sacrifice to society to dress myself in tight hoods, and a stiff coat, and go to a five-o'clock [sic] tea. But Mr. Morgan read me such lectures upon the necessity. . . ." Thus, Harrison immediately, with little more than a sigh, sacrifices both the pleasure of his own ways and the integrity of his actions to the supposed need of appearing "professional," to social convention.

It is not only by putting on a false appearance in actions, however, that Mr. Harrison deceives. He listens in silence as Dr. Morgan spreads false stories about him to enhance his reputation; he does nothing to silence these stories. For example, Harrison confesses the following about Morgan's talk with the gossip Mrs. Munton:

It had been the most trivial speech in the world that I had named as we walked along, and I felt ashamed at having to repeat it: but it answered Mr. Morgan's purpose, and before night all the town had heard that

---

9 Ibid., 401.

10 Ibid., 406. Note that there is this same idea of the "sacrifice" of true self, feelings, and happiness to ambition in A Dark Night's Work, below, p. 71.
I was a favorite pupil of Sir Astley's (I had never seen him but twice in my life); and Mr. Morgan was afraid that as soon as he knew my full value I should be retained by Sir Astley to assist him in his duties as surgeon to the Royal Family. Every little circumstance was pressed into the conversation which could add to my importance.11

Also, Harrison listens in silence as Morgan magnifies an incidental remark of Prime Minister Peel to the glove-maker Mr. Harrison, Sr. Soon local rumor in Duncombe has it that Mr. Harrison, Sr., was an intimate friend and important counsellor of the Premier. Harrison tells us that he sat through this recital of an absurd story "half indignant and half amused."

He did not bother to contradict it, however, since Mr. Morgan was too pleased with the way the story would gild Harrison's reputation (not a repugnant goal to Harrison himself, therefore, by implication); also, he "had little idea at the time how small sayings were the seeds of great events in the town of Duncombe."12 By multiplying these small deceptions, Harrison erodes his character.

What is the result of this maze of deception? There are two results, one for the love-plot and one for the social-standing plot. Harrison's reputation begins to suffer when Jack Marshland, a school friend, visits town. Jack tells everyone about Harrison's brief jail sentence -- a mistaken sentence, as the authorities soon discover, for Harrison had merely defended


a cripple from assault. True worth could not have been damaged by having this story known. Jack also tells about Harrison's "hoaxing letters" and about Harrison's love for hunting. These disclosures of Harrison's concealments and deceptions about what are considered vulgar things in Duncombe, contrasted with the simpering over-goodness of the old doctor's stories about him and his entire present manner, incline the townsfolk to have less assurance in Harrison's medical judgments, especially when, immediately after this, he suggests, contrary to Dr. Morgan, that amputation of the hand is not necessary for the injured gardener, John Brouncker.

The disregard of his professional reputation, however, is only a lesser difficulty compared to the trouble that follows. Fuel is added to the fire when it is discovered that three women in the town seem to be engaged to Harrison simultaneously, although he does not want to marry any of the three, and even dislikes violently two of them. He was thought engaged to Miss Bullock because he often visited the Bullock home. A concealment again was involved here: Harrison's secret reason in visiting was merely to talk with Mr. Bullock. He was thought to be engaged to Miss Caroline because of a lie told her by Jack Marshland -- that Harrison had confessed to Jack an irrepressible love for Caroline. Further Jack had sent her a valentine with Harrison's signature forged to it. Harrison was thought to be engaged to

---

13 Ibid., 417-8.

14 Ibid., 419, 449.
his housekeeper, Mrs. Rose, a widow, because he had given her a sewing table which he had in fun told the prying Mrs. Horsman would be given to his future wife -- another white lie with serious consequences.\textsuperscript{15} Thus, all these love difficulties are the result of petty deceptions.

Even more important than these reasons which acted as occasions, however, was the main cause of all the trouble in the story: people had thought Harrison engaged to each of these three because he had shown them the extreme unnatural politeness suggested by Mr. Morgan. Harrison consoles himself with this observation: "It was all Mr. Morgan's doing, who had lectured me into this tenderly deferential manner."\textsuperscript{16}

Obviously it was Mr. Morgan's deceptions and persuasions that led Harrison into this impasse. For his help, Morgan himself meets retribution later when rumor also has him engaged to the fearsome Miss Tomkinson, because he too had shown the same kind of over-politeness.\textsuperscript{17} Harrison's trouble is also, no doubt, partly due to the many minor people involved who had pushed themselves into Harrison's daily concerns more than was truly necessary to obtain medical help. Despite such assistance, however, it remains clear

\textsuperscript{15}\textit{Ibid.}, 432. Thus even small, joking lies meet justice.

\textsuperscript{16}\textit{Ibid.}, 439.

\textsuperscript{17}\textit{Ibid.}, 441. It is interesting when viewing the doctor's punishment to remember that he had disliked Miss Tomkinson especially for her bluntness in trumpeting the truth, no matter how unpleasant.
that the main cause for Harrison's difficulties is his own uncourageous lack of concern for living the truth and for showing his true self. If he had never allowed rumors of his exalted goodness to drift around, and if he had not taken to whispering and croaking around town in the manner of a busybody, if he had merely lived in his own vivacious, natural way, no one would have suspected Harrison of any sort of affection for the three women.

To summarize, Harrison's deceptions bring about two results. His practice falls off, as now few people will have anything to do with him. Then, he is so much publicly scorned as a deceptive lover that it is unlikely that he will ever regain social favor, much less the coveted love of Sophy. These are both directly due to his earlier falsehoods of silence about his real background and medical abilities and to his appearance of being other in personality than he really was.

Not everything is lost, however, for Mr. Harrison had never really fully given himself to all this deception. Several details show this. It had made him unhappy to have to accommodate his personal habits to a dignified and professional sedateness. This shows the remains of goodness still in him, contrasted with Morgan who, having given himself over entirely to this little game, finds nothing wrong at all in social conformity. Further, Harrison had taken a liking to the Vicar and to Sophy because they, almost alone in the town, were not affected in manner. For example, Harrison notes in his mind the following impressions of his first visit to the vicarage:

With a man whom he [Mr. Morgan] respected, as he did the Vicar, he lost the prim artificial manner he had in general, and was calm and dignified.
It was his [the Vicar's] character that produced this effect -- character that he never thought about, but that appeared in every word, and look, and motion!16

Harrison must still have some spark of sympathy left in him for what is true if he can thus admire the Vicar who is always unthinkingly true to his nature, contrary to the self-conscious, straining artificiality of Harrison himself and of Morgan.

Harrison does not like affectations in speech, such as Caroline's use of the high-sounding phrase "the great metropolis" instead of the common "London." Also, he urges Mrs. Rose to void the rules of etiquette that require her to stay in an unwanted seclusion of grief after her husband's death.19

The most important proof, however, that Mr. Harrison has not completely given in to falseness is the way he handles himself in the Brouncker affair. Everyone urges him to amputate, even Mr. Morgan and Mrs. Brouncker. It is made clear to Harrison that after the Jack Marshland episode he would utterly lose the last shreds of reputation if he should not follow common practice and amputate. "Think what a fine opportunity you have of showing off, Mr. Harrison," he is told.20 Although he has often in the past done things to show off for the sake of reputation, Harrison at last, when the rewards for show would save reputation and failure to do so mean ruin, places himself

18Ibid., 402.
19Ibid., 400, 412-3.
20Ibid., 427.
on the side of right and duty and truth. He decides that, although the town sees less skill in saving the hand than in neatly amputating it, the town may not be seeing the truth; he will tell the patient the truth and recommend medication instead. Harrison finally shows courage, avoids ostentation, and lives the truth in his medical life.

This one act of courage soon leads to another. He tells Morgan he will no longer follow all the false little "professional" pretences and affected mannerisms: "I must talk in my own natural manner."21 This is followed by another act of courageous pursuit of truth when he recommends the dangerous new medicine to save Sophy. What is now the result of living the truth? Just as all the earlier falsehood had been unhappiness as the consequences eventually caught up with him, so now the decision to live and act the truth brings job, a happy family, friends, a prosperous practice -- a happy ending.

Again in this story, the conflict is caused by falsehood, is removed by living the truth. So much does Dr. Harrison now insist on living the truth that he cannot even tell his brother this story in the third person, as if he were describing someone else's life. He must switch to the first person.22 Truth reigns supreme at last.

A Dark Night's Work, being a full-length story, offers a more lengthy treatment of falsehood. Although there are more strands of falsehood to be

21 Ibid., 440.

22 Ibid., 393. The narrator, Mr. Harrison, begins in third person, then abruptly decides that he must switch to first person.
observed, however, it is actually not as complex in deception of character as is "Mr. Harrison's Confessions." The plot is more obvious, the characters more transparent, and the falsehoods more direct and easily seen.

The main difficulty in the life of Edward Wilkins is that he had been over-educated. Edward was the "secret joy and pride of his father's heart." This father's self-deception of pride had led him to send his son to the best of schools, to schools usually attended only by the sons of the neighborhood's impoverished noblemen. "Mr. Wilkins had given his son an education and tastes beyond his position." The boy was too fancy for the vicar and the doctor, but not of noble blood so that he could mix with the aristocrats, before whom he nevertheless flaunted his superior wealth. Edward took pleasure secretly in the power which his father's money gave him, buying a horse in five minutes over which the poorer gentry had haggled for weeks. It was by deception that Edward was introduced into the "aristocratic" Hamley assembly; because old Wilkins insisted, Edward was presented by "one of the lesser gentry who was parent of eight 'muckle-moo'd' daughters, so hardly likely to oppose much aristocratic resistance" to introducing him. Thus propelled into social circles beyond his true nature by wealth, opportune blackmail, and an education that cultivated him beyond his calling, Edward began to live a life unnatural for him, a life that was a deliberate self-deception and attempted deception of others as to his true status. The result is that the heirs of the neighborhood call Edward "an upstart behind his back." He is accepted for his superior money
and wit, though really scorned by all.\textsuperscript{23}

Because he feels himself shunned, Wilkins makes even greater efforts to attain superior rank, especially after the death of his father, wife, and younger daughter. He begins to deceive himself more and more into a dream of his magnificence. Although brilliant, he will not educate his daughter Ellinor himself because then he must scold his idolized daughter at times. He wants a false front presented even to his own family. He will not have her with an image of him as disciplinarian.\textsuperscript{24}

Finally, he buys an elaborate carriage and digs up a vague connection in the distant past with a semi-aristocratic family. "For all this the squires, his employers \[he was the town lawyer, as had been his father\], only laughed at him and did not treat him with one whit more respect."\textsuperscript{25} Wilkins takes to buying luxurious gems, clothes, furnishings, books, etc., when there is no need for them, and not even a use for them -- sheer ostentation. He begins to drink more and more before he can hold a witty conversation, for without the drinks' forgetfulness he has become too self-conscious of the disregard in which his shamming is held. As he drinks and spends more, the office affairs become tangled. Only by taking in the clerk Dunster as a


\textsuperscript{24}\textit{Ibid.}, 414.

