Revoking Victorian silences: Redemption of fallen women through speech in Elizabeth Gaskell's fiction

Comanchette Rene McBee

Iowa State University

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Revoking Victorian silences: Redemption of fallen women through speech in Elizabeth Gaskell’s fiction

by

Comanchette Rene McBee

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Kathleen Hickok, Major Professor
Dometa Brothers
Christiana Langenberg

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Chapter 1: Introduction

I: Victorian Marriage, Silence, and Taboo

One of the primary effects of the Industrial Revolution in Victorian England was the growth of the middle class. Before the Industrial Revolution, England was more rural and less stratified; afterward more people moved into the cities and new, non-agricultural positions opened up in factories and mills. The vast array of new positions that became available allowed for the growth of the middle class, as they took jobs as shopkeepers, factory owners, and the like. This growth affected society in a multitude of ways. With the rise of the middle class, came the rise of the middle class’s ideology. Middle-class values and morals became more widespread, and they “determined the public values of the society as a whole” (Mitchell xiii). Among the many values the middle-class projected upon other classes was the value of female purity. The emphasis on female purity was directly related to the primary goal for middle-class women: marriage. For these women, marriage was essential for obtaining “station, role, duties and economic security” (Mitchell 10). Women needed to present themselves as marriageable or suffer the consequences of being alienated by a pharisaical society that valued women primarily for their marriageability.

To accomplish this goal, girls were raised to be wives. Often every aspect of a girl’s upbringing was related to the goal of making her marriageable. Fraser Harrison, author of The Dark Angel: Aspects of Victorian Sexuality, notes that a girl was “permitted to pass her time only with those activities likely to enhance her chances of attracting a husband” (29). Any skill that would make a girl seem charming, domestic, or docile was a good skill for a middle-class girl to have. The emphasis on marriage was practical; there were few career options open to women, especially ones from the middle classes and higher. If they were to
pursue careers, they often “had to choose between three underpaid and overcrowded occupations: governess (or teacher in a small private school), paid companion (usually overworked and underpaid) or seamstress (making or altering or mending clothes for the well-to-do)” (Perkin 164-165). If a girl was unable to marry and additionally unable to support herself, she had to rely upon the men in her family. Often, this meant running the risk of financial instability; because property was primarily passed down to male heirs, a daughter could be disinherited and left with nothing after her father passed away. Marriage was essential for obtaining “station, role, duties and economic security” (Mitchell 10). For these reasons, girls were often invested in marriage as well. Their livelihoods rested upon their marriageability, and they often adhered to the social decorum to strengthen their prospects of marriage.

These prospects depended largely upon their purity. Marriage was and is bound to economics, and matches still often occurred between cousins to keep property within the family. Similarly, chastity served to ensure that a man’s rightful heirs would not be usurped of their property; the money would stay within the family. The fact that a husband had sufficient warrant to divorce his wife if she committed adultery, but a woman had to prove cruelty in addition to adultery shows the connection between economics and purity. In fact author of Victorian Women, Joan Perkin, quotes Lord Chancellor Cranforth as saying, in the House of Lords in 1857, “the adultery of the wife might be the means of palming spurious offspring upon the husband, while the adultery of the husband could have no such effect with regard to the wife” (123). Thus the double standard was justified due to economic reasons. A woman’s legacy and property were not at stake if her husband committed adultery. Actually, under Victorian law, a married woman could own no property.
Under Victorian law married women were treated as the property of their husbands. Once married, she “ceased to possess a legal existence” (Harrison 7). Harrison explains, “In common with minors and idiots, she had no responsibility under law. Unless she committed murder or treason, her husband was liable for her crimes. She could not sign a contract, make a will or cast a vote” (7). To compare her with “minors and idiots” was to show that she was incapable of making decisions; her husband did that for her. Furthermore, a wife was subjected to her husband’s will:

He could restrain and chastise her – lock her up, keep her from seeing her children, beat her at will – so long as he did not endanger her life. She couldn’t sue him or charge him with battery because, in the eyes of the courts, she had no separate existence; any legal action she entered had to be taken jointly with her husband, and under his name. (Mitchell xi)

She could not get away from an abusive, controlling husband, which is especially true given that her property no longer belonged to her.

While single a woman could own property and keep her earnings; however, a married woman’s property belonged to her husband, making it nearly impossible to successfully leave him. When a woman became engaged, her husband already began to have rights over her property: “During the engagement period, her manacles were tried on for size in that she was forbidden to dispose of any of her possessions without her fiancé’s permission. When she married, the fetters were firmly clamped on” (Harrison 7). Everything she owned, “passed automatically” to her husband upon marriage, whether it be a family heirloom or an article of clothing. She owned nothing, and her husband could essentially take it all away from her. Given the emphasis on marriage in Victorian England, this meant that the majority
of women were powerless. They had no possessions, no earnings, no legal existence, and no means of leaving their husbands if they were cruel.

Before marriage, girls were kept powerless through ignorance. Victorian society went to great lengths to preserve women’s virtue. In The Fallen Angel: Chastity, Class and Women’s Reading 1835-1880, Sally Mitchell explains, “Purity was said to be natural, but it was also so valuable that extreme precautions were needed to preserve it. Prudery kept girls pure by concealing the basic facts of human existence” (xii). Prudery often meant silence. The Victorians repressed all information about sex from girls, assuming that if a girl did not know what sex was, she could not participate in it. Even when approaching marriage, girls were kept unaware of sex, and many women were completely unprepared for their wedding nights. A report by C. Willett Cunnington reveals that at least one doctor advised parents not to tell daughters what to expect upon marriage: “Tell her nothing, my dear madam, for if they knew they would not marry” (qtd. in Mitchell xii). The topic was taboo, and it was “not a fit discussion in polite society, among women friends or between parent and daughter” (Perkin 51). The degree of silence around issues of sex was so complete that some women did not realize their marriages had never been consummated. Mary Stopes, a woman born in 1880 whose mother “lectured on women’s rights, but told her daughter nothing about sex,” was married two years before discovering that her marriage had never been consummated (Perkin 57). Stopes was even an educated woman with degrees in zoology and botany, yet she was completely unaware of sex. Her ignorance is actually not surprising given the Victorian fear of female sexuality. To completely hide all signs of sex from young girls was clearly due to fear that girls might actually want to participate. So fearful were the Victorians that they
often kept any information away from girls that could lead to an understanding of sex; girls
even lacked a basic understanding of their own bodies.

High on the list of taboo subjects was menstruation. Menstruation, if discussed, was
done so between a mother and a daughter in the private sphere and only when absolutely
necessary. Some mothers avoided the subject altogether. According to Joan Jacobs
Brumberg, “In 1852, Edward John Tilt, a physician known for his pioneering work in the
field of obstetrics and gynecology, reported that out of every one thousand American girls,
approximately 25 percent were totally unprepared for menarche. Many were frightened, he
said, and thought they were wounded” (13). While this information comes from an American
study, one has to assume that this information also relates to America’s more reserved
mother country, a country in which “The taboos surrounding menstruation were so strong . . .
that there is little direct evidence of girls’ own reactions to its onset” (Perkin 20). Any
discussion of the taboo subject required the use of polite euphemisms such as “turns,”
“monthlies,” “poorness,” “the curse,” or “being unwell” (Perkin 21). Each term bore with it
a negative connotation which reinforced the taboo.

Even when told about menstruation, vital information was left out; girls did not know
what caused their “monthlies.” This ignorance was not merely an oversight on the part of
mothers, but also on the part of doctors. Up until the 1840s, some doctors still believed “the
menstrual flow came from ‘an excess of nutrient in the female’” (Perkin 21). Exactly what
“nutrient” was in excess remains vague and unclear. Even after the Victorian era ended, some
misconceptions still prevailed; Brumberg writes, “As late as 1904, G. Stanley Hall, the Clark
University psychologist who is considered the architect of modern adolescence, admitted:
‘precisely what menstruation is, is not very well known’” (7). In a century of study, from
1800 until 1900, not enough information was gathered on menstruation to identify “precisely what menstruation is,” suggesting that the taboo of society in general may have expanded into the scientific world as well. The ignorance surrounding menstruation expanded over seven decades. From the 1830s when Victoria ascended to the throne to the 1900s when Victoria’s reign ended, little was discovered about menstruation.

Although the scientific understanding of menstruation was obviously very limited, any information that was known, no matter how small, would have been published in scientific and medical journals. Perkin supports this fact by writing, “There is almost no explicit allusion to menstruation outside contemporary scientific literature” (21). Unfortunately, these journals were not meant for respectable women; such literature was created for male audiences, and “Women were not expected to read medical treatises” (Perkin 22). They were “not expected” to read about these topics, of course, but it was more than that. They were also not encouraged to read about such topics. Despite the importance such understandings would inevitably have for women’s health, the explicit nature of the medical texts made them “inappropriate” for respectable women to read. Indeed, Perkin writes, “Victorian sexual decorum allowed only medical men to discuss prostitution and venereal disease; the subjects were off limits to others, even Members of Parliament, and especially respectable women” (231). Sadly, this meant that the Contagious Diseases Acts were, like so many topics in women’s lives, unapproachable if a woman wished to retain her respectable position.

The introduction of the Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864, 1866, and 1869 presents a prime example of the Victorian double standard. Contagious diseases were becoming a serious problem in the armed forces, so the acts were implemented to contain the spread of
STDs in garrison towns by getting diseased prostitutes off the streets for a certain period of time. Notably, although the acts were a response to venereal disease in enlisted men, the acts did not target these men, but instead it targeted free citizens. In fact, Judith R. Walkowitz notes that a fear of decreasing soldier morale was a major factor in the decision to examine the prostitutes instead (74). The whole procedure proved problematic, however. Walkowitz explains, “Under the acts, a woman could be identified as a ‘common prostitute’ by a special plainclothes policeman and then subjected to a fortnightly internal examination. If found suffering from gonorrhea or syphilis, she would be interned in a certified lock hospital . . . for a period not to exceed nine months” (2). This “fortnightly internal examination” is better described by the terms those against the Contagious Diseases Acts used: “instrumental rape” (Walkowitz 87). These women were essentially raped, as they were being inspected against their wills. To be “identified” as a prostitute required no evidence, only suspicion. Based upon that suspicion, women could be violated every two weeks and locked up for as long as nine months.

No woman should have been subjected to such institutionalized violations. However, the definition of common prostitute “was vague, and consequently the metropolitan police employed under the acts had broad discretionary powers” (Walkowitz 2). Essentially, the vague definition of “common prostitute” meant that many more women were identified than should have been. However, many Victorians saw no problem with this practice, as they believed that to be identified as a prostitute, one had to be acting in a way unbefitting of a respectable woman. William Acton, a prominent Victorian doctor famous for his studies on prostitution, argued that the acts posed no “practical threat to modest women” (Walkowitz 87). If a woman was mistaken for a prostitute, clearly “her conduct was notoriously and
openly bad,” or so Acton argued (Walkowitz 87). These acts obviously had a more implicit objective: to police women’s bodies and behaviors. These acts were used as a way of making women fit in with societal norms of femininity; even if a woman could prove, as she needed to, that she “did not go with men, whether for money or not,” her reputation would have been irrevocably tarnished by the false allegation.

Women were not supposed to know about fallenness, contagious diseases, or prostitution. These subjects all related to sex and were therefore considered impolite. Women were, however, supposed to be the moral and charitable sex, and this created some conflict when women began supporting rescue societies for fallen women. In general, society believed that women should not be involved with the fallen, even for charitable reasons. It created a threat. If ladies worked with fallen women, they would likely be confronted with knowledge about fallenness and prostitution that would affect their innocence. Many well-known men spoke out against women helping with the fallen, including W.R. Greg. In “He Stoops to Conquer: Redeeming the Fallen Woman in the Fiction of Dickens, Gaskell and Their Contemporaries,” Laura Hapke writes of the controversy of women helping with rescue societies. Hapke references Greg’s opinion in the matter, “W. R. Greg felt that it was ‘discreditable to a [respectable] woman even to be supposed to know’ of the fallen, much less minister to them” (17). Greg’s words illustrate the general thought of society. The treatment of fallenness and prostitution as leprosy is highlighted in this controversy. There was a perceived threat that women may gain knowledge that would make them choose to lead immoral lives. Once again, society tried to exclude women from important knowledge through silence.
II: Gaskell’s Life

Elizabeth Gaskell lived in this time period. She saw the silences that were enforced to keep women ignorant, and she was subjected to some of the same silences and double standards, especially in marriage. One such way she was silenced was through her letter writing. Gaskell was very social, and she enjoyed writing letters to a number of friends. Although they were witty, Gaskell herself felt they were not as natural as they should be, a problem which she attributed to William, her husband, reading her letters. While William was away on business, Gaskell wrote about the problem to her sister-in-law (of the same name), stating:

the sort of consciousness that [William] may any time and does generally see my letters makes me not write so naturally & heartily as I think I should do. Don’t begin that bad custom my dear! and don’t notice it in your answer. Still I chuckled when I got your letter today for I thought I can answer it with so much more comfort to myself when [William] is away which you know he is at Buxton. (Letter to Elizabeth Gaskell)

Although her advice not to “begin that bad custom” seems to suggest that Gaskell had allowed William to begin reading her letters, she later became uncomfortable with the practice. She felt trapped and silenced, as she could not “write so naturally & heartily” as she wished to do. Furthermore, she urged her sister-in-law not to “notice it in [her] answer,” suggesting that William read both her incoming and outgoing letters, and that Gaskell was fearful of him discovering this conversation.

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1 All letters from Elizabeth Gaskell, unless otherwise stated, come from The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell, edited by J.A.V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard.
Gaskell also faced the same property rules as other women; as a married woman all of her earnings and property went to William, as is evidenced in a letter Gaskell wrote Eliza Fox. Gaskell wrote, “Do you know they sent me 20£ for Lizzie Leigh? I stared, and wondered if I was swindling them but I suppose I am not; and [William] has composedly buttoned it up in his pocket. He has promised I may have some for the refuge” (Letter to Eliza Fox. April 26 1850). Imagine living a life in which you would be excited if your husband gave you a portion of your own earnings! Later, Gaskell even acknowledges to her publisher that William received her pay: “Mr Gaskell sends me word that he has received the 50£ quite safely; now I don’t know if he is to acknowledge it or if I am; but I fancy you will like a double acknowledgement better than none at all” (Letter to Edward Chapman. 14 January 1851). Not only does this note acknowledge that the earnings were sent directly to her husband, never passing directly into her hands, but it also acknowledges that William did not send her earnings to her. She writes that he sends her “word that he has received the 50£,” but she does not write of him having sent her the money. Perhaps this first-hand experience with having her wages garnished by her husband is what caused Gaskell to sign the first incarnation of the Married Women’s Property Act.

