

Charles University in Prague

Faculty of Education

Department of English Language and Literature

Bachelor Thesis

The Role of Religion in Elizabeth Gaskell's Ruth and Mary Barton

Lenka Prücknerová

Study programme: Specialization in Education

Study subjects: English – Pedagogy

Thesis supervisor: Bernadette Higgins, M.A

2015

Declaration:

I hereby declare that I have written this bachelor's thesis by myself and that all the sources used during writing were properly cited.

Prague, 30th November 2015

.....

Acknowledgement:

I would like to thank my supervisor Bernadette Higgins, M.A for her priceless advice and persistent assistance.

Annotation:

The central aim of this thesis is to explore the role of religion in Elizabeth Gaskell's novels *Ruth* and *Mary Barton*. The theoretical part provides an insight into the role of religion in Victorian society. It includes the impact of religion on the two major themes of the novels – the values of the working class and the position of the female gender, emphasizing the concept of social inequality and the phenomenon of the fallen woman. The role of religion in Elizabeth Gaskell's life, and the public response to the two novels is also mentioned. The practical part analyses the significance of religion for individuals in their diverse social circumstances and conditions, and portrays how allusions to God are the adorning of daily words and deeds.

Keywords:

Elizabeth Gaskell, Ruth, Mary Barton, social novel, fallen women

Anotace:

Hlavním cílem této práce je zhodnotit roli náboženství v dílech *Mary Bartonová* a *Ruth* od Elizabeth Gaskellové. Teoretická část poskytuje vhled do role náboženství ve viktoriánské společnosti a zkoumá jeho vliv v hlavních tématech těchto děl – hodnotách pracovní třídy a pozici ženského pohlaví s důrazem na pojetí společenské nerovnosti a fenoménu padlých žen. Zahrnuta je také role náboženství v životě Elizabeth Gaskellové a odezva veřejnosti na výše uvedená díla. Praktická část zkoumá význam náboženství pro společnost i jednotlivce v jejich rozmanitých společenských podmínkách a zobrazuje, jak jsou odkazy k Bohu ozdobou každodenních slov a činů.

Klíčová slova:

Elizabeth Gaskellová, Ruth, Mary Bartonová, společenský román, padlé ženy

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	5
Theoretical Part	6
2. Victorian society	6
2.1 Values of the working class	7
2.1.2 The social novel	8
2.2 The status of women	8
2.3 The role of religion	10
3. The author and her work	12
3.1 Elizabeth Gaskell	12
3.2 The reception of Mary Barton	13
3.3 The reception of Ruth	14
Practical part	16
4. Mary Barton	16
4.1 Hardship of the working class	17
4.2 The spiritual magnitude of the main characters	18
5. Ruth	21
5.1 Ruth as the protagonist	21
5.2 Religious discourse	25
6. Ruth & Mary Barton	28
6.1 Response to trials	28
6.2 Characteristics of society reflected in both novels	29
6.2.2 The fallen woman	30
6.2.3 Superstition	30
6.2.4 Mutual support	31
6.2.5 Selflessness and steadfastness	31
6.2.6 Diligence	32
7. Conclusion	34
8. Works cited	36

1. Introduction

The thesis generally explores spiritual aspects in both literary and physical realms. It is incumbent upon readers to know that frequent allusions to the term ‘religion’ refer to “the belief in and worship of a superhuman controlling power, especially a personal God”, rather than, “a particular system of faith and worship”, as the definitions in Oxford Dictionary of English suggest.

The theoretical part of this thesis is essentially concerned with the role of religion in Victorian society and its reflection in the treatment of women and labourers, highlighting the concept of the fallen woman and the significance of the social novel. It offers an insight into the industrial circumstances of the society. The particulars of these topics are pertinent to the stances suggested in the two novels analysed in the practical part. The theoretical part also provides information about Elizabeth Gaskell relevant to the discussed themes – her life as well as her intention in writing these novels and their impact on Victorian society.