\textsuperscript{25}\textit{Ibid.}, 422.
partner can some order be kept. As Wilkins tries to draw more and more money to pay off his ever-mounting debts and to meet his daughter's dowry, however, financial and office affairs continue, understandably, to become more confused, as not even the systematic, orderly Dunster, faced with such maneuverings, can make ends meet. The obvious result is a series of arguments with Dunster. Finally, in a fit of drunken anger during an argument, Wilkins strikes Dunster, who dies after hitting his head in falling. The death of Dunster, a central event in the story, is, therefore, a direct result of the increasing deceptions of self and of others, of Wilkins' many years of social pretensions. From the hidden death and concealment of the body of Dunster, and indirectly therefore from Wilkins' many pretensions, several important results follow.

One of the results of the death of Dunster and the hiding of his body is the decay of Wilkins himself. Wilkins becomes even more unhappy than he had ever been before. He is more often drunk now, "to try and forget."26 His drunken state, his nervous tension, his fear that the secret death and burial will be discovered by Corbet's probing questions lead Wilkins to insult Corbet, Ellinor's fiancee. Wilkins' pretensions lead eventually, therefore, to the insulting of Corbet, and are thus partly responsible for the ensuing break between Ellinor and Corbet.

Corbet is the same sort of person, in a way, as Wilkins: he too is greedily using all means to attain increased social status. He will do

26 Ibid., 509.
almost anything, or sacrifice any of his loves or any part of his personality, in order to build up the facade of greatness. Just as with Wilkins, the result is a person who hides much and deceives with words that are half truths.

Corbet delays in telling his family or Mr. Wilkins of his proposed marriage to Ellinor. He was sure of Wilkins' approval, but telling Wilkins would demand telling his own father also. This would, "after all, have been the proper and straightforward course to pursue with a girl of her [Ellinor's] age." He is too cowardly to face up to the truth immediately; the delay will give him time to change his mind if necessary.

When the engagement is at last made public and permission has been sought from all involved, Corbet still requests that it be not much spoken about because he thought it "might go against his character for wisdom, if the fact became known while he was yet only a student." He maintains his facade in this way before outsiders. Even to Wilkins and Ellinor, he must present a false appearance: he never tells them of his own family's disapproval, which had been caused in turn by "touched up" tales told his parents by one of Wilkins' noble clients disgruntled at the lawyer's pretensions. Nor will Corbet speak to Wilkins or to Ellinor about the required dowry, one of the main concerns to Mr. Corbet, Sr., and to Corbet himself; the money should lend the affair some respectability. Thus, because of Corbet's deceits and concealments, Ellinor remains unaware of any obstacles

\[27\] Ibid., 432.
to her marital happiness.

With a heart so set on social preeminence and with suspicions of a disastrous future disgrace awakened by the difficulties at home, by the disorderly conduct of Wilkins, and by Ellinor's obvious concealment of something as regards Dunster, Corbet needs but little incentive to break off his relationship with Ellinor. The insult from Wilkins is merely a pretext, as Corbet himself admits. He adjusts his farewell letter "to say enough, yet not too much." Although Wilkins' insult could still have been forgiven, Corbet rationalizes, saying that so much pain has now already been given Ellinor that it is only as much to repair the wrongs as to sever relations entirely. Actually, Corbet has decided that this connection with the Wilkins family is not good for his career.29

Just as Wilkins was punished for his pretensions by a morbidness drawing over his life, so too Corbet is punished for his pursuit of self at the expense of his true feelings by an unhappy married life. Corbet has given death to his real nature and his natural affections, especially to his love for Ellinor, in order to soothe his ambitions. At the end of his life, however, "he could not help wishing that the slaughtered creature [his heart and love, his natural self] laid on the shrine of his ambition were alive again."30

28 Ibid., 440-445.
29 Ibid., 511.
30 Ibid., 585.
It would be well to pause here a moment to summarize the conflict thus far in the story. Wilkins' pretensions have led him to dissipate his character, intelligence, and fortune. Corbet's ambitions have led him to the other extreme; he has so regimented himself that he will allow nothing to stand in the way of his rise in the world. Both Wilkins and Corbet do away with their natural selves to do honor to social pretensions. Their desires lead to Wilkins' squandering, Corbet's delaying publicity of his engagement until a person dissatisfied with Wilkins' pretensions can ensure that a large dowry will be a necessary part of the marriage. To obtain the dowry, Wilkins eventually kills Dunster. Thus, the falseness of Wilkins and Corbet, combined with Ellinor's concealing of the Dunster secret, lead to personal unhappiness for Wilkins and Corbet, and to a broken engagement for Ellinor. How all this affects Ellinor must now be examined.

Hitherto Ellinor and her father had shared great happiness in each other's company. Once Dunster is secretly buried, however, with that great secret between them, "the unspoken comprehension of each other's hidden motions made their mutual presence a burdensome anxiety to each."31 Wilkins and Ellinor lose the best thing they had in life, their love for each other. Too late, only after her father's death, does Ellinor realize that if they had been "frank and open" about the accident, their future course would have been "simple and straightforward," as they would have been able to strengthen

31 Ibid., 473.
each other. Thus, the secret, first of all, poisons the smooth relationship between Ellinor and her father.

Then Ellinor finds that the secret has led to the collapse of her marriage plans, as Corbet leaves. Her personal rest and interior peace are lost. She is physically sick the very night of the burial and for some time afterwards. When she hears her father begin to tell other lies and to act falsely in little ways to hide their big secret, a mental sickness also tightens its grasp on Ellinor. Mrs. Gaskell shows the reader Ellinor's troubled state of mind with the following words:

Ellinor sickened at the words. She had been all her life a truthful, plain-spoken girl. She held herself high above deceit. Yet, here came the necessity for deceit -- a snare spread about her. She had not revolted so much from the deed which brought about unpremeditated death, as she did from these words of her father's. The night before, in her mad fever of affright, she had fancied that to conceal the body was all that would be required; she had not looked forward to the long, weary course of small lies, to be done and said, involved in that one mistaken action. . . . It needed all the pity called forth by such observation of her father's new feebleness to quench Ellinor's passionate contempt for the course on which she and her father were embarked. . . .

Even after she has recovered physically, Ellinor is still trying to rationalize with her conscience, especially in the wake of Corbet's departure. Ellinor promises God that she will act loyally and truthfully in her own personal life, leaving the future . . . and all the terrible chances involved in it . . . in His hands if, indeed, (and

\[32\text{Ibid., 474.}\]
here came in the Tempter, He would watch over one whose life hereafter may seem based upon a lie. 33

The consequences of falsehood are not so easily escaped, however, no matter how often Ellinor argues that she is acting only out of "filial piety." Wilkins continues to compound the falsehood by giving others to understand that the reason his affairs were in such disarray was that Dunster had stolen much from the office. 34 Thus, it becomes more and more impossible to reveal the truth, as the chain of deception begins to bind more and more tightly day by day.

Ellinor unhappily mopes away her life in a cottage. "The one terrible night . . . cut her happiness short." She finds a few scraps of peace as "she was being weaned these many years from self seeking in any shape," the self seeking that was at the root of her deceptions. 35 Her falsehoods and concealments have led Ellinor to a lonely life of unhappiness.

Even Dixon, the servant who had assisted in the burial of Dunster, is not forgotten; the consequences of the concealment catch up with him also. He witnesses to the inevitability of retribution in his life of fear: "They say blood will out; and, if it weren't for her Ellinor's part in it, I could wish for a clean breast before I die." 36

33 Ibid., 477.
34 Ibid., 478.
35 Ibid., 578, 532.
36 Ibid., 540.
The end comes quickly now, too quickly for all the complications involved. Although the story is thereby greatly weakened, the over-simplification of the ending spotlights clearly deceit as the major issue in the book, just as a study of the cause of the conflict shows that falseness is the author's main concern.

When Dixon is on trial for having murdered Dunster, whose body had recently been discovered, Ellinor rushes home from a continental holiday which was to help her recover her sagging spirits. She reveals the secret to the judge, who just happens to be the unhappy Corbet. The truth brings about Dixon's immediate dismissal from jail. When Ellinor confesses the truth to Livingstone, her other great source of unhappiness vanishes. Livingstone still presses to marry her, a request thrown aside many wasted years before when Ellinor had refused him bluntly on the morning after the burial of Dunster.

The contrast should be made between the hesitations in courtship of the scheming Corbet and the directness of Minister Livingstone, who had requested marriage immediately after falling in love with Ellinor. He had given a "straightforward explanation of his present prospects and future hopes." The final irony, however, is that he too has had a share in making Ellinor unhappy, just as had Wilkins and Corbet and Ellinor herself; unfortunately Livingstone had concealed his visit of sympathy to see Ellinor when she was ill because "she might not like it."37 If Ellinor had known of his visit

37 Ibid., 456, 476-7.
and of his faithful kindness, the two might have been brought together sooner.

Instead, Livingstone's secrecy coupled with Ellinor's many refusals to unburden herself to anyone, gives them both many years of loneliness. Livingstone remains faithful, however, and this covers up at last for his fault. Too late does Ellinor find out that her happiness for those many years had lain in confidence with Livingstone. He tells her, probably with a twitch of conscience for his own secrecy: "How I wish I had known of all this years ago! I could have stood between you and so much." But at last truthfulness has met its reward, deceit is atoned for with truth, and Mr. and Mrs. Livingstone fade out into a life of happiness ever after.

The falsehood in Sylvia's Lovers, although more tragic, is again not very complex. Sylvia's problem is to decide which of her two lovers she will marry, Charlie Kinkaid or her Cousin Philip Hepburn. Sylvia loves Kinkaid passionately, and is secretly preparing to marry him. Yet most people object to a marriage of Kinkaid and Sylvia, for Kinkaid has a reputation of being a "false lover." He had deceived Coulson's sister, and other girls; no one, therefore, can suppose he will be true to Sylvia. His falseness and irresponsibility in love have created the first difficulties to possible married happiness for him and Sylvia.

Philip is hard-working and honest, with a good reputation in the town, but when he is with Sylvia, he is not himself. There is always something

---

38 Ibid., 589.

strained and formal in his speech and actions when she is near. He will never kiss her or express his love too strongly, although without such violence he will never be able to win over the passionate nature of Sylvia. Philip feels that to do so, however, would be bad manners, and "Philip knows his manners too well."40 As a result of being untrue to his feelings, of being unnatural, Philip is seldom able to evoke much sympathetic response from Sylvia.