After receiving the petition for a Married Women’s Property Act in 1856 from her friend Eliza Fox, Gaskell signed the petition, though with some reservations. In her return letter, Gaskell wrote, “our sex is badly enough used and legalised against, there’s no doubt of that—so, though I don’t see the definite end proposed by these petitions I’ll sign” (qtd. in Rubenius 225). It is important to note that Gaskell’s reservations did not stem from any disbelief that married women should be able to own their own property, but from disbelief that a law would change anything. In fact, she argued that “a husband can coax, wheedle,
beat or tyrannize his wife out of something” (qtd. in Rubenius 225). Gaskell does bring up some excellent points; the law did give men unspeakable power over their wives. However, she failed to see how having an income could allow women to remove themselves from such situations. This is likely due to Gaskell’s emphasis on social reform over legal reform. Gaskell constantly wrote about social problems, but she rarely showed legal action as a solution; Mary Barton ends with the promise of a brighter future for factory workers. This future, however, is based upon mutual respect and trust, not legal action. Gaskell believed in bettering the lives of others through social work and writing.

Gaskell’s work with charities was extensive, and she was often working with the poor, hungry, fallen, or orphaned. In the Hungry Forties, she “worked for the relief of the poor” (Rubenius 22). In 1850, she was interested in the benefits of a public nursery being built in Manchester (Letter to Lady Kay-Shuttleworth. 12 November 1850), she signed petitions, and she agreed to be the corresponding member of various organizations (Letter to Lady Kay-Shuttleworth. 7 April 1853). Her help was offered when it was needed, and she was angered by those who would offer only their money and not their time to good causes: “in Manchester when you or I want a little good hearty personal individual exertion from anyone they are apt to say in deeds if not in words ‘Spare my time, but take my money’ . . . although by taking a little trouble they may benefit any person in a far more wholesome & durable way than by lazy handing over the money they don’t want” (Letter to Mary Cowden Clarke. 23 May 1852). This description comes from a person experienced with working for charities. Although she did a great deal of philanthropy, Gaskell rarely mentioned her good deeds in depth. For this reason, her interest in saving Pasley, a young prostitute, remains the highlight of her philanthropic work.
Gaskell took special interest in Pasley, a sixteen-year-old prostitute in the New Bayley Prison. It was there that Gaskell heard Pasley’s sympathetic story, which she recounted to Charles Dickens. At the age of fourteen, Pasley was apprenticed to a dressmaker, but the dressmaker’s business failed, and she was transferred to a different dressmaker. Unfortunately, it was under the watch of the new dressmaker that Pasley was deliberately led astray:

this woman was very profligate and connived at the girl’s seduction by a surgeon in the neighbourhood who was called in when the poor creature was ill. Then she was in despair, & . . . went into the penitentiary; . . . in desperation she listened to a woman, who had obtained admittance to the penitentiary solely as it turned out to decoy girls into her mode of life, and left with her; & for four months she has led the most miserable life! (Letter to Charles Dickens. 8 January 1850)

The information Gaskell relayed to Dickens concerning Pasley’s situation painted Pasley as an innocent victim of circumstance; although there is no reason to doubt Pasley’s story, Gaskell likely recounted Pasley’s innocence strategically. As a young, inexperienced prostitute, Pasley was the type of girl Victorians thought would be easiest to reform. For this reason, “women in rescue homes tended to be the most youthful prostitutes, as most homes restricted admission to relatively inexperienced ‘fallen’ women who were considered to be most amenable to reformation” (Walkowitz 18). Gaskell sought the help of Dickens, whom she knew worked with Miss Coutts’ Urania Cottage, a rescue home for fallen women. Dickens believed in removing fallen women from society, and Urania Cottage included an immigration scheme which sent girls to Australia. While Gaskell believed that fallen women
could be integrated back into society, Pasley was in a unique situation. Her seducer was the
doctor who worked at the penitentiary in which she was staying. For this reason, Gaskell felt
it important to remove Pasley from her temptation, so she called upon Dickens’s assistance.
While Dickens was unable to help Gaskell directly, he sent her letter on to Miss Coutts, who
was able to further advise Gaskell. After a few months in a rescue home, Gaskell was able to
send Pasley to Australia to start a new life away from her seducer.

Gaskell’s experiences with Pasley highlights her previous interest in fallen women
and her continued interest. In her letter to Dickens, Gaskell makes reference to an earlier
letter about creating a refuge in Manchester she had sent to Dickens on her behalf:

Some years since I asked Mr Burnett to apply to you for a prospectus of Miss
Cott’s refuge for female prisoners, and the answer I received was something
to the effect that you did not think such an establishment could be carried out
successfully anywhere, unless connected with a scheme of emigration, as Miss
Coutts was. (as I have written it it seems like a cross question & crooked
answer, but I believe Mr Burnett told you the report was required by people
desirous of establishing a similar refuge in Manchester.) (Letter to Charles
Dickens. 8 January 1850)

By her own account, Gaskell and others in Manchester were interested in creating a refuge
for fallen women at least a few years before Gaskell came across Pasley. While it seems the
refuge was not created, Gaskell’s interests in fallen women obviously did not stop there.

After finding Pasley safe passage, Gaskell was excited to discover new resources for helping
the fallen. In a letter to Eliza Fox, Gaskell exclaims, “I have got Mr Nash the ragged school
master to take care of [Pasley] up to London when the ship is ready to sail and have found
out a whole nest of good ladies in London, who say they will at any time help me in similar cases. On Saturday I heard from Mr Tom Taylor to this effect” (Letter to Eliza Fox. 24 January 1850). Gaskell was clearly excited to find new ways of helping fallen women. However, she did not stop at the individual. She also used her fiction as a way to help the fallen.

III: Gaskell’s Fiction

Gaskell’s fiction was an outgrowth of her philanthropy. Through her social work and personal experiences, Gaskell became cognizant of the many problems in society, and she determined to resolve those problems. In fact, Gaskell judged her own fiction not on artistic or literary merits, but on the social message it relayed. Before Mary Barton (1848) was published, Gaskell wrote a letter to her publisher, Edward Chapman, urging him to publish her novel soon because she “can not help fancying that the tenor of my tale is such as to excite attention at the present time of struggle on the part of work people to obtain what they esteem their rights” (Letter to Edward Chapman. 21 March 1848). Gaskell hoped to call attention to workers’ struggles with the publication of Mary Barton, and she was thus interested in making sure it was published at the opportune moment. After the publication of Ruth (1853), she was concerned about whether it “has made them talk and think a little on a subject which is so painful that it requires all one’s bravery not to hide one’s head like an ostrich and try by doing so to forget that the evil exists” (Letter to Lady Kay-Shuttleworth. 7 April 1853). Gaskell wanted Victorians to take their heads out of the sand and look around them; she wanted them to see what was really happening, and she also wanted them to speak about these issues. Each of her major works was meant to make readers think or act differently. Using creative writing as a means of social activism was certainly not a new
phenomenon created by Gaskell, as Roxanne Eberle explains, “For Gaskell, as well as for Dickens, Ruskin, and others, ‘social work’ was enacted within the literary work, but also in conjunction with actual philanthropic activity” (136). Others were similar to Gaskell in that they focused their novels and their philanthropy on social problems. However, Gaskell’s treatment of the fallen woman and the social messages she sends are unique.

While the plots of “Lizzie Leigh” (1850) and *Ruth* (1853) focused upon the fallen woman, other works such as *Mary Barton* (1848) also covered issues of fallenness to a lesser degree. Gaskell kept revisiting the theme, and continued to revise her understanding of fallenness with each new work. Using the traditional fallen woman trope but embedding it with new meaning, Gaskell forwarded a new understanding of fallenness and social blame. In *Mary Barton,* “Lizzie Leigh,” and *Ruth,* Gaskell focuses upon the importance of open dialogue. Through her use of characters who act as representations of patriarchal Victorian society, Gaskell places the blame of fallenness less upon the individual and more upon society’s silenced treatment of the subject. Specifically, she faults society’s polite euphemisms, silences, harsh words, and fictions as perpetuating fallenness in women. Furthermore, she illustrates that by breaking silences and by speaking kindly and truthfully, fallen women can be redeemed, allowing them to return to virtuous lives and afterlives. At a time when more attention was being directed towards understanding and solving the Great Social Evil, Gaskell provided a clear solution to the problem; Victorians only needed to be brave and speak up, as she did.

In the following chapters, I will explore the ways in which Gaskell’s characters portray traditional Victorian values to the harm of their loved ones and themselves. In *Mary Barton,* John Barton’s harsh Victorian views of fallenness push away the women he wishes
to protect, aiding Esther’s continued tailspin into prostitution. John Barton later feels remorse that he did not speak kindly to Esther, but Gaskell shows that such remorse comes too late. In “Lizzie Leigh,” the harsh words of the father, John, coupled with his command of silence causes problems in his marriage and also further perpetuates Lizzie’s fall into prostitution. In *Ruth*, the silences surrounding issues of fallenness make Ruth ignorant and susceptible to seduction. In each piece, silence and harshness play a major factor in the initial or continued fall of the women.
Chapter 2: “Far Fiercer Words”: The Harmful Effect of Harsh Words in *Mary Barton*

Although Gaskell wrote a great deal regarding the dangers of silence, she chose to publish her first novel, *Mary Barton*, anonymously. Unfortunately for Gaskell, the novel’s popularity caused an uproar, and everyone wanted to know the author, including Gaskell’s friends. Gaskell enjoyed the many rumors that abounded about the author, and she even contributed to these rumors:

*By the way, Emily was curious to know the name of the person who wrote ‘Mary Barton’ (a book she saw at Plas Penrhyn), and I am happy in being able to satisfy her Eve-like craving. Marianne Darbishire told me it was ascertained to be the production of a Mrs Wheeler, a clergyman’s wife, who once upon a time was a Miss Stone, and wrote a book called ‘The Cotton-Lord.’ Marianne gave me many proofs which I don’t think worth repeating, but I think were quite convincing.* (Letter to Catherine Winkworth)

By telling her friend that the proofs were “quite convincing,” Gaskell intentionally led her off her trail. Despite these efforts at deception, Gaskell was soon discovered to be the author, though she disliked this exceedingly, noting to editor Edward Chapman, “I certainly did not expect that so much curiosity would be manifested; and I can scarcely yet understand how people can reconcile it to their consciences to try and discover what it is evident the writer wishes to conceal” (Letter to Edward Chapman. 7 December 1848). Although the cause of Gaskell’s anonymous publication remains a mystery, it appears she was afraid that her readership might place more emphasis on the author than on the message of the text.

Amongst the many letters of praise Gaskell received, she most treasured a line from Carlyle’s letter: “May you live long to write good books, or *do silently good actions which in my sight...*
is far more indispensable” (Letter to Miss Lamont). The emphasis in this restatement of Carlyle’s letter was added by Gaskell herself, implying that she does value silence when it comes to doing good deeds because the deeds should speak instead. She hoped that the novel would do good, and indeed it did. Annette B. Hopkins explains that through *Mary Barton*, Gaskell not only “leaped into fame,” but she also “made the social novel respectable” (3, 4). According to Hopkins, Gaskell singlehandedly made novels revolving around social problems important in Victorian society through her sympathetic portrayal of the working poor. Hopkins’s emphasis on the industrial workers reflects the emphasis critics continue to place on John Barton’s narrative. Many completely ignore Gaskell’s exploration of the fallen woman trope in this novel and its significance. Hilary Schor, author of *Scheherezade in the Marketplace*, writes of this emphasis on John Barton:

The novel has largely been read as John Barton’s novel, and everything that has distracted from the story of the visionary worker, his losses, his anger, and his pathos, has seemed exactly that to critics—a distraction. Included—indeed, central—in that critical impatience has been Mary Barton’s story, which has seemed to most critics a weakening of the strong material of her father’s tragedy, a conventional way out of the complexity of the social dilemmas his novel represents. (13)

These critics not only ignore Mary’s story, they devalue it for distracting from John’s narrative and for simplifying Gaskell’s otherwise complex novel. They fail to see the ways in which Mary’s story interacts with John’s, and more importantly, they fail to see how Mary’s story is of extreme significance. Due to the complexity of the novel, to understand the true
importance of Mary’s narrative, it is important to first introduce a short summary of the novel.

*Mary Barton* focuses upon the hardships of the Bartons, a working class family in Manchester, and the story opens with a picnic between the Bartons and the Wilsons; the two families have remained close friends despite the fact that they are no longer neighbors. The disappearance of the elder Mary Barton’s sister Esther puts a damper on the picnic, though, and John explains to George Wilson that she has gone missing and is presumably fallen. Although Esther’s disappearance does darken the mood of the picnic, it serves as a contrast to the rest of the novel, which consists of the suffering of the Wilsons and Bartons.

Just a few weeks after the picnic, John’s wife, Mary the senior, dies during childbirth, and he blames the disappearance of Esther. After Mary’s death, he also becomes increasingly depressed and blames the higher classes for his continued woe and loss. He attempts to join a Chartist movement so his voice will be heard, but doing so jeopardizes his career, and soon John is unable to find any work. Mary, his daughter, however, goes to work as a needleworker’s apprentice. While working there, she meets Harry Carson, who is the son of a factory owner. Mary believes Harry plans to marry her, and she entertains his flattery.

The Wilsons face disappointments of their own. Although their baby twin sons seemed healthy and happy at the picnic, they soon become sick and die. Shortly after, the Wilsons are hit with another devastating blow as George Wilson also dies. This leaves only Jem Wilson, his mother, and his aunt Alice left. Jem supports his family, and having a good position, decides to ask Mary to marry him.

Esther returns to the novel, and we discover through her conversation with Jem that she ran away with a military man who subsequently left her. She lived with him for three
years before he deserted her while she was pregnant. To save her child from starvation, Esther turned to prostitution, but it was not enough to save her child, and she died. She returns to the narrative, however, to try to save Mary from repeating the mistakes Esther made. Esther seeks out John, hoping he will save Mary.

John, however, has sunk further into depression and anger. When he sees Esther, he confronts her with the anger that has been building inside of him for years. He refuses to hear her warnings, and he instead chooses to verbally and physically abuse Esther. After this incident with Esther, John starts to notice how similar Mary is to her aunt, and he starts to cross examine Mary in an attempt to keep her safe. He hopes that Mary will marry Jem so that she will not fall. However, when Jem finally does propose to Mary, she rejects his proposal.

Mary determines that she does not want to marry Jem, but would rather marry Harry Carson, and for this reason, she denies Jem’s proposal. However, she soon realizes that she is truly in love with Jem, and resolves to end things with Harry. Although she tries to break it off, Harry continues to show Mary affection. Sally Leadbitter, who has been a liaison between Harry and Mary, continually tries to persuade Mary to meet Harry but to no avail. Mary now realizes what she’s done wrong, and hopes to set things right with Jem. He, however, believes her rejection to be final, and he stops visiting Mary altogether. However, Jem determines to confront Harry.