The practical part of this thesis discusses the pivotal themes of the novels in relation to religion and its diverse roles and forms. Since each novel explores different social issues, the novels are initially discussed separately and their similar features are compared subsequently. *Mary Barton* essentially explores the extremes of poverty and wealth, and the reaction of the characters towards it. *Ruth* predominately focuses on the protagonist and examines the clash between what is laudable and reprehensible in terms of social behaviour from both religious and public points of view.

The quest for the origin and the role of moral values is an inherent part of human nature. Gaskell’s life and novels as well as Victorian constructs and society are a vital example of this phenomenon.

Theoretical Part

2. Victorian society

The nineteenth century was a time of rapid industrialization and urbanization. The first signs of the Industrial Revolution appeared around 1780 and generated many social changes. England was transformed from an agricultural to an industrial society, which rendered the nation a great economic authority (Mitchell 1).

There was a rapid growth of the population that greatly encouraged urbanization. In 1801, most of the population resided in villages, in 1851, more than half of the people inhabited cities (Mitchell 5). Significant changes in the social strata were a great part of the industrialization process. Wholesale traders, producers and investors advanced both financially and socially as a direct result of the Industrial Revolution (Mitchell 20).

Industrialization also correlated with the Victorian religious revival (Wolffe 256). The role of religion in its diverse forms and discourses was immense in Victorian society for both the owners of the means of production as well as for the members of the industrial workforce. Religion played an important role especially for the poor who experienced great trials in this period. These trials were partly the consequences of the shift from an agricultural to industrial lifestyle. The poor workforce now living in cities did not have access to food sources as they did living in villages as rural labourers (Lii).

This, together with the recently established Corn Laws, which prohibited the import of corn to raise the price of domestic corn, ignited a period of hunger often referred to as the “Hungry Forties”. It was a period of the first part of the decade when the price of food rose immensely. These measures caused economic depression in England as people had to spend money on food rather than goods and the living standards of the working class reduced to extremes (Bloy, *Corn*). This condition was a great source of inspiration for many politicians, philosophers and writers such as Benjamin Disraeli, Friedrich Engels or Charles Dickens.

The rapid social changes also instigated in 1836 a movement referred to as Chartism that was initiated and run by members of the working class. Their main aim was to establish parliamentary democracy, which they perceived as a way to improve social and economic circumstances. In fact, working class males did not have the right to vote

until the Third Reform Act in 1884. The movement received diverse responses and failed to reach its objectives, nevertheless it represented a notable reaction to the seemingly positive consequences of the Industrial Revolution, which were a great source of disappointment and destitution for the poor (Bloy, *Chartism*).

2.1 Values of the working class

The aforementioned social turmoil reinforced extremes of poverty and wealth and the rich and the poor became more alienated. Since categorizing was the very nature of Victorian reasoning, diverse attributes were assigned to both classes. The coarse conduct and lifestyle of the poor was believed to be utterly different from the refined mores and manners of the rich (Walvin 126).

The hardships of the poor naturally encompassed their attitude towards religion. The general assumption was that people were sinful and estranged from God. Especially the working classes were thought to require a strengthening of their Christian identity (Wolffe 85). In the Victorian era, the Established Churches perceived spreading the faith among the poor as vital for both individuals and society (Wolffe 54). Since the working classes were disparate in terms of “urban geography, cultural values and social status”, an intermittent sense of indignation surfaced and they rejected religious denominations that would aggravate rather than reduce these differences (Hempton 123).

Engels provided an insight into the social circumstances and suggested that working class people were morally, physically and mentally ostracized and neglected by those in power. The response to this treatment varied but as Engels notes, it is natural that if the working class people are “treated as brutes”, they will eventually fulfil this role (118). Some turn to anger as a result of inhuman treatment and reluctance to succumb to domination. Others either accept their burden and live a reverent and dignified life or they fail to face their fate and become indolent and dissolute creatures – they “lose their moral hold upon themselves as they have already lost their economic hold, live along from day to day, drink and fall into licentiousness” (Engels 120). It is reasonable that subservience, which seems to spring naturally from the indigent position of the poor, is easier to grant to the Almighty than to fellow mortals. Thus, their faith could be seen as a form of escape from social suppression.

