

*Wives and Daughters*  
-Sublimation of Mrs Gaskell's  
Social Interest?-

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It is neither original to ask the questions, who is the hero or heroine of *Wives and Daughters*, and what the novel is about, nor is it very academic to ask yourself why you find the book worth reading many times over. And yet I believe these questions will provide an appropriate starting point to my talk today.

(1) Who is the hero or heroine of this novel?

In her letter to Smith, her publisher, Mrs Gaskell made clear the plan of her novel.

...I have made up a story in my mind,—of country-town life 40 years ago,—a widowed doctor has one daughter Molly, —when she is about 16 he marries again—a widow with one girl Cynthia,—and these two girls—contrasted characters, —not sisters but living as sisters in the same house are unconscious rivals for the love of a young man, Roger Newton, the second son of a neighbouring squire or rather yeoman. He is taken by Cynthia, who does not care for him—while Molly does. His elder brother has formed a clandestine marriage at Cambridge—he was supposed to be clever before he went there—but was morally weak—& disappointed his father so much that the old gentleman refuses to send [his] Roger, & almost denies him education—the eldest son lives at home, out of health, in debt, & not daring to acknowledge his marriage to his angry father; but Roger is his confidant, & gives him all the money he can for the

support of his inferior(if not disrespectable) wife and child. No one but Roger knows of his marriage—Roger is rough, & unpolished—but works out for himself a certain name in Natural Science,—is tempted by a large offer to go round the world (like Charles Darwin) as a naturalist,—but stipulates to be paid half before he goes away for 3 years in order to help his brother. He goes off with a sort of fast & loose engagement to Cynthia,—while he is away his brother breaks a blood vessel, & dies—Cynthia's mother immediately makes fast the engagement & speaks about it to everyone, but Cynthia has taken a fancy for some one else & makes Molly her confidant. You can see the kind of story and—I must say—you may find a title for yourself for *I* can not.... (Letter 550 *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell* ed. by J.A.V.Chapple and A. Pollard, 1966)

In *Wives and Daughters* Mrs Gaskell's original pain is realized to a large extent. But it is a mark of her greatness as a writer that she amply developed her original design and created such a rich and complex novel.

In this novel who is the hero or heroine? Mr Gibson, Molly or both Molly and Cynthia? It is true that the story starts with Molly, a girl of 12 years old, on the morning of visiting the Towers, and ends when she, now a girl at the age of 17, is highly likely to marry Roger Hamley. But this is also a story of Mr Gibson, who believes his second marriage is planned for the sake of his daughter. In fact he is attracted by a beautiful widow, Clare, so even when he ought to be aware of what a serious mistake he has made in his choice of a second wife, he fails to realize his mistake, until the situation gets so serious he has to reprimand his wife in the name of professional secrecy. There is an intriguing gap between his high moral standards and his negligent attitude to the changed family atmosphere caused by his wife. In this sense, Mr Gibson stands as a superb study of an intelligent man's self-deception. And yet Mr Gibson remains merely one of several major characters, because every important incident

converges on Molly and it is mainly through Molly that the story evolves. What can be said about Mr Gibson is also true of Cynthia. Clearly Molly should be considered as the heroine of the novel, in that from start to finish the main emphasis is placed on her development as a woman, coping with many difficult situations and surviving psychological hardship.

But the interesting point is that in this novel there is something which makes you feel you are not doing it justice if you do not pay equal attention to the other characters. You may be tempted to think that in this novel there is no particular hero or heroine, but that the community, Hollingford, and the human relationships in it are what Mrs Gaskell wrote about, despite her original intention. Could one assert that *Wives and Daughters* resembles *Middlemarch*, rather than *David Copperfield* or *Shirley*? In this connection, Angus Easson's view is worth citing.