After her disappointment with John, Esther resolves to tell Jem of Mary’s danger. Jem reacts kindly towards Esther, and he listens to her entreaties. He resolves to determine whether Harry Carson has honorable intentions with Mary or not. When he confronts Harry, the two get into an argument and Jem even threatens Harry. A policeman sees the hostility
between the two and breaks them up. Unfortunately for Jem, Harry is murdered soon after this incident, making Jem look like the murderer. This is where John and Mary’s narratives truly converge.

Harry Carson draws a caricature of John and a few other Chartists who have tried to voice their concerns about the conditions in the factories. The Chartists, enraged by this comical depiction of their pain, decide to organize an anonymous murder of Harry Carson, which will also show Mr. Carson the pains they have suffered. They each draw paper from a hat to see who will have to murder Harry, and John is the one chosen. He uses Jem’s gun to murder Harry late at night, when he is thought to be out of town. For these reasons, Jem is the one on trial for Harry’s murder.

Esther returns to the crime scene and finds a piece of paper that she believes will further incriminate Jem. In an attempt to protect him, she takes the paper to Mary. However, Mary soon realizes that the paper was in her father’s possession, and that he was the murderer. Because she does not want to report the true murderer, Mary finds Jem an alibi in his cousin, Will, so that both will be free. After he’s exonerated, Jem, realizing Mary’s love for him, proposes to Mary; she accepts. However, because no one else was tried for Harry’s murder, Jem is still widely believed to be the murderer, and Mary is even perceived to be fallen. For this reason, Jem resolves to move his family to Canada to begin a new life.

John, who has been missing since Harry’s death, comes back into the narrative a broken, dying man. While at home, John overhears what happened to Jem, and decides to tell Mr. Carson the truth. Soon after doing so, John dies. Mr. Carson resolves to treat his factory workers better so that no one will feel such pain and anger again. Esther reenters the narrative for a third time, but she, too, is dying fast. After she dies, she is buried in the same
grave as John, because the two were both “wanderers.” Both sinned and led desperate, lonely lives because of their mistakes. The novel ends with Mary and Jem in Canada, living out happy lives.

As this summary shows, Mary’s story is intertwined with John’s, and it may be even more prevalent than John’s story. Because of the prevalence of Mary’s story and because of the lack of criticism on Mary’s narrative, it may be even more important to analyze Mary’s narrative. Jon Singleton remarks that “Feminist critics like Patsy Stoneman, Jill Matus, and Susan Johnston have demonstrated that the domestic and sexual elements of the narrative are expansions and complications of Gaskell’s political critique, not displacements of it” (919-920). Gaskell included Mary Barton’s story so that she could expand her critique to the treatment of fallen women in Victorian society. Although John Barton is of the working class, his position as head of the household and as the family patriarch imbues him with power in the domestic sphere which he lacks in the public. Thus, within the domestic sphere John comes to represent Victorian patriarchal values. In this position, John’s silences and harshness harm those he loves. Essentially, Gaskell critiques society’s use of fierce words and harsh silences through her use of John Barton as a stand-in for Victorian society.

The novel begins with a chapter entitled “A Mysterious Disappearance,” which focuses upon the recent disappearance of Esther, John Barton’s sister-in-law. Although the title of the chapter shows the audience that Esther’s disappearance was in some way mysterious, John Barton believes he has the answer; he knows why Esther left, and he tells his friend George Wilson the particulars: “My mind is, she’s gone off with somebody. My wife frets and thinks she’s drowned herself, but I tell her folks don’t care to put on their best clothes to drown themselves” (8). When Esther disappeared, she had been seen in her finest
clothes, and John feels this love of finery is to blame for Esther’s fall. John continues to explain to George his reasoning for believing Esther to be fallen, citing a chastising speech he gave Esther before she went missing.

When John saw Esther was in danger of becoming fallen, he chastised her in an attempt to dissuade her from a poor decision. Unfortunately, John’s harsh approach proved harmful to his cause. Previously in his conversation with George Wilson, John noted Esther’s sensitivity to criticisms, saying, “Her spirit was always up, if I spoke ever so little in the way of advice to her” (9). From this realization, he should have known such a brazen attack would push her further away. Even so, he tells George:

“I told her my mind; my missis thinks I spoke crossly, but I meant right, for I loved Esther, if it was only for Mary’s sake. Says I, ‘Esther, I see what you’ll end at with your artificials, and your fly-away veils, and stopping out when honest women are in their beds; you’ll be a street-walker, Esther, and then don’t you go to think I’ll have you darken my door, though my wife is your sister.’” (9)

Although Gaskell by writing shows she is in favor of a direct approach when speaking to women about sex and fallenness, Gaskell by no means believes in being as harsh as John is. By telling Esther that she is out while “honest women” are asleep, John implies that Esther is not an honest woman and is, thus, already fallen. When he further adds, “you’ll be a street-walker,” his ‘warning’ sounds more like a prediction. He does not tell Esther she may become a prostitute; he tells her she will become one. John thus implies that Esther is already fallen and headed towards worse sin. Furthermore, although John denies that he “spoke crossly,” his own words belie this claim. John starts off by explaining to George, “I told her
“my mind,” a phrase which insinuates that John held nothing back; even if his thoughts were severe and likely to offend, John still spoke them. By this very phrase, John immediately implicates himself as speaking crossly or at least rudely. Given that for the Victorians, the subject of sex was “not a subject that can be talked of before youths and maidens,” John’s approach towards Esther was more than a little heavy handed (qtd. in d’Albertis 22). While being honest is important, being harsh proves dangerous. Naturally, Esther reacted poorly to John’s diatribe.

According to John, Esther, incensed, replied to him angrily. Esther tells John, “‘Don’t trouble yourself, John, I’ll pack up and be off now, for I’ll never stay to hear myself called as you call me’ then she “flushed up like a turkey-cock” (9). Esther certainly believed that John had already called her a streetwalker, and she resolved to leave the house immediately. John’s harshness pushed Esther away from her respectable family life and towards fallenness. After leaving the Barton household, Esther had more freedom because she could choose to see the family “now and then” instead of every day (9). She also had more opportunity to digress from her respectable position. While writing of the sheer number of prostitutes who were also orphans, Walkowitz notes “a broken family background or strained family relations may have released these women from the stranglehold of standard female socialization. Without an emotional attachment to a mother and/or father, it may have been easier for a young woman to act against conventional norms” (20). The strained relationship Esther had with John likely gave her the emotional distance she needed to transgress sexually. Had John spoken more kindly to Esther, she may have reacted better, as we will later see she does with Jem’s kind words.
The entire story of Esther’s downfall and disappearance is told from the limited perspective of John, which calls into question the credibility of the narrative. Throughout the book, John remains a stern, angry man, even before his wife’s death, which leads one to speculate that he could have reacted more harshly towards Esther than he admits or even realizes. The fact that his best friend believes he is capable of throwing Esther to the curb proves this. After John claims that Esther moved out of his house on her own volition, George replies, “Then you still were friendly. Folks said you’d cast her off, and said you’d never speak to her again” (9). Because George states rather than asks “Then you still were friendly,” it proves that George does not doubt John’s narrative. However, the fact that George interrupted John’s story with this statement also suggests that he had been previously swayed by what the “Folks said,” and also thought that John cast Esther off. For George, John’s best friend, to believe he had done such a thing does prove that George believed John was capable of such harshness. This makes it unclear whether Esther truly did leave on her own or if John had cast her out of his house. After all, he does admit to telling Esther, “don’t you go to think I’ll have you darken my door, though my wife is your sister” (9). John makes it clear that Esther would not be welcomed in his house if she were a streetwalker.

Only a few weeks after Esther’s disappearance, her sister Mary dies in childbirth, and John blames Esther for his wife’s early death. John seeks a physician when Mary begins having difficulties during childbirth, but by the time John returns with the physician, Mary has died. In an attempt to comfort John, the physician tells him, “’Nothing could have saved her—there has been some shock to the system’” (20). John quickly attributes this shock to Esther’s disappearance, which certainly did affect Mary’s countenance. However, he fails to acknowledge the role a difficult childbirth could have played in Mary’s death. Childbirth was
extremely dangerous, and, aside from the many injuries a woman could sustain, death was prevalent. According to Joan Perkin, “More than one in 200 women died during childbirth due to many unforeseen complications” (65). As complications and deaths were commonplace, many women were likely reported as receiving “shocks” to their systems.

The cause of the shock Mary allegedly received to her system remains unclear, and it could have been the result of Esther or complications due to childbirth. Additionally, the physician’s diagnosis is shaky at best. Since he did not see Mary alive and completed the diagnosis posthumously. John, however, cared little. He saw this as an opportunity to blame Esther for his woe: “His feelings towards Esther almost amounted to curses. It was she who had brought on all this sorrow. Her giddiness, her lightness of conduct, had wrought this woe. His previous thoughts about her had been tinged with wonder and pity, but now he hardened his heart against her for ever” (22). Esther is John’s scapegoat, and he replaces his sadness at his wife with anger towards Esther. John jumps at the chance to speak the harsh words he feels when he later sees Esther as a streetwalker.

When Esther approaches John for the first time after her disappearance, John reacts with physical and verbal abuse, but it’s the verbal abuse that harms her the most. Upon recognizing her voice, John first “griped her arm” then “dragged her” to a street light where he “pushed the bonnet back, and roughly held the face” of Esther before shaking her roughly and eventually flinging her away (121-122). These actions all show John’s harsh abuse of Esther, yet his words affect Esther worse. John begins by expressing his satisfaction at seeing Esther as a streetwalker: “I’ve looked for thee long at corners o’ streets, and such like places. I knew I should find thee at last. Thee’ll maybe bethink thee o’ some words I spoke, which put thee up at th’ time; summut about street-walkers” (121). John gloats over his victory of
being right about Esther’s future by first asserting that he always knew she’d be on the streets then by recalling Esther to the exact words he spoke. He takes pleasure from her pain, but he goes even further.

John’s harshness reaches its apex when he cruelly accuses Esther of murdering her own sister. John says, “‘Dost thou know it was thee who killed her, as sure as ever Cain killed Abel. She’d loved thee as her own, and she trusted thee as her own, and when thou wert gone she never held her head up again, but died in less than a three week; and at her judgment-day she’ll rise, and point to thee as her murderer; or if she don’t, I will’” (122). John’s aim is to harm Esther with these lines, and he succeeds. By telling Esther that she killed her sister “as sure as ever Cain killed Abel,” John uses a Biblical analogy to show Esther there is no denying her role in Mary’s death. She killed Mary just as obviously as Cain killed Abel. Then by saying that Mary “loved” and “trusted” Esther “as her own,” he attempts to make Esther feel guilty of betrayal. Finally, by closing with the sentiment that Esther will be pointed at as a murderer on judgment day, he further implies that Esther will never be redeemed in the eyes of her family or God.

John’s words hit their mark, and later Esther remembers the pain of the words over the pain of the physical abuse; Esther’s “heart sank within her, at the remembrance of his fierce repulsing action, and far fiercer words” (154). To call his words “fierce” and even fiercer than his abusive actions, shows just how violent and powerful John’s words were. The physical abuse is not what keeps Esther away from John; it’s the verbal abuse that repulses Esther. Yet John merely acted out the role Victorian society prescribed him. Sally Mitchell writes of the Victorian terms for fallen women, noting, “There is not even any respectable term short of the clinical or barbarous to describe, as a group, all women who have sexual
experience that is not sanctioned by marriage” (x). The language used for fallen women was “barbarous,” meaning that Victorian society condoned the use of cruel terms for fallen women. For society to sanction the use of a vicious term against fallen women, meant it also implicitly encouraged the cruel treatment of these women, which includes using harsh language to and about them. Looking at John’s conduct toward Esther, before he realized who she was, he already called her an “opprobrious name” without much thought (121). For John, treating fallen women terribly and further acting contemptuously toward Esther was simply acting as Victorian decorum dictated. He treated fallen women as he was taught to. Gaskell shows this treatment of fallen women as wrong and harmful. John’s anger at Esther enables him to overlook her purpose of visiting him, which is to save Mary. By pushing Esther away from himself with such harmful and abusive words, John never receives Esther’s important message. Even if he had not spoken harshly to Esther, though, the way he chooses to silence her voice still harms his family.

John further misses his opportunity by silencing Esther. As Esther approaches John, he instantly tries to get rid of her, as he mistakenly sees her as just a prostitute. When Esther approaches John, she first whispers, “‘I want to speak to you,’” and when that has no effect on him, she continues, “‘I really do. Don’t send me away. I’m so out of breath, I cannot say what I would all at once,’” yet despite these pleas, John continues to ignore Esther, until realizing her identity (121). Schor argues that “Both John Barton and Jem initially ignore Esther’s entreaties to ‘listen’ because they assume that ‘public women’ use language promiscuously; they hear a sexual proposition rather than a plea” (146). To be able to mistake a plea such as Esther’s for a sexual proposition shows the preemptive silencing which occurs. A plea and a proposition are very different and would sound so, so for John to
mistake Esther’s plea shows that he was not really listening to her. It also shows how society was deaf to the pains of prostitutes. John however continues to ignore Esther’s pleas; when she tells John, “‘Oh, mercy! John, mercy! listen to me for Mary’s sake,’” he chooses to talk instead of to listen, suggesting he considers Esther incapable of discussing significant topics, as he views his voice more important than hers.

This silencing primarily hurts his daughter, Mary, as he never hears what Esther wished to tell him. After the interaction, Esther cries, “He would not listen to me, and I wanted to warn him. Oh, what shall I do to save Mary’s child! What shall I do? How can I keep her from being such a one as I am?” (122). She acknowledges the importance of her message and also that John would not listen. Schor notes that even the more progressive Victorians continued to silence prostitutes: “even as Victorian social reformers painstakingly record narratives of sexual transgression, they simultaneously silence women who provide them with the ‘data’ they crave” (138). The social reformers focused upon the data they needed, but they ignored the narratives and voices of the prostitutes. John likewise ignores Esther, as society has taught him to do. Yet, had he not done so, he might have received the important “data” that he craved as well. His unwillingness to listen to Esther trumps even his love for Mary. In this way, John’s Victorian reaction to Esther is problematized. To the audience, the fatal error of John’s ways is clear; he seems to have ruined Mary himself, yet John, like the Victorians generally, remains unaware of this fault.

After his encounter with Esther, John reflects upon his actions, determining that he should have treated Esther with more kindness. The narrator explains John’s thoughts: “He said no more than he had been planning to say for years, in case she was ever thrown his way, in the character in which he felt certain he should meet her. He believed she deserved it
all, and yet he now wished he had not said it” (123). The fact that John “felt certain” she would become a prostitute and had been planning these words “for years” shows his true severity. In the course of years, John had never thought of saying a kind word to Esther, and he believed, as society did, that Esther deserved her life. In fact, Victorian society often believed that prostitutes became such because they enjoyed it, not because of economic reasons. Mitchell explains, “For women whose sexual desires were [assumed to be] weak or non-existent the offense [of having passion] had to be deliberate: a conscious and knowing choice of evil over good” (xi). Victorians believed that women lacked sexual desire, so to give in to temptation had to be a deliberate decision.

