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Feelings of Fallenness: Affect and Gender in Victorian Fallen Woman Novels

Kate Kowalski
William & Mary

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Kathryn Kowalski

Accepted for Honors

Deborah Morse, thesis director

Suzanne Raitt, exam director

Simon Joyce, reader

Kathrin Levitan, outside reader

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Introduction: Feeling and Falling in the 19th Century

The Victorian era was an age of transition— from agrarian to industrial, from religious to secular, from feudal to democratic.[1] The growing middle class clamored for change, leading to long-awaited reform bills in 1832, 1867, and 1884 which greatly expanded the electorate.[2] In the midst of economic, political, and social change, there was another less visible shift: an emotional one. Philosophers of the 18th century loudly proclaimed the importance of feeling to human civilization; David Hume wrote in *A Treatise of Human Nature* that "reason is and ought only to

[1] Walter Houghton, chap. 1 "The Character of the Age" in *The Victorian Frame of Mind*: 1830-1870 (Yale University Press, 1985).
[2] Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind*, 6.

be the slave of the passions."[3] Hume and his contemporaries, such as Adam Smith, argued that humans are defined by our capacity for sympathy, which Smith identified as the mechanism that ensured "the harmony of society."[4] But after the turmoil of the French Revolution, Victorians recoiled from such ideologies, emphasizing instead 'British' values of self-restraint and stoicism.[5] The growth of industrialism and laissez-faire economics exacerbated the separation of emotion from the public sphere, precluding emotional bonds between employers and laborers and thus facilitating exploitation.[6]

In this era of seismic social shifts, one thing remained sacred: the domestic space. As the public sphere became less and less invested in morality and piety, the emotional and spiritual burdens of society came to rest almost wholly on the woman's shoulders. A famous poem by Coventry Patmore articulated Victorian expectations for women: to be "the angel in the house."[7] John Ruskin expounded Victorian gender dynamics in an 1864 lecture: the man "guards the woman" from the dangers of the outside world, while she ruled over the domestic sphere, "a sacred place, a vestal temple, a temple of the hearth watched over by Household Gods," where "need enter no danger, no temptation, no cause of error or offense."[8] The woman was the arbiter of morality, spiritual guide and helpmeet, and was worshiped almost as a goddess of purity—and goddesses need no legal protections. Chastity and submission were not only expected, but demanded of Victorian women. After all, these qualities were scientifically inherent in women (to the Victorian mind); the biological imperative of reproduction and maternity rendered

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[3] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Ed. by Ernest Campbell Mossner (New York: Penguin Classics, 1985), 415.
[4] Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (London: A. Millar, A. Kincaid and J. Bell, 175).
[5] Rachel Ablow, "Victorian Feelings." In *The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel*, ed. Deirdre David (Cambridge University Press, 2000).
[6] Ablow, "Victorian Feelings," 196.
[7] Coventry Patmore, "The Angel in the House." London: Cassell and Co, 1887.
[8] John Ruskin, quoted in Murray Roston, *Victorian Contexts,* 50. New York University Press, 1996.

women's bodies a sacred space and prevented their minds from developing as a man's could.[9] The twin forces of Victorian patriarchal science and religion both elevated and subjugated women, confining them in an altar-cage.

The higher the pedestal, the harder the fall. The definition of a "fallen woman" is broad—it was applied to behaviors ranging from alcoholism to prostitution, and even to women who were sexually assaulted, groomed, or otherwise manipulated into extramarital sex.[10] Regardless of what deviant behavior merited the term, Victorian society was not kind to these nonconformists. A slew of treatises against prostitution appeared in the nineteenth century, accompanied by discriminatory legislation such as the Contagious Diseases Act.[11] Rigid Victorian principles tended towards a practice of moral isolationism; reintegration into society after a "fall" was well-nigh impossible.[12] Especially for women who became pregnant, choices were bleak: the poorhouse (physically taxing, and separated mother and child), foundling hospitals (few in number, high in death rate, and often required rigorous admissions processes), baby farms (notoriously infanticidal and requiring funds), abortion (medically dangerous at the time), or outright suicide or infanticide.[13]

The fallen woman embodied the obverse of Victorian ideals of womanhood— in her engagement with sex outside of Christian marriage, she defied the assumption that female sexuality consisted merely of the desire to fulfill the needs of her husband. Consequently, she was the object of intense cultural fascination and the subject of an outpouring of art and

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[9] Kristin Brady, "Textual Hysteria: Hardy's Narrator on Women," in *The Sense of Sex*: *Feminist Perspectives on Hardy*, ed. Margaret Higonnet (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993).
[10] Deborah Logan, *Fallenness in Victorian Women's Writing: Marry, Stitch, Die, or Do Worse,* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998). 82-84.
[11] Logan, *Fallenness*, 64-68.
[12] Katherine Inglis, "Unimagined Community and Disease in *Ruth*," in *Place and Progress in the Works of Elizabeth Gaskell*, ed. Lesa Scholl, Emily Morris, and Sarina Gruver Moore (Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2015). 67-82.
[13] Logan, *Fallenness*, 116-119.

literature. Visual art of the period tended to isolate the fallen woman and emphasize the suffering and penitence that inevitably follow such deviance— see G.F. Watts's "Found Drowned" below. This painting embodies many of the artistic impulses towards the fallen woman— she glows pale and holy and beautiful against a dark backdrop, arms outstretched Christlike, finding her redemption in death, her corpse serving as the only visual evidence of her fall. Significantly, paintings like Watts's evoke pity rather than condemnation; but even in this pity there is a distancing, an acknowledgement of one's moral superiority and the irrevocable debasement of the fall.

Figure 1. G.F. Watts, *Found Drowned*, c. 1850, oil on canvas, Watts Gallery, Compton, England.

By the nineteenth century, the reading and writing of novels had begun to rise in the public consciousness from moralistic dismissal to celebration.[14] Suzanne Keen writes in *Empathy*

[14] Rachel Ablow notes the "feminized" nature of novel-reading in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in "Victorian Feelings," 198.

and the Novel that this transformation occurred with the realization of the moral "usefulness" of fiction, eloquently argued for by authors such as George Eliot.[15] This rhetoric of usefulness stemmed from the novel's potential to educate rather than to inspire emotion, a pursuit which was still looked upon with suspicion. But with the reform movements of the nineteenth century came the "social problem" novel, which utilized fictional settings to diagnose the condition of England. These novels appealed to the reader's human feeling, with heart-rending portrayals of poverty and suffering such as in the works of Charles Dickens. George Eliot advocated for the cultivation of readerly sympathy through realist fiction— "the doctrine that all truth and beauty are to be attained by a humble and faithful study of nature."[16] The word "sympathize," as used in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, was defined as "to feel with another; to feel in consequence of what another feels; to feel mutually."[17] This is the term[18] that David Hume elevated as the distinguishing characteristic of humanity, writing that "no quality of human nature is more remarkable."[19] The act of reading is an act of "feeling with" a character— thus nineteenth century novels served as weapons against the increasing deadening of feeling in the public sphere, shedding a spotlight on the human suffering such callousness causes.

In this thesis, I examine four novels of fallenness: Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth*, George Eliot's *Adam Bede*, Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, and George Moore's *Esther Waters*. I selected these novels due to the symmetry they offer— two published in the 1850s and two in the 1890s, two written by women and two by men. Their historical and authorial contexts

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[15] Suzanne Keen, *Empathy and the Novel,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). 38-40.
[16] George Eliot, "John Ruskin's Modern Painters, Vol. III" in *Selected Essays, Poems, and Other Writings*, ed. A.S. Byatt and Nicholas Warren (New York, Penguin Classics, 1990). 367.
[17] Samuel Johnson, "To Sympathize." *Dictionary of the English Language*, 1755. New York: Times, 1979.
[18] As this definition is similar to the definition of "empathy/empathize" today, though that word did not appear in the English language until the 20th century, I will use these words interchangeably throughout the thesis.
[19] Hume, *A Treatise*, 365.

determine the characterization of each novel's fallen woman, the presentation of her feelings, and readerly responses. Suzanne Keen distinguishes between three types of strategic authorial empathy: bounded, ambassadorial, and broadcast. Bounded strategic empathy "occurs within an in-group" and stems from mutual experiences; ambassadorial strategic empathy "addresses chosen others with the aim of cultivating their empathy for the in-group"; and broadcast strategic empathy "calls upon every reader to feel with members of a group by emphasizing our common vulnerabilities and hopes."[20] Each of these authors engage in a specific kind of strategic empathy, influenced by their gender, belief systems, and situation in history.

The questions I approach in this study are ones of feelings, art, and social constructions. How does cultural context shape our emotional responses to art? What is radical in these feelings, and what is conventional? How do feelings in the work itself influence our own? Where do these works situate cause, effect, and blame? Each of these four novels approach the fallen woman question with unique intentions and ideologies— but all challenge the cultural imperative to cast out the fallen woman and close her (and thus ourselves) off from human feeling.

Ruth (1853): Sacred Tears

Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth* is a novel with a purpose-- a dangerous purpose. Gaskell's correspondence reveals deep concerns that the novel's premise would be condemned as an "unfit

[20] Keen, *Empathy and the Novel*, 142.

subject for fiction,"[21] and she admitted that "it requires all one's bravery not to hide one's head like an ostrich and try… to forget that the evil exists."[22] Fallen women were unmistakably present in literature and culture at the time, but *Ruth* radically diverges from tradition in Gaskell's treatment of the fallen woman-- making her, as Thomas Hardy would later describe Tess Durbeyfield, a "pure woman."

Most representations of fallen women before Ruth's publication relegated these social outcasts to the periphery of the work— such as in Gaskell's own earlier novel *Mary Barton,* in which Mary's aunt Esther is a prostitute, and her short story "Lizzie Leigh," in which the titular character is also a prostitute. But Ruth is unquestionably the hero of her own story. The narrative not only centers, but vindicates her. Charlotte Brontë recognized the "philanthropic purpose" of the novel, and declared it a work "as useful in practical result as it is high and just in theoretical tendency."[23] This is a work of ambassadorial strategic empathy; Gaskell targets a specific breed of rigid Victorian self-righteousness to plead for sympathy for the fallen woman. She is explicit about her disruptive intentions very early on:

> The daily life into which people are born, and into which they are absorbed before they are well aware, forms chains which only one in a hundred has moral strength enough to despise, and to break when the right time comes-- when an inward necessity for independent individual action arises, which is superior to all outward conventionalities. (*Ruth*, 6)[24]

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[21] January 1853 letter to Anne Robson, quoted in *Elizabeth Gaskell: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Angus Easson (New York: Routledge, 1991). Pg. 202.
[22] 7 April 1953 letter to Lady Kay-Shuttleworth, quoted in *The Critical Heritage*. Pg. 203
[23] April 1852 letter to Elizabeth Gaskell, quoted in *The Critical Heritage*, 200.
[24] Elizabeth Gaskell, *Ruth*, 1853. Ed. Angus Easson (New York: Penguin Books, 2004). Parenthetical citations will refer to this edition.

From the outset, Gaskell identifies fallenness as a social construct; she focuses not on the "sin" of the fallen woman, but on societal and individual responses to fallenness. The impetus is not so much on the woman to remain pure— although this is still a concern— but on every individual to discard social prejudice in the pursuit of Christian compassion. This is reflected in the disabled Dissenting minister Thurstan Benson, who serves as protector and defender of Ruth. The moral tension represented by Benson and Ruth's main accuser, the wealthy and self-righteous Mr. Bradshaw, constitutes the novel's ideological battle between condemnation and sympathy; Ruth constitutes its heart.

Gaskell's appeal to empathy is, from the beginning, both emotional and a concrete call to action. *Ruth* presents emotion as a necessary component of social life, embodying the modern phrase "the personal is political." At the time of Ruth's publication, England was firmly in the grasp of industrial capitalism. As the public sphere of business and politics became increasingly detached from the domestic sphere, it also became detached from notions of morality, religion, and emotion; this stark separation resulted in a gendering not only of public versus domestic spaces, but of these characteristics.[25] In her impassioned argument for Ruth's reintegration into society after her fall, Gaskell advocates against this separation and the resultant callousness towards social outcasts, especially women.[26]

Elizabeth Gaskell, the wife of a well-known Manchester Unitarian minister, was involved in extensive charity work. One of the people she helped was a sixteen-year-old prostitute, called Pasley in her letters, whose tragic background inspired Gaskell to write her novel.[27] Like Ruth,

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[25] Rachel Ablow, "Victorian Feelings."

[26] See also Arnold Kettle, "The Early Victorian Social-Problem Novel," on the promotion of sympathy during the "social-problem decade" of the 1840s. In Boris Ford (ed.), *Dickens to Hardy: The Pelican Guide to English Literature*, Vol. 6 (Harmondsworth, 1958, 1976) pp. 169–87.

[27] Hilary M. Schor, *Scheherezade in the Marketplace: Elizabeth Gaskell and the Victorian Novel* (Oxford University Press, 1992). 45-81.

Pasley was a dressmaker seduced and abandoned at a young age who was unexpectedly reunited with her seducer years later.[28] Having previously written about, advocated for, and experienced the controversy surrounding the fallen woman, Gaskell knew full well the daunting task ahead of her. She expressed feelings of persecution and a trembling fear at the thought of potential backlash, comparing herself to "St. Sebastian shot at with arrows" in a "quiver of pain."[29] She was not wrong in her predictions; *Ruth* was banned from several libraries and many households, and was even burnt. In writing the novel, Gaskell was well aware that in order to evoke compassion from her audience, to overcome the most rigid of Victorian social codes, her protagonist had to be an exceptionally sympathetic character.

Ruth Hilton in the beginning of the novel is a fifteen-year-old girl, recently orphaned and working as a dressmaker's apprentice. She is described as remarkably beautiful, "innocent and snow-pure," and full of "the pliancy of childish years"-- essentially, she embodies Victorian ideals of femininity (40, 43). But crucially, this innocence and passivity, compounded by the failure of the adults in her life to guide and support her, is what leads to her seduction by the aristocratic and predatory Henry Bellingham. The very traits that endear her to Victorian audiences are used against her; her fall, then, cannot be a moral failure. Ruth's unimpeachable character leads the near-saintly Benson to the sympathetic conclusion that "not every woman who has fallen is depraved," that they deserve "that gentle, tender help which Jesus gave once to Mary Magdalen" (288). But Benson's powerful declaration that he believes "every woman who… has sinned should be given a chance of self-redemption" reaches beyond such innocent

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[28] For more on the social dangers surrounding the seamstress occupation, see Deborah Morse's article "Stitching Repentance, Sewing Rebellion: Seamstresses and Fallen Women in Elizabeth Gaskell's Fiction," in Keeping the Victorian House, ed. Vanessa Dickerson (Independence, KY: Garland Press, 1995). 27-73.