2.1.2 The social novel

These themes became prominent in the literature of that time and the genre that would predominantly explore them was the acclaimed social novel. This genre strongly correlated with the increasing influence of realism on literature and thus gained popularity during the “Hungry Forties”, a period which very much encouraged exploration of these topics (Keen). The concept of the social novel is also associated with Thomas Carlyle and his “Condition of England Question” posed in “Chartism”. This phrase, from which emerged the eponymous genre, endeavoured to participate in both social and political debates, concentrating on class relations, gender issues, labour conditions and social agitation (Diniejko, *Condition*). Carlyle inspired many Victorian writers and activists. For example, Disraeli with his literary and political aspirations promoted the idea of a kinship between employers and employees and thus was one of those “who wanted to bridge the gulf between the poor and the rich in England through reconciliation and respect for the monarchy, the Church, and the country’s traditions”. He criticized this division between the rich and the poor and referred to it as the “Two Nations” which was also a subtitle of one of his novels (Diniejko, *Benjamin*). Social novels as such explored the impact of the Industrial Revolution on society and strived to raise awareness and provoke sympathy in the rich (Diniejko, *Condition*). They also challenged social stigmas, such as that formal worship does not automatically imply strong faith and that association with certain domination does not necessarily guarantee high moral standards (Hempton 133).

2.2 The status of women

The role of women was also gravely affected by social stigmas. Women in the Victorian era were generally subordinate to man, “their rights were subsumed within those of their husbands”. It was stated by the legislation that through marriage, man and woman were made as one. Yet, the man was the breadwinner, and it was a role “imposed upon him by divine providence” (Ingham 22). Women were compelled to succumb to his authority and abide by his bidding.

Walvin states that their inferior position resulted from the general surfeit of women (126). The statistics show that for example, in 1851, there were 8,781,225 males and

9,146,384 females (Mitchell 13). This surplus of women gave rise to occupations highly associated with single women, such as governess or nurse (Walvin 126) and ignited new emancipation movements (Mitchell 14). Thus, despite the fact that the position of women was inferior, single women proved autonomy and married women embodied the “pillar upon which family life was based” (Walvin 124).

Women’s obedience was mainly reinforced by the austerity they encountered if they challenged their traditional roles (Walvin 126). These roles were based on the “propaganda generated by various proponents of certain ideals of family life” that represented the concept of the nuclear family, the basic institution of British society (Walvin 123). Nonconformist families, who encouraged divergent forms of cohabitation or methods such as contraception, were confronted with antagonism. This antipathy was encouraged by the notion that these ideas were “corrosive of the marital, domestic ideal”, which reflected the traditions and values often associated with religious teachings (Walvin 126).

Divergence from the traditional roles also encompassed matters of illegitimacy and prostitution, which were crucial matters of public and political discussions. Revulsion towards sexuality was to be the social norm. Most of the books written in this period reinforced the notion that prudery was a common attitude (Walvin 122). The recursive image of the ‘fallen woman’ that sprang from these circumstances was not merely an evangelical concept but an actual state of thousands of women. This image comprised seduced women and waged prostitutes. Those that were simply seduced became victims of bigoted society, which refused to condone aberrant relationships (King 11). The most severe retribution was imposed upon females with children without husbands. Such women were rejected by the society and frequently died (Walvin 126). Those that succumbed to prostitution were reprimanded for leading secular and profane lives, condemned by the bourgeoisie, who adorned themselves with high moral standards. Nevertheless, prostitution resulted from a financial condition and was by no means a desired profession. As Walvin says, it “was not a job to which women aspired but to which they gravitated from desperation” (Walvin 130).