Especially absurd is his insistence on educating Sylvia; this stress on intellect would just make her false to her passionate self. She does need control; she can never really fulfill herself until later she learns control and forgiveness. But Sylvia can have no use for book learning. Probably as a subconscious countermeasure, Sylvia resorts to irresponsible childish acts when in the vicinity of Philip. His subtle insistence on curbing her passions leads her to react in the opposite direction. She makes selfish purchases, buys a cloak imprudently, shuns advice, and has flowers planted to "set off" the sausages. At times she will leave the room when Philip is present, or remain there silent.41 In fact, all her life until the very end, Sylvia pouts this way as a result of Philip's actions. She can seldom act her true self to him, for in her reaction against reason and control Sylvia not only seems to feign an unnatural amount of childishness, but she actually does remain too much of a child, never maturing, too

40Ibid., 84-5.
41Ibid., 82, 10, 12, 23, 76.
unaccustomed to the true control of self, too anxious to avoid the dominating controls of Philip, too accustomed to the false independence of slavery to passion, as the author points out later in the book.

Against this background of characters performing some slight deceptions, the major event of the novel occurs. Kinkaid is kidnapped by an admiralty impressment gang. Philip, who had observed the fight and abduction of Kinkaid, does not tell Sylvia of Kinkaid's capture, nor does he relay to her Kinkaid's request that she be true until he (Kinkaid) can return. Philip does not even tell Sylvia later, when, suspecting something, she questions him directly about Kinkaid's disappearance. 43

Sylvia's mother, who with her accurate intuitions might have been able to help, is deceived about the real state of affairs as regards Sylvia and Kinkaid: Sylvia's father had never told her of Kinkaid's proposal, and neither Philip nor Sylvia tell her mother fully what is on their minds or exactly how they feel towards one another as time passes. 44 Thus unaware of her daughter's true feelings and of all that complicates matters, Bell becomes a powerful force urging Sylvia to marry Philip.

Finally, convinced that Kinkaid has betrayed her as he had so many others, Sylvia is almost blackmailed into marrying Philip, because Philip

42 Ibid., 365.
44 Ibid., 206-8.
has smothered the family with excesses of kindness, quite necessary when Dan, the father, ran afoul of the law. As a result of all the deception, both of character and of external facts, the marriage is far from happy. Philip continues to let his mind not see the truth; he continues to want to possess Sylvia entirely, with no regard for her own rights as a person. He is, thus, being untrue to her personality. Further, he must continuously hide from her the truth about Kinkaid. Sylvia is now more than ever enslaved to her childish passions and self-promoting whims. The result is constant arguments, especially when Sylvia once discovers to herself that her liking for Philip was nothing like love, but only a fleeting gratitude for favors done the family in its time of need.

Using a not too subtle means of exposing the conspiracies of concealment, Mrs. Gaskell merely has the lost Kinkaid return home and tell all to Sylvia. After a final argument, Philip joins the army and tries to work out his repentance fighting in the holy land. All he does in leaving, however, is to run from the difficulties that he should have faced. If he had faced them bravely, Philip might more easily have discovered the true self within him and have purged himself of his desires to possess Sylvia entirely.

Meanwhile, Sylvia has had second thoughts, and a child; she decides she must be true to Philip, although she has not yet so far conquered her passions as to be able to forgive him. She is more convinced than ever that she must be true to Philip when she learns that Kinkaid has quickly wandered away again and married, all thoughts of Sylvia having easily vanished.45

Unfortunately for him and for a happy ending, Philip has practiced another piece of concealment on leaving home: he has changed his name and has avoided facing life truly by severing all communications with the past. Thus, he can have no knowledge of the changes occurring in Sylvia. He finally returns home, quite poor. He watches Sylvia and the child, but does not make himself known to her -- another concealment. Sylvia herself has concealed her new love, this time a true love, for Philip, which love has been growing bit by bit during the years of separation. If she had spoken of this love to the friendly Hester, or if Philip had declared himself openly, perhaps even at this late date a reconciliation could have taken place, with a life of happiness to follow for all. A fatal illness attacks Philip. He is at last forgiven by Sylvia on his deathbed, as he repents of his own "self-seeking lie."  

Only at Philip's death do both Sylvia and Philip give up their lifetime of deceptions that have prevented them from sharing joy. Sylvia at last gives up her childishness and passions, learning forgiveness and humility. She faces truth at last, lets her actions mirror her thoughts, matures so that her true personality can stand revealed. She has learned, as well, that Kinkaid was false, and that Philip was all along the one who was "tender and true," at least in his own possessive way. Philip has so given up his trying to keep Sylvia for himself alone that he had not even

---

46 Ibid., 344, 365, 429.
47 Ibid., 439.
made himself known to her on his return. Dying, Philip sees and admits that life's tempting "thoughts of grandly possessing Sylvia despite truth to her own nature and the truth about Kinkaid were illusions, the arguments false and hollow." "In my lying heart I forgot to do to thee Sylvia as I would have had thee do to me. And I judged Kinkaid in my heart." 48 Philip's strivings, thus, were lies against the demands of God and the true personalities of others whom he tried to recast to his own fore-ordained image. Philip, like Sylvia, must also learn to give and to accept forgiveness. Happiness comes at last as the truth surrounds Philip's weepy end. Falsehood has caused the trouble; facing the truth has brought a final few moments of peace.

In Ruth, the trouble begins when Mrs. Mason, with artificial scrupulosity, thinks it wrong for Ruth to keep company with Mr. Bellingham, who is at first merely befriending the lonely orphan. When Mrs. Mason snorts that she does not want to see the girl's face any more, Ruth takes the old woman seriously. 49 Thus, a false moral sense and a loose use of words are Ruth's first hint of falsehood, soon to be a major difficulty in her life.

Bellingham then proceeds to deceive Ruth, taking her away with him as mistress instead of back to old Thomas, as he had promised Ruth. 50 Obviously

48 Ibid., 437, 435.


50 Ibid., 43.
Bellingham was not sincere with his affections either, since he is able to leave her permanently with actually very little persuading and never bothers to search for her. Ruth's first big embarrassment and her first major obstacle in life is, thus, the affair with Bellingham, brought on and conducted by deceptions.

The second phase of her life gets started in a similar manner. The Bensons agree to conceal the illegitimacy of Leonard, "a decision -- the pivot on which the fate of years turned." Benson did not conceal because he was ashamed to admit Ruth to his house. He himself was brave enough to tell the truth, but he wanted to evade "the trials for the child." Here is the main falsehood of this story.

What results from deception this time? Benson's conscience is quite upset immediately. People could notice that the Benson house gave pleasure because "everything is so above-board -- no shifts to conceal poverty under flimsy ornament." Now, instead of this former unthinking trueness, Benson finds that he often hesitates to act, even against the bribing electioneering, for he himself had decided to "wade through evil" "that good might come." He now often does wrong through this sort of excessive deliberation, when his first instincts would have led him to do what is right. Benson finds himself unable to punish Leonard's first childhood fault -- untruthfulness in making up stories, naturally -- because Sally charges that Benson, as a result of his

---

51 Ibid., 85.
own deceit, can have no justification for so harshly condemning lying in the boy.

Benson especially wants to let Bradshaw know the truth when Ruth is about to become the governess in that family. Instead, rationalizing, Benson allows the lie to roll on, and his conscience loses much of its former serene peace. Later, after all had been exposed, Benson remarks: "I have got . . . morbid just in consequence of the sophistry by which I persuaded myself that wrong could be right." Benson is finally forced to remark to Bradshaw:

Nothing you can say can upbraid me like my own conscience; no degradation you can inflict, by word, or deed, can come up to the degradation I have suffered for years, at being a party to deceit, even for a good end.\(^{53}\)

His sister, Faith Benson, also finds it a bit more difficult now to be completely good. Benson becomes quite angry with her for weaving a web of lies about Ruth's background, but he agrees that if they are to lie at all, they must make it a good lie, even if that involves further concealing and deceits. When Faith remarks that she finds it uncomfortable being "fettered" now by the truth, Benson forbids any adding to the lie, and he bemoans the "apparent necessity for falsehood."\(^{54}\)

Besides the effect on the happiness and characters of the Bensons, however, the deceit about Ruth's past has quite serious external effects also

\(^{52}\) Ibid., 178-9, 140-5.


\(^{54}\) Ibid., 104-5 for this whole paragraph.
when it is at last made public. Bradshaw is enraged because he considers Ruth a hypocrite. He discharges her in disgrace. Ruth is in such a state of shock soon that she wants to run away and hide. The Bradshaw family, richest parishioners, no longer come to Benson's church. All the close friendship between the two families seems at an end. Ruth is seriously sick. Leonard is sick, frail, afraid to show his face to the world. The years of deceit have suddenly taken their heavy toll. All have now seen proof that "all deeds, however hidden and long passed by, have their eternal consequences."55

The strange feature about this retribution meted out to Ruth and the Bensons, however, is that the avenging Bradshaw family is itself scarred with some deceit. This is why Mrs. Gaskell could not have ended the story at this point, as if the Bradshaws were to escape punishment.

Bradshaw, who has always set himself forth as a pillar of righteousness, is a bit of a hypocrite. By his unnatural sanctimonious strictures, Bradshaw forces his children and wife to live lies, often changing occupations and speech when he is near. His very firmness of "principle" is false -- for two reasons. First, it is not founded on justice but on stubbornness, for Benson notes that he could not make Bradshaw's "obstinate mind receive the truth."56 Secondly, Bradshaw's firmness is false because it is not really firm; it is not consistent. It can be eroded under the pressure of self-interest. This is shown in Bradshaw's conduct during the election, when he

55 Ibid., 218, 235ff.
56 Ibid., 245.
is ready to stoop to bribery. Instead of being true to the high ideals he had always trumpeted forth, Bradshaw succumbs to the argument that "they who would succeed even in good deeds, must come down to the level of expediency." He wants to get a Liberal elected because the law is filled with "underhand action" and "dead obsolete words." To get rid of this deceit in the law, Bradshaw is untrue to his professed principles and stoops to bribery, even while his candidate Donne is loudly avowing from the hustings that he "most decidedly disapprove[s] of bribery." So aware is Bradshaw of his evil that he even absents himself from church during the campaign because he is unable to face "the Christian standard -- that divine test of the true and the pure." He accepts bribery "disguised by names and words" so he will not have to consider it a sin, but it is still self-deception. 57 For his deceptions, Bradshaw, the avenger, also receives punishment: his long painful separation from Benson and, especially, the discovery that his "model" son is guilty of another type of deception, forgery.