[29] Letter to Anne Robson, 1853. Quoted in *The Critical Heritage*, 202.

victims as Ruth to envelop the whole fallen population, "depraved" or not, in his Christian compassion— as the Bible dictates, grace is given "not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began."[30] The moral dichotomy represented by Benson and Bradshaw, as articulated passionately by the former, is that of "Christ against the world" (288).

Ruth's fallenness begins with her own innocent compassion. The incident that wins Ruth's heart to Bellingham— and a notable instance of foreshadowing— is his only moment of gallantry: rescuing a child from drowning. Ruth's instincts as she sees the boy floundering are empathetic, impulsive, and selfless: she flies headlong down to the freezing river and "far into its shallow waters, before she felt how useless such an action was, and that the sensible plan would have been to seek for efficient help" (22). As she will for the rest of the novel, Ruth sacrifices herself without a thought to logic or efficiency—not always the most useful trait, but to Victorian readers familiar with Christian doctrines of self-sacrifice, certainly an endearing one. The event is narrated in snatches of breathless impressions, conveying Ruth's intense emotional investment in the boy's fate though he is a stranger to her:

> Past her like lightning—down in the stream, swimming along with the current—a stooping rider—an outstretched, grasping arm—a little life redeemed, and a child saved to those who loved it! Ruth stood dizzy and sick with emotion… When the rider turned his swimming horse, and slowly breasted up the river to the landing-place, she recognised him as the Mr Bellingham of the night before. He carried the unconscious child across his horse… Ruth believed it was dead, and her eyes were suddenly blinded with tears. (22)

[30] 2 Timothy 1:9, NKJV.

The power of Ruth's emotion is such that it becomes tangible, physical, external— she is "dizzy and sick," "blinded with tears." And this is on behalf of a child she does not know; Ruth is not only passionate, but compassionate. She feels the emotions of others as strongly as she feels her own. Ruth's capacity for sympathy later saves her from suicide; as she runs blindly towards the water, propelled by a "keen sense of the suffering agony of the present," she is "called out of herself" by Benson's cry of pain as he falls trying to chase her (83).

In such a situation, the dashing rider must make an impression, regardless of his subsequent references to the people he helped as "stupid" and "dirty" (24). He offers Ruth his purse to look after the boy, at first out of basic decency; but after being struck by her beauty, he insists that she take it in order to facilitate another meeting with her. Later in the novel, he will offer financial support to their son on the condition that Ruth marry him– an offer she is then wise enough to reject. But in that moment, thinking only of the boy's welfare, she innocently agrees.

Gaskell's humanitarian intentions lend the novel a keen ambition despite its heroine's ostensible passivity; the author not only centers Ruth and allows her to redeem herself, but sacralizes her.[31] Once Ruth gives birth to her son, Gaskell showers her with Madonna/Child imagery— even explicitly calling the baby "her mysterious holy child" (135). A woman's "fall" was culturally constructed as an irreversible transformation that would inevitably lead to decline.[32] However, Ruth's transformation does not occur with the loss of her virginity, but with the birth of her child— a transformation from girlishness into womanhood, from innocence to

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[31] For more on Ruth's role as Madonna, see Jennifer Stolpa's article "What's in a Name? Echoes of Biblical Women in Elizabeth Gaskell's 'Ruth.'" The Gaskell Society Journal, vol. 18, 2004, pp. 50–64. See also Michael Wheeler's 1976 essay, 'The Sinner as Heroine: A Study of Mrs. Gaskell's Ruth and the Bible', in Durham University Journals Vol. 37 (1976), pp. 148-61. And Ruth Y. Jenkins, *Reclaiming Myths of Power: Women Writers and the Victorian Spiritual Crisis* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1995).

[32] Roston, *Victorian Contexts*, 41-67.

holiness, from Magdalen to Madonna. Sacralizing a fallen woman was truly radical for the time, but in a way, this was necessary for Gaskell's aims.

Although the Victorian era is noted for increasing secularization begun by the Enlightenment and accelerated by the findings of Charles Darwin, this secularization was largely intellectual; Christianity still held sway over the emotions and sentiments of Victorians.[33] This sacralization, then, was the surest path towards sympathy for Gaskell's fallen woman. Ruth's narrative straddles conventionality and radicalism— conventional in that the Christ figure suffers and dies for others' sake, radical in that the Christ figure is a fallen woman; conventional in the fallen woman's obligation to suffer, radical in that this suffering is upheld as Christlike.

As we open the novel, we are immediately confronted by imagery of suffering. The first line of the novel's epigraph-- a hymn by Phineas Fletcher-- reads "Drop, drop, slow tears!" (3). The hymn dwells on the sacred tears of Mary Magdalen, the Bible's quintessential fallen woman. Fletcher beseeches the Magdalen's "wet eyes" to "Cease not… for mercy to entreat"-- it is with "wet eyes" that *Ruth* entreats its readers. Tears permeate the novel; the first ones fall from Ruth's eyes a mere four pages in. The emotionality of the text is remarkable. Ruth's character is from her first appearance defined by her deep capacity for feeling-- to be moved by nature, by the suffering of others, by her own tragic situation. Our very first glimpse of Ruth-- bathed in "moonlight" streaming from a stained-glass window in "a glory of many colors"-- links her to the natural, pure, and feminine moon as well as the sacred "glory" of the stained glass (7). She is explicitly set apart from the other girls in the seamstress shop through her emotional connection

[33] Ilana Blumberg, Victorian Sacrifice: Ethics and Economics in Mid-Century Novels (Ohio State University Press, 2013) pg 3.

to nature, a recurring theme throughout the novel.[34] Gaskell illustrates her behavior in marked contrast to the other girls' more realistic fatigue, hunger, and illness:

> But Ruth Hilton sprang to the large old window, and pressed against it as a bird presses against the bars of its cage. She put back the blind, and gazed into the quiet moonlit night…. The impulse was strong upon her to snatch up a shawl, and wrapping it round her head, to sally forth and enjoy the glory; and time was when that impulse would have been instantly followed; but now, Ruth's eyes filled with tears, and she stood quite still, dreaming of the days that were gone. (8-9)

The imagery of the caged bird is intense and recognizable Victorian iconography. Ruth is a girl entrapped by economic, social, and personal circumstance to a life of hard labor, severed from the "glory" of nature that she loves so much. The role of circumstance rather than moral failings in her "fall" renders her even more sympathetic to the reader, and Ruth's situation simultaneously indicts Victorian society and redeems the character.

Ruth clings to any fleeting glimpse or ghostly echo of nature available in this cage; the passage soon following, which describes Ruth's chosen corner, reflects the magnetic pull of the natural upon Ruth. Although it is the "coldest and darkest," she "instinctively" chooses it because of the panels on the opposite wall: decorated with masterful paintings of "the most lovely wreaths of flowers" (9). Among these flowers-- which Gaskell devotes over half a page to describing-- are "stately white lilies, sacred to the Virgin," and Christmas-associated plants such as holly, ivy, and mistletoe. Flower language was significant to Victorians, and these sacred

[34] For more on Ruth's connections to the pastoral, particularly in the opening nine chapters, see Rosemarie Bodenheimer's *The Politics of Story*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988.

choices foreshadow Ruth's later role as Madonna, and then as the sacrificial Christ figure of the novel.

These white lilies in particular recur in the novel. When Ruth is staying in Wales with Bellingham, he fetches her several which he arranges in her hair. Although Bellingham's pleasure in this act arises purely from "the joyousness of a child playing with a new toy," Ruth's is selfless, evoked by seeing the pleasure it has given him: "It was pleasant to forget everything except his pleasure" (64). Even as she discovers her sexuality, inherently taking on some agency in her role as an Eve in Eden, Ruth is self-effacing; her reflection in the water "gave her a sense of satisfaction for an instant, as the sight of any other beautiful object would have done, but she never thought of associating it with herself"-- differentiating her from Milton's Eve, whose foolish narcissism is foreshadowed by admiring herself in a lake (64). This passage contains a brief but poignant summation of Ruth's character: "Her existence was in feeling, and thinking, and loving." Although her absorption into her own feelings without consideration of their social and religious implications is proved unwise, her character remains driven by feeling even in her most significant moments of maturity and growth. The image of Ruth in her white dress, decked out in white lilies, is supremely pure and virginal, strikingly at odds with Victorian perceptions of her sexuality. Gaskell's portrayal of the satisfaction Ruth takes from her sexuality is notable; she does condemn Bellingham, who cares only for Ruth's beauty, but Ruth's own passions are presented with sympathy.

This sympathy, however, is extremely conflicted; Gaskell seems torn throughout the novel as to whether Ruth must atone for her sexuality.[35] The punitive nature of the narrative arc,

[35] Rosemarie Bodenheimer argues in T*he Politics of Story in Victorian Fiction* that the pastoral nature of these early chapters are set up to frame Ruth's fall as a "natural emotional event that has a life independent of the social constructs that are later brought to bear upon it" (154).

and its inconsistencies with Ruth's spiritual and social redemption, was noted even by early reviewers. Many scholars, including Rosemarie Bodenheimer and biographer Jenny Uglow, see in this confusion Gaskell's uncertainty about the implications of Ruth's seemingly contradictory innocence and sexuality.[36] For example, after Ruth's true story is exposed, Benson tells her she must "accept all this treatment meekly, as but the reasonable and just penance God has laid upon you" (357). It is also notable that despite two of Gaskell's daughters being older than Ruth at the time of her seduction (19 and 16) when the novel was published, she would still not allow them to read it, calling it "not suitable for young people."[37] In the novel itself, however, she particularly notes children's indoctrination into a culture of moral judgment if sympathy for the fallen is not encouraged. Ruth's sudden realization of her own fallenness— the beginning of her exile from Eden— is brought about by such a child.

While in Wales, a child staying at the same inn as Ruth and Bellingham hears his mother complain that "such wickedness" as the unwed pair must reside "under the same roof" as an upstanding family (61). When Ruth approaches the child later, with his nurse and his baby sister, he deals Ruth "a great blow on the face" after she attempts to kiss the baby, calling her a "bad naughty woman" (62). His protectiveness of his sister reflects Victorian ideas of the contagion of the fall— that such moral depravity is catching— which justified the social exile of the fallen woman. Predictably, if disappointingly, reviewers rejected *Ruth* on the basis of such ideas, "warning" their readers of the novel's dangerous ideas:

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[36] Bodenheimer, *Politics of Story*, 153.
Jenny Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories* (London: Faber and Faber. 1993). Pg 338.
[37] *The Critical Heritage*, 210.

> Society would sustain the deepest injury if, in virtue of this act of forgiveness, we were to rebuild the bridge of general intercourse between the guilty and the pure, and to readmit even the true penitent to all the privileges of society which she has forfeited.[38]

Mr. Bradshaw, the novel's representative of this philosophy of moral isolationism, later fires Ruth over this fear of "contamination" despite her fall being over a decade behind her— "She has led you to the brink of the deep pit, ready for the first chance circumstance to push you in" (278). In Wales, Ruth accepts the child's "infantile vehemence of passion… humbly and meekly" (62). With this blow, Ruth receives "new ideas" of her position in the eyes of society henceforth; this "agitation" brings her to tears. Her grief at "the sense she was just beginning to entertain of the estimation in which she was henceforward to be held" further impresses the audience with her innocence (63).

This incident, not her loss of virginity, is the fruit of the Biblical tree of knowledge of good and evil. Previously, Ruth had retained her innocence to a degree many scholars find unrealistic; Ruth seems unaware of the social consequences of sex and premarital intimacy in a manner that defies credulity.[39] Even early reviewers expressed skepticism— *Sharpe's London Magazine* noted that "Ruth, in her childlike purity and innocence, is not a veritable type of her class."[40] Gaskell's contradictory messaging is especially present here. Ruth must remain innocent and passive in order to deserve her redemption, but her simultaneous innocence and sexuality seems to validate this sexuality as natural. Victorian ideology largely denied female desire— thus their attribution of the existence of prostitutes to such causes as working class

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[38] "Ruth," The Christian Observer, July 1853. In *The Critical Heritage*, 313-315.
[39] See Amanda Anderson, the chapter "Melodrama, Morbidity, and Unthinking Sympathy: Gaskell's *Mary Barton* and *Ruth*," in *Tainted Souls and Painted Faces: The Rhetoric of Fallenness in Victorian Culture*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).
[40] "Ruth," *Sharpe's London Magazine*, 15 January 1853, ns ii, 125-6. Quoted in *The Critical Heritage*.

moral depravity or women's inherent submissiveness to male desire.[41] This latter claim is expressed by W. R. Greg in "Prostitution": "[Women] yield to desires in which they do not share, from a weak generosity which cannot refuse anything to the passionate entreaties of the man they love."[42] But Ruth's fulfillment in her sexuality is not merely passive. In contrast to the white lilies of purity in her hair, "her face was flushed into a brilliancy of colour which resembled that of a rose in June"--- a flower of passion and sensuality (65). Even years after her abandonment, she still dreams of Bellingham, and their reunion fully reawakens these sexual feelings.[43]

When Ruth re-encounters Bellingham twelve years later-- now a respected candidate for Parliament, renamed Mr. Donne to qualify for a large inheritance-- it is clear her passions have not entirely abated into the submissive mellowness of motherhood and piety. On the contrary; she is in a "strange confusion of agony," rants "fiercely… wildly and sharply," then "tenderly" calls him her "darling love," admitting that she "cannot forget" her love for him (225). The harmony of her passionate feelings with the storm outside indicates the physical nature of this love. However, bodily desires are eventually conquered by her maternal instincts ("He has no love for his child, and I will have no love for him"), religious faith ("She could not think, or, indeed, remember anything but that she was weak, and God was strong"), and the solace she takes in nature ("A still, calm night would not have soothed her as [the storm] did") (226). Religion and maternity are offered here as higher forms of intimacy for women, less exploitative and more mutual outlets for sensuality. All Ruth's sources of strength and comfort are still

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[41] Deborah Logan, *Fallenness*, 65-69.
[42] W.R. Greg, "Prostitution," quoted in Janet Murray, *Strong-Minded Women and Other Lost Voices from Nineteenth-century England*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982). 410.
[43] For more on the sexual subtext of Ruth's dreams, see Patsy Stoneman, *Elizabeth Gaskell*. (Indiana: Bloomington University Press, 1969).

motivated by that remarkable capacity for feeling which caused her to fall victim in the first place; her existence is still "in feeling, and thinking, and loving."

