

RUTH, A FALLEN WOMAN AND HER OPPORTUNITIES IN VICTORIAN ENGLAND

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1. Introduction

Elizabeth Gaskell is mainly known as a great social writer of the Victorian period. Due to her “rich social and religious” education - as she comes from a Unitarian family-, she was grown into an “open-minded [woman] in response to social transformation and change” (Matus 1). Gaskell’s social awareness determined her whole oeuvre, and it is reflected in her approach to topics such as the problems of the working-class, or the “representation of changing social structures and gender and class relations” (Matus 1). Even when she turns to the topic of prostitution, Gaskell’s attitude can be captured in her “sympathetic portrayal of a ‘fallen woman’” (D’Albertis 10). In the focus of this essay stands Gaskell’s novel, *Ruth*, which is a full-length novel telling the story of a fallen woman. On the surface, it seems to be the classic story of a fallen woman. The novel is about a young woman, who falls in love, commits her sin, and then she has to face the consequences of her sin, and she dies rather young at the end of the story. Nevertheless, the fact that Gaskell devoted the major part of her novel to the time period between Ruth’s sin and death makes the novel an unordinary story of a fallen woman. Therefore, the novel can be read not only as a social problem novel as it is a “work of fiction in which a prevailing social problem ... is dramatized through its effect on the characters of a novel” (“Social Problem Novel”), but as a social problem novel which proposes a solution to the social problem it represents: the saving of the fallen woman. I intend to explore Gaskell’s main ideas in connection with the fallen woman and her redemption by giving a brief documentary of the cultural and historical background of prostitution in Victorian England. Prostitution, or the “great social evil” as the Victorians called it, meant something different from the sex industry, as we understand it (Dolin ix). For the Victorians it meant “all forms of what the Victorians classed as female social-sexual transgression” (Dolin ix). Although Ruth never becomes a prostitute, a fallen woman and a prostitute did not belong to entirely different categories in the nineteenth century; partly because both the prostitute and the fallen woman were judged because they were women who had “sexual intercourse with a man to whom one was not married” (Mumm 529). In order to develop a comprehensive analysis of Gaskell’s saved heroine, the analysis of Gaskell’s other two fallen women is included; and they - unlike Ruth - actually become prostitutes in their lives. Esther was Gaskell’s first fallen woman, who appeared in her first novel, *Mary Barton*, published in 1848. Two years later, in 1850, “Lizzie Leigh”, a short story about a fallen woman, Lizzie, appeared in *Household Words*, a weekly magazine edited by Dickens. *Ruth* was published in 1853. The aim of my essay is to analyse

the representation of fallen women in Gaskell's fiction, and to focus on *Ruth* as a solution novel as a subgenre of the social problem novel.

The essay concentrates on two major topics relating to fallen women: their falls and what happens after they have become fallen. The analysis of the characters' falls is an important part of the essay' topic, because each character's fall defines to different extents what kind of life they live afterwards. The first part of the essay starts with a discussion of the common causes of prostitution in Victorian England including contemporary and modern critics' standpoints. In the second major part of the essay, the opportunities of fallen women are presented. Each part is followed by the analysis of the characters in contrast to the critics' assumptions of fallen women and prostitution. In the last section, the focus is on the comparison of the three characters, and the aim is to analyse the alternations Gaskell made in the character of the fallen woman.

2. The Causes of Prostitution

The Victorians' attitude towards social problems was characterized by a "sense of social responsibilit[y]" (Ladow). Around the 1840s, "the study of prostitution" started to attract laymen and experts alike (Walkovitz 33), so it was typical of the period that statesmen, doctors, and social investigators started to present "analyses of the causes of prostitution" in the middle of the nineteenth century (Valverde 174). Contemporary observers were in a disagreement in terms of what caused the large and thriving number of prostitutes in the nineteenth century (Rogers). Not only in London, but "even in a non-industrial provincial city, low-class prostitution was so widespread" that its existence could not have been ignored (Finnegan 212). William Acton, a famous doctor of the period, names vanity as the main reason for prostitution, but as a second one he mentions "poverty and lack of job opportunities" (qtd. in Valverde 175). According to Acton, women's desire for dresses and admiration had known no boundaries (Valverde 175). Similarly to Acton, John Chapman, editor of the *Westminster Review*, considered the "'love of dress' a cause of prostitution" (qtd. in Valverde 178). On the other hand, he differentiated between "the various grades of prostitute" and highlights that "some women ... become prostitutes in order to support children or aged parents" while others can be considered more blameworthy (Valverde 178). Besides the commonly considered causes e.g., poverty and vanity, a girl's education is given as a possible reason in a testimony on the Contagious Diseases Acts of 1871 by the feminist leader Josephine Butler (in Valverde 186). In her testimony, seduction, wantonness, and the love of dress emerged as reasons for prostitution, but Butler emphasised that the love of dress should not have been considered the only reason behind a girl's fall (Valverde 186). Butler attempted to draw the attention to accompanying conditions of a girl's fall, such as "a girl who has no education has a vacant mind, ready to be engaged with trifles" (qtd. in Valverde 186).

It is not surprising that working women's financial situation was desperate and it could lead to poverty and prostitution, because female occupations like needlework and dressmaking were low-paid jobs (Basch 199). Henry Mayhew, a famous journalist of the period, interviewed needlewomen concerning their earnings and living conditions, finding that these women lived in poor conditions, and they struggled because they earned little money (Mayhew 7-9). Moreover, the amount of orders was unpredictable, so there were times when they had to struggle through weeks without work (Mayhew 7). These hard-working women did not only have to face the difficulties of life, but they had to resist the temptation of prostitution. As one

of the interviewees mentioned other girls advised her to follow their path and become a prostitute, because they lived a good life, they had good clothes and enough food (Mayhew 8).

Even nowadays, critics do not completely agree on the causes of the high number of prostitutes in Victorian England. Jane Rogers's research regards the three most frequent causes of prostitution as seduction, degeneracy or immorality, and poverty. Judith R. Walkovitz names poverty as "a principal cause for women's move into prostitution" (19). Women had extremely limited job opportunities, and prostitution "was the only major source of paid work outside the factories and service" (Dolin x). Walkovitz also emphasises that it was not "sheer want" that drove women into prostitution "at the point of actual starvation" (19). Frances Finnegan agrees with Walkovitz, as he notes that poverty was not always the "inevitable" inducer of prostitution, but obviously, to some extent, it was "the major reason for girls initially taking to the streets (213). Walkovitz argues that women had other similarly "unpleasant alternatives" to choose from, so investigating the circumstances of those who indeed became prostitutes is the key to find out more about the topic (19). Unfortunately, concerning "certain aspects of women's family life and prior sexual experience, as well as their personality development" only limited amount of information is available (Walkovitz 19).

Like Walkovitz, Donald Thomas emphasises that money was not the only reason for women to fall (85). Prostitution was seen as a more "attractive future to girls in their early teens than the dignity of honest toil" (Thomas 85). Many teenage prostitutes "were not victims of indifferent families or poverty ... they had run away from homes where they remembered that 'great care' or the 'greatest care' had been shown them by hard-working parents" (Thomas 86). Men who hired girls for pleasure treated them more humanly than their middle-class mistresses (Thomas 85-86). Still Walkovitz concludes that fallen women mainly had "unusually disrupted" families, as it is known from the reports of rescue homes and hospitals (16). Additionally, it was typical that most of them were in their late teens when they moved to the streets and "remained there for no more than a few years" (Walkovitz 19). "Before going onto the streets, they had already had sexual relations of a non-commercial sort with a man of their social class" (Walkovitz 34). Their most frequent previous occupation was maiden work (Walkovitz 19). According to Susan Mumm, "the typical life-cycle of a 'fallen' servant" girl was "to be employed in domestic service from early to mid-adolescence; to fall through a sexual relationship with someone of roughly the same social class; to lose her place as a result; and be forced onto the streets through her lack of respectability" (533).