The concept of chastity “meant for many not only a lack of sexual experience, but a lack of sexual feeling” (King 11). Religion played an immense role in establishing these

moral values. It also greatly influenced the symbolic perception of women during the first decades of the Victorian period. Accordingly, the supreme images of ‘madonnas’ and ‘magdalenes’ emphasize the Victorian perception of femininity. The imagery is also endowed with great significance when exploring the religious impact on the perception of women. The two contrasting figures “provide a rationale for the division of women into ‘angels’ and ‘abominations’” and thus establish the twofold moral purpose of women in the Victorian society (King 10). This division closely correlates with the imagery of the poem *The Angel in the House* by Coventry Patmore. As described by Virginia Woolf, who avidly criticized this poem, women were to offer selfless sacrifices, perform flawless housework, and embody perfect purity (Blair 53).

Man must be pleased; but him to please
Is woman's pleasure; down the gulf
Of his condoled necessities
She casts her best, she flings herself.
How often flings for nought, and yokes
Her heart to an icicle or whim,
Whose each impatient word provokes
Another, not from her, but him. (Patmore)

2.3 The role of religion

Religiosity was a bright beacon of this period. The importance of religious faith persisted despite the fact that the literal truth of the holy writings was challenged due to scientific discoveries, which encouraged divergent readings of religious teachings (Mitchell 245). Victorian society thus experienced a crisis of faith. It evolved from reading the scriptures as indubitable truth to regarding them as allegorical guidance. For example, Jesus and his deeds were not perceived “as literal historical facts but as parables expressing philosophical truths about the relations between humanity and the divine” (Mitchell 250). Therefore, the aforementioned crisis did not ignite the fall of religion but a more profound grasp of its concepts.

Generally, the majority of denominations displayed evangelical zeal stressing the concepts of sin, atonement and redemption (Moran 26). Christians of the United

Kingdom sustained the succession of earthly days of trials, final judgment and spiritual life after death (Evans 278). The final judgement was either to bestow everlasting joy or condemnation to eternal damnation. This fundamental understanding reflected heavily in their daily lives and shaped their free time, “defining in many households what was said, read and done” (Moran 24). They emphasized the significance of a virtuous demeanour, righteous livelihood and selfless acts. They employed regular Bible reading and Church visiting into their everyday lives. As summarized by Evans, the “common conception of the meaning of life, and large agreement on its consequent practice, was the essential cement, which in spite of manifold diversities of society and economics, held the Victorians so strongly together” (Evans 278).

Besides its potency to bind society, religion was also a great source of assistance and relief for individuals. The extract of the poem below by Norman Macleod portrays the omnipresent guidance that faith in God epitomizes. It is called *Trust in God and Do the Right* and represents “a fine example of the evangelical emphasis on individual conscience” (Mitchell 248).

Courage, brother! do not stumble,
Though thy path is dark as night;
There’s a star to guide the humble:
“Trust in God, and do the right.”
Let the road be long and dreary,
And its ending out of sight;
Foot it bravely, strong or weary;
“Trust in God, and do the right.” (Macleod)

The supremacy of religion in the early Victorian society determined the nature of both the female gender and the working class. Christianity as such was a significant part of the Victorian cultural heritage. Christian ethics sustained the virtues of responsibility, selflessness and chastity, which naturally framed collective conduct (Moran 24). Nevertheless, in the Victorian period, literature “served to give wide cultural currency to religious references, while softening their theological focus” (Wolffe 185).

3. The author and her work

3.1 Elizabeth Gaskell

Gaskell was strongly influenced by Unitarians. Her husband and father were ministers of the Unitarian church therefore she was surrounded by Unitarians in both her private and public affairs (Matus 132). Unitarianism is a movement derived from Christianity. As the title suggests Unitarians refused the concept of the trinity (Wolffe 56). They intertwined science and philosophy with religion, encouraged progress of comprehension and search for truth, and upheld liberal interpretation of the Bible (Watts 3). This resulted in their promotion of “a more rational and optimistic position based on the belief that God created human beings with the capacity to govern themselves with both justice and compassion” (Matus 132). Unitarians believe that hardships are socially inflicted rather than divinely imposed and that they can be avoided and overcome by human endeavours. Gaskell is known for her generalization of the Christian ethos in a manner that engages readers of any religion because she focuses on the universal aspects of moral teachings (Moran 86). It also explains why Unitarianism as such does not appear in her novels yet its moral domains prevail. Her works tackle the issues of mortal hardship and spiritual guidance (Matus 164). She was primarily interested in the reciprocity of social change and individual conduct. Throughout her novels she “offers instances of both dramatic and quiet heroism” (Matus 13). Demonstrative is the example of Jem Wilson rescuing villagers from fire in *Mary Barton* or Ruth Hilton assisting the sick in *Ruth* (Matus 148). Both characters risk their lives as a result of their moral convictions, which emphasizes Gaskell’s grand message.