The intensity of Ruth's connection to nature is reinforced by the mirroring— or even displacement— of her feelings in nature. In the chapter "Treading in Perilous Places," in which she is seen with Bellingham and consequently fired from her job, the couple literally treads in perilous places: over "broken ground," "now pricked by the far-spreading gorse, now ankle-deep in sand" (41). The landscape 'feels' the danger that the innocent Ruth cannot, or will not. The Biblical imagery of the rock and the sand is repeated in Ruth's reunion with Bellingham on the stormy beach; she meets with him on the shifting, uncertain sands which "heaved and trembled beneath" her, and sinks down on a solid "overhanging rock" in which an ash tree is rooted after she has rejected him— God in the form of nature has answered her prayer to "be my rock and my strong fortress" (221, 250, 226). Rosemarie Bodenheimer attributes Ruth's emotional connection to nature to the absence of parental figures in her life; after her mother's death and her move from country to town, Ruth conflates the dead mother with Mother Nature and finds comfort in even the echoes of the latter.[44]

Still, Ruth's submission to the desires and rules of others is a throughline in the novel. She submits initially to Bellingham, to the child's slap, to her condemnation by Mr. Bradshaw, and finally to physical (rather than social) contagion brought about again by Bellingham. This passivity echoes the Christian teaching of "turning the other cheek," and her meek humility moves characters and readers. Her submissiveness while the Bensons' servant Sally cuts her hair, a Victorian symbol of power and sensuality, touches Sally and is a significant step in her

[44] Bodenheimer, *Politics of Story*, 162.

transition from judgment to sympathy.[45] Sally enters the room in hostility, telling Ruth "I've my doubts as to you," and insinuating that her presence brings "shame" upon the household; she leaves "touched" by "Ruth's soft yet dignified submission," admits she shed a tear at the loss of such beautiful hair, and reverently stows the shorn locks in folded paper in a drawer, as one would a relic of a saint (121-122). Ruth's unwillingness or inability to defend herself from ill-treatment creates "misgivings" like Sally's in the hearts of those who would condone or join in this treatment; her passivity makes her a mirror in which characters and readers alike see their own cruelty and hypocrisy reflected mercilessly back at them (121).

As a teenager entering motherhood in a socially and financially unstable position— and still recovering from her abandonment— Ruth is understandably still deep in the throes of despair, loneliness, and self-pity after Leonard's birth. It is clear that in order to find stability, she must first stabilize these emotions. This moment of maturation occurs when Sally reproaches Ruth for letting her tears fall onto baby Leonard's face:

> Her tears, scarce checked while she spoke, began to fall afresh; and as Sally stood and gazed she saw the babe look back in his mother's face, and his little lip begin to quiver, and his open blue eye to grow over-clouded, as with some mysterious sympathy with the sorrowful face bent over him. Sally took him briskly from his mother's arms… (145)

Sally's rebuke deeply touches Ruth; in accordance with her "tender" and self-effacing nature, the only thing that can "call her out of herself" once again is an appeal to the suffering of others. Her transformation from distraught teenager to self-effacing mother is immediate:

> Sally was quelled into silence by the gentle composure, the self-command over her passionate sorrow, which gave to Ruth an unconscious grandeur of demeanour… "Give

[45] For more on the symbolism of hair in Victorian literature, see Galia Ofek, *Representations of Hair in Victorian Literature and Culture*. (New York: Routledge, 2009).

> him back to me, please. I did not know it brought ill-luck, or if my heart broke I would not have let a tear drop on his face—I never will again. Thank you, Sally," as the servant relinquished him to her who came in the name of a mother… with a kind of admiration of the control which Ruth was exercising over herself. (145)

This moment is the crux of the narrative arc that redeems Ruth: the sublimation of her sexual feeling into maternal feeling. Sublimation alters the form, but not the essence; Ruth retains all her deep feeling, but channels it into caring for Leonard. She gives herself over to motherhood as she once gave herself over to Bellingham— and will eventually give herself over to death.

Ruth's death is by far the most controversial scene in the novel, to readers and scholars alike.[46] Charlotte Brontë spoke for us all when she lamented, "Why must [Ruth] die? Why are we to shut up the book weeping?"[47] Mentions of tears are frequent in letters about and reviews of Ruth. Elizabeth Barrett Browning expressed a similar sentiment to Bronte, George Henry Lewes declared that "it cannot be read with unwet eyes,"[48] and John Forster sheepishly admitted that he "had neither more nor less than a good cry over these final chapters."[49] Beyond the obvious emotional impact of her death, Christine Krueger argues that Gaskell's decision to end her life reveals that she "cannot articulate a thorough rejection of that exploitive world or imagine Ruth's . . . existence apart from it."[50] Although Ruth's reintegration into society was nearly complete—she wins over her community by her kindness and selfless dedication as a typhus nurse—Gaskell chooses to cut it short.

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[46] Christine L. Krueger, *The Reader's Repentance: Women Preachers, Women Writers, and Nineteenth-Century Social Discourse. (*Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). p. 194.
[47]April 1853 Letter to Gaskell, T*he Critical Heritage*.
[48] *The Critical Heritage*, 215.
[49] Uglow, 337.
[50] Krueger, *The Reader's Repentance,* p. 194.

The nature of Ruth's decline is crucial: she regresses. The role of mother, which has been her salvation and redemption throughout her adult life, is robbed from her as she forgets her child. In the very room in which she gave birth to Leonard, "her watch over him kept, her confession to him made," she "never looked at anyone with the slightest glimpse of memory or intelligence in her face; no, not even at Leonard" (366). The intense sympathy which her "childlike insanity" should elicit from readers is mirrored in the reaction of the "watchers" by her bedside: they look at her with "tearful eyes," in "awe" of her "exquisite peacefulness" (367). Ruth sheds the role of Madonna for the role of Christ in sacrificing her life for the undeserving (she contracts her fatal illness nursing Bellingham/Donne back to health).[51] But she also sheds maturity for childhood— and in doing so, sheds the burden of sexuality and sin which serve as the only obstacle between her and Heaven, as well as Victorian respectability.

Ruth encompasses many roles; in losing herself, she embodies the Christian ideal: "For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's, the same shall save it."[52] But the question arises of whether Ruth loses her life for the Gospel's sake, or, as Mr. Bellingham believes, "in consequence of her love of me" (370). When Mr. Davis asks Ruth if she still loves Bellingham, Ruth replies:

> "I have been thinking-- but I do not know-- I cannot tell-- I don't think I should love him, if he were well and happy-- but you said he was ill-- and alone-- how can I help caring for him?-- how can I help caring for him?" (361)

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[51] Katherine Inglis argues in "Unimagined Community and Disease in *Ruth*" that Ruth's role as typhus nurse represents the Unitarian idea of atonement ("at-one-ment") by means of reintegration into the community, in contrast to Mr. Bradshaw's moral isolationism. In *Place and Progress in the Works of Elizabeth Gaskell*.

[52] Matthew 16:25, NKJV

Ruth's sacrifice is not for love; her feelings in this scene are not the same as they were in Wales, or even during her impassioned breakdown in the storm upon their first reunion. Her sacrifice is rooted in her deep, instinctive sympathy for others. It is Christlike: for the sake of the suffering, no matter how unworthy-- "We have no right to weigh human lives against each other" (360).[53] Ruth's rationale here is Biblical: "for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God."[54] "The Dead" is always capitalized in reference to Ruth; her corpse is not merely a vessel emptied of a soul, but a sacred object to be treated with reverence. In this way, Ruth's death cannot be read merely as an atonement for her sexual sin; it is a culmination of her selfless nature, and a sad statement on how such giving souls are treated in Victorian society. As Elizabeth Bronfen notes in her book *Over Her Dead Body*, a "good" Christian death— where the figure accepts their fate calmly and even rapturously— lends legitimacy to their convictions and their having lived a "good" Christian life.[55] The religious euphoria of Ruth's death strengthens her claim to purity and godliness:

> Suddenly she opened wide her eyes, and gazed intently forwards, as if she saw some happy vision, which called out a lovely, rapturous, breathless smile. (366)
>
> Sally reverently drew down the sheet, and showed the beautiful, calm, still face, on which the last rapturous smile still lingered, giving an ineffable look of bright serenity. (369).

Her "rapturous[ness]," her beauty, in death and beyond, mirrors Bronfen's descriptions of the "virginal" Victorian death. In deathbed scenes such as that of young Eva in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*,

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[53] Terence Wright suggests that Ruth's nursing of Bellingham can be read as a victory over him, echoing the Bible verse Romans 12:20: ""If your enemy is hungry, feed him; If he is thirsty, give him a drink; For in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head." *Elizabeth Gaskell: We Are Not Angels*. (London: Macmillan, 1995).

[54] Romans 3:22, NKJV.

[55] Elizabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity, and the Aesthetic*. (New York: Routledge, 1992.) 84.

death assures the virgin's purity by whisking her away to heaven before the world can contaminate her. These parallels further emphasize Ruth's regression into sexual purity.

The stress of Gaskell's balancing act in articulating a pure fallen woman, and her determination to convey moral lessons through the novel, is reflected in Benson's difficulty in writing a sermon for Ruth's funeral:

> It was possible that the circumstances of her life, which were known to all, might be made effective in this manner to work conviction of many truths… Words seemed hard and inflexible, and refused to fit themselves to his ideas… He had never taken such pains with any sermon, and he was only half satisfied with it after all. (372)

Ultimately, both Benson and Gaskell let their religion speak for them. Benson reads a passage from Revelations in lieu of a sermon, beginning with this verse: "These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (374). In both Benson and Gaskell's eyes, Ruth's "great tribulation" and religious devotion have "washed" her of her sin. The inadequacy of mere words in conveying deep feelings— grief, remorse, empathy— is reinforced in the last line of the novel:

> The first time, for years, that he had entered Mr Benson's house, he came leading and comforting her son—and, for a moment, he could not speak to his old friend, for the sympathy which choked up his voice, and filled his eyes with tears. (375)

As Ruth's main accuser, Bradshaw's growth from cruelty to sympathy is perhaps the most important in the novel. This growth is catalyzed by the "fall" of his own son, Richard, who defrauds his own father's company. Bradshaw's failure to instill Christian values in his son, and his eventual forgiveness of Richard, humbles Bradshaw and lays bare his own hypocrisy. But

ultimately, it is Ruth's death, and Leonard's tears— "my mother is dead, sir!"--- that moves him to Christian compassion (375).

Adam Bede (1859): Compassion

George Eliot is well known for her commitment to "enlarging men's sympathies" through literary realism.[56] She was a firm believer in the power of novels to teach readers compassion for those different from them "in everything but the broad fact of being suffering, erring human creatures".[57] Accordingly, her works fall under the umbrella of broadcast strategic empathy; she attempts to cultivate and appeal to a general fellow-feeling for a broad range of characters. While Gaskell's values were deeply rooted in Christianity, Eliot was a noted religious skeptic, considering the Bible "mingled truth and fiction."[58] She found support for her humanitarian ideology in her translation of Ludwig Feuerbach's critical work *The Essence of Christianity*, in which he argues that the essence of Christianity consists of "the divinity of human nature"--- essentially proposing a religion of humanity.[59] Rather than finding echoes of Christ in human love, Eliot and Feuerbach observed the fundamental truth of human compassion in the story of

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[56] George Eliot, Letter to Charles Bray, 5th July, 1859. *George Eliot's Life as Related in her Letters and Journals*, ed. J.W. Cross. New York, Harper & Brothers, 1884. Accessed online at https://www.gutenberg.org/files/43044/43044-h/43044-h.htm. Cited henceforth as *Letters*, date.
[57] Letter to Charles Bray, 5th July, 1859. George Eliot's most well-known realist "manifesto" is contained in Chapter 17 of *Adam Bede*, "In Which the Story Pauses a Little."
[58] Letters I, February 1842. For more on Eliot and religion, see Barry Qualls, "George Eliot and Religion" in *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
[59] Ludwig Feurbach, *The Essence of Christianity*. Translated by Marian Evans. (London, Trubner & Co, 1881).10. I am indebted to biographers Rosemary Ashton and Kathryn Hughes for the connection between Feuerbach and Eliot (cited later in the text).

Christ. Unlike Elizabeth Gaskell writing *Ruth*, however, Eliot did not set out specifically to garner sympathy for the fallen woman figure in writing *Adam Bede*. In fact, the fallen woman in this novel, Hetty Sorrel, is one of the most ambiguous and polarizing fallen figures of 19th century literature.

In *Adam Bede*, the characters themselves must learn the same lessons of compassion Eliot endeavors to impart to her readers. To this end, Eliot employs parallels between the process of learning to read and the process of learning compassion, as Rebecca Mitchell notes in her book *Victorian Essays in Empathy and Difference*.[60] Describing laborers learning to read in a night school, Eliot observes that "it was almost as if three rough animals were making humble efforts to learn how they might become human" (*Adam Bede*, 255).[61] The act of reading, absorbing an author's thoughts into our heads and a character's feelings into our hearts, expands our humanity. Accordingly, Hetty Sorrel's narrowness of mind is implied to us through her inability to read novels: "if she had ever seen one, I think the words would have been too hard for her" (148). These limitations exacerbate her selfish nature, which thinks of others only so far as they might notice and fawn over her. This narrowness ultimately leads to her downfall; her inability to "read" the wealthy squire Arthur's intentions with her is mirrored in the slowness with which she reads his letter.