In contrast, Mariana Valverde examines "the love of finery as a chief cause of women's descent into prostitution" (170). She argues that in social commentary, "women needleworkers

and maids were linked not through being female workers, but through their common love of finery and their potential for becoming a fallen” (Valverde 184). Moreover, in her opinion Acton applied “love of finery” as chief cause of prostitution in order to strengthen his own ideas about women (Valverde 175). Valverde argues that Acton wanted to present women “both passionless and sinful” and he achieved this by highlighting women’s “love of finery” (Valverde 175).

To sum up, the previously mentioned causes can be categorized into three groups. The first category includes such causes as poverty, women’s poor financial circumstances, lack of job opportunities, low-paid female occupations, and the need to earn more money in order to support aged parents and children. These explain women’s fall financially. Most contemporary commentators and today’s critics agree that poverty is the decisive cause of the high number of prostitution in Victorian England. The second group covers those causes which originate from one’s personality. Causes relating to personal desires, like the love of finery, vanity, and wantonness belong to the second category. Education is put into a separate category, despite the fact that it was considered to be a minor cause, and it only appeared in the discussion of prostitution towards the end of the nineteenth century. From the point of view of this essay, education and more precisely social education played a more important role in a woman’s fall than it was regarded by the contemporary critics of Gaskell’s time.

2.1. The Characters of Gaskell’s Fallen Women

Gaskell’s family background is remarkably determined her approach to topics like prostitution. She was born into a religious family, as her father was Unitarian minister. Later, she married a minister, so her life was greatly defined by Unitarianism. “Unitarians were the most radical of the many Dissenting groups in nineteenth-century England ... [who] adopted ... the belief that God created human beings with the capacity to govern themselves with both justice and compassion” (Stoneman, “Gaskell, Gender and the Family” 134). They believed that women’s education is as important as men’s, thus Gaskell took part in “a seminary which provided her with what was, for the time, an excellent education” (Stoneman, “Gaskell, Gender and the Family” 134). Moreover, education in this context meant “the acquisition of knowledge”, because the aim was to “establish independence of thought and a self-regulating morality in both men and women” (Stoneman, “Gaskell, Gender and the Family” 134). As Coral Lansbury writes “[t]o be born a woman in the Victorian era was to enter a world of social and cultural deprivation unknown to a man. But to be born a woman and a Unitarian was to be

released from much of the prejudice and oppression enjoined upon other women” (11). In her novel, *Ruth*, Gaskell conveyed her own ideas and opinions which clearly diverges from the majorities’ beliefs. She believed that a pure, innocent woman can commit a sin, and at the same time, she cannot be hold responsible for it (Jaffe 55). She wrote in one of her letters that “an improper woman without knowing it” cannot be judged to be guilty if she was not aware of her own inappropriateness (Gaskell qtd. in Jaffe 55). This attitude played a role in the creation of Ruth’s character, because Ruth is exactly the pure, innocent woman, who commits a sin, but is unaware of it.

Gaskell’s view was not unorthodox in her time; similar ideas governed the Evangelicals’ movement, which attempted to help prostitutes (Hatano 634). Yoko Hatano points out that for the Evangelicals Ruth would be a perfect target for rescue, because she has a “respectable origin and her fall induced by her innocence, purity, and loving nature” (636). Concerning her origin, Ruth’s father was a farmer and her grandfather was a curate. All throughout the novel, innocence and purity are Ruth’s recurring attributes and the fact that she recognises her mistakes only when other members of the society appoint them to her is also a sign of her innocence. The first time Ruth thinks that she has sinned is when a little boy at the Inn where Ruth stays with her lover, hits her and calls her a “naughty girl” (Gaskell, *Ruth* 71). As Gaskell describes Ruth “stood, white and still, with a new idea running through her mind” (Gaskell, *Ruth* 71). Her loving nature is reflected in her relationships and her behaviour even towards strangers. Mr Benson and Ruth meet on the same day when she is abandoned by Mr Bellingham, her lover, they hardly know each other, but when Mr Benson falls “over some sharp projecting stone” Ruth stays to help him (Gaskell, *Ruth* 96). As Gaskell describes Ruth’s “tender nature” cannot “bear to hear or see bodily suffering in any of God’s meanest creatures without trying to succour them” (Gaskell, *Ruth* 96). When Jemima, a friend of the Bensons approaches Ruth, she receives Jemima’s rather annoying admiration for her beauty tenderly, and offers her love in return (Gaskell, *Ruth* 186). Ruth’s tender, loving nature, and her desire to help others will guide her later to become a nurse of the desperate victims of the typhus fever.

Already at the beginning, Ruth is a gentle, pure, and loving girl, but her innocence and purity mainly derive from the lack of her social education, which is due to her parents’ early death. Although her father appoints a legal guardian for her, but he shows no personal interest in Ruth, so she is brought to a dressmaker’s shop to work and live there. According to Hatano, Ruth’s fall could have been prevented, if she had the maternal guidance (634). Indeed, in Gaskell’s time “mothers were responsible for the social education of [their] daughters” and “being too talkative or too reserved; walking alone, with a young man, or without a bonnet

could be interpreted as a sign of dubious virtue, and once a girl's 'character,' or reputation, was questioned it was difficult to recover" (Stoneman, "Gaskell, Gender and the Family" 141). When Mrs Mason, Ruth's employer sees Ruth in the company of a young gentleman, Ruth's character is compromised. The scene represents the strictness of Victorian social rules, as Ruth is believed to be a fallen woman on the basis of simple assumptions, while she was still a virgin. According to Lynn Nead, "any woman who deviated from the feminine ideal and lived outside the middle-class codes of morality" was reckoned to be a prostitute (30), and the same happens to Ruth in this scene.

Ruth's lack of social education is a central question of the book and references to the mother's significance in a girl's education are implied in the novel. During a Sunday trip, Ruth and Mr Bellingham visit Ruth's old home, where she meets Old Thomas, an old family friend. Old Thomas foresees Ruth's fall, but he cannot warn Ruth directly, because it would be a female duty: "I'll put my missis up to going to the town and getting speech of her, and telling her a bit of her danger. An old motherly woman like our Mary will set about it better nor a stupid fellow like me" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 50). The mother's role in social education is not only conveyed through the characters, but the narrator also speaks out to the reader:

She was too young when her mother died to have received any cautions or words of advice respecting the subject of a woman's life--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 recognised and realised its existence.

Ruth was innocent and snow-pure. (Gaskell, *Ruth* 43)

Jenny Uglow notes that with the help of this imagery Ruth's lack of knowledge is implied, namely that Ruth's mother never talked to her about sex (328). The quotation also shows that the omniscient third person narrator represents Gaskell's ideas and embodies her opinion, because it does not judge Ruth while it follows the heroine's steps carefully. The importance of the mother and a girl's social education also appear in *Mary Barton*. The novel's heroine, Mary loses her mother at a similarly young age as Ruth. She says that her mother "died before [she] was thirteen, before [she] could know right from wrong about some things" (Gaskell, *Mary Barton* 390). Mary is also tempted by a wealthy gentleman, but Ruth loves Mr Bellingham unconditionally, while Mary is attracted to Mr Carson, but does not love him.