Jemima, a victim of the false strictness of her father, and one of the instruments by which Ruth's sin is exposed, is also guilty of deceit. She does not like the falseness involved in the way she and her mother must change their employment frequently when Bradshaw enters the room, yet she is not true to her conviction that this change of occupation is wrong. She has not yet learned to follow her own ideas of right and wrong; in fact, her own impulsive nature, somewhat similar to that of Sylvia in the previous

57 Ibid., 177-183.
story, was so anxious to avoid parental rebuke by presenting a pleasing exterior despite her true inner drives that she finds it "savored to her a little of deceit" itself. After discovering her father's "management everywhere" (even as regards getting Ruth to promote Farquhar), Jemima resolves to be false to her heart. Often rude to him, arguing, or not speaking, she conceals her love for Farquhar behind an apparent contempt. Driven by her father's "manoeuvring in the simplest actions, and . . . miserable in this constant state of suspicion," at last even quite mentally ill, Jemima deceives herself, trying to put on a personality she does not feel.\footnote{Ibid., 147, 167.}

Jemima comes to despise untruth only after it is too late. She has already, in an ingenious way, forced the gossipy dressmaker to blare Ruth's secret all over town. In her cunning way, Jemima pretends to make the dressmaker conceal the secret, thus insuring that the news would travel more quickly than if she had bribed the woman.\footnote{Ibid., 224.} Jemima slinks around for a while longer, trying to find something false in all the actions of Ruth, whom she is now secretly observing constantly. Evidently moved by the good example of Ruth and purified from her deceits by the long period of lonely suffering, Jemima is ready at last to stand by Ruth during Bradshaw's accusations and to become again Ruth's best friend.

Thus, both Jemima, the instrument by which Ruth's secret becomes public, and Bradshaw, the chief agent of external vengeance, are guilty themselves.
It is their deceptions, in fact, that have led them -- Jemima in jealousy, Bradshaw in self-righteous condemnations -- to become the means of punishment for Ruth. This realization lights up with sharp irony the author's lesson about the magnitude of falsehood in life.

Just when it seems that the main problems have been settled and all secrets revealed, the novel launches Ruth into the third phase of her life, her career as a public servant. Why does Mrs. Gaskell put Ruth in this position as nurse and friend to all those troubled? A clue is given much earlier in the novel, when Sally speaks to Ruth to persuade Ruth not to loll around the house doing her duties sadly. Sally points out that man must fulfill himself by doing his duties in the station to which God has called him, not with the sighs and moanings of useless rebellion against God's will, but with vigor as befits a person becoming himself. Sally warns Ruth that duty must be done not with a "self-seeking spirit which either leads us to neglect it \[duty\] to follow out some device of our own for our own ends, or to give up too much time and thought to it before and after doing." 60 Sally's advice has an immediate and lasting effect on Ruth, who thereafter recognizes her faults humbly, sets about her duties with new bold zest, and begins the maturing regeneration wherein she finally finds her true self. Ruth becomes the equal of any "lady" in the land, Mrs. Gaskell notes; she learns the connection between doing what one ought and Truth. Living the truth, being truly the person you were meant to be as duty directs, is

---

60 Ibid., 123.
actually what is meant by being good and doing duty. Ruth finds that "everything does minister to love when its foundation lies deep in a true heart." 61

Although she still shrinks from letting others know her secret, Ruth's character, chastened and punished by many hardships and disgraces already endured, is preparing itself to live only for the truth, to be entirely true to her own inner nature — which for Ruth means diffusing loving care on all with whom she works. Ruth will not now avoid meeting her former lover because "subterfuges and contrivances . . . are false and cowardly." She tells Donne (Bellingham) on the beach: "Whatever comes, I will not blench from the truth." Ruth now sees that "truth and goodness are one and the same," and she strives to be true in being good. 62

After the revelation of her secret, Ruth must put into practice this doctrine of being true to her nature as a slave of duty in helping others. While she at first thinks of running away, fleeing from life and herself, Benson persuades her to stay, using as one argument her duty to Leonard. Also he reminds her that they have all done enough hiding, concealing, running; now they must "stand firm on the truth," whatever the cost. 63 More important, she voluntarily puts her doctrine to a practical test, faithfully

61 Ibid., 145-6.
62 Ibid., 192, 206, 198.
63 Ibid., 248.
nursing the poor and the sick of the whole town during the plague. Her goodness is her true self. For facing her own inner nature and thus exposing its heroism, Ruth at last receives the happiness she had so long sought vainly in concealment: the town publicly praises her and heaps advantages otherwise unattainable on Leonard. It has been worthwhile for Ruth to live the truth, to be her true self, even though this eventually means the final pang of death in being true to her vocation, nursing the fevered Bellingham-Donne. The end of the book shows Ruth being rushed, as a result of this final heroism, into an even greater happiness in heaven; she has had the moral courage to be true. The Bensons, Bradshaws, Jemima -- all are reformed now and happy. Only Bellingham, still deceiving at the end with the thought that money is all, is unwanted. Once more truth triumphs.

Various forms of deception are again present in Cousin Phillis. Most important is the deception of Holdsworth whose love to Phillis has been a lie. This is what starts the trouble in the story. Although he never verbally expressed to others his love, he has, as Betty notes, made love "with hands and eyes." He then forgets Phillis and marries another in Canada. This love affair, and indeed Holdsworth's whole character, is a living lie. He has been suspected by the usually honest and keen Holman from the start.

Holdsworth looks foreign, not dressing his hair as a true Englishman should. He has a "round-about" way of speaking, a "tone of badinage"; he finds it a wholesome experience when he tries for a change to make his words represent his thoughts, instead of merely looking for their apparent effect on others. When visiting the Holman house, Holdsworth does not draw honest,
useful drawings like Mr. Manning; rather he draws vain, pretty scenes. Unlike Mr. Manning, who invents and works because it is his pleasure, duty, and dignity, Holdsworth gives up all, even his supposed beloved, for money and reputation. Holman is restless when Holdsworth is around because Holdsworth takes all from their duties and seriousness, "because he is "like dram-drinking," and because Holdsworth is not always "sober and truthful." Holdsworth may be considered a living lie, especially in contrast to the truthfulness usual in Holman, and it is the deception of Holdsworth that is the beginning of all the trouble that follows in the story.

There are other deceptions and concealments, however, which, if not as obviously important as Holdsworth's at first glance, are perhaps more dangerous because more subtle, and which are also necessary for the disaster to which the plot works itself out. Paul is not truthful even in introducing Holdsworth, as he does so in order to impress. Paul conceals Phillis' love from the Minister and conceals from Holdsworth the fact that he has declared

64 Mrs. Gaskell makes repeated use of the idea of work as fitting in closely with truth. The lying Holdsworth does not work either Paul or himself too much, leaving much time for leisure, as Paul discovers when a new master takes over control. Someone like Holman, however, finds his best rest in merely changing work. Honest work, is, therefore, an aspect of honest living, being your true self, and is opposed to deceitful living and little work or "eye-service" work. Note in this regard that all work "honestly" through Phillis' illness, even though the Minister cannot check on them. (All references here are from Cousin Phillis, 66-7, 81, 102). There is an obvious parallel here with the final part of Ruth.

65 Elizabeth C. Gaskell, Cousin Phillis, etc., Dr. A. W. Ward Introd., Knutsford Ed., 1906, 88; 49; 47; 51, 57; 51, 53, 64; 53, 79; 58.
his friend's love for Phillis and that Phillis has reciprocated love. Later, when Phillis is sick, Paul thinks over his past course of action and decides what to do for the future:

What was I to do or to say? I wanted to justify Holdsworth, to keep Phillis' secret, and to pacify the woman all in the same breath. I did not take the best course, I'm afraid. . . .

Well! don't let us show her we guess that she is grieving; she'll get over it the sooner. Her father and mother don't even guess at it, and we must make as if we didn't. It's too late now to do anything else. 66

These concealments by Paul prevent any meeting of the minds and clearing of the air. Misunderstandings mount. Phillis herself conceals the love affair from everyone; she hides letters, words spoken by Holdsworth, the giving of flowers to Holdsworth, blushes, paintings. 67 Then with self-pity, the delusion of self's grandeur and superiority which should not have to undergo trouble, Phillis compounds her misery and becomes truly sick.

Finally, there is Mr. Holman deceiving himself, and in a most unusual way, although there is some similarity between his conduct and that of Bradshaw in the previous story. The Minister deludes himself with the "pride of his own conceit" 68 into thinking that he and his provision are the best for Phillis, and that she would be absurd ever to change or to think

66 Ibid., 88-9.
67 Ibid., 60.
68 Ibid., 101, where Holman admits this in the case of old Tim Cooper.
of doing for herself. This all-controlling self-delusion of the Minister keeps Phillis in perpetual childhood, makes him always view her as a child. That Phillis is not independent, still considered a child, is shown by her still wearing the pinafore, by her retreating from reality to the children's woodpile, by her self-pitying avoidance of work and responsibility in a time of emotional struggle, by the conquest of passion over reason, and by the Minister's whole attitude towards her. Instead of always considering her a child, the father should have been able to see her womanly plight and to give her warning.

Usually the Minister was sympathetic to each individual person; he respected each separate personality. This attitude gave him access to the secrets of most hearts and allowed him to do much good for those suffering. He always saw, for example, when his wife was even slightly troubled. But because he puts his relationship to Phillis on a false footing pretending that he is more and she is less than they really are; because he still treats his daughter as an unknowing child, Holman helps bring about the great tragedy. Betty points this out, after Paul had asked her: "And she [Phillis] is so young; do you suppose her parents would not have seen it [Phillis' love for Holdsworth]?" Betty answers with the frank voice of common sense:

69 "Did we not make you happy here? Have we not loved you enough? . . . left us for a stranger and wandering . . . " (Phillis, 99-100).

70 Ibid., 9, 73, for references to the first two specific items; the others are general, and need no particular reference.
Well! if you ask me that, I'll say out boldly, "no."
They've called her "the child" so long -- "the child" is always their name for her when they talk on her between themselves, as if never anybody else had a ewe-lamb before them -- that she's grown up to be a woman before their very eyes, and they look on her still as if she were still in her long-clothes. And you ne'er heard on a man falling in love wi' a babby in long-clothes?!

Thus, because of his refusal to admit that Phillis is no longer a child, because of his restraining her due independence, Holman is robbed of Phillis' confidence. If he had known Phillis' feelings, the Minister with his sharp intuitions might have been able to warn and protect her against the mistrusted Holdsworth.

The deception of Holdsworth, the concealments of Paul and Phillis, the self-pitying delusions of Phillis, the delusions of grandeur of the Minister leading him to stifle Phillis' independence and her confidence -- these are the difficulties that are at the center of the conflict of Cousin Phillis.

The conflict in Wives and Daughters is a struggle for peace within the Gibson and Hamley families. Mrs. Gaskell has grown more subtle in this novel, as in Cousin Phillis. The deceits and their cures are more inherent in the characters of the people and of society, rather than in external actions committed.

The new Mrs. Gibson, "Clare," by reason of her hypocritical, status-grasping nature, is a prime disturber of the peace. There are many small details in the book which show her putting on a false front. Mrs. Gibson

\[^7\]Ibid., 88.
is constantly worried about pointless social appearances based upon mere
custom rather than on the true worth of the individual. To attain high
station she is willing to go through all these petty little social deceits.