Hetty's only references, then, come from images: the living and painted images of the people that surround her. When fantasizing her future with Arthur, she styles herself to resemble "that picture of a lady in Miss Lydia Donnithorne's dressing room," and imagines herself like the aristocratic "Miss Lydia and Lady Dacey… only she should not be old and ugly like Miss Lydia,

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[60] Rebecca N Mitchell, *Victorian Lessons in Empathy and Difference*. (Ohio State University Press, 2011). Pg. 50.

[61] George Eliot, *Adam Bede*, 1859. ed. Carol A. Martin. Oxford University Press, 2008. Parenthetical citations will refer to this edition.

or all the same thickness like Lady Dacey" (136-7). However, the naiveté of her giddy girlish daydreams also elicits sympathy. Her innocent mind reasons that "He would want to marry her… how else could it be?" (137). She has not seen enough of the world to be aware of the reality of their relationship. Arthur, on the other hand, is a well-read gentleman, and knows that, "out of a ballad," a person of his status could never marry a farmer's niece (126). He, unlike Hetty, knows exactly what he is doing, and the inevitable brevity of the relationship. Ultimately they both must learn that "our deeds carry their terrible consequences… consequences that are hardly ever confined to ourselves" (156).

Hetty's characterization is an intriguing contrast to the other novels of fallenness in this study; she is not a "pure woman" like Tess, or a Madonna like Ruth, or an honest hard worker like Esther Waters. George Eliot was a believer in portraying people as they were— no idealization, no romanticization, warts and all: "to give no more than a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind" (159). Hetty was based on a real legal case— that of Mary Voce, who was executed for infanticide. Voce was widely and unequivocally condemned at the time of her sensational trial; Eliot's attempt to add dimension and interiority to this character was an immense undertaking.[62]

The other characters in the novel believe Hetty is 'easy to read,' as do her readers; but these readings directly contradict each other. The people of Hayslope cannot see beyond her pretty face: "Her heart must be just as soft [as her features], her temper just as free from angles, her character just as pliant" (138). Readers— as scholars like Deborah Logan have observed— dismiss her as vain, selfish, and coldhearted.[63] As a fallen woman and a convicted murderess whose expulsion from society permits the harmonious union of more virtuous characters, Hetty

[62] Kathryn Hughes, *George Eliot: The Last Victorian*. (New York: Cooper Square Press, 1998). 207.
[63] Deborah Logan, "Am I My Sister's Keeper?" in *Fallenness*. 92-125.

becomes what Sara Ahmed terms an "affect alien" in her essay "Happy Objects": a figure that "allow[s] families to sustain its place as 'happy object' by demonizing those that threaten or do not follow the reproductive line."[64] But the narrator's careful attention to Hetty's emotions reveal a much more nuanced character deserving of compassion.

Like Ruth, Hetty is naive, childish, and beautiful. But unlike Ruth, Hetty has clear faults emphasized by the narrative: she is vain, materialistic, and ignorant. Eliot's continual comparisons of Hetty to such delicate creatures as butterflies, babies, ducklings and lapdogs infantilize and dehumanize her, rather than emphasize her innocence and connection to nature. The fatal combination of these characteristics and the attentions of a handsome, besotted squire lacking in self-control results in her impregnation, abandonment, and ultimately imprisonment for infanticide. Hetty's beauty is described quite violently as that "with which you can never be angry, but that you feel ready to crush for inability to comprehend the state of mind into which it throws you" (118). By the end of the novel, the community of Hayslope's inability to comprehend Hetty's character has resulted in her exile and death.

Readers have likewise struggled to comprehend Hetty. In typical Eliot fashion, she is juxtaposed with her cousin Dinah Morris, a Methodist preacher, in what scholar Dorothea Barrett terms Eliot's recurring "vain/soulful paradigm."[65] This paradigm is most visible in the chapter "The Two Bed-Chambers," in which the cousins' differences are laid out in stark contrast. Hetty admires herself in the mirror while Dinah prays for poor souls, and when Dinah approaches Hetty to pray for her, Hetty bursts into tears of fear of the "trouble" Dinah assures her will one day befall Hetty (146). We are made to understand here that Dinah is pious where Hetty is

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[64] Sarah Ahmed, "Happy Objects." In *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth. Duke University Press, 2010.
[65] Dorothea Barrett, *Vocation and Desire: George Eliot's Heroines*. (New York: Routledge, 1989). Pg. 35.

sinful— one absorbed in the self, one absorbed in altruism. Their differences, physical as well as spiritual, embed themselves in their aspects:

> What a strange contrast the two figures made, visible enough in that mingled twilight and moonlight! Hetty, her cheeks flushed and her eyes glistening from her imaginary drama, her beautiful neck and arms bare, her hair hanging in a curly tangle down her back, and the baubles in her ears. Dinah, covered with her long white dress, her pale face full of subdued emotion, almost like a lovely corpse into which the soul has returned charged with sublimer secrets and a sublimer love. (144)

Hetty's "flushed" countenance and "glistening" eyes, the wildness of her hair and her "bare" limbs, speak to her innate sensuality— what Eliot terms her "luxurious pleasure-seeking nature." The striking description of Dinah as a "lovely corpse" reveals her rejection of desire; as she "cover[s]" her body in the white dress, symbolic of chastity, so she "subdue[s]" her own emotion, and transcends eroticism.

What differentiates the "vain/soulful" paradigm from the Madonna/Whore dichotomy typical to Victorian literature is George Eliot's relationship to both ends of the spectrum. In her philosophical mind and literary ambitions she embodies the "soulful" preacher; but in her determined pursuit of sexual and romantic desires despite societal disapproval and familial rejection, she embodies the fallen woman. Eliot's decision to live with a married man— George Henry Lewes, her romantic and intellectual partner— caused her beloved brother to disown her.[66] This paradigm cannot, then, be a binary. Accordingly, as Dorothea Barrett observes, lines between vocational and sexual desires in the novel are continually blurred. Hetty's pursuit of

[66] Hughes, *George Eliot*. Pg. 132.

Arthur is both romantic and ambitious; in her daydreams, she is not alone at her lover's side, but parades before her peers flaunting her newly elevated socioeconomic status.

Many scholars have noted that Eliot's complicated relationship to her own ambitions and desires influences the endings of her heroines.[67] After Hetty's trial for infanticide and rescue from the gallows, her unhappy fate is relegated to a brief mention in the midst of a rosy domestic ending for Eliot's "pet characters" (as Deborah Logan terms them), Adam Bede and Dinah (modeled after her father and aunt). Motherhood physically alters Dinah; she now more closely resembles Hetty, with her sensuality embedded in her "fuller," more "matronly" figure (479). Domesticity is not a furthering but an extinction of Dinah's intellectual and vocational potential; while she is romantically, sexually, and maternally fulfilled, her great passion for preaching has been laid aside. Despite Eliot and the aunt who served as the model for Dinah both refusing to submit their vocational desires to patriarchal institutions, Eliot's ambitious characters invariably fail in or compromise these desires.[68] But while Dinah is at least granted domestic fulfillment, Hetty is not only killed off but elided completely from the text after her rescue from the gallows.

The narrator's lack of sympathy for Hetty in this punitive narrative is shocking given Eliot's ostensible commitment to sympathy. Paradoxically, however, this very lack of narratorial compassion arguably increases that of the audience; Dorothea Barrett argues that Eliot's harsh treatment "wins readers to Hetty perhaps more than a gentler treatment would have done."[69] Punishing a character to endear her to readers is a common narrative strategy in fallen woman

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[67] Kate Flint, "George Eliot and Gender." In *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*.
Barrett, *Vocation and Desire*.

[68] After women were barred from preaching in the Methodist denomination, George Eliot's aunt Elizabeth Evans left the community for the New Wesleyans where female preaching was still allowed. Letters Vol. III. This extinction of vocational ambition in Eliot's heroines is repeated in novels such as *Middlemarch* and *Mill on the Floss*.

[69] Barrett, *Vocation and Desire*, 43.

novels. Suzanne Keen closes her book *Empathy and the Novel* with a list of hypotheses about narrative empathy; the fourth hypothesis states that "empathetic responses to fictional characters and situations occur more readily for negative feeling states, whether or not a match in details of experience exists."[70] Elizabeth Gaskell employs this strategy, radically paired with sacralization to create such an unobjectionable, angelic character that to condemn her would essentially be a moral failure. The empathic pull of Ruth's great suffering is augmented by her unfailing sweetness, maternity, and self-abnegation to the point of death; sympathy is assured.

George Eliot does not take this route. Yes, Hetty suffers, and yes, her suffering is brought on by a social superior who should have known and done better— but unlike Ruth, her fall is not merely brought about by innocence to the point of ignorance, but by her ambition and vanity. What ultimately compels the reader to sympathy for Hetty is a combination of what Suzanne Keen above terms an empathy of "negative feeling" and the subversiveness of Hetty's character. Victorian readers were well used to the Christ-like narrative arc of a pure, undeserving sufferer taking on the sins of others to the point of death; they were less familiar with the sudden deep despair of a silly, vain teenage girl. Ruth is devastated by her abandonment, but her character remains essentially the same: unfailingly pure. Her growth is the conventional shift from girl to mother, and she gains a moral and emotional fortitude through her religious education. Hetty, on the other hand, undergoes a much more striking transformation— the shift from foolish child to traumatized woman elicits deep pity and a sharp emotional transition from judgment to sympathy in the reader. The power of Hetty's emotions does not lie in any profound philosophical insights, as with Tess Durbeyfield, but in the absolute terror provoked by her bitter circumstances that renders her more animal than human. Her tragedy is not of the classical genre— a fall from great

[70] Keen, *Empathy and the Novel*, 169.

heights such as Oedipus or Othello experience— but an ordinary catastrophe, brought about by common feelings and actions. Eliot is at her most eloquent in rendering Hetty's "Journey in Hope" and "Journey in Despair" (Chapters 36 and 37); despite her explicit dislike of the character, the author lends Hetty's situation a sympathetic gravity that speaks to her humanitarian principles.

Hetty's extraordinary blend of shallowness and depth renders her a uniquely compelling and sympathetic character. Ruth's suicidal ideation is a brief and rash dramatic reaction from which she is promptly saved; Hetty dwells on these thoughts for weeks before her bleak hopelessness leads her to the "dark shrouded pool" (328). While Ruth is "called out of herself" to help the injured Benson— a powerful demonstration of her "tender nature"— Hetty must call herself out of these thoughts (Gaskell, 82). The narrator frames this moment as indicative of Hetty's weakness of character:

> She clasps her hands round her knees and leans forward, and looks earnestly at [the pool], as if trying to guess what sort of bed it would make for her young round limbs. No, she has not courage to jump into that cold watery bed, and if she had, they might find her— they might find out why she had drowned herself. There is but one thing left to her; she must go away, go where they can't find her. (328)

Although Hetty is explicitly stated to lack "courage" in this paragraph, George Eliot shows us a new strength in Hetty that contradicts what she tells us. Maybe she lacks the "courage" to jump, but she musters the astounding courage to live, to journey far away from the only home she's ever known, and to bear the child whose unborn existence is already the greatest source of shame and fear she has experienced in her life. The dull, logical calm of her "earnest" contemplation illustrates the desperation of her situation. The Hetty of Book First could never have engaged in

such meditations. The switch to present tense in this scene immerses us in Hetty's "swift-advancing shame," emphasizing the urgency and intensity of her emotions (329).

The most notable instances of present tense in the novel, including this one, encourage audience identification with and sympathy for Hetty; although the narrative arc seems to favor Dinah, the reader's heart breaks for Hetty. We admire Dinah intellectually; we pity Hetty passionately. A reviewer at the time noted that Hetty's interiority renders her "less repulsive to us than if we did not see the workings of her mind."[71] George Eliot's narrator occasionally comments on the novel's events in present tense, and uses it as a scene-setting mechanism; but the use of the present tense to bring the audience into a character's feeling-state belongs almost entirely to Hetty.[72] In the moments before Hetty and Arthur Donnithorne's first kiss, the use of present tense emphasizes the intensity and immediacy of the characters' emotions, lending breathtaking power to what could easily be dismissed as a reckless and lust-propelled dalliance. The young lovers are awash in nature imagery— they are "two velvet peaches," "two brooklets," flowerbuds, butterflies (120, 122). The tears rolling down Hetty's cheeks are merely juvenile rather than sacred, as in Ruth, but their emotional power is clear from the effect they have on Arthur: "what else could he do but speak to her in a soft, soothing tone, as if she were a bright-eyed spaniel with a thorn in her foot?" (124).[73] As Hetty prepares for Arthur's birthday ball, her dreams of the future in which "she will be able to wear any earrings she likes" are likewise narrated in present tense (227). Her ambitions— though framed by the narrator as silly— clearly

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[71] Anne Mozley, Review in Bentley's Quarterly Review, quoted in David Carroll, ed., *George Eliot: The Critical Heritage*. (London: Routledge, 1971). 94.

[72] Examples of scene-setting include the introductions of Adam, Seth, and Lisbeth Bede, the rector, the villagers of Hayslope, and the inhabitants of Hall Farm. There are also brief instances of Adam's and Arthur's feeling-states conveyed in present tense, but pages-long immersions belong solely to Hetty.

[73] In Laura Brown's *Homeless Dogs and Melancholy Apes*, she notes the gendered image of the lapdog in Victorian literature, and the "transformation" of "alterity" into "intimacy" that it represents. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011). Pg. 65.

hold great emotional weight for her, and thus for the reader thrust into her world. Hetty's aspirations are immersive and sensory: "already she lives in an invisible world of brilliant costumes, shimmering gauze, soft satin, and velvet… she feels the bracelets on her arms, and treads on a soft carpet in front of a tall mirror" (227).