Gaskell's careful choice of her novel's heroine is what greatly differentiates Ruth from the earlier fallen women, Lizzie in "Lizzie Leigh" and Esther in *Mary Barton*. Neither of these writings presents their fallen women before their falls, so in their case, being fallen defines their

personalities to a greater extent, and not in the similar fashion as in Ruth. In Lizzie's and Esther's case, their falls oppress their characters. Apart from being a fallen woman, not much information is given about Lizzie and Esther. They are their family's disgrace, and they caused pain and shame for their relatives. John Barton, the husband of Esther's sister, even holds Esther responsible for his wife's death, as she has brought "sorrow" and "woe" on the family because of "her giddiness, her lightness of conduct" (Gaskell, *Mary Barton* 58). Esther reappears in the novel only to warn Mary against her admirer, Mr Carson, the wealthy mill owner's son, because Esther recognizes her younger self in Mary. Esther's attempt to help Mary can be considered her trying to do something good, but Patsy Stoneman regards Esther's attempt unnecessary, because Mary handles Mr Carson on her own quite successfully ("Gaskell, Gender and the Family" 142). Thus, Esther's presence in the novel functions as a mirror to Mary, because she is tempted in a similar fashion in the novel as Esther is, so Esther's life is feared to be Mary's future. Compared to Esther, Lizzie's character is even less developed, her character is determined by her fall almost exclusively. Only one characteristic of Lizzie's personality is revealed in the short story: her love for her child. Lizzie gives her child away, because she could not take care of her, and even though she abandons her child, she brings her daughter a little amount of money from time to time.

2.2. Agents and Circumstances of Ruth's, Lizzie's, and Esther's fall

Before Ruth becomes Mr Bellingham's lover – before her fall – there is someone who indirectly induces Ruth's fall: Mrs Mason, Ruth's employer. Mrs Mason sees Ruth and Mr Bellingham together and she reads the obvious signs of an improperly behaving woman: "she saw Ruth standing with a lover, far away from home, at such a time [eight o'clock] in the evening" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 54). Without any question she dismisses Ruth: "Don't attempt to show your face at my house again after this conduct. I saw you, and your spark, too. I'll have no slurs on the character of my apprentices. Don't say a word. I saw enough. I shall write and tell your guardian to-morrow" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 54). Intrinsically, Mrs Mason's immediate expulsion of Ruth is Ruth's punishment for her improper behaviour. Mrs Mason had an intolerance "keeping up the character of her establishment" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 53). Ruth does not realize her impropriety, which can be explained by her lack of social and sexual knowledge. Mrs Mason pushes Ruth to her fall, because Ruth's workplace is her home as well, and on workdays Mrs Mason provides her employees with food. If Mrs Mason had acted on the contrary and took Ruth away from Mr Bellingham instead of depriving her of her job, she could have saved Ruth from falling any

further, because at this point in the novel, Ruth is still a virgin, she has not committed her fatal 'sin' yet. Only Mrs Mason cannot presume Ruth's innocence, so she handles her as she should handle any other fallen woman according to the Victorian social norms. Francoise Basch also highlights Mrs Mason's responsibility and argues that "seducer, family and employer, all responsible for the tragedy, are representative of the society that Mrs Gaskell held liable" (248). The narrator gently formulates the critic of Mrs Mason's nature: "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" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 53).

Mr Bellingham, the seducer or the lover is the active agent of Ruth's fall. Although Mr Bellingham's true intentions are never fully revealed in the novel, he is not depicted as a wicked and maleficent man but some of his actions make his character ambiguous. When Mr Bellingham sees Ruth for the first time, he accompanies a young lady to a ball, where Ruth repairs Mr Bellingham's partner's dress. However, more suspicious his behaviour is when Ruth is dismissed from her job, because instead of preventing Ruth's fall, he leads her towards it, because she does not wish to depart from her side. He seems to be acting like a gentleman, taking care of a young woman, but when Ruth asks Mr Bellingham to take her to Old Thomas, who "would give [her] home" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 60), he allures Ruth into the carriage, and gently takes her to London. The novel is not specific about the period of time when Ruth and Mr Bellingham travel and live together, so it is not known how Mr Bellingham persuades Ruth to be with him, or whether he promises marriage or not. Presumably, Ruth is not forced because they are in love with each other, and love feels natural for her. The time they share together is "true enjoyment to Ruth" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 64). Although "Mr Bellingham is "old compared to Ruth", his mother still has an influence over his life because he is "young as a man" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 32). When the mother gets the lovers separated, Mr Bellingham defends Ruth's character, but in the end he lets her mother handle the situation.

Compared to Ruth's fall, the circumstances and agents of Lizzie's fall mainly remain unknown to the reader. At the beginning of the short story, there are only hints in the text that the Leigh family has a dark secret referred to as "the family's disgrace" (Gaskell, "Lizzie Leigh" 50) and as "the family['s] shame" (Gaskell, "Lizzie Leigh" 52). The secret unfolds slowly and gradually through the characters' memories and conversations. Lizzie was "young, and liked the thought of seeing a bit of the world", then she is sent away deliberately to Manchester to become a servant. She was "led astray" and her "master had turned her into the street soon" (Gaskell, "Lizzie Leigh" 61).

Lizzie moves to the city from the countryside, where her fall happens. The city was the typical place for a young heroine to fall in the nineteenth century, because “prostitution was regarded as a city vice and was part of the discourse of the dirt and disease of the city versus the health and spiritual soundness of the country” (Nead 35). Before her fall, Lizzie is placed in an unfamiliar environment, like Ruth, when she is sent to Mrs Mason’s dressmaking shop. As a mistress’s servant, Lizzie almost completely embodies Mumm’s theory of “the typical life-cycle of a ‘fallen’ servant” (533). She gets into domestic service at a young age, and later she loses her place as an outcome of her fall. Then, as she dares not to face her family as a fallen woman, she ends up in the streets, trying to save up a little money for her little girl. As Lizzie fits into the theory of Mumm’s, seduction by a fellow-servant can be assumed to be the reason for her fall, but it is not revealed in the short story.

Esther is introduced in a similar way in *Mary Barton*. At the beginning of the novel, she is already lost to the family. Barton, Esther’s brother in law, talks about Esther’s love of finery, which has defined her character before she has become a prostitute. Esther worked in a factory, and according to John she wasted most of her money on dresses. He remembers that “the last time [Esther’s landlady]” set eyes on [Esther] was last Tuesday” and Esther wore “her Sunday gown, and with a new ribbon in her bonnet, and gloves on her hands, like the lady she was so fond of thinking herself” (Gaskell, *Mary Barton* 43). Valverde highlights that in John Barton’s speech, “the theme of love of ‘artificial’ dress [is] linked to moral vice” (171). From Esther’s love of finery, John predicts her future stating that she will become a “street-walker” (Gaskell, *Mary Barton* 43). As the image of the fallen woman is connected to the love of finery and the dresses she wears, the novel always gives a detailed description of Esther’s gowns. When Esther first appears in the novel, she is wearing “her faded finery, the gauze bonnet, once pink, now dirty white; the muslin gown, all draggled, and soaking wet up to the very knees; the gay-coloured barege shawl, closely wrapped round the form” (Gaskell, *Mary Barton* 168). From Esther’s gown, John Barton concludes Esther’s profession without any doubt, even though Esther chooses to wear her “plainest” dress (Gaskell, *Mary Barton* 169). Although John Barton believes that Esther falls because of her love of finery, later it turns out that love of finery is not the chief cause of Esther’s fall.

Before Esther becomes a “street-walker”, she is a kept mistress of an officer. In Esther’s case, apart from the love of finery and love, there is one more motive behind her fall: desiring a better life. Her desire is reflected in her love of dresses, and that she loves an officer who is above her in the social hierarchy, while she comes from a working-class family, and she was a factory-girl. Esther’s concern about Mary lies here, as she worries about Mary because it is a

“great error of loving one above [one] in station” (Gaskell, *Mary Barton* 213). Esther’s lover was young, handsome and kind, like Ruth’s lover, Mr Bellingham. When the officer’s regiment was moved to Chester, “[Esther’s lover] could not bear to part from [Esther], nor [she] from him, so he took [her] with him” (Gaskell, *Mary Barton* 209). The lovers’ longing is similar to Ruth’s and Mr Bellingham’s relationship, as Mr Bellingham does not want to leave Ruth. However, in Esther’s case, the officer lures Esther into a relationship by promising her marriage. Stoneman also notes the similarities and differences between the two love-relationships, and she emphasizes that “there is no suggestion” in the novel that Esther is unaware “what she [is] agreeing to when she [goes] off with her young soldier” (“Gaskell, Gender, and the Family” 142).