Like John, Victorians believed that a woman who became a streetwalker “deserved it” because she chose that path deliberately. John, however, starts to feel guilty that he had said such severe words, although, “It would have been all very well, he thought, to have said what he did, if he had added some kind words, at last” (123). Gaskell includes John’s reflection to show how Victorian society needs to reflect upon its treatment of fallen women. Society has treated fallen women just as John has treated Esther: with unwavering severity in speech. Gaskell shows that this severity harms women, families, and society, especially if it is not coupled at last with kindness. John realizes that such kindness would have helped Esther, and he wishes he had addressed her “in a far different manner from what he had done before” (123-124). The use of the word “before” is intentionally vague. While at first it seems to denote his last meeting with Esther, it also suggests that he realizes now that he should have spoken to Esther differently from the very beginning, before Esther even left his home. John thinks that his harsh words would have been better received, had he also spoken
some kind ones, and Gaskell agrees. Unfortunately, John realizes this mistake too late. He has already aided in her fall.

John’s guilt is reinforced through the symbolism of Esther’s nail. While speaking to Wilson, John explains what happened when Esther visited the last time: “‘She goes and hangs her bonnet up on the old nail we used to call hers, while she lived with us’” (10). Esther had not been living on her own for long, yet John had already symbolically removed her from his family by saying the nail was no longer called hers. After the death of John’s wife, weeks after Esther’s disappearance, John further removed Esther from his family: “Only one [nail] had been displaced. It was Esther’s bonnet nail, which in his deep revengeful anger against her, after his wife’s death, he had torn out of the wall and cast into the street” (101). The nail, representative of Esther, was “cast into the street,” just as Esther was. At the time John threw the nail out, Esther was fallen but not a streetwalker. Through this scene depicting John forcibly throwing out the nail, John becomes further implicated in Esther’s fall. He may not have caused her fall, but he certainly perpetuated it. He rid his home of Esther, and made it clear that neither she nor any semblance of herself was allowed. His harsh words and actions gave Esther no opportunities for redemption. Although John perpetuated Esther’s fall, he has a new opportunity to save Mary. Unfortunately, John yet again takes the wrong course.

John never tells Mary the dangers of having admirers nor does he tell her of Esther. Because her mother died while Mary was still young, she never received any warning from her mother, and her father clearly never broached the subject. In an attempt to keep her pure, John never tells Mary about Esther, which becomes clear early on, when Mary believes “her beauty should make her a lady; the rank she believed her lost aunt Esther had arrived” (26).
Mary truly believes her aunt to be a lady and believes she can become the same. Had her father spoken to her of Esther, Mary would not have such misgivings about her aunt or herself, showing that his silence proves dangerous to Mary’s future. John’s silence in regards to Esther was to be expected, though. Mitchell explains, “The double standard ensured that the social problem was, actually, a problem primarily affecting the sex which was not supposed to know of its existence” (22). Women were not supposed to know of prostitution or even fallenness, despite the fact that it affected them most. To know of such subjects, according to W.R. Greg, was “discreditable to a woman” (qtd. in Hapke 17). John’s choice was a logical one by Victorian standards, but it proved problematic, and his silence put Mary in danger. Schor writes of the negative effects of keeping prostitutes’ narratives silenced, “The confinement of the prostitute’s story of seduction and ruin puts innocent girls at risk because it maintains the premise that they are immune from repeating her narrative” (147). Although John’s initial decision that Mary would never work in a factory was motivated by his fear that Mary would become like Esther, none of his following decisions were thus informed.

John trusts Mary, despite her ignorance of fallenness, and he decides to let her “choose her own associates and her own times for seeing them” (22). John remains silent on subjects that could help guide Mary towards better decisions, so his silence proves nearly fatal for Mary. This silence likely aided in Mary’s ignorance regarding her own actions. Mary, although sensing something may not be quite right, does not truly understand the dangers of associating with Harry Carson. Although Mary’s determination not to see Harry during her father’s absence shows that “There was something crooked in her conscience after all,” Mary convinces herself that her relationship is appropriate (87). Mary “brought herself
to think her conduct quite innocent and proper for although unknown to her father, and
certain, even did he know it, to fail of obtaining his sanction, she esteemed her love-marriage
with Mr. Carson as sure to end in her father’s good and happiness” (87-88). The use of the
term “love-marriage” suggests that Mary viewed her relationship with Harry as one that
would end with matrimony. She did not realize that Harry’s intentions were dishonorable.
Sexual naivety was prized in women, and they were often ignorant of the very rules that
governed them. Unfortunately, women were in a very difficult position. Victorian society
“demanded of her absolute ignorance of everything connected with sex, yet expected her to
know by instinct when her ignorance placed her in situations not strictly proper” (Rubenius
194). Simply put, Victorian girls could not have known any better, even though they were
expected to, and Mary was no different. Because of Victorian silences upon the subject, she
had little reason to think her interactions with Harry were dishonorable.

John fails to see Mary’s susceptibility to male interests, however dishonorable, and he
further fails to see his role in her perceived near fall. Literary critic Deborah Logan writes of
Mary’s vulnerability, which, in part, she derives from “the dismal prospect of returning to a
cold, dark, empty house devoid of fire, food, or companionship, posed against the flattery
(however false) of a gentleman admirer” (34). While the “cold, dark, empty house devoid of
fire, food” certainly affected Mary, the emphasis in the novel is on the lack of companionship
at Mary’s home, especially when contrasted with Harry’s flattery. Mary’s companionship at
home consists of her often silent, harsh father. For Mary, her home was unpleasant because
of her father:

He seldom spoke, less than ever; and often when he did speak, they were
sharp angry words, such as he had never given her formerly. Her temper was
high, too, and her answers not overmild; and once in his passion he had even beaten her. If Sally Leadbitter or Mr. Carson had been at hand at that moment, Mary would have been ready to leave home for ever. (114)

It was John’s neglect and his verbal and physical abuse that made Mary truly consider eloping with Harry. John repulsed Mary, and pushed her closer to sexual transgression. The phrase “If Sally Leadbitter or Mr. Carson had been at hand at that moment, Mary would have been ready to leave home for ever” suggests that Mary would have been willing to leave with Harry or Sally, the girl who organized the liaisons between Harry and Mary, had they been there. The only reason Mary did not fall at that moment was because of timing; they were not present at the right moment. The reason Mary would have been so willing to run to Sally or Harry was because her father “seldom spoke” and when he did he spoke “sharp angry words.” The companionship was terrible and even abusive. This example again shows how emotional strain can lead women to fallenness. Mary cared little for her father, and thus had no reason to feel guilty about her actions. Her father was abusive, and she was willing to do whatever she could to get away from him during his most abusive moments.

Mary’s house becomes inhospitable because of her father, and his harshness becomes worse yet when he begins suspecting Mary. Once again, rather than being kind or imparting knowledge on the near-fallen girl, John chooses severity. Although John does not accuse Mary directly, the hostile questions he asks her make Mary defensive and closed off:

Just when she was yielding more than ever to Mr. Carson’s desire of frequent meetings, it was hard to be so questioned concerning her hours of leaving off work, whether she had come straight home, &c. She could not tell lies; though she could conceal much if she were not questioned. So she took refuge in
obstinate silence, alleging as a reason for it her indignation at being so cross-examined. This did not add to the good feeling between father and daughter.

(124)

Although Mary merely pretends to be indignant, the use of the word “cross-examined” fully explains the hostility of John’s questions. When one cross examines someone, he or she is looking for flaws in that person’s argument, so to assert that John “cross-examined” Mary suggests that he expects her to slip up. The wording highlights John’s distrust of Mary. Additionally, as the cross examiner represents the other side, cross examining Mary casts the two as opponents.

Mary tries to protect herself from these intrusive examinations through the use of silence, which seems to recast silence as protective, at least for women. Unfortunately, both the questioning and the silence prove ineffective as Mary’s silence further endangers her. They both fail to communicate to one another, so Mary continues to see Harry. It is not until Mary realizes her love for Jem that she stops willingly meeting Harry. In this example, Gaskell shows how both harshness and silence can be harmful. Instead, she shows that had the family had a more open dialogue without accusations, silence, and hostility, the father and daughter would have been happier. For if John had not acted so harshly towards Mary, she would not have felt the need to hide her interactions from him with silence. Their hostile interactions harm their relationship, and lead Mary closer to temptation instead of further away from it.

After her terrifying experience with John, Esther decides to approach another person who cares for Mary: Jem. Esther’s experiences with Jem greatly contrast those with John. Where John’s harsh words nearly repulse Esther, Jem’s kindness nearly leads her to
redemption. Although Jem, like John, initially tries to shrug Esther off, once he realizes who she is, he gives Esther his full attention. The simple act of listening to Esther already shows Jem as more sympathetic and understanding than John and Victorian society in general, but his kindness goes further. He also tries to save Esther by bringing her back to society; he tells Esther:

“And now listen to me. You loathe the life you lead, else you would not speak of it as you do. Come home with me. Come to my mother. She and my aunt Alice live together. I will see that they give you a welcome. And to-morrow I will see if some honest way of living cannot be found for you. Come home with me.” (159)

Although this speech seemingly confirms Holly Pike’s assertion that “Gaskell argues that the moral regeneration of the fallen woman is possible only within the confines of the family,” Jem’s speech does allow for the fallen woman to reconnect with society (45). Jem is not only willing to find Esther a place in society, but also within his family. He does not only invite Esther to a better life, he invites her “home.” By inviting her to stay with him, he is saying that she is capable of rejoining society and also family. This further goes against John’s initial speech to Esther in which he tells her she will never be welcome in his house as a streetwalker. Jem’s response to Esther is that of kindness, and he shows a break with the traditional Victorian views of fallen women that John has come to represent. Sally Mitchell writes, “A woman who falls from her purity can never return to ordinary society” (x). John agrees with this Victorian belief that a fallen woman can never come home. Jem, however, gives Esther hope that she can rejoin ordinary society.
Although Esther does not accept Jem’s request, she does consider it. After Jem asks her to come home, she remains silent “for a minute,” as if weighing her options (159). She would not have needed a minute if the decision she was going to make was obvious. Esther eventually decides against Jem’s request, explaining, “God bless you, Jem, for the words you have just spoken. Some years ago you might have saved me, as I hope and trust you will yet save Mary. But it is too late now;—too late” (159). The sincere gratitude Esther voices for Jem’s words shows that Esther values the kind words Jem spoke to her. These kind words are the ones that Esther believes “Some years ago might have saved” her, which further illustrates the importance of kindness rather than harshness. Through her words, one can determine that had anyone spoken to Esther kindly before, she would likely have been saved. However, her gratitude towards Jem shows that no one showed her such sympathy. After all, the Victorians “expressed little open sympathy for fallen women,” especially prostitutes (Reed 59). By telling Jem that he might have saved her as she hopes he will save Mary, she further implies that his kind words can save Mary, and that such kindness could have saved Esther before she fell. Through Jem’s interactions with Esther, Gaskell thus shows how kind words are important to saving the fallen. John’s harshness pushed Esther and even Mary further away from home and purity, but Jem’s kindness nearly returns Esther to her rightful place.

Unfortunately, despite Jem’s best efforts, Esther never returned to society because she believed it was “too late.” Near the end of the novel, Mary sends Jem out to find Esther before they leave for Canada. Mary, who was nearly fallen herself, instructs Jem, “Hope yourself, and trust to the good that must be in her. Speak to that,—she has it in her yet—oh, bring her home, and we will love her so, we’ll make her good” (376). Since Mary was near
fallen, and even perceived as fallen in society, her words hold more weight; she is the character most likely to understand what will bring Esther home because she is the character who most resembled Esther. For Mary to instruct Jem to speak to “the good that must be in her,” Mary is telling Jem to say the exact opposite of what John said to Esther in each meeting. John always chose to speak to the bad in Esther, emphasizing before she fell that she would become a streetwalker and emphasizing after she fell that she was a murderer. John’s inept attempts of saving and responding to Esther backfired and repulsed Esther. This last attempt to save Esther, however, shows exactly what Gaskell believes will save fallen women. Just like Jem attempted to during his first interview with Esther, Victorians need to remind fallen women that they still have good in them; they need to speak kindly about and to fallen women if they want to help fix “the great social evil.”

By the time Esther is found, she is already deathly ill and dying fast. Despite their best efforts, it really is “too late” for Esther, and she passes away. However, through death, Esther finally returns to her family. They bury Esther in the same grave as John, who has since passed away. The engraved verse on the tombstone reads, “‘For he will not always chide, neither will he keep his anger for ever’” (378). The psalm is laced with a double meaning. Although “he” most obviously refers to God, it may also refer to John and the anger he had towards Esther. This reading suggests that John will no longer point to Esther as his wife’s murderer, and he will no longer punish Esther for his sins. He has, at last, forgiven her, and Esther can rejoin her family. Furthermore, the more obvious reading of the psalm suggests that God, too, will forgive Esther for her sins and allow her to rejoin her family in heaven. Esther is redeemed in the eyes of her family and in the eyes of God, and she should also be redeemed in the eyes of society.
Chapter 3: “I Telled Her All”: Overcoming Patriarchal Silences in “Lizzie Leigh”

Elizabeth Gaskell’s short story “Lizzie Leigh,” while not widely read today, held a position of honor in Charles Dickens’s weekly publication, *Household Words* (1850); the text appeared as the very first creative piece in the first edition of the publication. This story is the first by Gaskell to focus entirely upon the fallen woman, as the narrative centers around a mother, Anne, and her quest to find her fallen daughter, Lizzie. Although it may seem surprising that Dickens would bestow such an honor on a relatively new author, Dickens greatly admired Gaskell for her sympathetic treatments of factory workers in *Mary Barton* and solicited her help for his journal. When asking Gaskell to write for his new journal, Dickens flattered Gaskell: “I do honestly know that there is no living English writer whose aid I would desire to enlist, in preference to the authoress of *Mary Barton* (a book that profoundly affected and impressed me)” (Letter to Mrs. Gaskell 31 January 1850). For Gaskell to elicit such appreciation from the most well-known author of the time is quite impressive. Dickens, however, knew of Gaskell’s ability to sympathetically portray the downtrodden, which was a key goal of *Household Words*. In his preliminary note, Dickens highlights his purpose:

To show all, that in all familiar things, even in those which are repellant on the surface, there is Romance enough, if we will find it out—:to teach the hardest workers at this whirling wheel of toil, that their lot is not necessarily a moody, brutal fact, excluded from the sympathies and graces of imagination; to bring the greater and the lesser in degree, together, upon that wide field, and mutually dispose them to a better acquaintance and a kinder understanding—is one main object of our *Household Words*. (“A Preliminary Word”)
In a letter to Gaskell, Dickens more plainly communicates his goals as “the raising up of those that are down, and the general improvement of our social condition” (Letter to Mrs. Gaskell. 31 Jan. 1850). While *Mary Barton* inspired Dickens to approach Gaskell with the task of writing a short story for his weekly, “Lizzie Leigh’s” adherence to these goals gave the tale true value to Dickens. To understand just how well the story accomplished Dickens’s goals, let us look briefly at the plot of the tale.