Hetty's near-illiteracy points not only to her narrowness of mind, but also the vulnerability created by her ignorance. In Lauren Berlant's essay "Cruel Optimism," she suggests that objects of desire are valued not for themselves, but for a "cluster of promises" we want from that object.[74] For Arthur, the promises that Hetty embodies are physical and emotional— he is captivated by her beauty, and enjoys her adoration as an appeal to his ego. For Hetty, however, Arthur represents the promise of escape from what she views as an impoverished life. Her daydreams go beyond the face and words of her beloved; she conjures up an "imaginary drama" of herself in aristocratic finery, gazed on in awe by her peers (144). The class difference between the seducer and his object is repeated in all texts but Esther Waters. This creates an immediate imbalance of power which further victimizes the woman, but it also adds a dimension of potential class mobility. Alec d'Urberville weaponizes his wealth to manipulate Tess into becoming his mistress; Bellingham attempts to bribe Ruth into marriage and fails— but Hetty chases after Arthur's wealth willfully. This would seem to solidify the moral condemnation of the fallen woman, but again Hetty's interiority saves us from repulsion. Deborah Logan observes that Hetty's "ambitions are quite guileless, being limited to the symbolic possession of fine lace and white stockings rather than actual power or status."[75] Even at her most mercenary she is girlish and innocent, not artful and scheming— still thoroughly undeserving of the suffering she is to undergo.

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[74] Lauren Berlant, "Cruel Optimism." In *The Affect Theory Reader*, Gregg and Gregory.
[75] Logan, *Fallenness*, 97.

The luscious physicality of Hetty's childish dreams sets up the bodily intensity of her "Journey In Despair" in Book Fifth.[76] In this chapter, we slip in and out of Hetty's inner thoughts as she panics about her fate and endures weariness, darkness, hunger, and cold. Her animated bliss when she "kisse[s] her arms with the passionate love of life" upon finding shelter imparts a strength of feeling which the pale-faced, "corpse"-like Dinah rarely approaches (347). This chapter emphasizes the desperation of her situation and her complete ineptitude in the face of it. Her lack of "physical or spiritual gifts," as scholar Nina Auerbach terms it, is precisely what earns her our sympathy; if she was more capable, more profound, her situation would not be so pitiful.[77] But at the end of the chapter, Eliot seems to pull back from the empathic connection she has established with Hetty:

> Poor wandering Hetty, with the rounded childish face, and the hard unloving despairing soul looking out of it— with the narrow heart and narrow thoughts, no room in them for any sorrows but her own, and tasting that sorrow with the more intense bitterness!... What will be the end?-- the end of her objectless wandering, apart from all love, caring for human beings only through her pride, clinging to life only as the hunted wounded brute clings to it? God preserve you and me from being the beginners of such misery. (350)

After undergoing ten pages of Hetty's emotional and physical toil, feeling for her and with her, we must be reminded of her "unloving" and "narrow" nature. The final sentence of the chapter is almost haughty in its distancing and detachment. We are no longer on the rough road or cold ground with Hetty, but pointing and shaking our heads from above. Our identification with the fallen woman must again and again be compromised by moral condemnation. The motivations

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[76] Deborah Logan's theory that Hetty's infanticide may have been unintentional and due to postpartum depression should be noted here (*Fallenness*, 92-125).
[77] Nina Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982. Pg 174.

behind Eliot's complicated emotional push and pull are difficult to untangle; did she fear judgment and censorship from disapproving Victorians, or did she recoil from her own identification with a fallen woman when she truly wanted to be Mrs. Lewes? It seems to many scholars, and to me, that she deliberately characterizes Hetty as her opposite— ignorant and selfish while Eliot's values lie in education and compassion— in order to distance herself from fallenness.[78] But the intensity of Hetty's emotions indicates the extent to which Eliot must have felt for her— her sensuousness, the tragedy of her ill-advised infatuation, and her impending exile.[79]

Dinah Morris, often viewed as a virtuous "foil" to Hetty's selfish sinfulness, is likewise not as one-dimensional as such a reading might suggest. "The Two Bed-Chambers" highlights similarities as well as differences between the two women. They both engage in ritual worship: Hetty as a "devout worshiper" of her own image, and Dinah as a pious Methodist devotee to the plights of others. Hetty is absorbed by her mirror, Dinah by her bedroom window; one gazes inward, the other out. But this contrast cannot be used to simplify their characters to merely "sinful" and "virtuous." Rebecca Mitchell suggests that Dinah's inability to engage in introspection is just as damaging as Hetty's incapacity for empathy.[80] The particular nature of Dinah's piety is notable. In her preaching, both to crowds and to individuals, she emphasizes suffering, damnation, and fear: "painting to them the desolation of their souls, lost in sin, feeding on the husks of this miserable world, far away from God their Father" (26). Although Dinah is truly caring and undoubtedly pious (as in the jailhouse scene, where she speaks compassionately

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[78] Logan, *Fallenness*, 95. Dorothea Barrett, *Vocation and Desire*, 37.
[79] George Eliot underwent several such ill-advised infatuations (most notably, John Chapman and Herbert Spencer), leading to rebuffs and evictions which impacted her greatly.
Rosemary Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life*. (Oxford University Press, 1983). 8.
[80] Mitchell, *Victorian Lessons*. 59.

to the imprisoned Hetty when no one else will), her serene paleness and demure self-denial belie the shocking emotional manipulation she is capable of— just as Hetty's girlish beauty belies her sexuality. Deborah Logan argues that while Hetty is condemned for her enjoyment in being seen, Dinah engages in the same behavior when she presents herself— her ideas, emotions, and, unavoidably, her body— for public consumption in preaching.[81] Her dogged commitment to self-denial can be read as the arrogance of the martyr— especially since this mission is conveniently discarded when Dinah feels "called" to become Adam's wife instead.

When Dinah approaches Hetty in "The Two Bed-Chambers," she urges her to seek God because Hetty will one day "be in trouble," and Dinah's emphasis on the inevitability of suffering fills Hetty with "a chill fear" until she cries (145-6). Dinah mistakes this for a "stirring of a divine impulse," but the narrator is careful to clarify that it is merely "that excitable state of mind in which there is no calculating what turn the feelings may take from one moment to another" (146). Eliot continually emphasizes the power of emotions, but also their unreliable volatility. A conversion rooted in a moment of fearful passion, such as when Dinah cajoles Bessy Cranage into throwing down her earrings, is not a sustainable one.

The narrator shrewdly predicts the reader's response to Dinah and Hetty's dynamic in "The Two Bed-Chambers," and takes care to curb the impulse to uplift the former and condemn the latter. As she states clearly in the chapter "In Which the Story Pauses a Little," Eliot refuses to "let [her] most faulty characters always be on the wrong side, and [her] virtuous ones on the right" (160):

> It is our habit to say that while the lower nature can never understand the higher, the higher nature commands a complete view of the lower. But I think the higher nature has

[81] Logan, *Fallenness*, 106.

> to learn this comprehension as we learn the art of vision, by a good deal of hard experience, often with bruises and gashes incurred in taking things up by the wrong end, and fancying our space wider than it is. (146)

The violence of this passage— "bruises" and "gashes incurred," but not specified by whom— inherently calls into question whether such a nature is indeed "higher." Hetty's selfishness is easy to read; Dinah's arrogance, however, is equally problematic. Dinah often relies on the Methodist practice of opening her Bible to a random page for divine guidance. The ambiguity of the verses she lands on continues Eliot's theme of reading and misreading— for example, she is convinced to go literally put the fear of God into Hetty by lighting on the verse "And they all wept sore, and fell on Paul's neck and kissed him." This line— verse 37 of Acts 20— is taken from a scene in which Paul imparts final words of caution to the Ephesian church leaders before he bids them farewell; he urges them to beware of persecution from "grievous wolves" and blasphemy from "your own selves" that are sure to arise in his absence. However, the next verse specifies that it is not merely Paul's "warning" of the danger of their souls that moves them to tears, but the act of parting from a friend: "Sorrowing most of all for the words which he spake, that they should see his face no more" (Acts 20:38, KJV). Even in the original text, the emotional durability of such dire warnings is called into question.

Eliot's mission of compassion is so strong that, unlike in most other fallen women novels, she refuses to create a clear "villain." Eliot's sympathy for those subject to impulsive emotions was shaped by her translation of the philosopher Baruch Spinoza's *Ethics*. Spinoza argues that humans exist in a state of "servitude" to their emotions, which we must endeavor to "understand" in order to limit our "passiv[ity]" to them.[82] His assertion that "no emotion can be checked save

[82] Biographer Rosemary Ashton connects Spinoza and Eliot's philosophies (12).

by another emotion stronger in checking and contrary to itself" emphasizes the power of feeling and urges sympathy for those who fall victim to their own emotions. One such victim is the novel's seducer, Arthur Donnithorne. Arthur is introduced amidst repeated interjections from the narrator urging understanding for his character. She lays his flaws out clearly, while also emphasizing his "good nature:" "his faults were all of a generous kind— impetuous, warm-blooded, leonine" (112-3). Arthur's deep concern for others, despite the reckless lust that harms so many, is evident in his heroic arrival to save Hetty from the gallows. The narrator suggests that if his life had consisted of "smooth waters," he may have proved a "sea-worthy vessel," but the rough waters which his emotions land him in will reveal the deficiencies that may have gone unnoticed otherwise (114). Eliot even lays partial blame on guardian and mentor figures in the novel, such as the Reverend Irwine, who fails to advise Arthur, and Mrs. Poyser, who fails to understand Hetty.

Unlike, for instance, Bellingham in *Ruth*, Arthur does suffer physical and emotional consequences for his actions. He willingly enters the army so that "no one else… may leave their home on [his] account," and Adam reports years later that after a horrible illness and a long time away from home, "his color's changed, and he looks sadly" (421, 480). With this and the breathtaking power of his feelings for Hetty, Eliot seems to be asking the reader, "How do you know you wouldn't have done the same?" If you, like Arthur, were a "handsome generous young fellow, who will have property enough to support numerous peccadilloes," confronted by the "feverish thirst" of young love, "what else could [you] do?" (113, 124). Spinoza's observation that "a man who is submissive to his emotions is not in power over himself, but in the hands of fortune to such an extent that he is often constrained, although he may see what is better for him, to follow what is worse," is palpable in Eliot's presentation of Arthur's character. The narrator is

careful to indicate the role of "destiny" in the novel's tragic events, "[disguising] her cold awful face behind a hazy radiant veil," stressing the sense that this could befall many of us, finding ourselves in the same circumstances (118).

Tess of the D'Urbervilles (1891): Fallen and Pure

Nina Auerbach characterizes *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* as a "gauntlet" thrown at the feet of hypocritical religious and sexual double standards.[83] Indeed, the "purity" Hardy aggressively confers upon Tess is as stinging a slap in the face of Victorian society as Tess's famous gloved slap to the face of Alec, the nouveau-riche 'seducer' (rapist) whose family bought her ancestral name. Part of Hardy's eloquent fury in *Tess* arose from his battles with censorship; as Mary Jacobus details in her article "Tess: The Making of a Pure Woman," the heroine's purity and victimhood was markedly emphasized in the final serialized version as compared to the original manuscript.[84] In the "Author's Preface to the Fifth and Later Editions" of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Hardy expresses disdain for those who cannot conceive of any definition of "purity" beyond "the artificial and derivative meaning which has resulted to it from the ordinances of civilization," and would reject any natural, aesthetic, and spiritual truth to be found in the word (Hardy, 36).[85] As he addresses objections to the book, among them disagreement

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[83] Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon*. 171.
[84] Mary Jacobus, "Tess: The Making of a Pure Woman" in *Tearing the Veil: Essays on Femininity*. Ed. Susan Lipschitz. (New York: Routledge, 1978).
[85] Thomas Hardy, "Author's Preface to the Fifth and Later Editions." In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, 1891. Ed. Sarah E. Maier. (Ontario: Broadview, 2007). Parenthetical citations will henceforth refer to this edition.

about "subjects fit for art," he almost exactly echoes Elizabeth Gaskell's concerns about *Ruth* nearly forty years earlier.

Tess's purity was not only a sociopolitical gauntlet thrown against Victorian society, but an emotional gauntlet thrown to Victorian audiences, daring them to love the fallen woman. Hardy's connection to the character was so strong that in his eighties, he became infatuated with an actress portraying Tess in a stage production.[86] He wrote to a similarly infatuated reader that "I, too, lost my heart to her as I went on with her history."[87] Modern readers may feel wary at this romantic connection with a heroine whose traumatic rape and abandonment he so eloquently pens. The conflict between Hardy's love for Tess and his desire to express the unjust hand she is dealt often surfaces in his voyeuristic descriptions of her body. Here we feel the limits of his attempt at ambassadorial strategic empathy; it is exceedingly difficult to pen a defense of an oppressed group (women) which you not only do not belong to, but actively benefit from the oppression of.

Unlike Gaskell, Hardy claims in the Preface that he has "no ulterior intentions" with the novel, merely declaring the realist object of "[writing] down how the things of the world strike him" (37). He insists that the novel is "an impression, not an argument" (37). Nonetheless, the impassioned emotionality of the novel's "impression" is a clear argument: an apologia for the fallen woman.

Tess's simultaneous individuality and universality has been noted by scholars such as Kathleen Blake, who argues for the coexistence of these traits in Tess rather than the conventional critical focus on one or the other.[88] Tess's embodiment of a transcendent pagan

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[86] Robert Gittings, *The Older Hardy*. (London: Heinemann, 1978). 197-199.
[87] Letter to Sir George Douglas, quoted in Dianne Fallon Sadoff, "Looking at Tess," in *The Sense of Sex.*
[88] Kathleen Blake, "Pure Tess: Hardy on Knowing a Woman," in *Critical Essays on Thomas Hardy: The Novels*, ed. Dale Kramer. (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1990).

spirituality and her firmly physical, sensuous existence in her own body achieve a similar effect to Ruth's role both as singular self and allegorical Magdalen/Madonna/Christ. Dorothy Van Ghent argues that "the procedure of the novel is to individualize."[89] In *Tess*, Hardy individualizes the "social problem" of the fallen woman, while making her character integral to and an embodiment of Nature. Tess's particularity leads us to "fall in love" with her— as did Hardy, as did critics and readers at the time and now— while her universality and her innate, blameless connection with the Natural not only connects our soul with hers, but opens our eyes to the injustice of her tragedy. *Tess* certainly leaves an "impression" upon the reader: an impression of the unnatural expectations of Victorian culture, and the cruelty of their ruthless and indiscriminate enforcement. As we grieve Tess, we grieve the absence of a society that might recognize her "purity" and the naturalness of her desires.