2.3. The Uniqueness of Ruth

Both Gaskell and the Evangelicals considered one particular type of fallen woman for rescue, which indicates the assumption that not every fallen woman deserved to be saved in their eyes. Hence, in *Ruth*, Gaskell presents an individual and specific case. The uniqueness of Ruth is also supported by Gaskell’s two other fallen women. Ruth is chosen to be a rescued fallen woman unlike Esther and Lizzie. In addition, she is never left in such a desperate situation to be forced to choose prostitution like Esther and Lizzie. Still, all three fallen women are judged according to the common judgement of fallen women, namely they become cast out of society for a lifetime. In Ruth’s case, it is Mrs Mason, Ruth’s employer who represents society’s opinion and judgement as an authority figure. For Lizzie, the assumed authority figure is her mistress, however it is Lizzie’s father who acts according to society’s expectations. Similarly to Lizzie’s case, John Barton, the head of Esther’s family, embodies the same judgement. Although the three fallen women share the same punishment, the causes of their falls are different.

All causes that play a role in Ruth’s fall can be traced back to the fact that she becomes an orphan at a young age. Ruth’s innocence, purity, and lack of social knowledge are due to her mother’s absence. She fails Mrs Mason, because she has not been taught about society’s expectations of women in the nineteenth century, she is not aware of those expectations. When Ruth is charmed by Mr Bellingham, she does not think for a second that Mr Bellingham’s intentions are not decent, because she was not warned against such temptation. Still, poverty, the common cause of prostitution is a significant factor in Ruth’s fall. After her parent’s death,

Ruth is in a vulnerable position as an “abandoned gentlewoman”, who can easily become a prostitute, because of the limited job opportunities (Dolin x).

In Ruth’s case, poverty and helplessness are the main causes, and not vanity, greediness, or the love of finery. Ruth is depicted as a victim of her situation and not as the active agent of it. Nead notes that one approach to negotiate the social crisis of prostitution is to define “the fallen woman as victim rather than the oppressor” (31). While victimizing Ruth evokes sympathy and solidarity in the reader, at the same time, the same sympathy and solidarity prepares the suitable atmosphere to the major part of the novel, which is dedicated to Ruth’s redemption. In contrast to Ruth, Lizzie, and Esther are not victimized, and interestingly, the lack of social knowledge does not appear to be a cause in their falls. Most probably, Lizzie and Esther are well-aware of their own actions at the moment of their fall, as Lizzie calls herself “wicked” (Gaskell, “Lizzie Leigh” 74), and Esther does not dare to re-enter her family’s life because she has chosen her life willingly. However, Ruth’s fall resembles Esther’s fall, as they both fall out of love. While, hopelessness and misery play a part in Ruth’s fall, this is not entirely true in the other two girl’s situations. When Lizzie is dismissed from service, she has already committed her sin, but when Ruth is discharged she is still a virgin. While Ruth’s employer can be hold responsible for Ruth’s fall, Lizzie’s employer cannot be judged to the same extent. In Esther’s and Lizzie’s case, hopelessness and misery become factors in their lives after they fall. They find themselves in desperate situations (Lizzie without any job, Esther with a sick child) after they have fallen and because of their deteriorating living conditions they are drifting into prostitution.

Although Ruth’s fall is described only in the first eight chapters of the novel, Ruth’s character and the details of her fall crucially determine her path after it. Thus, the novel presents her heroine already from the beginning as a redeemable character, so the beginning strengthens the ending of the novel. It is clear that *Ruth* is not about saving prostitutes, because not every fallen woman deserves the kind of help Ruth is given in the novel. The aim of the novel is to demonstrate that there are fallen women who should be given a chance like Ruth.

3. Opportunities for a Fallen Woman in Victorian England

One of the common beliefs about prostitution was that once a woman falls she remains fallen forever (Inniss 116), but organizations were established in order to ensure help and to prevent prostitution in the nineteenth century (Basch 207). Such an organization was The London Society for the Protection of Young Females and Prevention of Juvenile Prostitution, “especially concerned for girls under fifteen” (Picard 260). The Midnight Meeting Movement, started in 1853, sent out gentlemen in a clerical look to invite “the passing prostitutes in the Haymarket to come into the meeting hall and have a cup of tea, and something to eat, and listen to hymns and prayers” and after that everyone was given the opportunity to stay and if they wanted to, they was offered a home (Picard 260). Another organization was The Female Mission to the Fallen, which “was founded in 1858 to work among the urban working class, and managed to send half the cases it dealt back to their families, and jobs, and the other half to residential homes” (Picard 260). Moreover, refuge homes like the British Penitent Female Refuge or London Female Penitentiary were run to receive fallen women in London (Basch 206-207). Along with these societies and organizations, famous people of the age also got involved in such public affairs, like William Gladstone, who invited prostitutes home to tea, or Charles Dickens, who was a co-founder of the Urania Cottage (Picard 260-261).

Urania Cottage was a famous refuge home for fallen women ran by Charles Dickens and Angela Burdett-Coutts. In a letter to Mrs Burdett-Coutts, Dickens wrote that the aim of Urania Cottage was “the formation of habits of firmness and self-restraint” (qtd. in Rogers). They intended to “offer a different and more sympathetic approach to the treatment of fallen women” compared to “the Magdalen Society”, which approached fallen women in “a typically harsh and punishing” manner (Rogers). Women were not forced to wear uniforms, but they dressed like “respectable plain servants” (Dickens qtd. in Rogers). The main goal of Urania Cottage was to achieve that “at the end of their re-education the reclaimed girls would return to society and lead a normal life” but possibly not in England (Basch 208). Dickens supported the boarders’ emigration after leaving Urania (Basch 208).

According to Mumm, “a female penitentiary was ... a charitable enterprise entered voluntarily by members of an outcast group, popularly known as a ‘fallen women’” but not only fallen in the sexual sense but others, such as female thieves, tramps even alcoholics were also admitted (527). These organizations “were intended as transformative institutions, where female outcasts ... could be changed into ‘honest’ women, a conversion which incorporated both a spiritual change from sinner to penitent, and an equally important social shift from

dissolute and deviant female to respectable woman” (Mumm 527). The first penitentiary was founded in London in 1806, but when the first Anglican sisterhood was founded in 1845, the number of the penitentiaries started to grow (Mumm 528). The penitents were provided “housing, food, clothing, medical treatment, education, and training” (Mumm 536) and some ran orphanages in order to keep mother and child together (Mumm 535). The training consisted of three main parts as the idea was to take care of the body, the mind and the soul: “first, the acquisition of a deferential and respectful demeanour; second, the instilling of middle-class values; and third, the inculcation of religious belief” (Mumm 537).

In *Poverty and Prostitution*, Finnegan explores the circumstances and situations of Victorian prostitutes in York, and the book includes a chapter on rescue and reform attempts. Finnegan claims that women entered The York Penitentiary Society “completely voluntarily, they were subjected to discipline, rules and regulations similar to that of life in a prison ... they were required to wear the drab uniform of ‘Penitentiary dress’ which obviously marked them from the rest of society” (Finnegan 171).

Penitentiaries, religious organizations and refuge homes shared the same aim and all were governed by similar principles, such as living by strict rules, teaching discipline, and a proper manner.

3.1. Ruth’s Path

Gaskell had a particular conception of what kind of women can and should be saved, and she explores her theory of the redemption and reintegration process in *Ruth*. Entering the household of the Bensons is the first step Ruth takes towards her redemption. When Ruth is abandoned by Mr Bellingham and his mother, she receives a note and a bank-note of fifty pounds. The note written by Mrs Bellingham says “I shall pray that you may turn to an honest life, and I strongly recommend you, if indeed you are not ‘dead in trespasses and sins’ to enter some penitentiary” (Gaskell, *Ruth* 91). Although Ruth did not enter any penitentiary, the Benson home shows similarities in their way of helping Ruth to the penitentiaries in the nineteenth century.