Clare buys good outer clothing, more expensive than she can really
afford, for show; but she has so little money left that she must wear rags
underneath, where no one can see. She buys grays because they give a lady-
like appearance while being economical. She puts herself on friendly rela-
tions with the over-cultured Osbourne Hamley by telling him of plays and
night life she has never actually experienced. She sops up the attention of
the aristocratic for herself, even concealing Harriet's "hello" from Molly. Although she frowns on Roger Hamley because he is not the first born
to inherit the pomp of a title, she speaks to him in her "sweet false tone."
Roger is dressed down for being so impolite as to visit in the morning, but
the rules of domestic morality can be relaxed for the morning visit of the
peer's wife; Lady Cumnor can visit Mrs. Gibson anytime. Later, after over-
hearing a medical secret about Osbourne's ill health and possible death,
Mrs. Gibson quickly douses her dislike of Roger, who then would be in line
for the Hamley name and wealth.72

Mrs. Gibson dislikes Dr. Nicholls because he sees through her false
"genteel appetite." When Lady Harriet visits, Clare prepares an extravagant
lunch beyond her means and usual habits; she wants to give the impression of a
lunch of "simple elegance," looking impromptu, as if no special preparations

had been made and this sort of meal was the usual thing for her. So much does she deal in duplicity herself that she cannot even believe the impeccable Dr. Gibson is telling the truth when he requests her not to manoeuvre behind the scenes in marriage plans for Molly, as she had done in so sly and irritating a way for Cynthia. 73

In her concern with gentility and the appearance of proper manners befitting elegance and high rank to which she aspires (false to her true crude nature and birth), Clare complains about many absurd little unimportant things. Cheese is too coarse; Dr. Gibson should eat an elegant omelette, even if that means being false to his tastes and desires. She frowns on his habit of whistling when happy; this is "low." She thinks the Hollingford people rather common, although she is continually ingratiating herself with them. Aping the manners of the aristocracy, Mrs. Gibson plots away to "bring out" Molly and Cynthia at the Easter ball, where the girls are instructed to dance only with gentlefolk. When visiting, Mrs. Gibson sends away the food untasted, lest the Cum nors and the duchess think her so poorly off that she is using it as her dinner in the middle of the day. Since she also considers it vulgar to overeat anywhere, the Gibsons are often neglected around the town for tea invitations. Mrs. Gibson cannot appreciate a duchess without diamonds. She considers all proverbs vulgar, especially ones that tell a nasty truth. Molly must never use such vulgar expressions,

73 Ibid., 293, 322, 362.
as refinement consists in never thinking a vulgar commonplace thing like proverbs and idioms. 74

While never bothering to conceal all this sham from her family, Mrs. Gibson can proclaim in a mood of righteousness that she has never even told a white lie. With the greatest aplomb she can complain about Cynthia, whose questions bare the "truths and falsehoods of polite life." She can intone in pious anger at the dallying of the married Osbourne: "If there is one thing that revolts me, it is duplicity." 75 Mrs. Gibson is a living mass of stature-seeking lies, perhaps the most fully covered with deception of any of Mrs. Gaskell's creations. Clare is a thorn of discord disturbing the previously smooth life of honest Molly and Dr. Gibson. With them dissatisfied, Clare can find little peace. Conscience, of course, can never let her be at rest in her continual quest to be more than she really is. And finally, others, especially Cynthia and the truly aristocratic, see through Clare's petty plotting; few in town, even among the poorest and lowest, have much regard for her, despite all her efforts.

The falseness of her mother is one of the things that makes Cynthia so moody, so unhappy, and false in her own way. Cynthia considers herself never bound to be truthful, feeling that only by playing her own game, hiding concealed in the shadows of events, can she shake off the cloak of

74 Ibid., 113, 356, 208, 211 and 259, 248, 398, 262, 287, 580.

75 Ibid., 323f., 424, 511.
her mother's all-consuming hypocritical control. Cynthia always keeps her inner thoughts to herself and tries to mask her inner preoccupation with pretending to read or to be busy with something. These hidden lone ways of hers have not made her happy. Cynthia denies to Molly that she has any private trouble. Neither will she find help in her unrest by confiding in Dr. Gibson; she respects him too much to have him lower his opinion of her by knowing the truth. Later she even begins equivocating with him when the doctor finds himself sympathetically puzzled and displeased by Cynthia's pronounced habitual air of mystery and concealment. Cynthia pledges herself to Roger without really loving him, and she asks her mother and Roger to keep the engagement a secret. Old Squire Hamley especially must not know of the engagement, for he would probably be so blunt that he would condemn the arrangement as false, based on characters that are incompatible. The real reason, however, why Cynthia must insist on having the engagement a secret is that she has already promised herself to Preston. 76

Yet for all her own untruthfulness, Cynthia is, as Mrs. Gaskell points out, like an emulsion to disguise bitter medicine: untruthful herself, she will accept other people only if they are strictly willing to live the truth of their own personalities. Thus, she distrusts her mother and dislikes Osbourne Hamley for wrapping and hiding false flattery in many words; but she likes the straightforward Dr. Gibson and the honest Molly. 77

76 Ibid., 198, 269, 266, 281, 422, 375 and 383, 340, 350-1, 418.
77 Ibid., 281, 295.
Cynthia is unhappy and troubled in her duplicity. Yet she has this spark of truth within her to make her dislike others who act falsely. Finally, to gain relief, Cynthia confides in Molly about Preston. She decides on the way of openness, which will free her from trouble in the end. She does not at first, however, tell Molly all, and she pledges Molly to secrecy. She has not yet learned to be completely open. The demands of secrecy almost ruin Molly. Later the revelation of all secrets will make them both free.

Molly has all her life been quite happy. Her happiness is due to her truthfulness. Straightforward Countess Cumnor notices this when Molly is only a child; she likes Molly's open speech. Harriet finds Molly "true and simple," not using any false manners and airs, a person who always tells the truth. Molly finds distasteful the Brownings' way of saying "a little bird told us," instead of openly naming their informant. 78

The only time sorrow comes to Molly is the brief period of dabbling in concealments. She does not tell her father of her displeasure in his coming marriage; instead she goes to a hidden garden to cry in secret, running away from life briefly. All winter following the marriage she is unhappy because of a burden she will not face -- that her father is unhappy with his new wife. Molly agrees to undertake clearing Cynthia from the grasp of Preston -- but in secret, for the good end of not disturbing Roger. 79

78 Ibid., 116, 144, 264, 399.

79 Ibid., 100, 370, 422.
Because of the secret meetings with Preston, Molly only has more worry. Her reputation around the town is so damaged that even her father doubts for a few brief minutes, and her close friends, the Brownings, are scandalized. Molly cannot clear herself because she has pledged secrecy to Cynthia.

Another person guilty of deceit is old Squire Hamley and his son Osbourne. The son has hidden his marriage to a lowly Frenchwoman because this would enrage the father. Osbourne must continually mope and seek money because of his concern for the wife and child. The squire, on the other hand, hides his love for Osbourne behind a mask of scorn, trying to spur the boy to live up to the paternal high hopes. Thus, the Squire has set up a false image on which he wants his son to pattern himself; the Squire has taken on the traits of the compulsive parents observed in previous stories. Squire Hamley's prejudices, false assumptions against Catholics, foreigners, "low" people, and the like, merely aggravate the situation, as he falsely gropes for past pretended family glories. Mutual pride keeps both apart. The father has a false pattern to which all must conform; the son has concealed his true present state which makes it impossible for him ever to fill the father's hopes. The result is an unhappy tension.

All the sources of trouble in this book, therefore, are in some way connected with falsehood. Clare is trying to appear what she is not. Cynthia and Osbourne do likewise in attempts to evade excessive, personality-killing control. Squire Hamley tries to fashion a false front for his whole family. Even Molly is on the verge of being trapped into the ways of pretence by apparent necessity.
What is the solution? It is the usual Mrs. Gaskell solution. Perhaps it would have been more subtle and sharply drawn if the author had lived to finish the work entirely in her own way. Reverse all this deceit, is the answer. Be yourself. Cynthia learns that she does not have to have herself judged by either Mr. Gibson's or Roger's high standards. She does not have to pretend to be what others think she must be, but only what she herself sees as correct. She becomes truly independent as soon as she learns to live according to her own lights. The Squire and Osbourne bury differences once the presence of wife and child at Osbourne's sickbed force them to face the truth and to cease trying to remake each other's character.

Mrs. Gibson never learns much, but she at least simmers down for a while -- enough to allow a happy ending. We see the lesson we must learn from her in the way all her plans have gone awry. When Molly's concealments are brought to light and all the truth is confessed, Molly reverts to her old truthfulness easily, and finds herself in the position she had secretly wanted for so long, yet denied in self-deceit; she is wife of Roger, to whom she truly belongs with her sympathetic, kindly, truthful nature.

It is then found that the matter of Molly's guilt is so complex that it is difficult to judge her, for her dealings with Preston have both an external and an internal truth. Molly, like Ruth, was trying all along

80 Ibid., 497.

81 Ibid., 468; other references in this paragraph, respectively, 477, 118, 120.
to be true to her own inner laws -- to love and help others all she could. Thus, in a way Molly is truer than the others in the book, because they are all trying to remake themselves and others into something alien. As Harriet points out, in the end Molly stands as "truth itself." All along Molly has consciously tried to think of others and to do for others without giving up her own individuality, her true desires, the things (as Mrs. Gaskell notes) that make her herself. Molly notes to herself that she never could stand the false piety that demands "killing" of self; true piety is to be oneself fully.

Throughout the story Lady Harriet is the one who in her periodic appearances tries to inject this idea of true living into the others. In this office, Harriet warns Molly of the important thing in life, as far as this story is concerned: whether in word or action, says Harriet, "Tell the truth, now and evermore." Once again, falseness to their true natures had brought trouble to the characters of this story; the truth sets them free.

The main purpose of the preceding analyses has been to prove that in a random selection of novels and short stories Mrs. Gaskell stresses this as her theme: man should live the truth and avoid deceptions. A careful study of the details of each story proves in the following two ways that such is constantly Mrs. Gaskell's theme: falseness of some kind is the reason for the conflict, the main trouble, in each story. Falseness always causes

\[82\text{Ibid.}, 468, 477, 118, 120.\]

\[83\text{Ibid.}, 145.\]
unhappiness and major unrest. As soon as the falseness is replaced with truth, the difficulties vanish and happiness appears. Secondly, Mrs. Gaskell stresses as theme the necessity for living the truth by using this idea as the principle of selection for what goes into each story. Qualities of characters' personalities, types of incidents described, even the repeated choice of such words as "true" and "false" applied to unlikely situations -- all have a basic concern with truth and falsehood. Since this relationship is expressed and emphasized by repetition of types of character, incident, detail, more than can be accounted for by coincidence in descriptions of the real world, the reader must suppose that Mrs. Gaskell has selected such details, perhaps subconsciously, in order to further the purpose she had in writing, in order to emphasize what all these details have in common -- the necessity for living the truth.