In its relationship to history, *Wives and Daughters* is more akin to the social and passional analysis of George Eliot's *Middlemarch* or even to the anti-romanticism of Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, than it is to Scott's *Waverley* or Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*. (Introduction to the World's Classics edition, 1987)

Therefore, to ask the question, who is the hero or heroine of the novel is not so meaningless as it might seem. Nor is the answer so very simple.

Mrs Gaskell had already completed *Mary Barton*, *Ruth*, *North and South*, and *Sylvia's Lovers*. In these works one of her major concerns was the kind of difficulties a young girl was faced with when she was growing up in Victorian society, especially without a mother's protection.

In *Wives and Daughters* Mrs Gaskell follows Molly through her vulnerable years, seeing her father's second marriage and, as a result, experiencing some distress, while maintaining a delicate

relationship with her stepsister. In order to depict Molly's situation in full, Mrs Gaskell had to establish the rich texture of a highly structured provincial society. However, this endeavour does not prevent Molly from being the central character of the story.

(2) What is this novel about?

As the sub-title "An Every-Day Story" shows, nothing extraordinary happens in this novel. The quality of everyday-ness is clear when the novel is compared with *Mary Barton*, *Ruth*, and so on. In the former the condition of England question forms the background as Mary grows up. And at the same time the hardships of working people in Manchester are described with the author's warm sympathy. In *Ruth* the Victorian values are questioned through Ruth's unhappy yet saint-like life. And the main themes of each novel are apparent. In *Wives and Daughters* is the theme as clearly present?

As Angus Easson points out, "Molly, over the action's three years, moves from being the 17-year old hero worshipper of Osborne to the assured, intelligent, passional woman who will shortly and fittingly marry Roger." (op.cit.)

In a narrow sense, Molly's progress is the subject of the story. But the novel has a wide background. The period of the novel is set shortly before the Reform Bill of 1832, a time when in England the industrial revolution was in headlong progress and political power was on the eve of transferring from the landed class to the industrialists. And the ideas, say, of women's education and of marriage were to undergo a gradual change, gaining momentum until young women were admitted into Cambridge. Therefore, it is not far-fetched to say that a major concern of *Wives and Daughters* is social change, or society on the eve of change.

It is interesting to find Mr Gibson, an intelligent man and a devoted father, saying to Miss Eyre: "Don't teach Molly too much: she must sew, and read, and write, and do her sums; but I want to keep her a child, and if I find more learning desirable for her, I will

see about giving it to her myself. (N.B. This does not mean that he will teach her more; Mr Gibson does not think it necessary. — H.Tohgo) Many a good woman gets married with only a cross instead of her name; it's rather a diluting of mother-wit, to my fancy; but, however, we must yield to the prejudices of society, Miss Eyre, and so you may teach the child to read." (Ch.111) And you see how times have changed since Squire Hamley said to Doctor Gibson: "Osborne might have ([i.e. a thoroughly good constitution])—H.Tohgo if he goes out o'doors more," said the squire, moodily; "but except when he can loaf into Billingford he does not care to go out at all. I hope," he continued, with a glance of suspicion at Mr Gibson, "he's not after one of your girls? I don't mean any offence, you know; but he'll have the estate, and it won't be free, and he must marry money. I don't think I could allow it in Roger; but Osborne is the eldest son, you know." (Ch.XXX111)

You cannot fault Clare's motive in accepting Mr Gibson. The author says: "Mrs Kirkpatrick accepted Mr Gibson principally because she was tired of the struggle of earning her livelihood; but she liked him personally—nay, she even loved him in her torpid way, and she intended to be good to his daughter,..." (Ch.X1)

But you must ask again, exactly what is changing in these changing times? The main change seems to be in perception of marriage. In this respect, *Wives and Daughters* offers some important insights.