Elizabeth Gaskell was one of the essential female proponents of the Victorian period, which was known as “the age of the rising woman novelist” (Foster 1). Prominent female writers of that time provided fiction with a social dimension – novels served as a representation of local life and analysis of moral themes (Ford 107). While “the phenomenon of women entering the commercial world of publishing caused considerable anxiety in some circles, because it was perceived as threatening the traditional female roles of marriage and motherhood” (Foster 2), Gaskell’s letters verify that “under favourable circumstances, Victorian women did have some freedom to act

in the public world.” Nevertheless, this freedom depended on the will and permission of the males (Matus 132). Given these circumstances, the aforementioned Unitarian social environment surrounding Gaskell proved to be of great benefit. Unitarians promoted the idea that education should be provided for both men and women, therefore Gaskell herself was granted a great education for that time (Matus 132).

Her desire to render service to humanity demonstrated itself in various ways (Eberle 136). Forster states that the “links between biography and artistic production are particularly important” in her work (Foster 1). The essential themes addressed in her novels were strongly associated with the social affairs Gaskell managed and supported throughout her life. In the two novels discussed here, Gaskell mediates how social customs reinforce poverty and prostitution (Eberle 136). Although the novels are of a different nature, religion plays a crucial role in both. It is depicted in its positive and negative light, which manifests Gaskell’s elaborate insight into the topic.

3.2 The reception of Mary Barton

Gaskell, and her endeavour to raise awareness of the broadening discrepancy between the living conditions of the affluent masters and the downtrodden workers, was accused of providing “grist for revolution” (Lesjak 30). Lesjak clarifies that Gaskell wanted her novel to raise the awareness of the oblivious middle classes who would “respond with charity and good will if only they knew of the inhumane conditions under which the laboring classes were suffering” (Lesjak 30). To express her feelings about social inequalities, she referred to the deprived as “the poor”, which was a term typically employed in biblical and religious contexts (Ingham 8). The novel was “an act of faith” portraying that “social evils” are socially constructed rather than divinely imposed (Uglow 10). In the preface of the book, Gaskell mentions her ignorance concerning the theories of trade and emphasizes her wish to enunciate the struggles of working class people. The procedure to eradicate class conflict and create social concord turns towards moral guidance extracted from religious writings rather than constructed consensus initiated by political parties (Macdonald 13). Lesjak notes that the reason why Gaskell accents moral rather than political matters is that exploring ethical issues was considered to be the appropriate domain for female writers of the 19th century (Lesjak 32). Gaskell was a great promoter of the notion that emphasizing social problems should go

hand in hand with implementing philanthropic activities. Married to a Unitarian minister she frequently assisted the poor and continuously strove to improve their lives (Eberle 136). Thus, her life and work were intertwined.

3.3 The reception of *Ruth*

When the novel *Ruth* was published, it received an “adverse reaction” (Davis and Helmstadter 127). It was an epitome of a controversial book. Gaskell redefined the concept of the fallen woman. She endowed her protagonist with solemnity, which challenged prejudices of that time. Discussing these subjects was generally subdued thus their bare depiction aroused a wild response (Easson 5). Gaskell presented fallen women as “victims of oppressive discursive structures that propel them toward ruin rather than reform” (Eberle 137). Her depiction of fallen women was strongly affected by the fact that in the 40’s and 50’s, Gaskell turned her humanitarian activities towards prostitutes (Eberle 152). *Ruth* as the heroine is subjected to criticism based on hypocritical moral values which contrasts with her naturally pure character (Eberle 136). Gaskell compares her to Mary Magdalen, which is implied by the poem on Mary Magdalen that introduces the novel and suggests the subsequently developed comparison.