Three years prior to the opening of the narrative, Lizzie was dismissed from her position in Manchester for being pregnant. The Leighs, who live in the countryside, did not find out about her fall until a letter to Lizzie was returned with a note attached. Upon finding out, James Leigh, Lizzie’s father, decided that they would no longer have a daughter, and Lizzie’s name was forbidden to be spoken. While the oldest son, Will, knew of Lizzie’s “shame,” the youngest brother, Tom, believed her to be dead. The order of silence created tension in Anne and James’s relationship because Anne yearns to save her daughter but James prohibits it. However, three years after the fall, James passes away, and shortly before doing so, he forgives Lizzie.

Anne, now free to find Lizzie, moves her family to Manchester and searches for Lizzie at night. Lizzie is rightfully presumed to be a streetwalker. Meanwhile, Will falls in love with a girl named Susan Palmer, but thinks she cannot love him because of his association with Lizzie. Anne decides to visit Susan and tell her about Lizzie because she believes Susan will understand, and she does. Susan reveals that a toddler, Nanny, whom she has been caring for is likely Lizzie’s child, Anne confirms this from a piece of clothing, and thus discovers that Lizzie is alive. Furthermore, Lizzie has been putting money under the door of Susan’s house for her daughter.
Later that same night, Susan’s father comes home late at night drunk. Susan rushes to help him get inside safely, but in doing so, she leaves Nanny alone upstairs. Nanny tries to reach Susan, and she falls down the stairs. Susan goes for the doctor and discovers Lizzie outside. All three return to Susan’s house, but Nanny is dead. Susan calls for Anne, and she comes to comfort Lizzie. After being reunited, Lizzie and Anne move back to the countryside. Lizzie works towards her redemption by nursing the ill and by visiting her daughter’s grave every Sunday. Will marries Susan, and they move back to his father’s farm. They have children, one of whom they name Nanny.

This short story includes everything Dickens’s periodical represents: sympathy, Romance, the uplifting of characters, and a social critique. Perhaps this is what inspired Dickens to further write to Gaskell, “I am not at all singular in my opinion of Lizzie. [John] Forster (who has a share in the publication) came to me in a state of the highest admiration after reading the proof; and the printers were very much impressed by it too” (Letter to Mrs. Gaskell 6 March 1850). Dickens’s description of Forster’s reaction as “a state of the highest admiration” shows that Gaskell’s short story was highly esteemed by some of the largest literary names at the time. The degree to which Dickens and others admired “Lizzie Leigh” is impressive.

The admiration Gaskell’s short story received from Dickens and his peers far exceeds that shown the story today, but many critics are still able to see the value in this overlooked tale. Emily Jane Morris argues that while many critics emphasize “Lizzie Leigh” only as “a stepping stone in a progression which culminates with *Ruth,*” the text is actually “progressive in its own right” (40). She argues that “In ‘Lizzie Leigh,’ Gaskell juxtaposes feminine agency with masculine social paralysis and shows that tragedy can be rectified, if not avoided, by the
act of doing instead of judging. In doing this, she overthrows the traditional depiction of the fallen woman and challenges her status as irretrievably lost” (41). Joanne Thompson also focuses upon feminine agency and overthrowing the traditional fallen woman story. Thompson writes, “In the typical version of the story, the young woman is seduced and abandoned by an upper-class villain, suffers the curses of her father, and dies begging the mercy of her male savior. In Gaskell’s story, by contrast, the male figures are absent. Lizzie’s father is dead. We never learn anything about the seducer or the seduction itself” (24). Thompson, like Morris, sees women as being the main figures in the text, and she sees this as a feminizing of the fallen woman story which is empowering because the focus is upon the woman’s experiences.

These are all important points, as Gaskell clearly attempts to empower women through her revision of the fallen woman narrative. I agree with Morris that “It is not in the depiction of the fallen woman herself, for Lizzie Leigh is almost a peripheral character in the story, but in the way in which different characters respond to her that ‘Lizzie Leigh’ is progressive and challenging” (43). The way Gaskell depicts other characters’ silences rather than their given responses makes this text progressive. Gaskell shows the ways that silence and fictitious stories, rather than saving the family from disgrace, actually further the disgrace and sin of the daughter and thus of the family. Gaskell shows that Lizzie could possibly have been saved from further ruin had her father and brother not kept silent and not told the fictitious story of her death. She further shows how breaking the silence helps to rectify the situation. Through her taboo conversation with Susan Palmer, Anne is reunited with her daughter. Through her use of James and Will Leigh as patriarchs and symbols of Victorian society, Gaskell illustrates the ways in which silence and fictitious stories about
fallen women harm not only the fallen woman herself, but also those in her life. It is through
the use of speech that the fallen woman can be redeemed and the family can be reunited.

James’s embarrassment regarding Lizzie’s fall causes him to order his family to
silence in an attempt to ignore the problem. When James first heard of Lizzie’s sexual
transgression, he “had forbidden his weeping, heart-broken wife to go and try to find her
poor, sinning child, and declared that henceforth they would have no daughter; that she
should be as one dead, and her name never more be named at market or at meal time, in
blessing or in prayer” (7). James bans the use of Lizzie’s name both in public—“at
market”—and in private—“at meal time,” “in blessing or in prayer.” By saying that her name
will never be mentioned “in blessing or in prayer” he further tries to silence her even from
the thoughts of his family. In essence, by treating Lizzie as dead and by denying his family
the right to even mention her name, James commands total silence about Lizzie’s fall. The
family obeys James’s orders. Anne “never named her” until after James’s death, and the
youngest son, Tom, even believes Lizzie to be dead, as he cried for his “poor, pretty,
innocent, dead Lizzie” (8). The silence was so absolute that no one told Tom that Lizzie was
not “innocent,” and he lived for years believing Lizzie to be dead. John’s reaction to Lizzie
was, by Victorian standards, befitting of a father; he had to do what he thought best for his
family. Sally Mitchell explains the popular Victorian belief that “a woman who lost her
chastity had to be totally cut off from society so that she would not contaminate decent
people” (33). Fallenness was viewed similarly to a disease—it could spread to anyone in
close vicinity; it could poison the morals of others. James believes he needs to cut off Lizzie
so she will not taint the respectability of the Leigh family. Had he allowed her to come home,
the family likely would have been cut off from society. However, even though James’s
actions make sense due to Victorian standards, Gaskell shows his actions as harmful. His silencing aids in sending his daughter towards further sin.

Because she cannot return home, Lizzie’s lack of resources leads her to prostitution. A pregnant Lizzie, living away from home in Manchester, has nowhere to go after being dismissed by her mistress. Joan Perkin writes that “The most unfortunate unmarried pregnant women were those seduced and then abandoned in the towns, far from family and community support” (180). Lizzie’s situation was even worse. She was not only abandoned away from her family, but when they found out, they refused to support her. Having nowhere to turn, she goes to the workhouse, her last option; Lizzie is turned away after giving birth because she is young enough to find work. Critic Deborah Logan explains the problem with workhouses: “Some critics claim workhouses—ironically named, in that those driven to them out of desperation did so out of economic need due to unemployment—were designed more for the purpose of discouraging the able-bodied from exploiting the system than for materially aiding the ‘deserving’ poor” (79). Although they tried to discourage the “able-bodied” from staying, who were the able-bodied that tried to exploit the system? Fallen women like Lizzie had no viable work options while supporting illegitimate children, yet the workhouse “turned her out as soon as she were strong, and told her she were young enough to work” (13). Lizzie’s last option, her safe haven, denied her refuge, forcing her out onto the streets.

A rhetorical question Anne poses to Will illustrates exactly what options Lizzie has left, after being forced out of the workhouse: “‘but whatten kind o’ work would be open to her, lad, and her baby to keep?’” (13-14). The implications of Anne’s words are obvious, leading critic Joanne Thompson to write, “Anne then asks her son a question to which he,
and she, and we, and the Victorian reading public, know there is only one likely answer” (23). The answer is prostitution. Perkin notes, “a woman alone had a hard time trying to keep herself and her baby alive” because few career options were open for them (181). James’s unwillingness to talk about Lizzie and his unwillingness to let Anne save her daughter, both aid in Lizzie’s continued downward fall because she cannot return to the safety of her home. Logan writes that James “places Lizzie in a situation she is not equipped to cope with and then rejects her when she fails . . . and he keeps them apart after the fall, thus providing the circumstances for Lizzie’s further descent into prostitution” (78). While Logan focuses more upon James’s actions, his silence also causes Lizzie’s fall. By refusing to discuss Lizzie, he allows himself to believe in his own fiction that she is dead. He enables her fall and ignores his own faults. The reaction James has to Lizzie harms not only Lizzie, but also his relationship with Anne.

Although Anne obeys James’s order of silence, she does so with resentment, which creates a rift in their marriage. Anne feels confined in her relationship, and “for three long years the moan and murmur had never been out of her heart; she had rebelled against her husband as against a tyrant, with a hidden, sullen rebellion, which tore up the old land-marks of wifely duty and affection, and poisoned the fountains whence gentlest love and reverence had once been for ever springing” (3). The comparison between James and a “tyrant” shows that Anne felt James to be cruel and oppressive. She did not feel free to be herself with him, and he was clearly no longer a partner but a ruler. Because of his tyranny, the “moan” and “murmur” stayed in Anne’s heart for three years. Where “moan” evokes images of intense pain and “murmur” means a low sound, the two together suggest that Anne had to keep her pain hidden in her heart, away from James. She could not tell him how she felt, so instead
she silently sulked in her pain. She did, however, rebel against him, for although she continued to do her wifely duties, she did so without the “love” and “reverence” she previously had. James’s command seemed tyrannical to his wife, and she could not talk to him because of his cruelty.

Anne determines that she cannot talk to James about her unhappiness, and thus begins keeping secrets from him. Because of his stern reaction to Lizzie, Anne remarks to Will, “‘I could never ha’ spoken to thy father as I did to Him’” (8). In this sentence, Anne shows how James’s oppression silences her further by making her afraid to speak to him. She feels she could “never” have spoken to him about Lizzie as she did to God. Anne hides her feelings from James, as she tells Will, “‘Many’s the time I’ve left thy father sleeping in bed, and stole to th’ window, and looked and looked my heart out towards Manchester, till I thought I must just set out and tramp over moor and moss straight away till I got there, and then lift up every down-cast face till I came to Lizzie’” (7). By emphasizing that she left James “sleeping” and “stole” to the window, Anne shows that she does this secretly, so that James will not notice. Her fear of James’s rebuke causes her to do these actions secretly; she’s afraid of James’s harsh command of silence. The tyranny James expressed through demanding silence of his family tears apart the “calm and happy” relationship the Leights have, replacing the happy relationship with a secretive, fearful one (3). The true effect of James’s tyranny on Anne’s countenance is most clearly illustrated through the change in her spirit after James’s death.

After Lizzie’s sexual transgression, neighbors, who believed her to be dead, see a major change in both James and Anne. They tell Will, “poor Lizzie’s death had aged his father and his mother, and how they thought the bereaved couple would never hold up their heads again” (8). For the neighbors to call the Leights “aged” suggests that they seem haggard
and worn, and to discuss the way they hold their heads up suggests that the Leighs seem saddened, morose, even. While they certainly did look this way, for Anne, at least, her mood was not due entirely to Lizzie’s fall. The worn, sad look Anne wore on her face was related to her husband’s order of silence, which is evidenced in her changed demeanor after James’s death and forgiveness of Lizzie. Only one page after looking dispirited, Anne moves to Manchester and “had more spirit in her countenance than she had had for months, because now she had hope” (9). This emphasis on her having more spirit than she had in “months’ coupled with the fact that she now has “hope” shows that initially James had ruined Anne’s hopes of finding Lizzie and bringing her home. He crushed her hope through his silence. However, his deathbed forgiveness of Lizzie restores Anne’s hope and also her love for James.

In many ways, James Leigh’s forgiveness of Lizzie comes too late, but forgiving her does restore him in his wife’s eyes, thus bringing peace to the family. The last words James whispers before death are those of forgiveness: “’I forgive her, Anne! May God forgive me!’” (3). His words suggest that he realizes just how wrong he was in his anger at Lizzie, and now he needs God to forgive him for his actions. Although his forgiveness comes too late to save Lizzie from further degradation, it does restore him in Anne’s eyes. After his vow of silence, we learn that Anne “rebelled against her husband as against a tyrant,” but “those last blessed words replaced him on his throne in her heart” (3). James appears to be the king of Anne, replaced to his “throne.” She looked up to him, and after he forgives Lizzie, Anne is able to look up to him once more. By breaking the silence surrounding Lizzie, James restores his position in Anne’s heart, and thus their marriage is set right again, though, sadly, not soon enough for either of them to benefit from it. Furthermore, by forgiving Lizzie, he gives Anne
the freedom to go to Manchester and find Lizzie. When speaking to Will, Anne tells him,

"thy father forgave her at last. The last words he said were that he forgave her. Thou’lt not
be harder than they father, Will? Do not try and hinder me going to seek her, for it’s no use."

(8). By bringing up James’s forgiveness of Lizzie directly before commanding Will not to
hinder her from finding Lizzie, Anne shows that she uses James’s forgiveness as justification
for her to go. If James forgave Lizzie, why can she not go and rescue her? Thus, James’s
final words do prove helpful to Lizzie and Anne, though they would have done more good
had they come sooner.

While Anne may seem complicit in James’s silence since she does not directly defy
him, her role as a dependent and subservient wife absolves Anne of culpability. From the
very beginning of “Lizzie Leigh” the role of the wife as subservient is highlighted: “Milton’s
famous line might have been framed and hung up as the rule of their married life, for he was
truly the interpreter, who stood between God and her” (3). To assert that the “rule” of their
marriage was one in which the husband stood between his wife and God, implies that James
is closer to Godliness than Anne, and he also better understands God’s will. As a result, Anne
should obey James’s wishes. For the most part Anne carries out her duties, even when angry
at James, but even the small rebellion she feels in her heart is chastised by the narrator: “who
knew but what, if she had only been more gentle and less angrily reserved, he might have
relented earlier—and in time!” (4). The narrator argues that had Anne been gentler with her
husband, he would have forgiven Lizzie much earlier, and thus Anne’s choice to rebel seems
a mistake. Furthermore, even if Anne had wanted to rebel more openly, she likely had not the
resources to do so. According to Victorian law, as a married woman, “All her property,
including inheritances and earnings passed automatically into the ownership of her husband,
and he was legally free to do with it whatever he wished—if he chose, he could disinherit her” (Harris 7). Anne could not leave James to go looking for Lizzie because she had no resources to do so; everything belonged to James, and he had already forbidden her from rescuing Lizzie.