The Bensons take care of Ruth’s body, mind, and soul in a similar manner as the sisters in female penitentiaries. “Women were encouraged to adopt middle-class standards of cleanliness, behaviour, and thought. The reformation of the body included cleanliness ... and good manners” (Mumm 537). At the Bensons’, Ruth has to maintain the family’s strict daily routine in order to fit in, for instance, the Bensons say their prayers at half-past seven in the

morning, which is first missed by Ruth, but she learns that they never differ from it (Gaskell, *Ruth* 140). As she becomes a member of the Benson family, she adapts to the family's behaviour and thoughts. To train the mind, penitentiaries encouraged women to read so it included "the development of the intellect" (Mumm 537). Ruth, under Mr Benson's guidance, starts her education, and her aim is to be a proper tutor of her son in the future:

By degrees they spoke of education, and the book-learning that forms one part of it; and the result was that Ruth determined to get up early all through the bright summer mornings, to acquire the knowledge hereafter to be given to her child. Her mind was uncultivated, her reading scant; beyond the mere mechanical arts of education she knew nothing; but she had a refined taste, and excellent sense and judgment to separate the true from the false. With these qualities, she set to work under Mr Benson's directions. She read in the early morning the books that he marked out; she trained herself with strict perseverance to do all thoroughly; she did not attempt to acquire any foreign language, although her ambition was to learn Latin, in order to teach it to her boy. (Gaskell, *Ruth* 175-176)

Additionally, Ruth does not only prove to be a diligent pupil of Mr Benson, but she is also talented:

Her tutor was surprised at the bounds by which she surmounted obstacles, the quick perception and ready adaptation of truths and first principles, and her immediate sense of the fitness of things. (Gaskell, *Ruth* 185)

The reformation of the soul meant religious transformation in the penitentiary system (Mumm 537). In Ruth's case, the aim is not Ruth's religious transformation, because she always has faith. She is depicted as a deeply religious woman at the beginning of the novel, who goes to church regularly (Gaskell, *Ruth* 25), and who reads the Bible (Gaskell, *Ruth* 34). Ruth is led astray by a series of events, and what she needs is proper guidance to find her way back to God. Becoming the member of the Benson family, it means going to church to hear Mr Benson's sermon. More importantly, Mr Benson as a Dissenting minister provides Ruth a home where her faith can be embraced again.

The process of Ruth's becoming a part of the Benson family can be traced in the text: "life had become significant and full of duty to her. She delighted in the exercise of her intellectual powers, and liked the idea of the infinite amount of which she was ignorant; for it was a grand pleasure to learn--to crave, and be satisfied" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 189-190). Gaskell herself "believed in the power for good of the domestic sphere" (Hatano 635), which is provided by the Bensons in the novel. *Ruth* is Gaskell's demonstration of how the domestic sphere can

be a positive influence on a fallen woman. This essence of the novel is also noted by Nancy Henry claiming that “Gaskell aims to change society’s attitudes toward “fallen women” at home in *Ruth*” (150).

As it was noted above, running an orphanage was an advantage of penitentiaries, because it meant the possibility for a fallen woman to stay together with her child (Mumm 535). In the novel, mother and child stay together and it plays a crucial role in Ruth’s growth. As Deanna L. Davis mentions, “Ruth’s love for her son was constantly leading her to God” (526). Moreover, because of Leonard she is not “allowed to break down” but she is “forced back to consciousness and duty” (Gaskell, *Ruth* 526). This idea is represented by Mr Benson in the novel:

“Faith, Faith [Mr Benson’s sister]! let me beg of you not to speak so of the little innocent babe, who may be God’s messenger to lead her back to Him. Think again of her first words--the burst of nature from her heart! Did she not turn to God, and enter into a covenant with Him--‘I will be so good?’ Why, it draws her out of herself! If her life has hitherto been self-seeking, and wickedly thoughtless, here is the very instrument to make her forget herself, and be thoughtful for another. Teach her (and God will teach her, if man does not come between) to reverence her child; and this reverence will shut out sin,--will be purification.” (Gaskell, *Ruth* 118)

Mr Benson hopes that the innocent child might be God’s gift. If he is right, then through motherhood Ruth can change and earn forgiveness, despite the fact that Leonard’s existence is the evidence of Ruth’s sin. Ruth indeed becomes a mother who is fully devoted to her child. Audrey Jaffe also notes that in Ruth’s transformation the child played an important part and claims that the child is not the ‘evidence’ of Ruth’s sin, but he is rather “a morally appropriate site for her” (56). Mr Benson is proved to be right about Leonard’s good influence over Ruth. Ruth learns diligently and Leonard is Ruth’s main inspiration in this process. The intriguing statement of the novel is that Ruth is depicted as a fallen woman, who with help becomes a mother capable of giving a true education to her son. As it was noted above, it was the mothers’ duty in the family to provide the necessary education for the children. Ruth is educated by the Benson family, she gains her skills and exercises her power as a mother in the domestic sphere, and proves herself to be a good mother to Leonard.

Ruth’s good and pure nature is embraced at the Bensons, and by the time of the second meeting with Mr Bellingham, she is not the little naïve girl anymore, who is not aware of social norms and expectations. Mr Bellingham reappears as a politician called Mr Donne, and after

she recognizes Ruth and learns about his son, eventually proposes to Ruth. Susan Morgan notes that Ruth and Mr Bellingham are shown in a reversed position compared to their first meeting (47). By now, Ruth has the social education she lacked before, she can judge Mr Bellingham's character. According to Nataalka Freeland, Ruth rejects the proposal because it is her opportunity to prove her virtue (206). Moreover, Leonard has become Ruth's first priority, and she wants to protect him from his father in order to ensure that her son will never be like his father (Morgan 47). Ruth might still love Mr Bellingham, but she cannot say yes to his marriage proposal.

Nevertheless, the rejected marriage proposal can be considered as Gaskell's criticism of those fallen women who managed to become respectable members of society through marriage. In one of his reports, Mayhew mentioned a kept mistress who said to him that "[she] could marry tomorrow if [she] liked" (qtd in Auerbach 33). It seems that Gaskell intended to present that a fallen woman should not re-enter society without any attempt to earn forgiveness for her sins, because it is simply not a solution, but a lie. For Ruth, marriage is an option to avoid her humiliation at this moment in the novel. She refuses the proposal not only because she thinks that Mr Bellingham would have a bad influence on Leonard, but also because she knows that marrying Mr Bellingham would not annul the sin they committed together.

The effectiveness of the Benson family as a therapeutic organization is shown in that Ruth is offered a position as a governess at the Bradshaw family. Ruth's diligence and hard-work is awarded when she is asked to be a governess, and for eleven years she works as a governess. In fact, the image of Ruth formed by the Bradshaw family is partly based on a lie, because they believe that Ruth is a widow. Still, Ruth is good at her job, and no controversial incident happens during her time as a governess. As Ruth has a "respectable origin" (Hatano 636) becoming a governess could have been her fate, if she did not lose her family early. According to Liza Picard, "for a gently bred woman whose world suddenly fell apart" – as Ruth's family did – "prostitution was not the answer", as it was commonly assumed to be what happened to these women (261). She considers finding an employment as a governess as the solution (Picard 261), but when Ruth falls, she is not educated enough to become a governess. As Ruth proves herself to be a good mother to Leonard, she proves herself to be a good governess at the Bradshaw family.

After being a governess for eleven years, the previously mentioned common belief – once fallen, always fallen – seems to prevail in Ruth's situation. She is dismissed by Mr Bradshaw, when he learns about Ruth's path, but not because of her insufficiency. From that moment on, Ruth's disguise is destroyed and who she was as a widow and how she has lived her life for years seem to be forgotten. Mr Bradshaw, similarly to Mrs Mason but in a harsher

manner, he represents society's judgement on a fallen woman, he calls Ruth "corrupt" and humiliates her:

Look at that woman ... look at that woman, I say--corrupt long before she was your age--hypocrite for years! (Gaskell, *Ruth* 334-335).