(i) Many different marriages

Mr Gibson's second marriage is different in quality from Osborne's clandestine marriage to the French girl Aimee. In his second marriage Mr Gibson's objective was to provide Molly with a protector, but the second Mrs Gibson turned out to be a crass, self-centred, calculating, sentimental creature who laboured under the impression that she was a sensitive, refined lady. The failure of Mr Gibson's marriage is felt first by Molly and then Mr Gibson, and you may wonder how he could put up with such a wife. On the other hand, some readers see

Osborne as morally weak, or a spoilt weakling, but at any rate Osborne did marry for love, and continued to love her well. The trouble with Osborne was that he was not in the least practical. Knowing too well what his father would say, he never ventured to reveal his secret marriage, nor did he know how to earn his living. How pitifully impractical he was to expect to make his living by publishing his poems!

Cynthia's engagement to Roger Hamley, and then marriage to Mr Henderson was not based on love. Cynthia shines in Hollingford society. She adores attention, but as she admits to Molly, she has no gift of loving. "If Molly had not been so entirely loyal to her friend, she might have thought this constant brilliance a little tiresome when brought into everyday life; it was not the sunshiny rest of a placid lake; it was rather like the glitter of the pieces of a broken mirror, which confuses and bewilders." (Ch.XXX1) Although Cynthia marries Mr Henderson with her mother's encouragement, you can never be sure that she will lead a satisfying family life, in spite of Lady Cumnor's excellent advice. Squire Hamley married money from London to preserve his ancient estate and he loved Mrs Hamley in so far as he was capable. Mrs Hamley had been poorly all her life and it was believed that her disappointment in Osborne hastened her death, but it was essentially the squire's lack of understanding that was responsible for her demise.

The story ends unfinished, intimating that Roger and Molly will get married when he comes home from Africa. Molly became spiritually independent of her father and in spite of his stated wish to keep Molly in a state of simple childishness, she developed a keen interest in nature, or science, and became mature enough to be compatible with Roger. She suffered for the love of her father, the Hamleys, Roger and Cynthia. We know that Molly will continue to cope with the changing circumstances.

So again, *Wives and Daughters* is Molly's preparations for her coming marriage.

(ii) The contrasting personalities of Molly and Cynthia

In his introduction to the Penguin edition of *Wives and Daughters* Laurence Lerner speaks highly of Cynthia. He asserts that the characterization of Molly is made within the convention of the prevalent Victorian values, while Cynthia is something quite new.

Old fashioned critics of *Wives and Daughters* used to praise Molly as the most charming of her heroines, 'the loveliest conception to be found in all Mrs Gaskell's writings' .... Yet Molly is too intimately tied up with what is conventional in the book to achieve the finest kind of life. (Introduction, 1969)

As I have said above, despite her father's educational policy, Molly developed a keen interest in natural science, and as a young girl she possessed a considerable sense of justice and a naivety to match.

To Lady Harriet Molly says:

'No, don't please,' said Molly, taking hold of her, to detain her. 'You must not come—indeed you must not.'

'Why not?'

'Because I would rather not—because I think I ought not to have any one coming to see me who laughs at the friends I am staying with, and calls names.' (Ch.XIV)

This is Molly's naivety, not petulance. Throughout the novel, she is depicted as being made of different stuff than Cynthia. Although she is motherless, Molly is enveloped by the love of her father, the Misses Browning, and the Hamleys. Molly is a spiritually stable, trusting girl. She stands ready to make real sacrifices for Cynthia's sake.

On the other hand, Cynthia is emotionally unstable, with a deep-rooted anxiety. That is why she feels restless unless she is sure that