Upon James’s death, Will, as the oldest son, steps up to fulfill his father’s role as family patriarch and as a symbol of patriarchal Victorian belief. He transitions into the role seamlessly due to his similarity to his father: “Will, the elder, was like his father, stern, reserved, and scrupulously uptight” (6). The description of Will and his father as serious, slow to show emotions, and prudish perfectly describes Victorian attitudes, illustrating once again how they symbolize society. Joanne Thompson, a scholar, notes Will’s resemblance to James in his interactions with his mother: “the contrast between James and Anne is continued between Will and Anne; the man stern and righteous, the woman gentle and sympathetic” (23). Will takes the stern, righteous role of his father, and after his father’s death, he is even treated by others as the family’s patriarch.

Anne wishes to lease out the farm and move temporarily to Manchester in order to find Lizzie. Although James bequeathed the farm to Anne “for her lifetime,” when the proprietor of the will hears Anne’s plans, he says, “I’ll speak to Will about it,” which implies that Will is the one in charge (5, 6). Upon discovering that Will did not know of her plans, he says he’ll have nothing to do with leasing the farm until Anne and Will talk. Even though the farm is left to her, the proprietor of the will refuses to listen to her decisions until Will agrees. Anne likewise gives Will power over herself. After visiting Susan Palmer, she tells Will, “I did not put myself forward. I put on my Sunday clothes, and tried to behave as yo’d ha’ liked me” (21). For Anne to behave as Will wants her to suggests that he had some authority over
her; she abided by his wishes. Will becomes the symbolic patriarch of the family, and as such, he continues with his father’s harsh position towards Lizzie.

Although Will proves less harsh than his father by acquiescing to his mother’s plan of going to Manchester in search of Lizzie, he still continues on the same trajectory as his father. In perpetuating the fiction of Lizzie’s death, Will shows that he is still harsh towards Lizzie. Will tries to make his mother believe that Lizzie is dead by telling her, “She may be dead. Most likely she is,” and then telling her, “At the end of the year you’ll come back, mother, and give over fretting for Lizzie, and think with me that she is dead,--and, to my mind, that would be more comfort than to think of her living” (8). Interestingly, Will does not state that it would be better for Lizzie to be dead, but better to think of Lizzie as such. This belief suggests that the comfort of believing Lizzie to be dead does not come from knowing that she no longer suffers, but from a disassociation from her. He no longer has to think about her depravity and his kinship to one such as her. In fact, Will later admits as much: “why will you keep on thinking she’s alive? If she were but dead, we need never name her name again” (13). Will’s comfort comes from never having to think of or speak of Lizzie. Sadly, Anne nearly believes Will’s fiction, and she falters in her own belief. Anne tells Susan, “Oh, if we could but find her! I’d take her in my arms, and we’d just lie down and die together” (19). Anne suggests that Lizzie would be better off dead. Susan, however, saves Anne from succumbing to this belief by saying, “she may turn right at last. Mary Magdalen did, you know” (19). Susan gives Anne hope that Lizzie can be saved, while Will further tries to silence and hide Lizzie’s fall.

Like his father, Will tries to keep Lizzie’s sexual transgression quiet, especially from Susan, whom Will views as too pure to be associated with Lizzie. He explains to his mother,
“if she knew about my sister, it would put a gulf between us, and she’d shudder up at the thought of crossing it” (14). His belief is that a woman as good as Susan would never associate herself with the fallen because doing so would be degrading. His belief does make sense from a Victorian perspective. Fraser Harris, author of *The Dark Angel: Aspects of Victorian Sexuality*, explains, “If a woman could not convincingly present herself as a reliable vehicle of legitimacy, she stood no chance of receiving a proposal” (31). Women like Susan had to distance themselves from the fallen to “convincingly present” themselves as pure, which was essential for a marriage proposal. To be seen interacting with a fallen woman put a woman’s appearance of purity in jeopardy. Even Will’s reaction to Susan proves this. After discovering that Susan has been caring for an illegitimate child, he says, “all these things startle me. To think of Susan having to do with such a child!” (22). For him to be “startled” by Susan’s interactions with “such a child” suggests that even he had concerns about Susan after discovering her association with a fallen woman, even though that fallen woman was his sister!

Because Anne has become accustomed to her silence, even she hesitates to speak when she should. Anne visits Susan so that she can tell Susan about Lizzie and then gauge Susan’s worthiness. However, even though her purpose is to speak, she finds herself unwilling to do so:

“Well now! I’ll tell you the truth. Will dreads you to hear it, but I’ll just tell it you. You mun know.”—but here the poor woman’s words failed her, and she could do nothing but sit rocking herself backwards and forwards, with sad eyes, straight-gazing into Susan’s face, as if they tried to tell the tale of agony which the quivering lips refused to utter. (16)
A few factors stop Anne’s speech. First of all, the fact that her “words failed her” shortly after she mentioned Will’s dread of her speaking suggests that she still feels the need to abide by Will’s wishes, and she must decide whether to continue with his imposed silence. Thus, she rocks “backwards and forwards” trying to make a decision. Yet Anne also seems hesitant for personal reasons; Anne is afraid to speak because the story is painful. Her “sad eyes,” “tale of agony,” and “quivering lips” all signify the sadness that prevents Anne from speaking. She is afraid of telling the painful tale, especially to one who will not be sympathetic. However, Susan’s reaction allows Anne to open up: Anne’s “wretched, stony eyes forced the tears down Susan’s cheeks, and, as if this sympathy gave the mother strength, she went on” (16). Susan’s sympathy allows Anne to open up, thereby suggesting that Anne’s initial silence was caused by fear that she would receive a stern reaction from Susan as she did from James and Will. With the help of Susan, Anne overcomes her fear of speaking about Lizzie, and she also overcomes the oppression of silence. She begins to speak about the taboo subject.

When Anne tells Susan about Lizzie, she broaches a topic James, Will, and Victorian society would rather keep quiet. Her unconditional method proves effective. When speaking to Susan about Lizzie, Anne “‘telled her all!’” (21). For her to speak of Lizzie being “led astray” was considered highly improper, because “A woman, if she was to be considered as ‘pure-minded’ according to Victorian standards, must know nothing about sex, and above all not show such prurience as to want to discuss anything connected with such a subject” (Rubenius 189). Women, simply put, were not supposed to speak about fallenness; even knowing about sexual transgression was considered improper for women, who were “not supposed to know of its existence” (Mitchell 22). If knowledgeable about such subjects,
women were not to speak about them because they evidenced an unchaste knowledge. However, a desperate Anne decides to discuss this off-limits topic, and doing so proves beneficial. Linda Hughes and Michael Lund write about Anne’s unconventional process of finding Lizzie; “knowing that her daughter cannot be reached within the system, [Anne] must herself escape conventional behavior in order to reclaim Lizzie” (74). Anne breaks conventions by breaking the silence, and, surprisingly, Susan does the same. In a pivotal scene, Susan reveals that Nanny is not her niece and likely belongs to Lizzie. From the belongings Susan received from the mother, Anne “recognised one of the frocks instantly as being made out of a part of a gown that she and her daughter had bought together” (18). Through her illicit conversation, Anne discovers that her daughter is alive, and she also discovers her grandchild. The conversation, rather than being negative, helps Anne gather important information for finding Lizzie, and it also helps further Will’s relationship with Susan.

Will initially feels threatened by Susan’s discovery of Lizzie’s fall, but by telling Susan about Lizzie, Anne furthers Will’s prospects of marrying Susan. When Will finds that his mother “telled her all,” he becomes aghast, and exclaims as much: “’Mother! you’ve ruined me.’ Said he, standing up, and standing opposite to her with a stern white look of affright on his face” (21). Will’s exclamation that she “ruined” him combined with his “look of affright” illustrates just how fearful Will was of Lizzie’s past being discovered. He was sure that if Susan was to find out about Lizzie, she would want nothing to do with him. Will believes Susan to be too pure to associate with the fallen, and, before finding out her involvement with Lizzie’s daughter, even resolves to leave Manchester, explaining, “’Oh, mother, she’s so gentle and so good—she’s downright holy. She’s never known a touch of
sin; and can I ask her to marry me, knowing what we do about Lizzie, and fearing worse?’” (14). He believes that Susan has never been touched by sin, and that if she marries him, she will be tainted because of Lizzie. He cannot do that to her. However, when Anne meets with Susan, she finds that Susan is not “so hard” as to reject Will for that reason. Anne even boldly tells Susan “Thou’lt be a happy woman if thou’lt have him”’ which prompts Susan’s realization that Will has been thinking seriously about her (19). By bringing up Lizzie’s fall, a subject deemed unfit by Will and society, Anne actually furthers Will’s relationship with Susan. She is able to show Will that he does not have to leave, and that he can in fact “lead Susan home as thy wife” (22). By illustrating the benefits Will received from Anne’s taboo conversation, Gaskell shows that speaking up about fallenness is beneficial, even to those who least expect it.

Anne breaks the remaining shred of power the silence has over her and Lizzie when she finally speaks to Lizzie, the very person she was expressly forbidden to even name for three years. By speaking kindly to Lizzie, Anne helps to alleviate the suffering and rectify the sin caused by the original order of silence. Anne shows that even though she could not give voice to her feelings, she never stopped loving her fallen daughter: “I never left off loving thee, Lizzie. I was always a-thinking of thee. Thy father forgave thee afore he died”’ (30). Anne’s words are meant to soothe Lizzie by showing her that all has been forgiven, and she has always been loved, despite her sins. Because the first words Lizzie speaks are, “‘Mother, don’t look at me! I have been so wicked,’” Anne uses silence to protect Lizzie (29). Anne tells her, “‘Whate’er thou art or hast been, we’ll ne’er speak on ‘t. We’ll leave th’ oud times behind us’” (30). By saying “we’ll ne’er speak on ‘t,” Anne reassures Lizzie that the suffering she faced will never be brought back up to torment her. Anne’s order of silence
seems more positive, more protective than that of James. For, although James was also trying
to protect his family, he did so to the harm of his daughter. Anne’s silence of Lizzie’s past
comes at no such price.

Once again Gaskell shows the dangers of silence. Gaskell asserts there is a right way
to use silence and a wrong way. If silence is used to protect the daughter after her fall, then
that silence can be positive. However, the silence of families shunning their fallen daughters
is extremely harmful to all involved. The continued silence of Victorian patriarchal society,
as seen through James’s and Will’s actions, leaves fallen women like Lizzie open to further
sin and requires them to resort to prostitution. Not only does Lizzie suffer; so, too, does the
rest of the family. However, when Anne finally breaks free of the bonds of silence, the
family as a whole begins to heal and progress, and Lizzie is finally found and brought back
home to safety. While many may have tried to hide these issues or pretended they did not
exist, Gaskell shows that a punitive silence tears families apart and causes a great deal of
suffering. Gaskell appears to believe in speaking, and especially in speaking the truth. Lizzie
could have been saved much suffering had her father been sympathetic and open from the
beginning. Perhaps, Lizzie could have been spared the changes Anne saw in her, for Anne
“saw Lizzie,—but not the former Lizzie, bright, gay, buoyant, and undimmed. Lizzie was old
before her time; her beauty was gone; deep lines of care, and alas! Of want (or thus the
mother imagined) were printed on the cheek, so round, and fair, and smooth, when last she
gladdened her mother’s eyes. Even in her sleep she bore the look of woe and despair which
was the prevalent expression of her face by day; even in her sleep she had forgotten how to
smile” (27). These were “marks of the sin and sorrow she had passed through,” and they
could have been prevented (27).
Chapter 4: “No Definite Idea”: Silences and Coded Language in *Ruth*

Opinions regarding Gaskell’s *Ruth* have changed dramatically since the novel’s original rocky reception in 1853. After the publication, Gaskell began receiving a great deal of negative criticism from friends, community members, and reviewers alike. In response to *Ruth* many of her friends expressed their “deep regret” to Gaskell, while Gaskell expressly forbade others to write because she anticipated “so much pain from them” (Letter to Anne Robson). The formal reviews were not much better. Gaskell notes “Spectator, Lity Gazette, Sharp’s Mag; Colborn have all abused it as roundly as may be” (Letter to Eliza Fox. February 1853). It was further banned from at least one public library in London (Letter to Eliza Fox. February 1853), and it was the object of scorn for many. In a letter to Eliza Fox, Gaskell shows just how poorly received *Ruth* was:

I think I must be an improper woman without knowing it, I do so manage to shock people. Now *should* you have burnt the Ist vol. of Ruth as so very bad? even if you had been a very anxious father of a family? Yet *two* men have; and a third has forbidden his wife to read it; they sit next to us in Chapel and you can’t think how “improper” I feel under their eyes. (Letter to Eliza Fox. February 1853)

Gaskell feels improper because women were not supposed to know of these issues, and they certainly were not supposed to write about them. Perkin explains, “Sexual activity did not decline, but nor was it talked or written about. When novels mentioned adultery, they gave no details of the sex act” (52). Women were not supposed to know of sexuality, and for a woman, especially a minister’s wife, to write of it so knowledgeably called into question the woman’s purity. For this reason, the novel was banned and burned, and Gaskell was likely
thought “improper” by others for writing such a book. Indeed, she created a sensation that could have rivaled Mary Braddon’s novels. For a pure woman to be writing about fallenness in such a knowledgeable way shocked many Victorians. Hughes and Lund make a fitting analogy that explains this reaction to Gaskell: “In some ways, then, Gaskell’s works themselves resemble her primary subject at this time of her career, the illegitimate offspring of fallen women” (69). They compare Gaskell to a fallen woman, and in many respects, her reputation did suffer similarly to that of a fallen woman. One publication even writes of its “regret that we and other admirers of *Mary Barton* must feel at the author’s loss of reputation” (225). The statement allows for ambiguity: is it the loss of her reputation as an author or as a proper woman that we regret? Gaskell herself acknowledges *Ruth* to be a “prohibited book in this, as in many other households; not a book for young people, unless read with someone older” (Letter to Anne Robson). The outpour of negative reactions led Gaskell to confess in a letter to Anne Robson, “In short the only comparison I can find for myself is to St Sebastian tied to a tree to be shot at with arrows; but I knew it before so it comes upon me as no surprize.” Gaskell felt she could not escape the criticism, which is evidenced through her analogy of being “tied to a tree to be shot at with arrows.” To compare herself to St. Sebastian also symbolizes a feeling of martyrdom; she is being persecuted for her dedication to her beliefs. To better understand what caused this outrage, I will briefly outline the plot of *Ruth*.