Drop, drop, slow tears!
And bathe those beauteous feet,
Which brought from heaven
The news and Prince of Peace.
Cease not, wet tears,
His mercies to entreat:
To cry for vengeance
Sin doth never cease.
In your deep floods
Drown all my faults and fears;
Nor let His eye see
Sin, but through my tears (Fletcher).

Thus, it is clear that Gaskell was a devout and a charitable writer, oriented towards people rather than doctrines. She refused to walk the path of those whose words differ from their deeds, which represents a great source of inspiration for readers around the world.

Practical part

4. Mary Barton

Mary Barton, published in 1848, was the first novel written by Elizabeth Gaskell. The book was published anonymously as female authors were eager to preserve their privacy (Foster 3). Nevertheless, it was soon recognized as a feminine work (Ingham 55). *Mary Barton* is a prime example of a social novel, raising diverse moral issues. It depicts "the manifold social evils attributable to the economic inequality of masters and men" (Dolin 9). The story portrays mainly members of the working class. It revolves around the cotton mill worker John Barton and his daughter Mary Barton. John reacts to the sufferings of the working class by joining a trade union and the Chartists. Bitterly disappointed by the social circumstances, he murders the son of his employer. Mary, who is ambivalent about her love and aspiration, is to choose between her two suitors – the dubious and wealthy Harry, or the plain and modest Jem. Their lives intertwine under investigation of the murder, which represents the climax of the plot.

The title *Mary Barton* bears the name of the female protagonist, who develops an exemplary sense of responsibility and identity throughout the novel (Uglow 4). Yet, Gaskell notes that it is John Barton who is the pivotal character of her story (Uglow 16). The subtitle of the novel, *A Tale of Manchester Life*, suggests its setting. The city of Manchester embodied the power of industrialization with its benefits, such as vast job opportunities and downsides, such as low living standards. Readers are drawn into an industrial environment of the 1840's, experiencing the working class struggles (Ford 179). The novel portrays the poor in their domestic conditions rather than in their work environment, which contributes to its profound poignancy (Uglow 17).

The religious beliefs of the society represent the sole glimmering of hope to which both the rich and the poor turn in times of trials and tribulations. So severe are their hardships that the poor are to survive from day to day with no regard for the past and no prospect for the future. Thus, Gaskell's ultimate desire is "to bring Christian principles as a mediating force within class antagonism" (Ford 179).

4.1 Hardship of the working class

The plight that the poor experience generally highlights the importance of faith. The essential virtue that empowers characters to endure these hardships is acquiescence in the will of God. The character of Alice Wilson is a perfect example of this virtue. When she squanders the opportunity to visit her mother before she dies, she soothes herself with the words, “let the Lord send what he sees fit” (*Barton* 33), subserviently laying her life in the hands of a higher power which, in this particular context, helps her to bear her regrets. She reflects: “I sometimes think the Lord is against planning. Whene’er I plan over-much, He is sure to send and mar all my plans, as if He would ha’ me put the future into His hands” (*Barton* 77). Upon the death of the Wilson twins, Alice says to Jem: “The Lord has ta’em the from some evil to come, or He would na ha’ made choice o’ them. Ye may rest sure o’ that” (*Barton* 78). Her certainty emphasizes the strength of her faith in divine providence, which plays a tremendous part in times of such afflictions. However, receptive readers cannot but contemplate the fact that had the family had enough money for a proper treatment, the twins’ disease might not have resulted in death.

The penultimate chapter in *Mary Barton* begins with a short poem called *The Dream* and it depicts as well as questions the inequity between the rich and the poor.

"The rich man dines, while the poor man pines,
And eats his heart away;
'They teach us lies,' he sternly cries,
'Would *brothers* do as they?'"