Mrs. Gaskell obviously uses many different ways to illustrate this theme of hers. The analyses in this chapter reveal that she sees many different types of ways in which a person may deal in untruths, even though her characters seldom are found telling direct lies. Four principal categories of falsehood may be found in these works of Mrs. Gaskell.

The first is concealment of facts. The narrator, for example, conceals his real identity in "Curious if True." Facts of the robbery, of the father's forgery, and of the husband's and wife's knowledge of the situation are concealed in "Right at Last." Mr. Harrison conceals youthful pranks; Ellinor and Wilkins conceal Dunster's death; Ruth's past crime is not told; Phillis' puppy-love actions are not told of; Kinkaid's love declarations and capture are not made known; Osbourne's wife and child are hidden away;
Molly and Cynthia have concealed dealings with Preston.

Secondly, there is the deceit involved in attempting to present to the world a false personality, a facade which is not one's real character. Thus, Corbet and Wilkins attempt too high a respectability, Mr. Harrison enslaves himself to petty social conventions, Philip is pedantic in the presence of Sylvia, Bradshaw rants with Puritanical strictness yet allows bribery, Jemima pretends coldness to lover Farquhar, Phillis stifles her love, and almost everyone in Wives and Daughters puts up pretence, either by the empty social conformity of Mrs. Gibson and Osbourne and the town's ladies, by the unnaturally abrupt and inconsistent breaking of social custom by Cynthia and Squire Hamley.

Besides these two main categories of falsehoods, there are two minor types as well. There is the concealment of true feelings, as, Sylvia's for Kinkaid, Ellinor's for Livingstone, Harrison's for Sophy, Corbet's for Ellinor, Phillis' for Holdsworth, Jemima's for Farquhar, and Molly Gibson's for Roger Hamley. These people try to delude themselves at least briefly into a false and unrealistic relationship with the lover - either over-concern or apparent unconcern. Finally, there are some cases of self-deception where people blind themselves, almost unconsciously, to facts they should have known and used in dealing with their lives. Wilkins, for example, flaunts his social pretensions with its drinking and financial problems; Corbet nurses dreams of greatness; Bradshaw boasts of righteousness in tyranny and bribery; Mrs. Gibson, Mr. Harrison, and Holdsworth all crave public acclaim; Cynthia and Osbourne try to follow patterns of conduct beyond their abilities; Philip, Ruth, and Molly Gibson briefly try to run
away from responsibilities. The most common instance of this category, however, is the parent, tightly controlling all actions, refusing to admit that his children have matured and must be allowed to live their own lives. This proud, exaggerated sense of self-importance leads the parent (or lover) to force the children to become a slave to some impossible ideal that the parent hopes the child may reach, even though it may demand destruction of the child's nature and inability of the child to live his own sacred life. Examples of this occur in the lives of Bradshaw, Minister Holman, Dr. Morgan (with Mr. Harrison), Philip (with Sylvia), Wilkins, and Mrs. Gibbon.

Finally, just the reverse of this last idea, there are a few children, like Sylvia, Jemima briefly, Phillis, and Cynthia, who remain slaves of passion instead of exerting their wills to mature like Ruth to a reasoned and willed unfolding of their true nature. Often such children are only partially to blame, however, because they are usually stunted by a nearby controlling parent or friend.

These last two "minor" categories are not thought by the present author to be as important as the first two because these last two categories mesh with the important "false personality" category, into which these two eventually lose themselves. Concealment of true feelings and self-deception as regards one's own true personality and role in life are actually two of the most important reasons for attempting to present a false appearance to the world -- along with and complementary to an attempt for glory in social prestige. In other words, it would be easier for the purpose of drawing generalizations if these last two "minor" categories were not kept separate, but combined with the previous one to show that men often act falsely when
they attempt to present to others an untrue, unreal self.

An analysis of the writings of Mrs. Gaskell, therefore, leads to the following conclusions about things Mrs. Gaskell is most anxious to show in her writings. First, the conflict of each story involves a straying from full truth. Secondly, there is usually some concealment of facts or blindness to qualities or basic truths in an attempt to project a false image of one's true character or nature -- often involving the pressure of social conventions and pretences. Thirdly, the most common way of living the truth, contrasted with the above living of untruth, is to evolve enough moral courage to be the kind of person one's real personality indicates he is to be. This usually involves facing, not concealing, present facts and realities, however unpleasant or damaging in the sight of others, and a sincere effort to be natural, to develop the full personality even when this demands great sacrifice in promoting the well being of others. Fourth, falsehood is always punished; truth, rewarded. Fifth, the theme of stories by Mrs. Gaskell is, therefore, the necessity for living the truth.

The only person in all these stories whose punishment for falsehood we are not directly told of is the doctor who tells some mischievous whoppers at the end of Ruth. Since this occurs only about a page from the end of the story in about two sentences, it would not be fair to expect the author to show the doctor's punishment. If she had continued the story, no doubt Mrs. Gaskell would have rewarded this doctor as well as she rewarded every other - even minor-untruthfulness.
CHAPTER V

THEME AND UNITY IN CRANFORD AND "THE CAGE AT CRANFORD"

For those who deny the unity of Cranford, the village of Cranford itself is made what can be called the protagonist if one can go so far as to say that a book without action has a main actor. The town is described; it is the center of interest. The reader might be led to assume that Cranford is considered the protagonist both by the title of the book and by the large amount of space and interest occupied by the village and its mannerisms. In other words, Cranford does not have as the protagonist a person to whom difficulties occur, but, in the manner of the heath in The Return of the Native, it has the village of Cranford as its main character. These critics would see a difference, however, between Cranford and The Return of the Native. Cranford would be considered as setting forth a description and history of the typical quaint old English village -- but not in a dramatic or narrative way and not with unified action.

If Cranford itself is the protagonist, there is no narrative, as these critics note. For if the village is the protagonist, against whom or what does it struggle? What is this main actor doing or trying to do? Because they find no single answer for these questions, the critics have considered Cranford as disunified.

The heath in The Return of the Native, for example, has a separate existence and character of its own. It reveals its gloomy yet sturdy
character and personality, and it tries to impress these as an outside force on the personalities of those who live on the heath. The natural qualities of the heath dwellers seeking self-expression and fulfillment clash with the nature of the heath as it seeks to demonstrate its true self and to imprint its traits on all. In Cranford, however, the situation is a bit different. The village has no perceptible existence or character separate from that possessed by its inhabitants. The reader is not given a hint even as regards any physical qualities of the town, much less any psychological properties. Its character traits are only the mannerisms of the inhabitants. The town is not having a battle with its own traits or those of its inhabitants, for the traits of the town are those of the inhabitants. The town, therefore, is not having its difficulties; there is no conflict. With Cranford as protagonist, one can see why so many of the critics would have declared the book disunified, without the unity of a novel. There is no story, only the strain of living from day to day.

Perhaps, however, the conflict is precisely this: the struggle of Cranford to live on from day to day. While such a theory would produce a pale potential conflict of perseverance in life for Cranford, it still would not produce unified action. The book remains a mere character sketch or idyll. There is no climax in this action, no point where Cranford faces squarely its problem of living and seeks a solution or even meets self-revelation. There is no point where Cranford meets its severest opposition and either conquers, goes down in defeat, or stands dramatically revealed. All that happens is that the town ambles on from day to day, from one event to another, none more important or decisive in any way than the other. In other
words, if Cranford is the protagonist of this book, all that the reader is
given is a character portrait, a number of incidents whose only relationship
to one another is that they can all be used to see what sort of a place the
village is. There is nothing in any one event to demand that it be followed
by any other event. Any point could be the start; any incident could end the
book. There would be no change in the performing of a main action or in
dramatic revelation of character. There is no reason why the last events
could not have been first, or omitted entirely. The incidents have no narra-
tive structure. With such a view, Cranford becomes truly a mere series of
sketches, not a novel. It is only a portrait of a community without dramatic
sequence of action. Since the action leads nowhere, it cannot be said
whether or not the author shows that Cranford is to be imitated or condemned
or whether it is even a matter of indifference: the book shows nothing; it
has no theme. If Cranford is to be seen as a novel, there must be -- to
simplify the problem of a complex book -- a conflict met at some climactic
point for better or for worse, at least for self-revelation, so that the
reader can say that one should either espouse or avoid or choose at will a
general course of action or character trait of which the conduct of the
protagonist is a specific example. Some start, ending, significance, pur-
pose, must be found for the book. Another protagonist must be found if
Cranford is to be considered a unified novel.

The only character who is given treatment as large as that of the town
is Miss Matty. Three arguments could be found, however, against the assump-
tion that Matty is the protagonist. The title of the book seems to indicate
that the village is of first importance. Secondly, having Matty as
protagonist seems only to make the book even more episodic and loose in structure. At least with the village as main character one might justify apparently irrelevant details by claiming that they help present a complete description of the village. Obviously, however, not all the details give a description of Matty. Some relationship to her must be found for them.

Finally, just as it was impossible to find a suitable conflict and climax with Cranford as protagonist, likewise there seems to be no opponent nor difficulty against which Matty is struggling. On closer observation, however, these difficulties vanish.

There are two easy ways of locating a conflict in Cranford with Matty as protagonist. Both involve reasoning from theme to climax and conflict in the manner suggested in Chapter Two. First the theme of Cranford must be determined.

The Gaskell "answer book" developed in the previous two chapters is one of the ways of deciding what is probably the theme of Cranford. Mrs. Gaskell's usual theme is the necessity of truth and the evil effects of the various forms of falsehood. If she has used this theme in many of her works, as has been shown, she has probably used it again in Cranford. Thus, the conflict in this book should show, if it is to follow the Gaskell pattern,

---

1See above, pages 25 to 33. Note especially page 26, where it is pointed out that once the critic has determined the theme in one manner he should be able to go back to the novel and see how the protagonist won when opposing what should be opposed, and so on. The real conflict should become evident, that is, once the theme is known. The reason, to repeat from the earlier chapter, why such a method is valid is that the most obvious method (usually used unconsciously) for determining theme is to say that one must do what must be done to win in the conflict, or one must have that quality necessary in the story for victory.
how Matty loses when she deals in deception and becomes successful when she lives the truth. As added assurance, two critics lightly suggest the possibilities of fruitful investigation in this area. In *Cranford*, says ffrench, "foolishness is to some extent the object of gentle ridicule."² Sanders agrees that the "best name for the sort of writing used in *Cranford* is, perhaps, gentle satire, for satire it is" as it laughs at "unjust prejudices."³ Such remarks would lead one to suppose, in the light of Mrs. Gaskell's usual condemnations of falsehood, that Matty is fighting some type of social prejudice prevalent in Cranford, prejudice somehow falsifying life in the town. A knowledge of Mrs. Gaskell's usual theme, therefore, suggests that *Cranford* has as its main encounter a struggle by Matty against what is untrue in her society. The emphasis placed on the village of Cranford in the title and in the book is then easily explained, for the trend to falseness in the mannerisms of most of the people of Cranford is what Matty opposes; the village might be said to be her static antagonist. It would be better to say that, since the village has no separate existence of its own, Matty must battle against false prejudices in herself and her neighbors, in those who are Cranford.