*Ruth* follows a poor, orphaned apprentice, Ruth. She works as an apprentice for a needleworker named Mrs. Mason. While working at a ball, she becomes acquainted with a Mr. Bellingham, who decides to woe Ruth and lead her astray. Mr. Bellingham starts showing up outside of Ruth’s church, so he can walk with and speak to her. Soon, his place
in her heart escalates, and she feels she can trust him. He eventually proposes a trip to her childhood farmhouse, and she accepts. However, while returning from that trip, Mrs. Mason sees Ruth outside of an inn, holding on to Mr. Bellingham. She immediately believes Ruth to be fallen and dismisses Ruth. Ruth, having nowhere to turn, agrees to go away with Mr. Bellingham. The two leave for Wales, and she becomes his kept mistress. However, Mr. Bellingham gets sick in Wales, and the doctor decides that his mother needs to be called in. When Mr. Bellingham gets well, his mother persuades him to leave Ruth, which he does.

Ruth, heartbroken, nearly drowns herself, but is saved by a minister named Mr. Benson. Shortly after, Ruth falls very ill, and Mr. Benson cares for her. After bringing in a doctor, they discover that Ruth is pregnant. She resolves to lead a good life so that she can care for her child. Mr. Benson brings Ruth home to live with him, his sister Faith, and their servant Sally. They decide to protect Ruth by disguising her as a distant relative of theirs who has recently been widowed. Because of her likeability, Ruth becomes well respected, and she eventually receives a position as a governess. Unfortunately, though, when the truth of her past is discovered, she is dismissed from her position. She raises her child, named Leonard, in the Benson household, and eventually she becomes a well-respected nurse. However, in one last act of kindness and love, Ruth nurses Mr. Bellingham back to health, while endangering herself. She passes away, and is highly honored at her funeral by the community. The original negative reactions Ruth received have largely been replaced by the praise of scholars today.

Although some critics still devalue Ruth, as they feel the heroine’s death belabors the point of redemption, many have found the text to be quite progressive in that critics like Maria Granic-White laud Ruth for being the “first to include the fallen woman as the
protagonist” and further for “Blurring the boundaries between the two terms of the binaries, and more so . . . Gaskell’s text challenges the Victorians’ paradigms and dramatizes the possibility of the fallen woman to become sanctified by society upon her death” (147).

Morris asserts that “The tendency among critics is to trace an evolution in Gaskell’s portrayal of fallen women from the rather clichéd role that Esther plays, through the more sympathetic story of Lizzie, to the finally quite progressive, provocative, and socially challenging Ruth” (40). Many critics see Ruth as being the most progressive of Gaskell’s texts, and their views show just how important her writing truly is.

The strong response Ruth received does lead us to believe it was socially challenging, as people do not often burn books without feeling passionately about their subject matter, but what specifically about Ruth caused such strong reactions from the public? Logan provides some understanding, arguing:

Gaskell’s literary insight is keen: she knows her audience—the middle class—and she understands that the greatest potential for social change rests with them. A novel that inspires book burnings and is directly associated with midcentury Magdalenism is clearly a novel that has aroused its intended audience from moral complacency. (38)

Gaskell did so through her critique of society’s silence and coded language. Gaskell places blame on society by showing the ways in which silences and coded language contribute to fallenness instead of purity. Clearly, some of the public was afraid of this message.

Yet the audience should also be fearful for Ruth from the very beginning of the novel. When Ruth enters the novel, she already appears in danger of falling. The town in which she lives is described as “ill-paved,” and the citizens “walked about at considerable peril both
night and day. The broad unwieldly carriages hemmed them up against the houses in the narrow streets. The inhospitable houses projected their flights of steps almost into the carriageway, forcing pedestrians again into the danger they had avoided for twenty or thirty paces” (1-2). Ruth walks through those “ill-paved” perilous streets “late at night unchaperoned” (3). She also returns from an errand at such a late hour, Gaskell’s audience must have questioned her moral fiber at once: “Up such a stair—past such a window (through which the moonlight fell on her with a glory of many colors)—Ruth Hilton passed wearily one January night, now many years ago. I call it night; but, strictly speaking, it was morning. Two o’clock in the morning chimed forth the old bells of St Saviour’s” (3). Ruth’s placement—out at night in such a town—leads the audience to begin questioning her morality immediately.

Through this opening scene, Gaskell instantly shows how Ruth’s orphan status and apprenticeship endanger her morality and position. Ruth is “unchaperoned” because she has no family to watch over her, and she is out late at night because of her apprenticeship. While this scene foreshadows Ruth’s fall, the real danger lurks in the messages Ruth never received. Deirde d’Albertis focuses upon the need for Ruth to learn her proper sexual role. The difficulty of this learning, he argues, is due in part to the complex codes of Victorian society. D’Albertis writes, “Gaskell stresses that the codes are not instinctive. Assuming one’s proper sexual role evidently requires rigorous training” (79). Ruth never receives this training.

When Ruth’s mother died, Ruth was only twelve. Because of her young age, “She was too young . . . to have received any cautions or words of advice respecting the subject of a woman’s life” (44). The emphasis on the word “the” implies that if a woman were to receive advice, this would be the most important subject to receive advice upon, yet Ruth
never receives that training; she never learns the subject of her life as a woman. However, this small omission plays an important role in Ruth’s fall. Eberle remarks that both Bellingham and Ruth are “left vulnerable to sexual transgression because they have not been properly instructed in their familial parlors. Ruth, beloved and protected at her mother’s knee, never learned about either female desire or male seduction” (161). Eberle shows how having no understanding of “female desire” or “male seduction” leaves Ruth vulnerable to sexual transgression; however, had Ruth’s mother been alive, she likely would not have directly approached the topic of female desire. Perkin notes that there was “no discussion of adolescent sexual longings” (51). Thus, while Ruth’s lack of information about male intentions stems from her mother’s death, her lack of knowledge about her own desires would likely never have been addressed. Gaskell shows that Ruth is “innocent and snow-pure. She had heard of falling in love, but did not know the signs and symptoms thereof” because she never learned any of these lessons from her mother (44). This innocence is why she cannot comprehend Mr. Bellingham’s attentions, nor can she understand her own emotions. While critic Nadya Chishty-Mujahid asserts that “Ultimately, it is Ruth’s lack of friends and finances that places her at Bellingham’s mercy,” her assertion misses a major factor in Ruth’s fall (61). Not only does her lack of friends and finances place her at Bellingham’s mercy, but her lack of guidance does so as well.

Whether Ruth would have received that guidance had her mother lived remains unclear. Gaskell further suggests that had Ruth reached a more “appropriate” age by the time her mother died, her family may still have approached the subject indirectly. Gaskell writes, “if, indeed, wise parents ever directly speak of what in its depth and power, cannot be put into
words—which is a brooding spirit with no definite form or shape that men should know it, but which is there and present before we have recognized and realized its existence” (44).

Certainly, Victorian parents never did “directly speak” of these desires, and often, when they warned girls, the warnings were subpar. Many Victorian girls received vague warnings about fallenness. Joan Perkin quotes one Victorian girl as saying, “What did my mother mean when she said, ‘Now I have warned you against men. You’ve been warned so you can safely go anywhere.’ That was all my mother ever told me” (58). Others received warnings from parents “not to allow men to be familiar with them” (Perkin 60). Such warnings included no concrete language, which disallowed for girls to truly understand the meanings. However, by calling into question whether “wise parents” would speak directly about these subjects, Gaskell seems to be suggesting that more direct speech is unnecessary. There are two reasons for this possible shortcoming in Gaskell’s text; either Gaskell fails to carry through her argument to the fullest potential or Gaskell attempts to expose the limited vocabularies parents have in Victorian society.

Both scenarios certainly are plausible. Although Gaskell’s thinking is quite progressive, she still faces societal constraints. Any respectable woman, let alone a minister’s wife, could not openly admit she wanted to discuss sex with her daughter. Certainly, even Gaskell had boundaries and could not envision a conversation with a daughter in which parents “telled her all” (“Lizzie Leigh” 21). Perkin explains, “Sex was not a fit discussion in polite society, among friends or between parent and daughter” (51). In a time where sex was not discussed even between parents and daughters, the idea of speaking openly about the subject was likely inconceivable. To do so would be too forward for the time, and not very realistic. However, equally as likely is the possibility of Gaskell critiquing the vocabularies
of even wise parents. By asserting that the subject “cannot be put into words,” she may yet again be critiquing society’s limited sexual language. Here, the problem is not that wise parents choose not to speak directly about sexuality; the problem is that they simply cannot. Joan Perkin writes, “There was no talk of pubic hair, the clitoris, or orgasm. The words were never spoken, let alone understood by most people, though they were discussed in medical journals” (51). Perkin’s discussion illustrates that most of the population did not have the vocabulary or understanding to discuss sex, and the vocabulary needed was primarily contained in the medical sphere. Parents could not discuss sex because they did not know how; they had not the necessary vocabulary. This idea of a limited sexual vocabulary returns with Old Thomas, a friend of Ruth’s father.

Old Thomas symbolizes wisdom and even parenthood to Ruth. When Ruth and Bellingham enter Ruth’s childhood home, Thomas is there reading Bible verses. So well read is Thomas in the Bible that “the Bible was the language in which he thought, whenever his ideas went beyond practical everyday life into expressions of emotion or feeling” (50-51). His deep understanding of the Bible already symbolizes Thomas’s wisdom to Victorian audiences. More so, by calling him Old Thomas the conflation between wisdom and age works to further symbolize Thomas as a wise man. Ruth further establishes Thomas as a father figure, telling Mr. Bellingham, “‘He is so good and kind, he is like a father to me. I remember sitting on his knee many and many a time when I was a child, whilst he told me stories out of the ‘Pilgrim’s Progress.’ He taught me to suck up milk through a straw’” (49). Thomas is like a wise parent to Ruth, and he has the limited vocabulary which makes him inept at helping Ruth escape her looming fall.
Thomas desperately wishes to warn Ruth of the trouble she is in, but finds no good way to do so. Old Thomas mistrusts Mr. Bellingham, as well he should, even noting to himself “I misdoubt that young fellow though, for all she called him a real gentleman, and checked me when I asked if he was her sweetheart. If his are not sweetheart’s looks, I’ve forgotten all my young days” (50). Seeing all of this prompted Thomas to “give her a warning of the danger that he thought she was in, and yet he did not know how” (50). Instead, all he could think to do was to recite a passage from the Bible. Thomas tells Ruth, “My dear, remember the devil goeth about as a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour; remember that, Ruth” (51). His words do not have the intended effect he was hoping for. Because the reference holds no concrete meaning for Ruth, she does not comprehend the warning. Instead, she had “no definite idea” of the meaning of Thomas’ words (51). For Ruth, Thomas’ quotation reminded her only of a silly childhood association she made between the passage and a dark forest. She, like many real young girls in Victorian society, did not understand the underlying message, and did not understand how to apply the passage to her life. These indirect words prove threatening to Ruth. D’Albertis also writes of Thomas’s use of the Bible passage, arguing that “language too contains dangers for [Ruth]. Perhaps the most important of those dangers hides in euphemistic expressions she does not understand” (78). In this way, Gaskell begins to show how even indirect words, such as those that were prominent in the Victorian period, can be inadequate if girls do not understand them. Silence can be deadly, but so too can indirect and confusing messages be. Gaskell implies a need to further clarify the meanings of such euphemisms through this example and also through the narrator.
The narrator clarifies Thomas’s words for the readers. If the reader has any doubt about the meaning of Thomas’ passage, the narrator clarifies, noting “She never imagined that the grim warning related to the handsome young man who awaited her with a countenance beaming with love, and tenderly drew her hand within his arm” (51). Gaskell not only suggests that more direct messages are needed, she shows the benefit. By further explaining Thomas’s words, the meaning of them is, in fact, quite obvious to the reader. Unfortunately, though, Ruth and the real-life Victorian girls she represents had no access to a personal narrator, and thus they needed to be told in clear ways what dangers may await them. Of course, this clear speech does have its limits. Certainly it would be an ill-conceived plan for a father to explain the full intent of those like Mr. Bellingham, who mean to use these women for their sexual satisfaction and then cast them off, but certainly they could try to warn girls in more direct ways. Thomas plans to send his wife to warn Ruth because he thinks “An old motherly woman like our Mary will set about it better nor a stupid fellow like me,” but his wife’s words would be too late (51). He needs to be able to speak those words to Ruth, but cannot. Thomas cannot save Ruth because he “did not know how” to tell her of her danger (50). Gaskell suggests that having the right vocabulary to speak clearly about sexuality is important to saving girls from potential dangers. In addition to Thomas’s inability to save Ruth with his words, we see that Mrs. Mason is also partially to blame for Ruth’s fall.

Gaskell consistently attempts to illustrate the dangers of being a seamstress’s apprentice, but through her portrayals in Mary Barton and Ruth, Gaskell attempts to show how the professional seamstresses are as much to blame for lack of guidance as for the harsh conditions they place the girls in. While Gaskell certainly does “implicate the needlework
milieu as an exploitative occupation in more ways than one,” she focuses less on the work than upon Mrs. Morgan’s interactions with her apprentices (Logan 34). Mrs. Morgan is often quick to dole out harsh words to her apprentices when they do poor work, but she otherwise stays silent upon their affairs, leading them to think their conduct proper. Mrs. Mason’s harsh criticisms reach paramount the morning after the ball at which Ruth and Mr. Bellingham first meet. That morning, in particular, Mrs. Mason “was disposed to find fault with everything, and everybody,” and poor Ruth bore the brunt of many of Mrs. Mason’s criticisms (19).

Finally, Ruth could stand no more, and she “laid her arms on the table, and, burying her head, began to cry with weak, unchecked sobs” (20). This harsh treatment had at least two major effects upon Ruth. First, had Mrs. Mason not been so harsh, Gaskell’s message reiterates, Mr. Bellingham’s kindness would not have left such an impression upon Ruth, for the contrast between his and Mrs. Mason’s words would not have been quite as stark. Furthermore, if she had not been so harsh upon these small matters, and yet so silent upon others, she may have been able to offer her apprentices more guidance and kept them on the “right” path. This argument from Gaskell is quite progressive. Social protocol did not dictate that employers give moral guidance to their apprentices. In fact, for them to speak about issues of sex and sexuality to apprentices broke the social decorum of the time. Parents often believed that “ignorance of sex would keep their daughters pure” and they certainly would not like a third party giving their daughters information about the subject they tried to hide (Perkin 52).

Despite this fact, Gaskell shows Mrs. Mason as having a moral obligation to discuss issues of sexual transgression with her apprentices.