Tess's physical and sensual connection to nature drew outrage from Victorian critics.[90] If Ruth's blissful submission to Bellingham's white lilies is sexual subtext, Tess's ecstatic immersion in the foul-smelling "juicy grass," "thistle-milk and slug slime," and "sticky blights" of the garden where her beloved, Angel Clare, plays the harp is as explicitly sexual as Victorian censors would allow (148). She "undulate[s]" on his notes as they "pass through her," and the tears they bring to her eyes are not Ruth's tears of despair or remorse but of sexual "exaltation" (149). Readerly empathy here immerses us not in religious penitence, but in orgasm; there is joy in the consensual fall. This tacit approval of extramarital sexuality is made explicit in Tess's offer to live with Angel out of wedlock (193).

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[89] Dorothy van Ghent, *The English Novel: Form and Function*. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1953).

[90] Even in a mostly favorable review, Margaret Oliphant calls certain chapters "naughty" and "grotesque," and calls the novel an "elaborate and indignant plea for Vice, that it is really Virtue." *Thomas Hardy: The Critical Heritage*, edited by R. G. Cox. (Oxford: Taylor & Francis Group, 1996). Pg. 219-227.

Tess's body embodies her multiplicity. It expresses "a luxuriance of aspect, a fullness of growth" that belies her innocence— "made her appear more of a woman than she really was" to the rapist Alec--- just as the same body appears to Angel as "so pure, so sweet, so virginal" that he cannot conceive of her having any sexual past (73, 249). Hardy's portrayal of Tess's sexuality is complicated by his gender; there is an element of voyeurism that at times overpowers our sense of Tess's autonomy. Although her enjoyment of her own body is radical, Hardy's sensuous descriptions of her body as she engages in ordinary activities such as milking a cow tend towards an objectifying hypersexualization (173-174). Crucially, however, in many of these passages he occupies the perspective of a male character, usually Alec or Angel, indicating an awareness of his gendered position.

Tess is sensuous by nature, and pure by nature; Hardy suggests these are not contradictory aspects, but dwell in harmony.[91] Tess's sexuality is not only benign, but natural to her, to all women, and all life; she is "mastered" by "the irresistible, universal, automatic tendency to find sweet pleasure somewhere, which pervades all life" (131). Tess and her fellow dairymaids are each a "portion of one organism called sex," emphasizing the naturalness of female sexuality (170). When Tess's enjoyment of her body is censured and thus severed, so too is her enjoyment of nature; after her abandonment by Angel, she writes that "the daylight has nothing to show me, since you are not here, and I don't like to see the rooks and starlings in the field" (341).

Hardy's indictment of Victorian society in Tess's tragedy is less restrained than Gaskell's, attacking beloved institutions such as the church. Tess's execution at the hands of the

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[91] Rosemarie Morgan defends Tess's purity and sexuality at length in her book *Women and Sexuality in the Novels of Thomas Hardy*. (London: Routledge, 1988).
See also Shirley A. Stave, The Decline of the Goddess: Nature, Culture, and Women in Thomas Hardy's Fiction. (London: Greenwood Press, 1995).

state— as opposed to Ruth's Romantic and rapturous illness, validating the religious necessity of her suffering and death— completes this indictment. Like Ruth, Tess is at her introduction defined by her emotional depths and purity— in her white dress at the May-Day Dance, she is a "vessel of emotion untinctured by experience" (48). But their philosophies set them apart; while Ruth is blissfully innocent and devotedly religious, Tess is fatalistic even before the tragedy of her rape, and grows throughout the novel to reject Christian teachings. Fully cognizant of her family's poverty and her parents' foolishness, she tells her little brother that they live on a "blighted" star (63). She simultaneously experiences the earth-shattering implications of Prince, the family horse, dying, and realizes the insignificance of this event to the greater world: "she was not an existence, an experience, a passion, a structure of sensations, to anybody but herself. To all humankind besides Tess was only a passing thought" (120). These unorthodox mentalities have led some scholars, such as Margaret Higonnet, to theorize on Tess's function as a mouthpiece for Hardy's own views; she observes "deliberate parallels between what the narrator says and what Tess says or thinks," and terms these parallels a "ventriloquistic illusion."[92]

Space and size are significant in *Tess*, echoing Tess's multiplicity and evoking shifting feelings of awe and pity. Tess is at once sexual and pure, peasant and aristocracy, all-encompassing and insignificant. Nina Auerbach notes the recurring motif of Tess posed against vast, unfeeling landscapes.[93] But while she is described as "like a fly on a billiard-table of indefinite length, and of no more consequence to the surroundings than that fly," she is also "a being large, towering, and awful" as she baptizes her baby by candlelight (132, 123). The

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[92] Margaret Higonnet, "A Woman's Story: Tess and the Problem of Voice." In *The Sense of Sex*, 25. For similar perspectives, see Judith Mitchell's chapter "Hardy's Female Reader" in the same book, and Kaja Silverman's article "History, Figuration and Female Subjectivity in Tess of the d'Urbervilles" in NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction , Autumn, 1984, Vol. 18, No. 1 (Autumn, 1984), pp. 5-28. Duke University Press.

[93] Auerbach, Woman and the Demon, 172.

greatness of an individual's interior world, and their simultaneous insignificance in the eyes of the universe, is a distinctly Hardyan idea. The juxtaposition of Tess's immense emotions against her relative smallness is both emotionally and philosophically evocative; facing her death at the vast "forest of monoliths" of Stonehenge, she seems "a lesser creature than a woman"--- but at the same time, "upon her sensations the whole world depended… the universe itself only came into being for Tess on the particular day in the particular year in which she was born" (392, 394, 177). Even at her smallest, she is more than pitiful; in the hanging of this insignificant dairymaid, a whole universe is lost.

Although he briefly considered a career as a clergyman, Hardy is noted for his religious skepticism, which he expresses with particular vehemence in his later novels— including *Tess*. In contrast to Ruth, which poses religion as the solution to the ill-treatment of fallen women, *Tess* poses religion as one of the primary evils that causes its heroine's condemnation. Hardy's values, as Robert Schweik articulates in an essay on Hardy and religion, emphasized the importance of "human feeling."[94] Accordingly, his most powerful moments of religious criticism in *Tess* consist of the clash between Christianity and human sympathy.[95]

Hardy highlights the cruelty of an ideology that would inspire such images as an "arch-fiend" spearing an infant with a "three-pronged fork" as Tess, in frantic desperation for her sick baby's soul, conjures childish nightmares of hell (122). As she baptizes the child Sorrow herself late at night— pitifully described as "a child's child"--- the "ecstasy of faith" transforms her into a "divine personage," mirroring the radical sacralization of *Ruth* (122-123). This moving, sacred

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[94] Robert Schweik, ""The Influence of Religion, Science, and Philosophy on Hardy's Writings," in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Hardy*, ed. Dale Kramer. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.)

[95] For more on religion in *Tess*, see Mark Asquith's article "Putting faith in Tess: Religion in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*" in The English Review (Vol. 19, Issue 3). (Philip Alan Publishing, 2009).
And G. Glen Wickens's "Sermons in Stone: The Return to Nature in Tess of the D'Urbervilles" in ESC: English Studies in Canada, Volume 14, Number 2, June 1988, pp. 184-203.

testament to a mother's love, however, is insufficient for the church. When Tess asks the parson if her baptism was legitimate and would merit a Christian burial of Sorrow, the sympathetic "man" and the cold "ecclesiastical fought within him"; although Tess's "tenderness… moves" the man in him to "victory" in telling her "it will be just the same" for the baby in heaven, he cannot allow these feelings to come into public knowledge and refuses her request for the burial. (125) It is the parson's human nature, not his religious feeling, that produces his sympathy, and his dogma that limits it. Where Christian charity should augment human compassion, it is shown to repress and reject it.

The conflict between feeling "Nature" and callous "social law" come into play again on Tess's wedding night. Angel Clare, a minister's son who Tess adores but who loves her only as "a visionary essence of woman—a whole sex condensed into one typical form," believes that his parents' theology is "as foreign to his own as if they had been the dreams of people on another planet" (156, 181). [96] However, the revelation of Tess's rape and pregnancy— despite his earlier confession of sexual experience— reveals that beneath all his Romantic admiration for paganism, the gendered prejudices of Victorian society remain deeply engrained in Angel. Although he is agnostic, he retains the views of the patriarchal Victorian church that allow forgiveness for his sexual transgressions, but not for hers— that upholds the standard of the chaste "angel in the house" for women, but permits indiscretions in men who must engage with the "worldly" public sphere. This is a prejudice that renders him "apathetic" to her tears, and causes him to "smother… his affection for her" (244). A single tear, "so large that it magnified the pores of the skin over which it rolled, like the object lens of a microscope," is the only sign of emotion that escapes him; he is not indeed unfeeling, but emotion is suppressed by his socially

[96] See Jane Thomas, in *Thomas Hardy and Desire*, on Angel's desire for Tess as idealized essence of woman. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

sanctioned misogyny (245). The ineffectiveness of Angel's emotion here indicates the insidious durability of the patriarchal ideologies that act as tools of violence against women, fallen or not— and the low odds of men who profit from these ideologies questioning them in any meaningful way.

Tess's deep and unconditional love is agonizingly detailed during Angel's rejection: she falls at his feet, "bursts into a flood" of tears, "shriek[s]" in pain (243). But crucially, she does not excessively perform her emotions. Hardy's narrator suggests that

> If Tess had been artful, had she made a scene, fainted, wept hysterically, in that lonely lane, notwithstanding the fury of fastidiousness with which he was possessed, he would probably not have withstood her.

Her refusal to engage in the manipulative emotional performance that Angel subconsciously desires, though its consequences are tragic, only increases our respect for her. Kristin Brady details the Victorian belief in hysteria as a "symptom of [the] natural female disease," a belief which re-enforced the gendering of emotion.[97] Tess is an intensely feeling woman, but she is not "artful"; she expresses herself and no more. In fact, her restraint and self-silencing has been noted by many scholars. Margaret Higonnet in particular questions the meaning of silent women represented by a male narrator— "Can a male writer's narrative translate the language of women, a "muted" group, into that of his own "dominant" group? What does it mean for a male narrator to represent a woman's silence?"[98] Tess's silence is often explicitly "strategic," such as when she purposefully drops her hat to orchestrate an escape from Alec in his gig (86). I would argue that this strategic silence and her refusal to perform hysterics for Angel confirm that she is often silent because she knows men will not listen. Rosemarie Morgan insists that "repression is

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[97] Kristin Brady, "Textual Hysteria: Hardy's Narrator on Women," in *The Sense of Sex*.
[98] Higonnet, T*he Sense of Sex*, 14.

not submission," reclaiming Tess's silences as an act of will and confirmation of autonomy.[99] Tess's silence, unlike Angel's, is more emotionally evocative than speech, because it arises from the despairing knowledge that her words— for him and for Victorian society— hold no weight at all.

Unlike Ruth, who consistently turns the other cheek, Tess resists objectification, idealization, and condemnation alike— any person or theory that threatens or disregards her ownership of her body. When Tess turns, she turns away, as from Alec's kisses. She insists on her own individuality; refusing Angel's allegorization of her as "Artemis" or "Demeter," she says, "Call me Tess" (156). Denying Tess her humanity is clearly demonstrated to be the most fundamentally harmful act in the novel; the ultimate results of these denials are emotionally brutalizing for Tess and for the reader. Alec's assault "appropriates" her body for himself, while Angel attempts to transform (and therefore obscure) her individuality to allegory, "actualized poetry" (104, 186). The actions of both these men directly lead to Tess's extended suffering, spiritual death, and finally physical death in the latter half of the novel.

Abandoned by Angel, Tess is dehumanized, a "hunted soul"--- her emotional connection with her body begins to wither (287). She had previously found joy and fulfillment in her body, her sensuality, her physical connection with nature, but she now begins to feel that "in inhabiting the fleshly tabernacle with which Nature had endowed her she was somehow doing wrong" (315). Mutilating her eyebrows and dressing in ugly clothes, she forcibly denies her body and any attempt to read it, as Angel once tried to "con… the characters of her face as if they had been hieroglyphs" (196). Her "purity" was previously as resilient as her very body, and she hoped to put the past behind her. Now, she realizes heavily that "bygones would never be bygones til she

[99] Morgan, *Women and Sexuality*, 95.

was a bygone herself"--- her past seems physically writ upon her, and the bodily transcendence that she used to relish in by gazing at a "big bright star," she now pursues as an escape (313, 146).

Tess's longing to escape her own misery is expressed externally when she comes across a group of wounded pheasants who had escaped the hunters: "With the impulse of a soul who could feel for kindred sufferers as much as for herself," she wrings their necks "tenderly" as tears stream down her face (288-289). Tess's kindness and tears for the birds reflects her identification with them: their human and animal suffering is inflicted and condoned by typical patriarchal Victorian pursuits (hunting and seduction). As in *Ruth*, readerly empathy is magnified by the character's own— and by the character's suffering.

Alec returns to prey on Tess when she is physically and emotionally weakest, while she is working a "red tyrant" of a threshing machine that "kept a despotic demand upon the endurance of their muscles and nerves" (329). The chapters-long process of Alec emotionally beating Tess into submission is incredibly painful to read. Her furious reaction to his initial proposition (the gloved slap) is momentarily heartening— but, violently rendered "weak as a bled calf" by her physical and spiritual exhaustion, she is unable to keep up such resistance (339). When she finally gives up hope of Angel returning for her, she becomes Alec's mistress. By the time Angel does return, "Tess had spiritually ceased to recognize the body before him as hers— allowing it to drift, like a corpse upon the current, in a direction dissociated from its living will" (380). Tess's separation from her body here is not at her own "will," but as a method of survival.

Thomas Hardy observes in his Preface that sexual assault or even merely extramarital sex has, in other literature of the period, "usually been treated as fatal to her part of protagonist, or at least as the virtual ending of her enterprises and hopes" (36). His awareness of the fatality

of the fall is intriguing given his ultimate capitulation to that narrative trope— Tess is executed by hanging for the murder of Alec d'Urberville. Of course, Tess's death is represented as an injustice rather than an atonement, but it is a death nonetheless. Even before her execution, Angel's rejection serves as a "virtual ending of her enterprises and hopes." Rebecca Mitchell argues that Tess's death is a culmination of Victorian society's failure to understand her. Tess is continually read and misread by presumptuous strangers and lovers, and punished on the basis of their ignorance—- but she gains peace by achieving the "ultimate unknowable state."[100] Jane Thomas similarly identifies death as the "realm of pure desire" to which Tess "yearn[s] to return."[101] Mitchell further claims that her death reflects the impossibility of the quest of realist fiction: to achieve true knowledge of another (albeit fictional) person.