She has come amongst us with her innocent seeming, and spread her nets well and skilfully. ... She has led you to the brink of the deep pit, ready for the first chance circumstance to push you in. And I trusted her—I trusted her—I welcomed her. (Gaskell, *Ruth* 336)

Ruth bears Mr Bradshaw's humiliating words "speechless", because she knows what sin she has committed and she has realized its consequences. Therefore, she shows no resistance neither in words nor in motion: "her head drooped a little forward; her eyes were more than half veiled by the large quivering lids; her arms hung down straight and heavy" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 334). Ruth even admits that she has "done very wrong" and that she knows that being young is her only excuse, but Mr Bradshaw shows no sympathy (Gaskell, *Ruth* 334). Ruth takes Mr Bradshaw's judgement, until he starts to attack her son and names him a "bastard" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 336). Ruth believes her child is innocent, and he should not suffer because of her sin, that is the reason why she is learning and working so hard, for her child's sake. Ruth speaks out to protect her son standing as "a wild creature at bay, past fear now" saying that "I appeal to God against such a doom for my child. I appeal to God to help me. I am a mother, and as such I cry to God for help--for help to keep my boy in His pitying sight, and to bring him up in His holy fear. Let the shame fall on me! I have deserved it, but he--he is so innocent and good" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 337). As Leonard is Ruth's main inspiration her only concern is her son.

After the unveiling of Ruth's past, it is only people's attitude towards her that changes, while she remains truthful to herself. Even in her desperate situation, she is still a pure and good woman, who makes her choice to become a nurse in order to help the sick and the poor. To be a nurse remains an option for a fallen woman, because in the Victorian Age this occupation was seen as a "menial occupation" (Uglow 316). In Uglow's analysis, the novel argues for "the dignity of nursing", as Ruth earns the forgiveness of society through her sacrifices. Lansbury points out the similarities between Ruth's and Florence Nightingale's life, as Nightingale's "family accepts her as a nurse after the holocaust of the Crimea", similar to how Ruth becomes a respectable member of society only after the epidemic that breaks out in Ecclestone (Gaskell, *Ruth* 78-79). Hatano also notes that "Ruth changes the meaning of nursing by her tender care, much as Florence Nightingale was doing at the same time in history" (638). Hatano gives a short account of the evaluation of nursing before Florence Nightingale:

Before Florence Nightingale's assiduous attempt to improve the quality of nursing, thus raising the status of nurses, nursing outside the home and for hire was considered to be degrading and improper. Mariam Bailing contends that 'nurses belonged to the servant class and [...] when employed in private houses, were regarded as equals of the scullery maid rather than of the upper servants'. Moreover, the traditional paid nurse was associated with immorality and bad character, such as hard-mindedness, ignorance, laziness, promiscuity, and drunkenness, and was even represented 'as an irresponsible, money-grabbing fool'. Worst of all, there was a 'cultural assumption that attending to the intimate bodily functions of another person is degrading' [Poovey, p. 177], a notion that further develops the connection between nursing and sexuality. (Hatano 638)

The underappreciation of nursing is conveyed through Jemima (Mr Bradshaw's oldest daughter and a friend of Ruth's) and Ruth's conversation about Ruth's choice, when the surprised Jemima thinks that Ruth is "better educated" than to become a nurse, which means she is "fitted for something better" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 385). Ruth is well aware of her situation that no one would have her as a governess, but she believes that she can be a good nurse.

Even if nursing was considered to be a degrading or an improper occupation in the nineteenth century, in Gaskell's novel the inhabitants of Ecclestone are moved by Ruth's sacrifice, and they respect her as a nurse. Leonard overhears a conversation about his mother outside the hospital, where she works during the time of the typhus fever:

"Such a one as her has never been a great sinner; nor does she do her work as a penance, but for the love of God, and of the blessed Jesus. She will be in the light of God's countenance when you and I will be standing afar off. I tell you, man when my poor wench died, as no one would come near, her head lay at that hour on this woman's sweet breast. I could tell you ... for calling that woman a great sinner. The blessing of them who were ready to perish is upon her." (Gaskell, *Ruth* 425)

The significance of Ruth's sacrifices is that they affect his son's life. He is no longer the bastard son of a fallen woman, but a son who is not ashamed of her mother because he can be proud of her. Lansbury considers *Ruth* "a study of the martyrdom a woman had to endure before she could make society accept her illegitimate child" (54).

3.2. Esther's and Lizzie's Path

Compared to Ruth, Esther and Lizzie live the miserable and desperate lives of prostitutes. Still, Gaskell's wretched characters are also pitied and attempted to be saved. Esther goes out to the streets because her child becomes ill, and she cannot find any other way to provide her enough money for food and medication. According to Nead "the dominant representation of the prostitute in the middle of the nineteenth century" was "the wretched outcast", who is defined "in terms of her guilt" (31). In Esther's character Gaskell embodies this stereotypical representation of the fallen woman. This fallen woman "deviates from the virtuous norm" and she cannot "return to respectable society but forced into a life of prostitution" (Nead 31). As she is "tortured by memories of her lost childhood innocence, the prostitute turned to drink to ease her conscience and suicide was the final act of this poor social victim" (Nead 31). At one moment, Esther admits that she starts drinking because the life she lives is unbearable. Esther says that drinking is "the only thing" which prevents prostitutes from committing suicide (Gaskell, *Mary Barton* 213), and she adds that they drink not only to forget their current situation, but also to forget their past, when they were innocent. Esther might be considered the worst of Gaskell's fallen women, because of her selfish behaviour; still she is pitied by Mary, her niece and Jem, Mary's lover. At the end of the novel, Mary and Jem set out to Canada to start a new life, but before the leave, they attempt to find Esther in order to take her with them as well. Unfortunately, Esther dies before the journey, but at least she is comforted in her last hours.

Before Lizzie is found and saved by her mother, she lives on the streets for several years. As Walkovitz notes, it was common that prostitutes lived on the streets for only a short period of time in Victorian England (19). Most probably Lizzie chooses prostitution not only to stay alive but to support her new-born girl, and supporting one's family was also a factor in one's becoming a prostitute in Victorian England (Valverde 178). After she is reunited with her mother, Lizzie's life is similar to Ruth's life in Eccleston, as they both live their lives in devotion to God. However, Lizzie lives her life away from society with her mother, and they "dwell in a cottage so secluded that, until you drop into the very hollow where it is place, you do not see it" (Gaskell, "Lizzie Leigh" 76). She lives in peace and constantly praying for forgiveness, because she would like to see her child in heaven once again. Moreover, in a way Lizzie also becomes a helper of the sick and sufferers as "every sound of sorrow in the whole upland [where Lizzie lives] is heard there – every call of suffering or of sickness for help is listened to by [Lizzie] ... who comes out of her seclusion whenever there's a shadow in any household"

(Gaskell, "Lizzie Leigh" 76). It is not an accidental outcome for fallen women, as in the period "the emphasis on moral redemption through suffering and self-sacrifice is of course a familiar trope" (Foster, "Elizabeth Gaskell's Shorter Pieces" 113). In A. B. Hopkins' analysis, both Lizzie and Ruth is saved as "one mistake of this sort made in the ignorance of early youth does not argue unredeemable depravity and therefore should not condemn the offender to lifelong ignominy" (68). Still, while Lizzie is punished with her child's death, Ruth wins the forgiveness in her own death and her son is spared. Edgar Wright judges Gaskell's heroines more strictly than Hopkins, as he emphasizes that Lizzie gains no social forgiveness compared to Ruth (70). He points out clearly that Gaskell differentiates the fallen woman (Ruth) and the prostitute (Lizzie and Esther), and she only gives chance to a fallen woman to "earn reacceptance into normal life" (Hopkins 71). Although Lizzie's life is spared, unlike Esther's, the ending of the short story is a bitter-sweet one despite of the reunion of mother and daughter. Lizzie's child dies on the same day when the mother finds Lizzie.