Further, it is quite likely that Mrs. Gaskell has used her familiar theme again in *Cranford*. What would explain a sudden single deviation in the middle of her career? Yet, this whole argument from the use of the theme of

² ffrench, *Mrs. Gaskell*, 76.
lying and truth in other works only gives probability at best, not certitude that it has been used again in Cranford. Thus, another method of exploration based on the text itself is needed to provide final full proof for the theory suggested and to show how the novel would thus be unified in its details.

The second way to discover the theme and thereafter the conflict of Cranford is to search for details so often repeated as to show that the author is trying to emphasize what they have in common. 4

Throughout the book there is a constant dwelling on things that are considered vulgar. A whole catalogue of these "vulgarities" may be compiled from every part of the book. It is vulgar to do such things as the following: to mention poverty, to be a man, to work, to publish in numbers, to suck oranges, to eat peas with a knife, to allow the maid to have any male followers, to regret the flight of time, to use words like "hoax," to have a name like "Hoggins" with the word "hog" in it, to eat heavily when out, to be wealthy, to turn around to see who is there, to make any noise in a place of public amusement, to see magic, to marry, to shop in the grocery, to be over-curious, to wear garters, and to cross your legs. 5 There are other instances of things considered unfashionable and not to be done (or the opposite, recommended for those with good breeding); those listed here are situations specifically labeled as vulgar -- a sufficiently long and

4 See above where this is discussed, pp. 27-33.

5 Elizabeth C. Gaskell, Cranford, London, Smith, Elder, [n.d.], 9, 10, 12, 31, 13, 14, 15, 33, 40, 45, 50, 58, 71 and 172, 76, 88, 95, 124, 131, 142, 166.
representative list. As mentioned earlier, such constant repetition can be one method the author might use to make the reader aware of the unreality, the artistic selectivity, of the situation being pictured. It can be Mrs. Gaskell's way of emphasizing the thematic principle of selection that chose such details, her way of forcing the reader to extend the literal meaning of the words so as to perceive the deeper significance of the total movement of the story.

How are these details unreal? A few of the prohibitions, like slopping an orange in public or excessive curiosity, are such that anyone would condemn them. Nothing termed poor manners or vulgar in the whole book, however, is of such great moment as to arouse a whole town to public indignation, as happens in most of the examples here cited. Furthermore, ordinary coincidence would not allow so many examples of "vulgarity" to come constantly before the attention of anyone. That so many examples of poor manners have been catalogued in this book shows that the author intended to stress such incidents and the implications of them.

More important, most of the prohibitions cover things which are obviously not in any way wrong or unmannerly, but sometimes even good and necessary -- such as, wealth, marriage, shopping, and working. To hold that such things are vulgar and wrong is false. Anyone who would inveigh against such things is putting on a false personality, for he is, in fact, being untrue to the very nature of man. Man must work, marry, possess. It is obvious why, with this theme at the back of her mind, Mrs. Gaskell makes reference to the absurd cow in the lime pit as being similar to hypocritical human cows in flimsy flannel suits in London. Such a one is like the person
chasing sunbeams off the carpet to protect an imagined but absurd carpet purity. He is violating nature (here the nature of the carpet), chasing false unrealities, making "paper paths" that have no substance in the real world. One who keeps these unnatural social commandments is turning his back on reality and on a true life. He is stunting his full growth. These prohibitions are merely escapisms, "paper paths," to soothe people who wish to delude themselves with the idea of their own vanished or never attained eminence. By frequently repeating this type of detail -- having the town name vulgar things good and necessary, also things unworthy of a whole town's wrath -- the author shows the tragic and absurd results of adhering to such conventions. She forces the reader to go beyond a strict characterization of the town, to observe where the sad results of this chain of deception dramatically lead. She forces the reader to go beyond the literal meaning of the words to her theme that man should adhere to what is true and avoid whatever is pretentious display of false personality yearning for an untrue glory.

This is one difficulty Matty must face. She must ransom her true happiness to false social appearances. She must sacrifice true feelings to conform to this social pattern of the town. A dramatic structure emerges as the reader observes Matty's unhappiness when she must march squarely against social convention to sell merchandise, to earn her living, to leave off her aristocratic pretences. Matty faces a conflict in deviation from truth in

6 Ibid., 11-12.
her social life. Matty is moody, restive, unhappy in her dealings with others because she is bound by these unreasonable laws which she accepts and obeys. Since acting for convention is acting a lie, Matty must seek her social happiness in breaking these bonds of conventionality, in living a life to conform to what she really is and what she really feels. There is a close parallel between this aspect of Cranford and aspects of Ruth, the difficulties of most of the people in Wives and Daughters, and the conduct of Mr. Harrison.

Matty finally achieves enough social maturity to live the truth instead of lie when she braves all public opinion in resolving to do what life demands of her. She becomes "vulgar" in two main ways. She opens her store, although business is vulgar as is all work. Matty has found here the same solution as found by Ruth. Matty will now honestly meet debts incurred by bank failure rather than accept her bankruptcy that would so harm others. She feels it would be a lie to claim bankruptcy when she still has some money. She is most scrupulous in her business dealings, giving others full measure and sparing herself no pains. To accept duty and to do work, to give all for others if necessary, is her way of fulfilling herself. The whole town comes to accept her integrity, especially her flying in the face of the vulgar to do true duty to herself and others.

Secondly, Matty comes to accept men, although all males are considered vulgar. It is important to observe the place of males in Cranford. Each

---

7Ibid., 90, 135, 152, 156, 157.
male introduced is one who openly braves vulgarity, is a breaker of convention. Captain Brown is "poor out loud," Brunoni can stoop to accept help, and Peter, who crosses his legs, does all sorts of things to frustrate convention, just as he had shocked the conventional by the hoax (which one should not even mention) after which he had left home. The trouble with Peter, says convention, is that he had "lived too long among the savages." Holbrook is also unconventional; his reading is not classical. Yet all these men are made very sympathetic characters to the reader by their kindness to the needy, their thoughtful consideration, as is especially emphasized with Peter. Males are, thus, breakers of the lie of convention and of the false assumptions of grandeur of escapism. Males are the principles of truth, the "honest warmth of a manly heart." In accepting man, therefore, Matty is not only negatively breaking a restraint of convention, but she is also coming positively to accept what stands for honesty and truth. Does Matty really come to accept men? The answer is that she does gradually. At almost the threshold of her life she had been pressured into refusing marriage with Holbrook. As the story moves along, Matty allows Martha to have a follower. She approves of what is considered low: Lady Glenmire's wedding. She mourns over her loss of Holbrook. In times of difficulty and for matters of business (as with the

8 Ibid., 13, 10, 166, 58, 171, 39, 58.

9 Ibid., 51. Note that even the Old Rector, who so often bows to convention, could also be listed here among the other men, for he too is kindly, and at times strong enough to stand up to convention and to act contrary to the habitual and usual ways of acting (See 51, 58, 62).
bank failure) Matty thinks over and reappraises the value of men. When there are thieves, she sees a value in having a man around. She blesses the marriage of Martha and Jim, accepting help from them. She had always wished for and dreamed of a baby of her own. Finally, she accepts home her manly brother Peter. Further, since men are equated with business, in accepting business Matty accepts men. Men stand for truth and the breaking of pretence in this book, for true human values; in accepting males, Matty opens the way, actually, psychologically, and symbolically, for social true living and happiness.

Just as she is bound socially by unreasonable convention that, as it were, kills her while she lives by making her live a lying life not her own, so also is Matty bound in her personal life by an unreasonable bond. Throughout her life Matty has never been independent. She has always been bound by the will of her sister, whether the elder sister is alive or dead. Here is the same sort of deception as in Cousin Phillis, where the one in authority forces an untrue life on his subordinate by refusing due independence. So completely has Matty been led from fulfilling her own true personality by over-restraint, that after her sister's death Matty pays for the few deceptive laxities and slight disobediences she had practiced while the sister was alive, for after the sister's death Matty is more closely bound than ever by inordinate conventionality and by slavery to the sister's

10 Ibid., 45 and 47, 124, 136, 137, 146, 117-8, 137, 154; for Matty's acceptance of men in business and men's equivalence with business, see 137 and 154.
will. It had been her subservience to her sister that had caused the
disaster in Matty's personal life, just as subservience to social conventions
caus[ed her social unhappiness. Matty had the daily petty annoyance of
having her will thwarted in the little pleasures of simple living. Further,
and more important, because her sister frowned on men and marriage as vulgar,
Matty had refused the marriage offer of her one great love, Holbrook, with
resulting unhappiness to them both. It is this that makes Matty unhappy
personally; it is this that leads Matty to conclude, as she broods over the
babies she might have had, that this is a rather sad life.11 It is only
when Matty breaks this bond by coming to accept men that she is able to be
happy personally in being and living the truth of her own nature. It is
important to notice here also how the personal and social aspects of the
conflict unite for a final climax. In her affirmations against pretension
Matty accepts men, thus obtaining personal happiness and a symbol of social
success. One must live the truth.

To summarize, Cranford does have the unity of a novel. A careful
analysis of its theme shows that there is narrative structure: Matty faces
personal and social unhappiness through living lies; she gains happiness in
both by living the truth of her own self. Cranford has, thus, a conflict,
a climax; the actions draw together and make a significant point. The novel
is unified.

11 Ibid., 46, 138, 117.
It is good to have this judgment on the theme and structure of Cranford assured by noting that it fully complies in each of the five major ways with the analysis of Mrs. Gaskell’s usual treatment in her other works. Cranford takes its place with Ruth, Wives and Daughters, and A Dark Night’s Work in protesting against the restraints of social conventions combined with personal ambitions. The book is similar to Ruth, Sylvia’s Lovers, and Cousin Phillis, for, like Sylvia and Phillis, even as regards petty, insincere token non-conformity before and after major decisions, Matty must try to break through excessive and stifling restraints from one in authority over her. As in the other books, the authority should not remain, or at least remain as strong, for Matty herself is now required to lead her own life, as was true with Sylvia and Phillis. Cranford is like Ruth in its solution that man must live the truth of his own character even when this means almost losing self in service of others. Finally, the dramatic structure of Cranford, unobserved by those who call the book "sketches" but revealed by the analysis offered here, makes Cranford quite similar to "Mr. Harrison’s Confessions": both have a double conflict of personal and social infidelity to true self. The dual lines of action meet in both to allow for a single solution of happiness as the main character finds true self, personally and socially, by breaking out of conventionality mainly with a single act of dedication to deep duty.

