

Chapter II

Characters, Interests and Aims

Mrs. Gaskell

Compared to her contemporaries Mrs. Gaskell is known as the most feminine of the English women novelists of that time. Indeed this is one of her main characteristics. Not that the others such as Charlotte Brontë, or even George Eliot, were altogether unfeminine. Both of them did have at least some obvious feminine traits : for example, Charlotte was emotional, illogical and always concentrated on the personal; but she was not like the ordinary women of her time, in that she was independent, and unconventional. Mrs. Gaskell was all a woman was traditionally expected to be, especially a woman in the Victorian age. Unfortunately, few books have been written about her life, so we hardly know about her character as a child. She began to write quite late and, in order to know her well, the surest way is to examine her works.

Mrs. Gaskell's early life did not show her to have had any depressions which might have forced her to find an escape into another world of her own. The only disappointment of her childhood was that her father remarried after the death of her mother. Except for whatever caused the bad impression made by her step-mother, Mrs. Gaskell as a child did not actually receive unkind treatment from any of those who took care of her. Moreover she had a kind-hearted aunt who regarded her as her own daughter. The pleasant surroundings at Knutsford seem to have played an important part in forming her character, for she grew up to be a woman happy by nature.

David Cecil describes Mrs. Gaskell as follows :

" But we have to look at a portrait of Mrs. Gaskell, soft-eyed, beneath her charming veil, to see that she was a dove. In an age whose ideal of woman emphasized the feminine qualities at the expense of all others, she was all a woman was expected to be; gentle, domestic, tactful, unintellectual, prone to tears, easily shocked. So far from chafing at the limits imposed on her activities, she accepted them with serene satisfaction. She married young and had seven children; she performed with decorous enthusiasm the duties expected of a Unitarian minister's wife; she looked up to man as her sex's rightful and benevolent master. #1

Perhaps Cecil's remarks are not altogether true, for Mrs. Gaskell shows us in Wives and Daughters that her intellect was greater than he has indicated. As we have seen, she travelled a lot on the Continent and, at the end of her life, bought herself a country house to be away from the responsibilities of a minister's wife.

Owing to the fact that she was characteristically feminine, her capacity for expressing virile thoughts, feelings and intellectual ideas was somewhat limited; but, on the other hand, her power to give her readers minute details of feminine delicacy was such that few writers can equal her. Her pictures of Mrs. Jameison's drawingroom in Granford, Molly's bed-room in Wives and Daughters, Miss Jessie Brown's childish ribboned frocks, and Miss Jenkyns' new bonnet, are drawn with a woman's skill. She lacks Charlotte's burning imagination and, at any rate in her earlier writings, she is too unintellectual to analyse her impressions. When she wanted to write about something, she just sat down and described what she saw and her

1 Early Victorian Novelists by David Cecil

works turned out to be very interesting because of her descriptive ability and her subtle observation.

Mrs. Gaskell was compassionate towards poor people and she tried to show the real situation of the miserable workingmen of her day and the treatment they received from their masters. She did not very openly blame either side, for she was always afraid of public criticism. In this way her works do not seem entirely honest. She was more anxious to please her readers than to reveal matters which she thought were improper for woman. In The Life of Charlotte Brontë, the episode of Charlotte's love of M. Héger in Brussels is omitted — not because Mrs. Gaskell did not know about it, but because her timidity led her to suppress it: for this she has been blamed. On the other hand, her rebellious exaggeration of some of the characteristics of real people, in The Life of Charlotte Brontë, dramatizes that work here and there, as seen in ^{the} characterizations of old Mr. Brontë and Mr. Nicholls.

Mrs. Gaskell was a sympathetic person who always aimed at peace. She was interested in the conditions of the workmen living around her, whom she observed closely while performing her duty as a clergyman's wife. She understood very well the effect of a background of smoke and rain in Manchester. Living there, she began to appreciate the loveliness of the country around Knutsford and, in her books, she often recalls its beauty. She always hoped to make the rich and the poor understand each other. Mary Barton does not show the writer to be someone with a revolutionary spirit, but rather gives evidence that Mrs. Gaskell was full of sympathy and kindness, and was therefore gentler than Charlotte whose character was more noble than sympathetic.