These theories ultimately echo similar scholarly conclusions about Ruth's death, as deliverance rather than punishment.[102] This is seemingly confirmed by Tess's final words of the novel: "I am ready" (395). But as a woman in Victorian society, Gaskell possessed an insight into patriarchal oppression that Hardy, for all his outrage, did not; Ruth's deliverance-by-death can be read as kind, but Tess's is solely cruel. While Ruth's can be read as a religious sacrifice, Tess's is inherently absurd, and Hardy emphasizes that it could only be demanded by the most absurd of societies.[103] Rene Girard's theory of "sacrificial substitution," in which a society deflects its violence upon a victim whose murder is legitimized by societal values, is especially applicable here— Tess's execution by hanging mirrors the execution of Christ (the "hanged

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[100] Mitchell, *Victorian Lessons,* 84.
[101] Jane Thomas, *Thomas Hardy and Desire*, 84.
[102] Deborah Logan, *Fallenness*, 46.
[103] See Henry Kozicki's "Myths of Redemption in Hardy's Tess of the d'Urbervilles." Papers on Language and Literature, 10(2), 1974.

god"), and her role as innocent sacrifice is explicitly stated in the final lines of the novel.[104] "'Justice,'" Hardy observes in sarcastic quotation marks, "was done, and the President of the Immortals, in Æschylean phrase, had ended his sport with Tess" (396).

Hardy foreshadows Tess's fate from the beginning, connecting her suffering to "the sins of the fathers" lying in her ancestral vault at Kingsbere. Tess herself "hate[s]" her forefathers for "the dance they had led her," robbing her of her autonomy by making her feel she is "one of a long row only… that there is set down in some old book somebody just like me, and… I shall only act her part" (104, 130, 152). In Tess's fatalistic awareness of her place in history and the destructive effects of her patriarchal line, Hardy emphasizes the cruelty of these cycles of violence and "sacrifice." Elizabeth Bronfen adds another element of foreshadowing in the form of "rape as death," indicating that Tess's journey down that "road to dusty death" that every person must walk was begun at this first "death" of her maidenhood (145).[105]

From his impassioned defense of Tess's purity in the subtitle and preface to his cruelly sardonic ending, Thomas Hardy's mission for sympathy for the fallen woman is eminently clear. Tess's beauty, compassion, intelligence, and natural purity cause the reader to not only pity her, but to love her, as Hardy did— though his love remains complicated by his voyeuristic and objectifying tendencies. In her death, Tess completes her blissful absorption into nature, and the novel completes its indictment of Victorian society.

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[104] Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*. Translated by Patrick Gregory. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1977).
[105] Elizabeth Bronfen, "Pay As You Go: On the Exchange of Bodies and Signs." In *The Sense of Sex*, 66-86.

Esther Waters (1894): Resilience

In the introduction to the Oxford World Classics edition of *Esther Waters*, the heroine is introduced with this epithet: "the resilient Esther Waters."[106] Like her fellow fallen protagonists, Esther endures miserable conditions both personal and societal; she is impregnated and abandoned and struggles to survive in poverty. Through her character, George Moore explores the institutions and experiences common to fallen women in Victorian society: workhouses, baby farms, degrading employers, predatory and disappointing men. Early in the novel, Esther realizes that in order to make the father of her child do his duty by her, "she was bound to make him respect her" (65). Her dogged determination throughout her trials reveals her creator's similar goal: for Victorian society to do their social duty by fallen women, he must make them respect her.

Esther is set apart from the other fallen heroines I have examined by one simple narrative detail: she lives. Ruth is taken by disease, Hetty by exile and an unspecified end, Tess by the state. Their journeys begin in innocence and end in death. Esther's journey is circular: she begins and ends at Woodview Lodge, her first place of employment. When she first arrives at Woodview, it is a prosperous place, but hangs entirely on the success of its racehorses; when she returns, its former prosperity is in ruins (a "fallen" place), but the gambling that led to the devastation of its proprietors and employees alike— including Esther's own husband— is likewise vanished. The deteriorating power of time, as well as cycles of renewal, are realistically

[106] "Introduction" in George Moore, Esther Waters, 1894. Ed. Stephen Regan. Oxford University Press, 2012. Vii. Parenthetical citations will refer to this edition.

portrayed here.[107] Esther has lost the brightness of youth– once "luminous, and veiled with dark lashes," her eyes now "reflected all the natural prose of the Saxon"-- but retains her "stout and strongly built frame" (311). Her resilience mirrors that of the "barren landscape" she has returned to— the rooks building their nests, the brush and trees that have "carried away" the paths and walls of the once-great, once-corrupt estate (311, 319). Just as the land has weathered Woodview's "fall"--- the moral degradation of gambling— Esther has weathered hers.

Not only does Esther survive, but so does her child. Moore was directly inspired by *Adam Bede*, writing that a "true molding" of his subject "would be Hetty living to save her child."[108] The characteristic he viewed Hetty as lacking— and thus imbued his heroine with in abundance— is resilience. This resilience is driven by Victorian ideals of sacrificial motherhood; he briefly considered the title *Mother and Child* for the novel.[109] The name he settled on recalls one of only two books of the Bible named after a woman (the other, of course, being Ruth). The Biblical Esther, living in Persia under Babylonian rule, saved not only herself but her people by leveraging her position as queen, risking her life in the process. Her cousin Mordecai urges her to this act by saying "Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?"[110] Unlike her namesake, George Moore's Esther has no social or political power. But her philosophy somewhat echoes Mordecai's: "One doesn't do the good that one would like to in the world; one has to do the good that comes to one to do" (251). Ultimately, she employs the most valuable resource at her disposal— her resilience— to save both herself and her son from ruin.

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[107] For more on the circularity of the novel's ending, see Janet Egleson Dunleavy's *George Moore: The Artist's Vision, the Storyteller's Ar*t. (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1973). 98-102.
[108] George Moore, "A Communication to My Friends." (London: Nonesuch Press, 1933). Pg. 65-70.
[109] From Stephen Regan's "Introduction," xiv.
[110] Esther 4:14. NKJV.

George Moore was moved to tell this "miserable story" by a newspaper article on the lives of servants, which urged middle and upper-class readers to consider the difficulty of the servant's burden. He describes his thought process in A Communication to My Friends:

> "I was asking myself if servants, who in English literature are never introduced except as comic characters, might not be treated as the principal characters of a novel. After all, they are human beings like ourselves, though reduced by riches to a sort of partial slavery…. The principal figure would be the indomitable mother who will sacrifice her life for her child."[111]

Once Moore had arrived at this idea, he considered it "the greatest that had ever been treated in literature." In a rare authorial interjection in the novel, he declares that "hers is an heroic adventure if one considers it— a mother's fight for the life of her child against all the forces that civilization arrays against the lowly and the illegitimate" (143). Moore's belief in Esther's heroism is evident in the circular ending reminiscent of the Odyssey— like Odysseus, she returns to a changed land as a changed person, her triumph lying in the glorious fact of her survival against all odds, her "woman's work" complete in raising her son (326). Some scholars, such as Annette Federico, point out that the inception of the novel arose not from a social activist's desire to change the patriarchal order, but a novelist's search for material.[112] But despite his artistic (rather than feminist) perspective, Moore's conviction of his heroine's nobility is unquestionable. And his novel is not without activist sentiments; he expresses the power of social solidarity through storytelling in Esther's identification with the prostitutes at Piccadilly Circus— "Their stories were her story."

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[111] Moore, "A Communication," 67.
[112] Annette Federico, "Subjectivity and Story in George Moore's Esther Waters." English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920, Volume 36, Number 2, 1993, pp. 141-157.

George Moore resists both sentimentality and cynicism in depicting Esther's trials and triumphs. Even Woodview Lodge, the closest thing to an Edenic paradise within the novel, is described as a "bleak country" (4). Esther's inability to read, but acute ability to calculate the exact number of pounds she needs to survive, emphasizes the novel's economy— less luxuriant in prose but dwelling more heavily on pounds and shillings than novels like *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *Adam Bede*, it is grounded in the reality of working-class English women. Hetty Sorrel is able to read, but uninterested, reflecting her higher class status relative to Esther as well as her childish self-centeredness. Esther's inability illustrates the immediacy of her struggle to survive— her life revolves around wage calculations, no time for luxuries such as novels.

But despite her illiteracy, Esther has a keen sense of the power of stories. Gazing on lovers in a London park, moved by the "poetry of the hour," she muses that "she would have liked to have called them round her and told them her miserable story so that they might profit by her experience" (99-100). In a moment of desperation, when she has nowhere to turn with her newborn child but the workhouse, she tells her sad tale to a passing stranger in hopes that he can assist her:

> She told him the story of the baby-farmer and he listened kindly, and she thought the necessary miracle was about to happen. But he only complimented her on her pluck and got up to go. Then she understood that he did not care to listen to sad stories. (100)

Esther's struggle to find a willing and openhearted audience reflects the struggle authors faced in writing fallen heroines. They fight against the "chains which only one in a hundred has moral strength enough to despise"-- Victorian social expectations— and against apathy, as with the stranger here (Gaskell 6). These hurdles are reflected in Esther's friend Sarah Tucker's trial for

theft; the judge considers her story "very sad, but one full of simple, foolish, trusting humanity," and sentences her to eighteen months of hard labor despite her desperate circumstances (271). His apathy is reflected in his dismissive remark that "it was a typical case, presenting all the familiar features." Even listeners who are "not indifferent to Esther's story" are not inclined to take action on her behalf, as with one woman who interviews Esther but declines to give her a reference letter since she is unmarried (98). With characteristic bluntness, Esther refuses to answer any more of her questions: "I don't see what interest all that can be to you, as you ain't going to give me a letter." Merely listening and sympathizing is insufficient unless it moves one to action.

These authors faced creative hurdles as well as social; George Moore voices the difficulty of telling a story in a way that will elicit empathy for the heroine:

> There must be many a kind heart behind those windows who would help her if she could only make known her trouble. But that was the difficulty. She could not make known her trouble; she could not tell the misery she was enduring. She was so ignorant; she could not make herself understood. (132)

Like Esther— who is met with dismissiveness stemming from male privilege by strangers, employers, and even her husband— the novel's more explicit scenes were regarded with distaste even by reviewers who praised its realism and morality. *The Times* review expressed confusion over whether Esther Waters was "moral or immoral"; they agreed with circulating libraries' decision to ban the novel despite their conclusion that its more "repugnant" scenes are redeemed by its moral lesson— not concerning the fallen woman's plight, but the dangers of gambling for the lower classes.[113]

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[113] *The Times*, 15 May 1894, 10. Quoted in "Note on the Text and Reception" in Oxford Classics Edition (Regan).

Unlike Ruth, Tess, and Hetty, Esther has no place in the traditional iconography of Victorian womanhood. She is not an angelic beauty, a pure country girl, or a coy seductress. Her initial physical description emphasizes her plainness— a good-looking young girl, but nothing "remarkable" (Gaskell, 7), no "immaculate beauty," (Hardy, 96) nothing that "you feel ready to crush for inability to comprehend" (Eliot, 118). Esther is "a girl of twenty, short, strongly built, with short, strong arms. Her neck was plump, and her hair of so ordinary a brown that it passed unnoticed. The nose was too thick but the nostrils were well formed" (3). The protagonist's ordinariness is one of the novel's unconventional strengths— as in *Jane Eyre*, the plain heroine finally gets her say— but within the story, it is one of her greatest hurdles. We as readers, with privileged insight into Esther's inner thoughts, marvel at her remarkable endurance and outspokenness; but to her peers and betters the great struggle of her life is just "that old story" (274). When listened to with empathy, Esther's storytelling is shown to break down class barriers, as with Miss Rice and Mrs. Barfield's identification with her: "while listening to Esther's story [Mrs. Barfield] dreamed her own early life over again... overcome with the listlessness of happy memories" (43).

George Moore's scorn towards the emotional dishonesty of sensationalist fiction is echoed in the character Miss Rice, one of Esther's employers. Miss Rice, a novelist, is described as "one of those secluded maiden ladies so common in England, whose experience of life is limited to a tea-party, and whose further knowledge of life is derived from the yellow-backed French novels which filled her bookcases" (169). Moore's evaluation of Miss Rice aligns with George Eliot's own complaints about women writers in her essay "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists." In this essay, she bemoans over-philosophizing, moralistic novels that attempt to put

forth “a complete theory of life and manual of divinity in a love story.”[114] George Moore ultimately has more sympathy for these writers than Eliot, however. Notably, despite Miss Rice’s “remoteness from life” (as Annette Federico terms it), she demonstrates an acute social awareness: "it is always the woman who is sacrificed" (203).[115] She is moved to tears by Esther’s story, and observes that her own novels seem "so pale and conventional . . . compared with this rough page torn out of life" (203).