12See above, p. 105.
From the ideas presented in this chapter several conclusions can be drawn. Cranford has narrative unity, with an obscured conflict and climax revealed from a careful consideration of theme. The book presents Mrs. Gaskell’s usual theme through situations and a conflict quite similar to those in other works of the author. The fact that careful analysis is required in this novel to reveal the theme and dramatic structure shows that Cranford is not only worthy to take its place beside Mrs. Gaskell’s other works, but also that, since it has a subtle conflict of character found (not so well hidden) only in a few other of her writings, Cranford may even take foremost rank among the stories of Mrs. Gaskell.

A final word must be said about "The Cage at Cranford." A brief survey shows that it is not part of the novel, for, although it does give a picture of Cranford life, the center of the stage is occupied by the narrator, Mary Smith, and by Miss Pole.

The basic difficulty in the story occurs because both Mary and Miss Pole are unwilling to allow anyone to know that they are not fully conversant with the latest fashions. In this, they are trying to present a false front to the world -- a familiar motif of Mrs. Gaskell.

Mary had told Miss Pole that a certain hat was "unbecoming" because she had ordered a surprise cap from Paris for Miss Pole and did not want her friend to buy a hat until the gift came. When Mary finds out that the hat is not coming from Paris, she suddenly urges Miss Pole to buy the hat so scorned the day before. It is obvious to Miss Pole that Mary is being false somehow. For her untruths Mary must hear herself called "very muddle-headed." After Mary blurts out the truth, Miss Pole, afraid that some
deception remains, reminds the narrator: "Mary, Mary, remember who is the father of lies!" 13

In her desire to cater to the town's social conventions and to have the new piece of apparel raise Miss Pole to new high status, Mary had asked Mrs. Brown in Paris to buy "something new and pretty," something "fashionable." This was Mary's undoing. She should have been more honest, more exact, more true with her words. She should not have been ambiguous in her wording to obtain something stylish about which she knew nothing; in her desire to increase Miss Pole's standing, Mary deals in fashions as if such dealing were an ordinary part of her character. Thus, Mary is being false not only in her desire to enhance slightly and "innocently" Miss Pole's prestige by showy externals, but she is also deceiving herself, being false to her own nature in dealing with what is beyond her realm as if such fashions were commonplace for her. Mary actually knows so little about the fashions that she does not even know what a "cage" is. When the servants suggest that the present is a dress or petticoat, they are shouted down by Mary and Miss Pole -- who again falsely flaunt what they feel is their superior knowledge in matters of fashion. Says Mary: "I was rather looked upon in the light of a fast young woman by all the laundresses of Cranford, because I had two colored petticoats." Mary insists on maintaining her

false position even when she is clearly ignorant of style or use. Later at
dinner Miss Pole ridiciles the servants' suggestion once more. As a result
of their false pretensions Mary and Miss Pole must suffer a good deal of
humiliation when the truth is revealed, although the matter here is so petty
that Mrs. Gaskell does not make them unhappy with life, as happens when a
person is guilty of more serious falsehood in the other stories. Mary and
Miss Pole are shamed before Peter and Hoggins, and even before the servant
Fanny, whose wisdom they find was really quite superior. Instead of being
so concerned with the showiness and originality of Miss Pole in her new
garb, instead of ignorantly agreeing in criticism of Mrs. Fitz-Adams'
"unfashionable cap", and instead of jealously guarding her own reputation
as a connoisseur, Mary should have held to the truth of words and action.
She should have told the woman in Paris exactly what was wanted, without
being worried about fashionableness. Miss Pole had advised that "when you
want a thing, say what you want; it is the best way in general." Instead of being
worried about fashionableness, Mrs. Gaskell had advised that "when you
want a thing, say what you want; it is the best way in general." In other
words, Mary should have done away with evasiveness, kept to the exact truth
of words and actions; she should have lived the truth.

While "The Cage at Cranford" has the same Gaskell theme, therefore,
and the same setting, it will not join itself structurally to Cranford, as
it should do if the book were only a series of sketches or a study of the
village. The different characters and sequence of action that "The Cage at

\[14\] Ibid., 248, 245, 256, 250.

\[15\] Ibid., 248.
"Cranford" focuses upon separates it from the main stream of action of Cranford, at least in the present form of these two stories. It is reassuring to see this, for this observation lends further credence to the analysis offered for Cranford: the contrast between this short story and the novel show them separate. Some of the important details are carried over from Cranford, however, besides the obvious similarities of characters, setting, theme, and point of view.

There is the same concern for the external appearances of things. All think a cage from France much more "elegant" than one from England. Mary makes much of her insistence on the word "fashionable," her downfall eventually, as she learns that "there is such a thing, I can assure you" as a gift's being "too fashionable." This story has an inordinate concern again with what is "vulgar", both in the worry over fashionable externals mentioned above, and explicitly in examining "Mr. Hoggins' vulgarity." It is vulgar of him to stand in the presence of his aristocratic wife. Further, Hoggins begins "to laugh in his boisterous vulgar way" when he reveals the truth of the "cage" to Mary and Miss Pole. Finally -- quite significant -- this story presents the same view of males as does Cranford. Men are only in the way at home, the reader is told, and they do not belong in the drawing room, for that is where the local gossips weave their untruths for social prestige. Peter and Mr. Hoggins are the ones who finally impress the truth about the cage on Mary and Miss Pole.  

\[16\] Males, therefore, considered vulgar

\[16\] Ibid., 257, 245, 254, 258, 254.
in the town, are actually the main bearers of truth. This, of course, is why Mrs. Gaskell has the town, with its false standards, consider men as vulgar when the plot shows the contrary to be true. To live the truth and to gain peace, this story again shows, Mary and Miss Pole must accept men and what they have to say. In all its few details, this story reflects Cranford, although it has a different structure of action from that of the book.

"The Cage at Cranford" is interesting, then, as a final support for the ideas presented about Cranford. The fact that although separated by ten years from the previous work, it shows the same type of detail and demands the same type of thematic interpretation of this detail confirms the analysis of Cranford. Yet this short story announces its distinctness from Cranford: if Cranford were only sketches of the town, this story would fit in as well as any of the chapters of the book. Instead, this story has its own separate structure. "The Cage at Cranford" allows the critic a final confirmation, therefore, in placing Cranford as a novel well unified in its dramatic action as revealing and revealed by the theme of the necessity for a true life.
CHAPTER VI

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Critical opinion, research shows, holds that Cranford lacks any sure relationship among its incidents, lacks a single, unified conflict. The events lead to no climax; there is no progress; there is no change or clash of characters in the book. Although the events do so well describe the town of Cranford that many critics held the book to be an idyll, a piece of description, and although many were impressed by the uniform tone and sympathetic point of view in the book, no one supported the view that Cranford is a unified novel.

Inquiry into the nature of narrative structure showed that, in a work aspiring to be a novel, theme may focus all the strands of detail and unify the book. Theme reveals the unity of the conflict and all its parts also, for the conflict is but the major detail of the work. Theme may be discovered by observation of the outcome of the conflict or, if the conflict (and, therefore, the narrative unity) is in doubt, by a generalization made on realizing that the author has exercised selection to produce unrealities (as, repetitions, distortions of the normal) that force a certain interpretation. Once theme is discovered by the latter method, any previously concealed dramatic structure should, if present, become apparent. Once theme is discovered by an analysis of the pattern of the minor details, the pattern of the main detail (the conflict) should be clear. The connection
between theme and narrative structure, thus, was found to provide a concrete method for judging the unity of a novel.

Research into critical opinion began the attempt to decide on the narrative unity of Cranford. The critics have judged that Mrs. Gaskell used the same theme in all her works. Although some critics treated the matter so lightly that their testimony is only useful as corroboration, and although many of the critics expressed their opinions on theme incompletely and in a confusing way, investigation indicated that Mrs. Gaskell's usual theme is a warning to avoid various forms of lying, untruth, deception of self or others, by words or actions. The major preoccupation of Mrs. Gaskell is with the evils of falsehood and the value of fidelity to truth.

Careful and detailed textual research of her works themselves showed that such is indeed the usual theme of Mrs. Gaskell. An examination was made of eight representative works, three short stories and five novels. In each the conflict involved a straying from full truth. As regards method of treatment and structure, some concealment of facts or blindness to basic truths or personal characteristics, often involving pressure of social conventions and pretensions, was usually observed. The common way suggested in which one might live the truth was found to be this: evolve enough moral courage to be the kind of person one's personality indicates he is to be, even though this may demand facing unpleasant and damaging personal truths as well as promptness in promoting the well-being of others. Since falsehood is always punished in the books and fidelity to living the truth rewarded, the usual theme of Mrs. Gaskell's stories is indeed, as the
critics had suggested, the necessity for living the truth.

A careful examination of Cranford showed sufficient distortion of reality to allow an inference (in the manner shown in the second paragraph above) about what Mrs. Gaskell intended as the theme of Cranford. Since there is unnatural stress on prohibitions against "vulgarity," and since the prohibitions are against things not only not evil but even good and necessary for man if he is to be truthful to his nature -- since the author distorts reality to emphasize her point, one may infer that the theme of Cranford is again the necessity for living the truth. When this theme is applied to the action of the story, a conflict is revealed in which Matty strives for social and personal truth -- truth to her human nature and truth to her own individuality. Only when she abandons the falseness of the conventional prohibitions against false "vulgarities," only when she accepts the truthfulness of males and of labor, does Matty find happiness. Cranford has a structure as it shows how Matty comes gradually to reject her old views and to live the truth.

Knowledge of Mrs. Gaskell's usual theme and manner of treatment suggested what theme and what type of detail to look for in Cranford. The distortion of reality proved the theme of Cranford. This theme pointed to a conflict and narrative structure previously unnoticed by the critics. It may be concluded that Cranford is, therefore, a unified novel.

The certainty of this conclusion was further bolstered by the observation that, with its structure explained in the manner indicated, Cranford fits in well with Mrs. Gaskell's usual pattern; it resembles her other stories in theme, structure, type of detail, and manner of treatment.
The certainty of the conclusion was also assured by a study of "The Cage at Cranford." Since this short story shows the same type of detail in the same way, it demands the same thematic interpretation. That it still does not, however, fit into the central pattern of events in Cranford, confirms the fact that Cranford has its own narrative structure. If Cranford were only an idyll or a piece of description, "The Cage at Cranford" should fit in well as further description.

The study of the basis of narrative structure and of Mrs. Gaskell's usual theme and manner of treatment suggests what to look for in Cranford and further strengthens conclusions based on the details found in Cranford. The investigations undertaken in this paper, thus, lead to the conclusion that Cranford is a unified novel.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


APPROVAL SHEET

The thesis submitted by Donald Racky, Jr. has been read and approved by three members of the Department of English.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts.

Jan. 29, 1962

Date

Signature of Adviser