3.3. The Importance of the Family

The family consisted of a father, a mother, and children “was increasingly idealized during the Victorian period” (Mitchell 145). In the centre of the new ideology was the middle-class family, which “represented the essence of morality, stability, and comfort” (Mitchell 146). The husband had the “legal and economic control” in the family, and “the family depended on his income”, because he brought the money through labour (Mitchell 146). As the father spent most of his time away from home working, the moral and spiritual guidance became the mother’s duty in addition to “supervising all of the household’s practical affairs” (Mitchell 147). Nevertheless, the power of the mother appears to be greater, because the family was the place “in which the character of boys as well as girls [was] formed” (Stoneman, “Gaskell, Gender and the Family” 137). Boys were raised “under their father’s authority” until they could succeed in the world, while girls usually stayed at home “unless or until they married” (Mitchell 146). Claudia Nelson points out that “understandings of family in Victorian England were complex” (172). The family was believed to be a “conservative and stabilizing force” and many considered the family the key for “the potential salvation of the nation” (Nelson 172). In contrast, “others saw family as potentially destructive on its own account, an institution that often demanded endless sacrifice (particularly from women) and sometimes offered few rewards, or that perpetuated a cycle of criminality and destitution among the lower orders of society” (Nelson 172).

Family as a “potential salvation” (Nelson 172) is presented in *Ruth*, but interestingly the Benson family is not a traditional middle class family. Mr Benson lives together with his sister Faith, and their servant Sally is almost like a family member. A middle class household was not likely “to include unrelated persons” in the nineteenth century (Mitchell 146), therefore Ruth’s case is indeed unique. Although the Benson family’s structure is not the traditional one, its family members act out the traditional roles of a father and a mother. Mr Benson can be accounted as the father, because he supports the family financially, and also he decides about taking Ruth in. His decision has an effect on the other members of the family, but they obey Mr Benson. Faith and Sally behaves like mother-figures to Ruth, Faith nurses her when she is sick, and Sally helps the family disguise Ruth so she could have peace and a safe place to live with her son. Ruth becomes a daughter to Mr Benson and Faith, who can live “at home as long as [she] is single” (Mitchell 146).

The Benson family’s life resembles the main governing principles of a penitentiary. All who entered such institutions had to adapt to their rules and daily routine. Penitents were taught

manner, skills and they were given a religious education as well. Still, Gaskell did not choose a penitentiary for Ruth to prove herself, because a penitentiary could never offer what the Bensons could offer to Ruth: to be part of a family. Certainly, in a penitentiary, Ruth would have learned the social knowledge she lacks at the beginning of the novel, but it could not provide the same safety as a family. As Gaskell describes the Benson's home, it has an atmosphere which cannot be compared to a penitentiary: the Bensons "seemed ... pure and good, not merely from a lovely and beautiful nature, but from some law, the obedience to which was, of itself, harmonious peace, and which governed them almost implicitly, and with as little questioning on their part" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 141). To be part of a family means a stronger bond than to be a member of a penitentiary. Penitents' leave was always decided on an individual basis, after they generally spent two years living in a penitentiary, but "no woman was sent away" (Mumm 531). But if they decided to leave, many women returned to domestic service, which often had caused their fall in the first place (Mumm 537). Simply, "the sisterhood penitentiaries were unable, given the limitations on women's occupations in the nineteenth century, to offer their penitents a sure means of escape from the cycle of service and 'sin'" (Mumm 537). The beneficial influence of the domestic sphere on one's character is presented in the novel, and as penitents lack the family pattern at the penitentiaries, the same positive effect could not be replicated at a penitentiary. Moreover, the main aim of penitentiaries was to transform its penitents into "honest" people (Mumm 527). In Ruth's case, this is not the Bensons' role in the novel. Ruth is considered to be an innocent sinner, and she is not transformed at the Bensons, but her pure character is embraced with the help of the Bensons.

Family, and especially the ties between the female characters play an important role in Ruth's and Lizzie's lives, in their falls, and their lives after. Both in *Ruth* and in "Lizzie Leigh", family or the lack of it defines the girls' fall. As Lizzie moves to Manchester and lives her life away from her family, the family's positive influence weakens. Julie Nash argues that in the short story "Manchester and its surrounding environment is a place in which the paternalist social order has almost completely broken down" (104). Due to Lizzie's new environment, the father is deprived "of his rightful role in the family, that of protector and master" (Nash 104). While he exercises his power over his wife and sons, he fails his daughter. Nash propounds that "the changes brought about by industry" partly can be hold responsible "for the breakdown of the social compact", which in Lizzie's case causes her tragedy (Nash 104). However, Lizzie's mistress acts out the 'caretaking role' with little success. Her attempt signifies that the social relations in Manchester are also fragmented (Nash 104). On the contrary, in *Ruth*, the heroine is saved and taken in by a family, where the previously mentioned social roles are still strong

and Mr Benson acts out properly the role of the protector. While, Lizzie is the one who could have returned home, where she would have found at least her mother's help, it is Ruth, the orphan girl who receives this treatment. Even before the Bensons taken Ruth in, Old Thomas's family represents a similar possibility for Ruth, a family to take her in. While Ruth's lover prevents Ruth's escape to Old Thomas, Lizzie decides for herself that she cannot return home.

Especially in "Lizzie Leigh", the importance of family in terms of ties between female members is emphasised, as the short story is rather about a mother finding her long-lost fallen daughter than about a fallen woman's suffering. Moreover, the whole short story is governed by the dynamism between the female characters, such as between Mrs Leigh and her daughter, and between Mrs Leigh and Susan. Anna Walters points out that the relationship between Mrs Leigh and Lizzie dominates the tale (12). Nevertheless, the dominance of the mother-daughter relationship is emphasised, as in the short story the female characters share similar opinions and attitudes, and the male characters also show similar reactions. Will, the oldest son accepts the father's judgement about Lizzie's sin, he even tries to forget his sister's existence, because it is easier for him than to live with the thought of his sinner sister. On the contrary, Mrs Leigh and Susan pity Lizzie and want to help her. This duality concerning male and female characters is noted by Shirley Foster claiming that "Lizzie's eventual recovery and partial redemption ... are due to the strength of maternal and female love: notably, both Mrs Leigh and Susan Palmer, Will Leigh's fiancée, are readier to forgive Lizzie than are her father and her brother" (*Elizabeth Gaskell* 33-34).

The (bastard) children determine their mother's life in Gaskell's fiction – in each case to a different extent – and thus the importance of the family is strengthened through the relationship the fallen women have with their children. Taking care of children in Gaskell's fiction is typically a "crucial test of moral values ... [and it] is never restricted to biological mothers and conventional households" (Stoneman, *Elizabeth Gaskell* 49). In the short story, Lizzie's girl is taken care by a strange woman, Susan Palmer, while in the novel, Ruth proves herself to be a good mother of her son. Although Lizzie's child dies, it does not mean that Susan fails. In Walters' opinion the child's death was simply unavoidable, as it would be impossible to write a happy ending to the short story, because "retribution for Lizzie's sin must be made and the child is made the sacrifice" (13). Still, Gaskell gives a meaning to the child's death, as it induces the meeting of mother and daughter. In *Mary Barton* Esther child's death can be seen as a punishment to the mother, but Esther is also punished for her sin. Lizzie is also punished with her child's death, but while she is reunited with her mother, Esther lives the miserable life of a prostitute and dies before her family can help her. Ruth gives life to a boy, and it is the

child who is punished because he loses his mother. It is only Ruth who is not punished with the death of her own child, while all bastard children are presented as little innocent angels. Leonard is spared, because her mother is an innocent sinner.