Like most women, Mrs. Gaskell was superstitious. This is shown by her comment on the picture of the Brontë sisters painted by Branwell :

"The picture was divided, almost in the middle, by a great pillar. On the side of the column which was lighted by the sun, stood Charlotte, in the womanly dress of that day of gigot sleeves and large collars. On the deeply-shadowed side was Emily, with Anne's gentle face resting on her shoulder, Emily's countenance struck me as full of power, Charlotte's of solitude; Anne's of tenderness ----- I remember looking on those two sad, earnest, shadowed faces, and wondering whether I could trace the mysterious expression which is said to foretell an early death. I had some fond superstitious hope that the column divided, their fates from hers, who stood apart in the canvas, as in life she survived. "1

Charlotte Brontë"

Charlotte had a strong and original character. Unlike Mrs. Gaskell, who was sweet and pleasant towards everybody who happened to come into contact with her, Charlotte often gave people the impression that she was unattractive because of being terribly shy and nervous, which did not help her to be easily popular. She had an Irish father who was known particularly for his queer behavior and for the stern discipline with which he brought up his children. So Charlotte and her sisters, even as children, were grave and silent beyond their years and some used to think them spiritless, though in fact they were markedly different from any ordinary children in that they had exceptional intellects. The early death of Mrs. Brontë", their ailing mother, increased their solemnity and they clung to each other more and more. One thing especially evident is that the Brontë"

1 The Life of Charlotte Brontë" by Mrs. Gaskell

children loved each other tenderly. Mrs. Gaskell wrote about their childhood :

" They were all in all to each other. I do not suppose that there ever was a family more tenderly bound to each other. "1

This had a sad effect on Charlotte afterwards, because when she was left alone she suffered from terrible loneliness.

Charlotte and her brother and sisters were interested in books and in their own inner lives rather than in outside society. Of course, they did not read childrens' books; instead, as Charles Lamb said, they " browsed undisturbed among the wholesome pasturage of English literature. "2

and Mrs. Gaskell also relates :

" Upstairs were four bed-chambers ----- , with the addition of a small apartment over the passage, or "lobby" as we call it in the north ----- This little upstairs room was appropriated to the children. Small as it was, it was not called a nursery; indeed, it had not the comfort of a fireplace in it; the servants — two rough, affectionate, warm-hearted, wasteful sisters, who cannot now speak of the family without tears — called the room the "children's study." The age of the eldest student was perhaps by this time seven. "3

Like most children, they loved to play, but their games revealed them as they really were — intellectual and imaginative. They created a new world in which they played ^{an} adult part. Whenever they wished to escape from their unsatisfying everyday world, they "acted out" adventurous episodes, some from literary works they had read and some from their own precocious minds, the records of which give us some ideas of the young Brontës' opinions. All of them began to write when they were quite young.

1 The Life of Charlotte Brontë " by Mrs. Gaskell

2 The Life of Charlotte Brontë " by Mrs. Gaskell

3 Ibid

Charlotte's earliest known work was written when she was not more than twelve years old.

The experience Charlotte had at Cowan Bridge involving the death of her two eldest sisters made a deep impression on her. In several of her novels, she put in somewhere a bitter portrait of schools for poor children. She intended to relate what she had seen and what she felt about the unhealthy conditions at her school, but does not seem to have had any conscious intention of bringing about reforms. However, her writing indirectly caused an improvement as time went on for the wretched children.

Charlotte never enjoyed the pleasures of carefree life, because she had to take care of her younger sisters from the time when she was a little girl and also had to look after the house and her father. Mary Taylor's first impression of Charlotte's appearance was :

" Coming out of a covered cart, in very old-fashioned clothes, and looking very cold and miserable ----- she looked a little old woman, so short-sighted ----- "1

The fact that she had serious responsibilities, however, gave her strength to live on, and this also had an important influence on her character. Miss Nussey once said of her :

" She always seemed to feel that a deep responsibility rested upon her; that she was an object of expense to those at home, and that she must use every moment to attain the purpose for which she was sent to school, i.e., to fit herself for governess life ----- she did not play or amuse herself as other did. When her companions were merry around the fire, or otherwise enjoying themselves during the twilight, which was always a precious time for relaxation, she would be kneeling close to the window busy with her studies,"2