When Ruth strays from this right path, though, Mrs. Mason is all too quick to judge instead of offering guidance. Instead of speaking to Ruth about what she sees of her conduct
with Mr. Bellingham and attempting to save Ruth, she dismisses Ruth at once with “low, bitter tones of concentrated wrath” (54). The narrator becomes a mouthpiece for Gaskell’s views of such matters. The audience learns that “Mrs Mason was careless about the circumstances of temptation into which the girls entrusted to her as apprentices were thrown, but severely intolerant if their conduct was in any degree influenced by the force of these temptations. . . . It would have been a better and more Christian thing, if she had kept up the character of her girls by tender vigilance and maternal care” (54). It is harsh not to warn them, yet expect them to live up to certain standards. For many of the girls, Mrs. Mason spent more time with them than their guardians, and thus, Gaskell suggests she should be more invested in their moral well-being. Mrs. Mason’s harsh words did show Ruth how very wrong she was, but they did so too late and in too harsh a way to lead Ruth back to the right path:

It seemed to the poor child, as if Mrs. Mason’s words were irrevocable, and that, being so, she was shut out from every house. She saw how much she had done that was deserving of blame, now when it was too late to undo it. She knew with what severity and taunts Mrs Mason had often treated her for involuntary failings, of which she had been quite unconscious; and now she had really done wrong, and shrank with terror from the consequences. (55)

Because of Ruth’s limited perspective, Mrs. Mason’s harsh words make Ruth believe she has no chance of redemption because she was “shut out from every house.” Because the words were “irrevocable” she believes it is too late to change her fate, and she can do nothing to “undo it.” She therefore believes Mr. Bellingham is her only option. Rather than warning Ruth, Mrs. Mason’s words send Ruth further towards sin. Up until this point, Ruth had done
nothing “irrevocable” with Mr. Bellingham, but when she believes she cannot be redeemed, she turns to him as the only one who will take her in. Mrs. Mason had the ability to save Ruth and keep her from committing any immoral behavior had she only chosen to watch over the girls and to warn Ruth about the consequences of her actions. Instead, she chooses to remain silent and ignorant of her girls’ temptations until they do something worthy of dismissal. Mrs. Mason is yet another who chooses silence (and even harsh words) rather than warning girls of the dangers they face.

While Gaskell has hitherto shown how speaking to the young woman in danger is important, she further shows how speaking to the man is also important. Mrs. Bellingham, unlike Thomas, seems to have no interest in saving Ruth or others like her, even though Gaskell establishes Mrs. Bellingham’s blame for Ruth’s fall. Instead, her primary investment is in her son’s well-being and her own reputation. Mrs. Bellingham, both as an individual character and as a symbol of respectable, aristocratic society, plays a large role in Ruth’s fall primarily through the blind eye she turns upon her son’s actions. Mrs. Bellingham was able to overlook his behavior because “A sexual double standard existed in all classes, because many men had relationships from an early age and were not castigated for illicit sex as women were” (Perkin 61). From the moment Gaskell introduces Mrs. Bellingham, the audience is led to infer that her attitude of raising her son with little compassion for others is one of the reasons Mr. Bellingham ignores the implication his actions have on others’ lives. We learn that “the regardlessness which she had taught him (by example, perhaps, more than by precept) of the feelings of others, was continually prompting him to do things that she, for the time being, resented as moral affronts” (32). Mrs. Bellingham is more bothered by “these boyish tricks” because they affected her more than his “misdoings in college.” Not only did
Mrs. Bellingham instilled in her son an idea that others’ feelings did not matter, which led to a hedonist lifestyle of “at all times taking care to please himself,” but upon noticing his behaviors, she often chose to remain silent and ignore them (33). It was not until these issues disturbed her that she chose to voice her opinions.

Mrs. Bellingham’s self-interest caused her to speak up only when Mr. Bellingham’s affairs affected her. This is because Mrs. Bellingham is most chiefly upset when Mr. Bellingham does something to perturb her, not others: “All these boyish tricks annoyed and irritated her far more than the accounts which reached her of more serious misdoings at college and in town. Of these grave offenses she never spoke; of the smaller misdeeds she hardly ever ceased speaking” (32). Just like Mrs. Mason, Mrs. Bellingham is quick to throw around harsh words for small misdoings, but then chooses silence or ignorance upon worse deeds, that is, until she can no longer claim ignorance. Gaskell’s point here is all too obvious; she shows how the silence of society, and especially of parents and guardians, further perpetuates the “great social evil” of prostitution and fallenness. To Gaskell, who largely depicts aristocratic males as those who lead women wrong, society could help solve this problem if mothers would but speak to their sons, whom they “still, at times” had “great influence over,” instead of letting such actions go unchecked (32). Then these men would better understand the consequences of their actions.

Breaking the silence and feeling compassion for others are two cures Gaskell suggests for the social problem of the day. However, Mrs. Bellingham enacts the antithesis of Gaskell’s message. She chooses to remain silent on the matter until she sees the personal effects and can no longer avoid speaking. When she approaches the topic, she even observes, “‘Of course,’ she continued ‘it was my wish to be as blind to the whole affair as possible’
(88). Even when breaking the silence, she refuses to acknowledge her son’s misdeeds, instead blaming Ruth. She tells her son, “I do not wish to ascertain your share of blame; from what I saw of her one morning, I am convinced of her forward, intrusive manners, utterly without shame, or even common modesty” (89). Mrs. Bellingham again refuses to hear the truth, let alone speak it; instead she prefers to cast Ruth as a depraved temptress. The stereotype appeals to Mrs. Bellingham, as it allows her to ignore her son’s complicity, even though there have been previous accounts of such behavior. Mrs. Bellingham becomes so engrossed in the fiction she created that she, like society often did, fails to see the difference between Ruth’s position as a newly-fallen kept woman and that of a common prostitute, suggesting she entrapped young men in vice and leaving Ruth with “a bank-note of fifty pounds” (92). Not taking this bank-note, which would have made her life much easier and more secure, is the indicator that Ruth is not a prostitute. However, Mrs. Bellingham blames Ruth, telling her son, “Don’t be too severe in your self-reproaches while you are so feeble, dear Henry; it is right to repent, but I have no doubt in my own mind she led you wrong with her artifices,” (90). Fascinatingly, she asserts that he was the one “led” astray, which places him in the role of victim and also emasculates him. Worse yet, Mrs. Bellingham’s words not only hurt Ruth, whom she has no interest in, but they further hurt her own son. By ignoring his share of the blame, she also ignores the ways she can save other women from becoming fallen, and thus perpetuates fallenness. Had she taken this moment to actually discuss his misdeeds, she would have helped her son, Ruth, and others like her, who are the real ones led astray.

Gaskell wanted to show how society aided in fallenness by these silences and euphemisms, and she took a great risk to do so. Even while Gaskell was still writing *Ruth,*
she already understood the controversial effect it would have, making her relieved to send it to the printers and forget about it for a while: “And Ruth is done—utterly off my mind and gone up to the printers” (Letter to Eliza Fox. December 20 1852). Yet she likely did not realize just how controversial it would be. While she seemed hesitant to have her friends read the book—“I don’t think I shall give away a single copy”—she could not have imagined that her books would not only be besmirched, but banned and burned as well (Letter to Marianne Gaskell). Yet today’s reaction, in comparison, shows just how far we have come since Gaskell’s time. In fact, an issue that was cause for public outcry during Gaskell’s time is likely to be respected today. Still, we can come to appreciate the importance Ruth had at the time of publication. It was a fascinating novel that, as Logan suggests, “aroused its intended audience from moral complacency” (38). While Holly Pike believes Gaskell “does not suggest that her society’s judgement of seduced women needs to be changed. . . . Gaskell only shows the need for greater understanding of the problems faced by her subjects while accepting her society’s attitudes to them,” this is simply not true (46). Gaskell herself notes in a letter “I have no doubt that what was meant so earnestly must do some good, though perhaps not all the good, or not the very good I meant” (Letter to Anne Robson). She even later writes, “I think I have put the small edge of the wedge in, if only I have made people talk & discuss the subject a little more than they did” (Letter to Anna Jameson). From these words, Gaskell’s intent seems obviously connected to changing societal reactions to the fallen woman; by wanting people to “talk & discuss” the subject, she shows her desire for society to discuss these matters openly. However, as every critic knows, the author may well intend to write one thing and produce another. Therefore, the textual evidence really closes this case.
In this text, Gaskell really does critique society at all levels. She shows how society’s silence and polite speech are partially to blame for fallen and seduced women, and as d’Albertis claims, “the publication of *Ruth* promoted a rupture in the discursive silence enjoined upon women in polite, middle-class society” (90). While some believe the novel is progressive because of the treatment of the character Ruth, who was the first major fallen protagonist, the truly progressive part of the novel is the way Gaskell portrays other characters. In this novel, Gaskell criticizes a community that chooses silence and polite speech instead of directly addressing fallenness. By showing the way many characters were complicit in Ruth’s fall, she also shows that society is complicit in fallenness. For “The Great Social Evil” to end, society needs to start warning women and men of the dangers of sexual transgression. They need to be diligent and kind, and they need, above else, to speak up.
Women in Victorian England often had little knowledge about sex and their bodies. Many families did not teach their daughters about these “improper” subjects, and some even thought providing girls with sexual information would somehow taint their purity. Sometimes their ignorance was so great that they did not understand sex or pregnancy even after they were married. Mary Stopes, a woman born in late Victorian England who was a botanist and zoologist, for example, had no idea until two years later that her marriage had never been consummated (Perkin 57). Her marriage did not even occur until 1911, but silence was still prevalent. Mitchell writes of this ignorance: “The ideal Victorian woman was completely ignorant about sex. She could not fall: she could not consciously decide to engage in sexual activity was. But because of her ignorance—which was more attractive when it was called innocence—she could be seduced” (49). So, naturally, many believed women should not know about fallenness and the Great Social Evil, prostitution. Such was the world Gaskell lived in: a silent and ignorant one. And such, too, was the world Gaskell sought to critique. Likely the silence and harshness of society was, at least in part, meant to protect women from being seduced and thus losing their marriage prospects. After all, if women did not know what sex was, how could they partake in it? And, if they knew how harshly fallen women were treated, would that not deter them from becoming fallen? Unfortunately, this is not what happened at all. Rather than deterring women from falling, they became more vulnerable and helpless. Gaskell saw the failings in the social system and critiqued them within her works.

Gaskell critiques the hypocrisy of a society that keeps women ignorant through silence, but then judges them harshly and considers them irredeemable should they fail to
live up to society’s expectations. The silence does not protect girls from being seduced.
Instead, their ignorance makes them easy targets for those with poor intentions. Often, being ignorant meant that they did not understand the wrongness of their actions in society’s eyes. Mary Barton, for example, “had brought herself to think her conduct quite innocent and proper” when it came to her relationship with Harry Carson (87). Ruth, likewise, did not understand why walking with Mr. Bellingham was considered bad: she “wondered why a strange undefined feeling had made her imagine she was doing wrong in walking alongside of one so kind and good as Mr Bellingham” (39). Mary’s mother, we understand, died before Mary was old enough to hear any warnings about male attentions, and John Barton had failed to do this as well, as Mary was naïve enough to believe that Harry Carson’s interests were honorable. Likewise, no one, not even Mrs. Mason, warned Ruth of the dangers, and her mother also died before she was old enough to “have received any cautions or words of advice respecting the subject of a woman’s life” (44). So both girls not only thought their own actions were innocent, but they both “believe their admirer’s intentions are honorable” as well (Logan 34). Neither girl had been warned about men’s possible dishonorable intentions, and rather than protecting them, this put them at risk. Gaskell shows how silence does not serve the women in these stories; in fact, their ignorance, which arose from silence, is what caused one’s fall, and the other’s near fall.

Harsh words, too, were shown as hindrances to fallen women’s progress in Gaskell’s works. When the patriarchs of the different households tell the women in their families that they will no longer be welcome in the family if they are seduced or become fallen, as John Barton does to Esther and James Leigh does to his daughter, Lizzie, rather than deterring the women from falling, we see that it makes them fall further, as they need to find a way to live,
and they have been told that returning home is not an option. While James Leigh does not tell Lizzie this, but instead his family, it can be assumed that Lizzie, knowing of her father’s harshness, already understands how he will react. Likewise, the harsh words of the employers apprenticing them cause them to further fall. To Ruth, Mrs. Mason’s angry words seemed “irrevocable, and that, being so, she was shut out from every house” (55). These words, rather than pushing Ruth away from sin, pushed her towards it, as she had no one to rely upon but her seducer, Mr. Bellingham. Lizzie, after being dismissed from Mrs. Lomax’s service and not welcomed at home, had to go to the workhouse, and from there she went into prostitution. Suddenly, Anne Leigh’s question resonates with more force: “but whatten kind o’ work would be open to her, lad, and her baby to keep?” (13-14). What kind of work would be open to any without home or respectable connections, with or without a baby? Gaskell portrays the consequences clearly enough. For Esther the answer was prostitution. For Lizzie it was prostitution. And Ruth, had she not been saved, would have chosen death over the only occupation open to her: prostitution. Gaskell thus shows the ways in which society, by giving girls no other options, push women into depravity.

Gaskell successfully critiques society’s silences and harsh words, but she also offers a logical solution. Gaskell shows that by breaking the silences and by speaking kindly and openly, the wrongs of society can be fixed. Gaskell, in fact, does this herself by writing these three works. In all three works, Mary Barton, “Lizzie Leigh,” and Ruth, Gaskell shows sympathetic and true depictions of fallen women, and she breaks the silence around these issues. This is especially true of Ruth. Ruth was deemed “‘An unfit subject for fiction’” because many felt threatened by the way she spoke of the fallen woman as innocent and having morals (Letter to Anne Robson. January 1853.). While Ruth was a controversial
novel, it did not receive only negative reviews. The general public may well have disliked the way Gaskell presented *Ruth*, but many of her literary friends loved that she was brave enough to break the silence. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, for example, thanked Gaskell for *Ruth*: “I am grateful to you as a woman for having so treated such a subject” (qtd. in Leighton). And she was not the only one. Elizabeth Gaskell biographer Patsy Stoneman writes, “Readers like Charlotte Bronte, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and W.R. Greg, on the other hand, applauded *Ruth*’s challenge to the assumption that a woman’s sexual ‘fall’ is ‘the leper-sin’ from which ‘all stand aloof dreading to be counted unclean’” (65). Though, many of these same readers were certainly not happy with the way Ruth was killed off at the end of the book. Gaskell struck a nerve with the publication of *Ruth*, because it pushed boundaries. It was an important step forward, and many, such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning understood that.

Not only was it the act of writing about fallen women, though, that broke the silence. She also shows the characters as breaking the silences which entrap them as well. By sharing the “unfit” story of her daughter, Anne Leigh is reunited with her daughter. It is the kind words of Thurston and Faith Benson that save Ruth; it is the kind words of her mother, Anne, that save Lizzie. Both are brought back to the path of redemption, and both are promised the possibility of a happy afterlife. It is the kind words of Jem that nearly save Esther from her troubles and hardships, though she determines that she is too far gone to save. All can be saved through open dialogue and kind, true words. Gaskell, thus, critiques society’s wrongdoings in her three works, *Mary Barton*, “Lizzie Leigh,” and *Ruth*, but she also shows society that, like the fallen women, it can change its ways. Society can be saved.
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