4. The Representation of Fallen Women in Gaskell's Fiction

Over five years, Gaskell developed her fallen woman character from a novel's minor character into a main character, first in a short story, and later in a novel. In the comparison of Esther and Ruth, the change in the character of the fallen woman is unmistakable, and "Lizzie Leigh" as Walters notes "looks back to *Mary Barton* and forward to *Ruth* in terms of its main concerns" (10). In "Lizzie Leigh" Gaskell started to change the representation of the fallen woman fundamentally compared to her earlier fallen woman, Esther. Gaskell in her first fallen woman drew a "convincing picture of the path to prostitution" (Walters 10). In Esther's story, she presented that a woman could only achieve promotion and step up on the social ladder through marriage (Walters 10). Moreover, to be a "self-made woman" in the nineteenth century was impossible (Walters 10), so when Esther tries to make a living by owning her own shop, she is destined to fail. Esther desires those things that a Victorian woman could not aspire, and she is punished for it. In "Lizzie Leigh", Gaskell did not focus on the representation of the fallen woman but she started to seek for a solution. The circumstances of Lizzie's fall are vaguely told in the short story, because the focus has moved to saving Lizzie's life. According to Hopkins, what Gaskell intends to show "hesitantly" in Lizzie's story, she does with an "entire openness" in Ruth's (68).

Gaskell might have idealized Ruth's character "in order to awaken the reader's pity" (Basch 270). Concerning Ruth's innocence and purity, Uglow questions the credibility of the novel, as there is too much emphasis on Ruth's innocence (325). She argues that it is unlikely that "Ruth would never hear enough workroom gossip to warn her against going away with a man" (Uglow 325). Needless to say, Ruth's life cannot be considered idealised as a fallen woman, but when Ruth is left alone pregnant, she is saved miraculously by Mr Benson. She has not for one day or minute to fear her life, or to suffer from hunger. On the other hand, it was simply not Gaskell's main intention to represent the physical suffering of a fallen woman, but the spiritual path towards forgiveness. Gaskell took an active part in helping prostitutes, and similarly to Dickens, she supported the emigration of prostitutes (Lansbury 52). In a letter to Dickens, she wrote about a seduced woman whose life is speculated to have been an influence on Gaskell's fallen women: Esther in *Mary Barton*, Lizzie in "Lizzie Leigh" and Ruth (Henry 150). Gaskell met this girl, Pasley "in a Manchester jail through her rescue work with prostitutes" (Hatano 634), and eventually Pasley went to live in Australia (Lansbury 52). Knowing this, it is curious why none of Gaskell's fallen women is given a new life through emigration. One reason can be that emigration meant an escape rather than a solution. As it was

mentioned above, many prostitutes found their way back to society through marriage. Moreover, without difficulty, one “could easily ‘become respectable again’ simply by moving away” (Mumm 534). The preceding two options involved lying to the same society which stigmatized their fallen women in the first place. More importantly, all three options meant the avoidance of society’s punishment and the lack of fighting for one’s honour. Although Ruth moves to Eccleston and she is disguised as a widow, when her secret is found out, she faces the consequences, and even as a nurse gains respect from other members of society. As Hopkins points out, Gaskell’s aim was “to show in these stories that girls like Lizzie Leigh and Ruth Hilton can by proper treatment be made into useful members of society” (68).

Gaskell’s critics have come up with different explanations for why *Ruth* had a “controversial response” (Matus 3). The novel was accompanied by “a disproportionate scandal”, and Freeland argues that “the social phenomenon of the fallen woman” was too familiar to Victorians to be shocked by it (199). Still, copies were burnt (Matus 3), and “many people did refuse to read it, or forbade their womenfolk to read” (Uglow 322). Gaskell, for the first time, “placed the innocent victim of sexual depredation at the centre of the mainstream Victorian novel” (Dolin ix), and therefore, the novel “was inevitably a shock to its readers” (Craik 48). Freeland analyses the novel from the aspect of economics, and explains that it was outrageous because Ruth’s refusal of becoming either a wife or a prostitute disrupts the Victorian social standards (199). Although Ruth lives a sexually active life when she lives with Mr Bellingham for a while, so she “has sex outside of the cash nexus”, still as a “private property” she is not “bought or sold” (Freeland 199).

Gaskell’s novel is not free from stereotypes either. Beyond Ruth’s sweet and pure nature, she is given the stereotypical background of a fallen woman: coming from a disrupted family, losing one’s family early, working as a needlewoman, having sex young and becoming pregnant. The ending of the novel also strengthens the theory of the stereotypical representation of Ruth, when she dies. If it had ended before Ruth’s death, it would have been read as a “successful reclamation of the fallen woman” (Uglow 323). Morgan considers the novel a “redemption” story, and a story of “the transforming power of time” (47), where Ruth’s death is only an ending point. Lansbury emphasises that Ruth remains truthful to her character and even when she dies, she is “a faithful, obedient and loving child whom society had insisted on treating as an adult” (80). Jaffe points out that the novel not only demonstrates a saved fallen woman but proposes the possibility that a sinner can be virtuous in the eyes of society (54). Even if Ruth’s death comes as a sudden ending to the novel, and her death can be understood as her punishment, it does not annul that she has earned her respected position in society. More

importantly, Gaskell's intention was to show that people should be able to welcome a fallen woman's sacrifice, as the Ecclestone people did of Ruth's sacrifice. Tim Dolin comes up with two explanations to why Gaskell destined Ruth to die. Ruth's death is a kind of a self-awakening moment of the novel, both for Gaskell and for her readers, as it was a "bourgeois fantasy from which the novel must awake itself up pretty sharply" (xv). Dolin's other explanation is that "the story of sacrificial redemption is deemed to be a tragic necessity somehow, a way of cleansing the whole community of its sin as Ruth had cleansed herself" (xv).

5. Conclusion

Elizabeth Gaskell, “as the wife of a Unitarian minister, took an active part in his social work” and it included work with refuges in Manchester (Hatano 635). Based on her own experiences she conveyed her thoughts, feelings, and experiences into her fiction, into the representation of those outcasts. Gaskell, already in her first novel, *Mary Barton*, got engaged with the topic of the ‘great social evil’. Although Esther is only a minor character, she is the heroine’s aunt, who embodies the typical image of the fallen woman in the nineteenth century. Esther’s desires led her to a relationship which does not end in a marriage; and as her financial situation starts to decay she drifts into prostitution, starts drinking and dies as an outcome of her poor lifestyle. In her short story, “Lizzie Leigh”, Gaskell’s changing representation of the fallen woman is undoubtedly present. Although Lizzie, similarly to Esther, is punished by losing her child, but she is saved by her mother. The focus has shifted from the representation of the fallen woman to the saving of the fallen woman. As a social problem novel, the aim of *Ruth* is to awaken social awareness, like any other social novel of Gaskell’s – *Mary Barton* or *North and South* – or as any other novel of the same genre in the middle of the nineteenth century. However, Gaskell did not only represent the social problem, but she proposed a solution for a fallen woman, but for one type of fallen woman only. Gaskell intended to give voice to those who were victims rather than agents of their fall, but they were judged according to the same social norms and rules, as other fallen women who became prostitutes. Thus it is crucial to emphasise that *Ruth* presents the fall of an innocent woman, who sins through no fault of her own. The novel criticises the attitude of Victorian society in judging women as harshly as they did.

Gaskell’s novel proposes that the saving of a fallen woman should happen in the domestic sphere. At the Bensons’ Ruth is given a safe home, proper guidance, and more importantly, a family. Although the way Ruth’s redemption is depicted at the Bensons partly reflects ideas according to which penitentiaries were run in Victorian England, Gaskell did not put Ruth into a penitentiary. The novel shows and emphasises what it means to be a member of a family and what the family can give to a fallen woman. Ruth, with the help of the Benson family, becomes an educated woman, a good mother to her son, and a respectable member of her community. To present a fallen woman like Gaskell did in *Ruth*, was unique and brave from a woman living in Victorian England.

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