1 The Brontë Story by Margaret Lane

2 The Brontë Story by Margaret Lane

Thus, Charlotte was abnormally developed. Her naturally deep and strong emotions and her love of freedom conflicted with her keen conscience and this conflict was accentuated by the responsibility put upon her by the family. She longed for fame and wealth so that she might live happily with her sisters in Haworth which, as long as they had one another's company, seemed so fascinating a place for all of them. In this way she was very different from other women of her time. Marriage as an immediate goal did not play much part in her thoughts at that time, even though she was fully grown then and had had two proposals. She loved to be independent and hated the idea of having some inferior person to master her so she went out to be a governess, a situation she accepted unwillingly because she had no choice. She wrote from Haworth in 21st December 1839 as follows :

" I intend to force myself to take another situation when I can get one, though I hate and abhor the very thought of governess-ship. But I must do it, and, therefore, I heartily wish I could hear of a family where they need such a commodity as a governess."¹

The other reason why Charlotte did not escape from the life which stretched wearily before her was because of her romantic attitude towards love. Concerning Henry Nussey, one of her admirers, Charlotte wrote to Ellen :

" Yet I had not and could not have that intense attachment which would make me willing to die for him; and, if ever I marry, it must be in that light of adoration that I will regard my husband."²

1 The Brontë Story by Margaret Lane

2 The Brontë Story by Margaret Lane

Her books show Charlotte to be highly unconventional. She broke down the **long-**standing tradition that the heroine of a novel should be incomparably beautiful. In The Professor, Mademoiselle Henri, who is drawn from Charlotte herself as regards outward appearance and expression, is, according to the hero, Mr. William Crimsworth, "girlish but not striking"¹. Moreover, Jane Eyre, who is obscure, inexperienced, unimportant and looks pale and ordinary, but who has a "soul made of fire, a character that bends but does not break", is also Charlotte herself.

Mr. Smith's impression of Charlotte was recorded after he first saw her in London, as

"Interesting rather than attractive. She was very small, and had a quaint, old-fashioned look. Her head seemed too large for her body. She had fine eyes, but her face was marred by the shape of the mouth and by the complexion. There was but little feminine charm about her; and of this fact she herself was uneasily and perpetually conscious. It may seem strange that the possession of genius did not lift her above the weakness of an excessive anxiety about her personal appearance. But I believe she would have given all her genius and her fame to have been beautiful. Perhaps few women ever existed more anxious to be pretty than she, or more angrily conscious of the circumstance that she was not pretty"²

Her letters to M. Héger and many passages in her works prove her to have been ardently romantic. Charlotte wrote those letters in a way that anyone who reads them will realize that she had undoubtedly fallen in love with the Belgian Professor. Mrs. Gaskell suppressed this love-affair because, in Victorian eyes, it was shameful for anyone to fall in love with a married man; but there is no doubt that her love for M. Héger was

1 The Professor by Charlotte Brontë"

2 The Brontë Story by Margaret Lane

virtuous and that she never expected anything from him beyond the sympathy and compassion which he seemed unwilling to give her. She tried to get rid of her passion, however hard it was for her. From beginning to end, Charlotte had to face conflicts in her heart because of being deeply emotional and at the same time born with such painful shyness of character.

Characters, Interests and Aims — a Comparison

Among English Victorian novelists, Mrs. Gaskell's typical Victorianism is as obvious as Charlotte's originality. Mrs. Gaskell was concerned with the question of good and evil; and satisfied with innocence, industry and warm-heartedness; at the same time she disliked harshness, flippancy and loose-living. Though her characters were fairly realistic and not so obviously "good" or "bad" as those of Dickens, she tended to reward virtue and punish vice; and true love in her novels is usually rewarded. Charlotte was interested in individuals and, since she knew very few people, she often had to rely for character-descriptions on her own personality, emotions and experience of the world. She was especially concerned about frustrated love. The chief characters in her novels, whether male or female, such as William Crimsworth, Jane Eyre, Lucy Snowe, represent Charlotte herself. In this way she was more romantic than Mrs. Gaskell for, in spite of her own high standard of virtue, she had more sympathy for human weaknesses, and she liked to describe human feelings, passions, etc. for their own sake. On the other hand she was more realistic in that she had a remarkable power of observation, and everything she wrote was based on her own experience. As we shall see in a later chapter, she never punished or rewarded her characters. The hateful brother of William Crimsworth is very successful in the end and Lucy Snowe

is not sure to lead a happy and prosperous life with Paul Emmanuel. That is why Charlotte is quite different from typical Victorian novelists, not only from Mrs. Gaskell, but also from Charles Dickens and others.