Moore’s pride in his “rough,” realistic “pages,” despite his privileged status in Victorian society as a man, has struck some scholars as arrogant and anti-feminist. In the preface to the 1932 edition, titled “A Colloquy: George Moore and Esther Waters,” Moore constructs a dialogue between himself and his heroine in which she asserts her rights as a “living thing” to “defend her life.”[116] Discussing this preface– which is often omitted from later editions— Rita Krandis contends that Moore uses it as a device to grant himself the “authority” to tell Esther’s story and “remove himself from a potentially uncomfortable position as… potential appropriator of women's experiences.”[117]

This argument raises the age-old question: can people in positions of social privilege tell, respectfully and accurately, the stories of people in oppressed groups to which they do not belong? As with Hardy, we must question the veracity of George Moore’s attempt at ambassadorial strategic empathy for groups he is not a part of— in this case, both women and the lower classes.[118] George Moore’s relationship to feminism is a point of contention among

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[114] George Eliot, *Selected Essays, Poems, and Other Writings*. 149.
[115] Federico, “Subjectivity and Story,” 148.
[116] George Moore, “A Colloquy: George Moore and Esther Waters.” (New York, Liveright, 1932).
[117] Rita Krandis, Subversive Discourse: The Cultural Production of Late Victorian Feminist Novels. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1995). Pg. 117.
[118] While Hardy’s family was never destitute, both he and his father worked as tradesmen and his family’s means precluded a university education; George Moore, in contrast, came from the Irish landed gentry. Robert Gittings, *Young Thomas Hardy*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1975.
Dunleavy, *George Moore*.

scholars; we often want things for her as readers that she does not seem to want herself, such as completing her rejection of class hierarchies by calling Mrs. Barfield by her first name. That his intentions were naturalistic rather than feminist is generally agreed— Carol Ohmann observes that he merely set out to "cover an aspect of English life that he considered had not been 'done."[119] His ambition lay in the originality of the story rather than its radical potential, unlike authors such as Gaskell and Hardy who explicitly voiced intentions of promoting social justice. Ohmann reads Esther as a "representative," a "type figure" through which Moore could exercise his skills in realism and demonstrate "the enduring principles of human nature."[120] To Ohmann, this results in "the blanching reduction of experience to the typical or even the prototypical."[121] Patricia Stubbs disagrees, arguing that Moore was acutely aware of "the vast discrepancies between the acceptable cultural images of women and what women actually experienced," but concedes that he would not have explicitly aligned himself with the feminist movement.[122] Elena Jaime de Pablos goes further, calling Moore a "committed feminist" due to his potrayal of strong and outspoken heroines.[123]

Esther Waters is without a doubt the most assertive protagonist among the four I have examined. She confronts hypocrisy and unjust class hierarchies in a plain but uncompromising manner. Nina Auerbach observes that despite elements of subversiveness in *Ruth*, *Adam Bede*, and *Tess*, they all remain "variations on its culture's central myth," conforming to the "strictures" of the Victorian fallen woman narrative and ending predictably in the fallen woman's "ritual

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[119] Caroh Ohmann, "George Moore's Esther Waters." *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (Sep., 1970), pp. 174-18.7

[120] Ohmann, "Esther Waters," 179.

[121] Ohmann agrees with Horace Gregory and L. Paul-Dubois that Moore's Irish fiction was his best, as his Irish identity made the material familiar and thus lent itself well to realism.

[122] Patricia Stubbs, *Women and Fiction: Feminism and the Novel*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1979. xiv.

[123] Elena Jaime de Pablos, "George Moore: Committed Feminist" in *George Moore: Artistic Visions and Literary Worlds*. Ed. Mary Pierse, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2006.

slaughter."[124] Esther Waters stands out as an exception not only in her survival, but because she is allowed to express freely what is perhaps the most forbidden emotion to women: anger. Sensing her lover's impending abandonment, she "see[s] blood" and rushes at him with a kitchen knife (46). She even gets into a physical altercation with one of the proprietors of the baby farm. Tess openly expresses her anger against Alec throughout the novel, but ultimately, beaten down by life, chooses a "strategic silence" instead; although Dorothy van Ghent saw echoes of the ballad heroine in Tess, her homicidal act stems from hopelessness rather than rage.[125] Esther's conformity to the maternal values of Victorian society and her parallels to the Madonna echoes *Ruth*, whose child also survives— but her anger, pride, and self-advocacy expands the Madonna's radicalism even more than the earlier novel.

Other scholars have concurred with George Moore's assessment of the shortcomings of George Eliot's fallen woman text.[126] The narrator's pointed characterization of her fallen woman as selfish, materialistic, and amoral is ostensibly intended to provoke disapproval and foreshadow her inevitable fall; instead, it renders her a far more compelling figure than characters the narrative treats with more sympathy, such as Adam and Dinah. In contrast, George Moore explicitly makes a hero out of his fallen woman. Esther's centrality, like that of Ruth and Tess, is radical in itself, and all these women have moments of agency; but the consistency of Esther's independence is unique. In refusing to confine the fallen woman to passivity and sorrow, George Moore goes beyond the naturalism he so doggedly pursued. Perhaps Moore was simply adhering to his quest of portraying humanity as it is, not how it is 'supposed' to be, in

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[124] Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon*, 168-170.
[125] Van Ghent, *The English Novel*, 205.
[126] For other examples, see the chapter on "The Rise of the Fallen Woman" in Nina Auerbach's *The Woman and the Demon*, and the chapters on Adam Bede in Deborah Logan's *Fallenness* and Rebecca Mitchell's *Victorian Lessons in Empathy and Difference.*

Esther's defiance of societal expectations and her full range of emotions— and I would not necessarily call him a "committed" feminist— but in doing so, he dares his audience not to merely pity the fallen woman, but to respect and admire her.

In accordance with his dedication to realism, George Moore rebels against the death of the fallen woman both as a social reality and as a literary trope.[127] But despite Esther's refusal to be sacrificed, George Moore aligns with his predecessors in utilizing graphic depictions of suffering and inhumanity to elicit sympathy for his heroine. The scenes of the lying-in hospital and the baby farm, cited by censors as justification for banning the book from circulating libraries, are especially sordid. As Esther is "overcome with pain and shame," feeling like she is "being torn asunder" in her labor, the nurses around her chat about novels and plays, eat sweets, and pay more attention to a band passing on the street below than the woman delivering a baby (102). She and the other woman in her room are later kicked out unceremoniously, despite having little money and no place to go; the other woman declares in despair that "I wish I had gone and drowned myself" (113).

In a desperate bid to avoid the poorhouse, Esther begins work as a wet nurse and gives her baby over to the care of a baby farm run by Mr. and Mrs. Spires. The contrast between Esther's intense emotions and the Spires's apathy makes the darkness of the baby farm scene especially poignant. Mrs. Spires offers matter-of-factly to kill Esther's child through neglect, assuring her that this is a common practice, while Esther is moved by the sight of another woman's dying infant: "Esther looked at the poor wizened features, twitched with pain, and the far-off cry of doom, a tiny tinkle from the verge, shivered in the ear with a strange pathos" (128).

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[127] However, Dunleavy's *George Moore* explores the "haphazard" nature of Moore's realism and his failure to complete adequate research— for example, into the practices of Esther's religion (Plymouth Brethren) and certain details of childbirth and hospitals. 107-110.

Esther's capacity for empathy is what sets her apart from the infanticidal world of wet-nursing and baby farms. She does not only want to protect her own child, but feels deeply for others as well. George Moore implies here, as George Eliot does, that empathy is the defining characteristic of humanity. In writing Esther Waters, he set out to create a book that was "more human: I shall bathe myself in the simplest and most naive emotions, and shall not leave them."[128] Esther likewise does not leave her humanity behind, even in her lowest moments; we empathize with Esther because she empathizes with others. To an extent, Esther's story should strike us with the same "pathos" that she feels for the dying baby— she is constantly on "the verge" of financial ruin, of homelessness, of social ostracization, of death. Unlike some of the other fallen woman novels I have examined, however, her journey is not a linear downward progression from innocence to death. As a singularly realist heroine, her life goes through ups and downs, periods of relative security and insecurity, experiences of kindness and cruelty— much like our own lives. Thus the pity evoked by her emotional and physical fatigue is transformed into respect for her strength, outspokenness, and love for her child. Unlike Ruth, she gets to be a mother to the end— there is no shame in her maternity, only pride.

Esther is not merely a pathetic figure, but as with these other novels, pity for her excessive suffering certainly plays a major role in garnering empathy. Esther herself, in retelling her own story, often begins with an appeal to pity by describing her woes; as she says to one of her employers, Mrs. Trubner, "I've suffered a great deal… if I am to lose my situation, I don't know what will become of me" (141). Her "plain way of putting things," of calling attention to hypocrisy and injustice, has the power to elicit perhaps a more powerful emotion than pity in her listeners (though never in herself): shame (125). When she confronts the woman she works for as

[128] Moore, "A Communication," 69.

a wet-nurse, Mrs. Rivers, the upper-class woman is not troubled by the thought of Esther losing her baby; in fact, she implies that little Jackie might be better off dead— "he'll only be a drag on you" (125). The one thought that gives her pause is this: "she did not care for it to be publicly known that the life of her child had been bought with the lives of two poor children" (125). Wet nursing was a practice "well within the law," practiced by hundreds of "fashionable ladies"; a practice this entrenched and sanctioned by society is difficult to view objectively and part from without the shame that Esther's simple statement, "a life for a life," elicits (124). Ultimately, Mrs. Rivers's sense of class hierarchy trumps both sympathy and shame: "You forget that I'm paying you fifteen shillings a week…. you have utterly forgotten yourself" (125).

Another notably divergent aspect of Esther Waters as a fallen woman is the nature of her seduction. All three of the preceding novels feature an upper-class seducer, ranging from diabolical to reckless, and a woman lower in the class hierarchy who is manipulated, forced, or misled by them. Conversely, the father of Esther's child, William Latch, is a footman and lower-class like Esther. Their relationship is balanced in its power dynamic— at least in terms of class— and its passion. They are equally "inflamed… to reach out to life and to grasp it together" (40). Although her religious guilt for committing "the sin which her race had elected to fight against" and panic over her pregnancy eventually overcome her, she does not express undue remorse for her sexuality and does not have to spend the rest of her life redeeming herself for it (65). She does not pay for it in celibacy or erasure like Ruth, in exile like Hetty, in abandonment like Tess, or in death like all three; her suffering is solely credited to unjust institutions and prejudices, closest resembling *Tess*. But in contrast to *Tess*, the lovers' reunion is not due to Esther's hopelessness or lack of choice. She turns down a more respectable and secure life with Fred Parsons, who shares her religious convictions, for the sake of her child knowing

his father. Her independence and sexuality also contribute to this decision— she is attracted by her reawakening feelings for William and the excitement of a career as a landlady and barmaid at William's inn.

The fallen woman's agency, her relationship to her own body, is a site of conflict for Victorian writers. If an author wants their character to be sympathetic, like Ruth, her agency must be limited; her say in her own sin must be next to nothing. But the visual art of the period reflects the complexity surrounding the cultural image of the fallen woman. The fallen woman is often depicted alone– in George Watts's *Found Drowned*, Ford Madox Brown's *"Take Your Son, Sir!,"* Augustus Egg's *Past and Present* triptych, in Millais's *Ophelia*.[129] The omission of the seducer can be attributed to a Victorian sense of propriety, as Nina Auerbach theorizes— but its effect is to center these women, their choices, and their abasement.[130] The fallen woman's solitude emphasizes her agency as well as her ostracization.

Esther's independence in the text is remarkable. The other fallen women in this study are at their most desperate when they are alone; but Esther rejects dependence, refusing to bow to societal or individual pressure. She leaves comfortable situations, such as with Mrs. Rivers and Miss Rice, to live life on her own terms. She is not alone: she is autonomous. Ruth is blessed with constant allies in the Bensons, while Tess stands alone for the most part against a vast, bleak backdrop of uncaring nature; both must ultimately pay for their sins and face death alone. Esther lies somewhere in between the two women. She is fortunate enough to find friends at crucial junctures— Miss Rice, William, Mrs. Barfield— but most often she struggles alone, cast out by respectable society, rejected by her baby's father, left behind by her family. Her survival,

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[129] Ford Madox Brown, "*Take Your Son, Sir*!," oil on canvas, 1851-6, London, Tate Gallery.
Augustus Egg, *Past and Present,* oil on canvas, 1858, London, Tate Gallery.
John Everett Millais, *Ophelia*, oil on canvas, 1851-2, London, Tate Gallery.
[130] Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon*, 155.

unlike Ruth's, cannot be attributed to an external kindness. It is her dogged internal strength and maternal instinct that save her— not from herself or her sin, but from a patriarchal capitalist society hostile to her very existence. In order to experience the joyful ascent into heaven, Ruth must regress; her motherhood, her sexuality, all her worldly knowledge must be erased. Esther must retain that knowledge, must embrace her motherhood and her bodily autonomy in order to survive.

By the novel's end, life has worn her down, and despite the apparent closure of her return to the rural Woodview, she knows she must "work on, work on" til the end (318). She triumphs in her survival, but this triumph does not extend to liberation— she is still entrenched in class hierarchy, refusing to call Mrs. Barfield by her first name, and though she has raised her son to manhood he is now subject to the uncertainty of a soldier's fate as she watches uneasily from afar. Moore's realism resists the undeserved tragic endings of many fallen woman novels as well as the unrealistic sentimentality of a happy ending. The novel's final chapter is a perfect microcosm of Moore's strategies of narrative empathy. We feel for Esther's fatigue, her unease about her son, the difficult past behind her and the difficult road ahead; but even more so, we close the book in awe of her inner strength, defiance in the face of oppression, and overwhelming resilience.

Conclusion

The temporal journey from *Ruth* to *Esther Waters* encompasses decades of social reform and ideological shifts which are tangible in the differences between the four novels. By the time George Moore had completed his fallen woman novel, the pernicious Contagious Diseases Act had been repealed; amendments to the Matrimonial Causes Act expanded women's accessibility to divorce in 1878; the Custody of Infants Acts of 1839 and 1873 granted women more rights to their own children; and the Married Women's Property Act of 1884 recognized women as autonomous individuals not belonging to their husbands.[131]

Although in many ways Thomas Hardy and George Moore's gender complicated their progressivism, the political and social advancements of the 1890s expanded their ability to vindicate the fallen woman. They were granted a far wider space to explore female sexuality and emotions than their counterparts of the 1850s; but this is not to say these novels were 'better.' Indeed, Gaskell and Eliot creatively and subversively played with the rigid social mores of their time, lending their work great depth and interpretive potential. As female authors, their firsthand experience of oppression under Victorian patriarchy heightens the emotionality and radicality of their novels— in their fallen characters, they were personalizing issues that were already personal to them.

The question of the empathy/altruism hypothesis— whether empathic emotion can motivate altruistic action— is one I have not approached in this thesis. Nevertheless, this question was deeply considered by these authors, and their beliefs about the ability of fiction to spur positive change pervades their novels. Regardless of their background, identity, or intentions, they all succeeded in the radical act of feeling for the fallen woman, and making their readers feel for them too.

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[131] Mary Lyndon Shanley. *Feminism, Marriage, and the Law in Victorian England, 1850-1895*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021).

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