people are attracted to her. Unlike her mother, however, Cynthia is capable of self-reflection, and knows herself well. "I wish I could love people as you do, Molly." (Ch.XIX) says Cynthia. She also tells Molly how as a child she was not cared for by her mother. (Ch.XIX) In another situation she cries to Mr Gibson: "Oh, sir, I think if I had been differently brought up I should not have had the sore angry heart as I have...." (Ch. L1) Although Cynthia's self-centredness does not lose Mr Gibson's love, she lacks the motivation to develop beyond her unhappy upbringing by means of deep sympathy with other people. Even Mrs Gibson cannot avoid noticing this marked difference between the two girls, though she ascribes the reason to something quite irrelevant. "There is something quite different about you—a je ne sais quoi—that would tell me at once that you have been mingling with the aristocracy. With all her charms, it was what my darling Cynthia wanted;..." (Ch.LV111) Squire Hamley is frank in his appraisal of Molly some time after Cynthia breaks her engagement to Roger Hamley. "I wish I might never hear of her again....Why, there's my boy saying now that he has no heart for ever marrying, poor lad! I wish it had been you, Molly, my lad had taken a poor fancy for....And no offence to you, either, lassie. I know you love the wench; but if you'll take an old man's word, you're worth a score of her...." (Ch.LIX)

All her friends are aware of Molly's worth, in marked contrast to Cynthia's, although not all of them can say exactly what it is that they appreciate in her. Molly does not have to pose as a social rebel to represent the new breed of woman.

### (3) What makes *Wives and Daughters* so worth reading?

In no other work of Mrs Gaskell is the sense of humour so rich as in *Wives and Daughters*. However, this quality is by no means evenly distributed to all the characters. Mr Gibson is endowed with a good sense of humour, but Mrs Gibson is not. She is shown to be a woman of shallow, self-centred, sentimental character.

To cite a few instances:



'Would it tend to cure your—well! passion, we'll say—if she wore blue spectacles at meal-times? I observe you dwell much on the beauty of her eyes.'

'You are ridiculing my feelings, Mr Gibson. Do you forget that you yourself were young once?'

'Poor Jeanie' rose before Mr Gibson's eyes; and he felt a little rebuked. (Ch.V)

Mrs Gibson lacks her sense of humour and betrays the fundamental crudeness underlying her refined surface, when she says of Mrs Hamley:

'What a time she lingers! Your papa never expected she would last half so long after that attack....' (Ch.XV11)

or when she comments on Osborne's child:

'I wonder how the poor little boy is?' said Molly, after a pause, speaking out her thoughts.

'Poor little child! When one thinks how little his prolonged existence is to be desired, one feels that his death would be a boon.'

'Mama! What do you mean?' asked Molly, much shocked. (Ch.LX)

Mrs Gibson seldom shows her sense of humour, but she is often found in a humorous situation.

As soon as Mrs Gibson found that he was not likely to miss her presence—he had eaten a very tolerable lunch of bread and cold meat in solitude, so her fears about his appetite in her absence were not well founded—she desired to have her meal upstairs in her room; ... (Ch.XV)

The younger characters in the novel exhibit less similar tendency; thus Cynthia does not appear in scenes where humour predominates. Molly, however, can be extremely droll, as in the following response to Mrs Gibson.

'I feel so lonely, darling, in this strange house; do come and be with me, and help me to unpack. I think your papa might have put off his visit to Mr Craven Smith for just this evening.'

'Mr Smith couldn't put off his dying,' said Molly bluntly.

'You droll girl!' said Mrs Gibson, with a faint laugh.

'But if Mr Smith is dying, as you say, what's the use of your father's going off in such a hurry?...' (Ch.XV)

Here what is interesting is that although *Wives and Daughters* abounds in humorous scenes and expressions, they are centred in the first quarter and the last quarter of the novel. This is because the most serious incidents and situations develop in the middle of the book. Among those are: Osborne's failure in Cambridge; Mrs Hamley's death; Osborne's clandestine marriage; Cynthia's engagement to Roger and her breach of it; her promise of marriage to Preston, and Molly's extension of help to her stepsister.

So a perceptive reader of *Wives and Daughters* will be quite interested to find that without the first and the last quarters of the novel, *Wives and Daughters* would be a much more serious, if not gloomy, novel. And I am not sure if it would invite such an enjoyable second and even third reading.

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