Thus, while Mrs. Gaskell herself was every inch feminine, beautiful in appearance, charming in manners, tactful and tender in her mind, Charlotte had but "little feminine charm about her," and she was so conscious of this fact that the heroines of her novels were very simple like herself.

Both writers had difficulty with the problem of male characters; for, like most women novelists in those days, they had only limited contacts with men. Charlotte, whenever she tried to depict male characters, was convinced that they must be unlike women and she used her imagination to bring out wild, savage types, such as Rochester, Paul Emmanuel, and Louis Moore, who are all of them rugged in looks and rough in manners. There is too much violence and virility in them to be realistic. Or else she created such characters as Crimsworth, who was like a stormy girl and who resembled her heroines in being drawn from herself. Mrs. Gaskell's male characters are, in some cases ^{only} ~~even~~ more unrealistic than Charlotte's, because the conventions of the Victorian Era kept men and women so much apart that mutual understanding was difficult. Thus Charles Dickens' young female characters are similarly unrealistic.

Both Mrs. Gaskell and Charlotte were bound by the Victorian conception of duty to family, and obligation to set a high example. Mrs. Gaskell followed this sense of responsibility both in real life and in her writing. She was a good mother and wife and she clung to her husband and children until the end of her life. Her interests were not incongruous with her character and position. Her being religious and philanthropic made her wish to see the rich more charitable and the poor

more comfortable — these are partly the interests of ^aminister's wife. Charlotte was equally dutiful — she felt responsible for taking care of her own home at Haworth, as well as of her younger sisters and of her father. She always struggled against her own wishes in order to fulfill her duty at home. In writing she was different from Mrs. Gaskell who made her works as typically Victorian as herself. Charlotte did not pay much regard to affairs outside the scope of her experience. It can be seen that, in her novels, Charlotte wrote almost entirely about characters based on people she knew or upon herself, her own experiences and so on, such as governesses, teachers and students. Her novels are about adventures of the spirit, about inner emotions. She was especially good at describing young girls similar to herself. The first quarter of Jane Eyre is a profound study of childhood and as good as that of David Copperfield, the youthful hero of Dickens. Mrs. Gaskell was more successful in building up typical Victorian heroines, such as Molly Gibson and Mary Barton, than at portraying such independent, serious characters as Margaret Hale in North and South, who is generally regarded as unconvincing.

Charlotte wrote just because writing pleased herself and satisfied her loneliness, so almost everything she wrote was true, at least to herself. She was frank and sincere and did not seem to care what her readers would feel towards her books. She had some of the well-known Victorian prejudices about women's behavior, yet she gave for the first time in the history of the English novel, a portrait of a passionate woman seen through a woman's eyes. However, while her heroines refuse to deny their passions, they decline to over-step the limits of conventional propriety :

" Do you think I can stay to become nothing to you ? (demanded Jane of Rochester) Do you think I am an automaton ? — a machine without feelings ? and can bear to have my morsel of bread snatched from my lips, and my drop of living water dashed from my cup ? Do you think because I am poor, obscure, plain and little, I am soulless and heartless ? You think wrong! — I have as much soul as you — and full as much heart! and if God had gifted me with some beauty, and much wealth, I should have made it hard for you to leave me, as it is now for me to leave you."¹

If Charlotte had written this under her own name instead of under the name of Currer Bell, she would have been criticized bitterly at the time of publication, because such exposure of emotion had never been known before from women. Charlotte, to this extent, was unquestionably realistic in her writing of Jane Eyre — her most typical book and the one which is most likely to be immortal. However, in some other ways, Jane Eyre is romantic to the core, sentimental and melodramatic — Rochester's queer character, Jane's worship of him and the episode of the mad woman are all products of an imagination deeply affected by isolation.

Mrs. Gaskell was more tactful than Charlotte. She was anxious to please her readers and therefore her works are less intellectually honest. Like most women, she was afraid of discussing sexual matters and she mostly wrote about social problems and did not concentrate on individual life. Charlotte clearly perceived this lack of truth of her friend and upbraided her in the letter already quoted.

In The Life of Charlotte Brontë,["] Mrs. Gaskell's tact in not writing everything she knew about Charlotte; though partly for the sake of her friend's memory and of the husband and father who survived her, can also be attributed to her desire

¹ Jane Eyre by Charlotte Brontë"

not to offend against Victorian notions of propriety, thereby shocking some of her readers. This is another reason why Charlotte's letters to M. Héger are not included in this book.