The extreme exploitation of the working class engenders their consciousness of the social inequality in their society. The narrator states that the “indigence and sufferings of the operatives induced a suspicion in the minds of many of them, that their legislators, their magistrates, their employers, and even the ministers of religion, were, in general, their oppressors and enemies; and were in league for their prostration and enthrallment” (*Barton* 85). This discrepancy between the employers and the employees is visible when looking at the desperate poverty of the Davenports and the family idyll of the Carsons (*Barton* 69). In this aspect, religion plays a crucial role. John says to Mary, “we mun speak to our God to hear us, for man will not hearken; no, not now,

when we weep tears o' blood" (*Barton* 98). Paradoxically, faith in God concomitantly represents faith in Humanity, which becomes the source of bitter disappointment for John.

Poverty is the pivotal impetus of the character's behaviour. The narrator comments on the state of poverty when she says, "the evil and the good of our nature came out strongly then" (*Barton* 58). Extreme feelings such as love and hate, or hostility and solidarity surfaced. The poor would generally soothe themselves with the idea that the rich "are having their good things now, that afterwards they may be tormented" (*Barton* 99). Nevertheless, it remains a matter of conviction whether such statements emanate from the idea that the poor will be rewarded in the afterlife if they show patience and fortitude under God's trials, or whether it is merely an irrational construct that mitigates their ordeals and legitimizes injustice. The story reaches its conceptual denouement with the notion that we all unite in our misery – "rich and poor masters and men, were then brothers in the deep suffering of the hearts" (*Barton* 362).

It seems to be Gaskell's intention to adorn daily utterances with religious allusions. The promise to pray for someone is a manifestation of profound gratefulness. Job promises to the woman who eases him on his way from London: "I'll pray for you till my dying day" (*Barton* 108). He also promises his spiritual support to Mary. After he confesses neglecting regular praying he says: "I'll pray regular for Jem, and for you. And so will Margaret, I'll be bound" (*Barton* 259). Nevertheless, making these allusions is generally considered a right reserved merely for the pure among the plain people. John says to Jem: "Thou, who wert as innocent of any knowledge of it as the babe unborn. I'll not bless thee for it. Blessing from such as me would not bring thee any good" (*Barton* 361). Esther says to John: "God keep her from harm! And yet I won't pray for her; sinner that I am!" (*Barton* 125). Society considers it unworthy for sinners to offer their prayers and blessings, which fosters the abatement of religious hypocrisy. Thus, *Mary Barton* represents religion in its purest form emphasising its alleviating role rather than social power.

4.2 The spiritual magnitude of the main characters

As mentioned in the introduction, John is the central figure of the story. He symbolizes a victim of social injustice – the hostility of the rich and the ruthlessness of the society result in his ultimate destruction. The transformation is visible as the novel presents him in two different lights. First the readers encounter him as a devoted father ever ready to sacrifice his interests in order to assist others, later he is presented as an opium addict who abases himself by losing his temper and beating his daughter. Gaskell attributes “the origin of his bitterness to the very strength of his affections” (Horsman 271). His bitterness is clear from the response to the news of George’s death. He says, it is “best for him to die” (*Barton* 99), which portrays his forlorn and desolate state of mind. His despair weakens his faith and fortifies his guilt. At one point the narrator mentions that when he “heard the words of blessing, he shook his head mournfully” (*Barton* 198). The socially provoked act of killing Harry represents the mystery of the plot. John is not fully aware of the spiritual consequences of the crime. He says to Job: “I didn’t know what I was doing, Job Leigh; God knows I didn’t!” (*Barton* 363). In his bewildered state of mind, he reasoned himself into regarding “the performance of undoubted sin appear a duty” (*Barton* 363). When the afflicted Mr Carson expresses his determination to impose capital punishment on him, John replies: “I didn’t know but that I should be more haunted than ever with the recollection of my sin. Oh! God above only can tell the agony with which I’ve repented me of it, and part perhaps because I feared He would think I were impatient of the misery He sent as punishment – far, far worse misery than any hanging, sir” (*Barton* 361). Guilty pangs of consciousness are considered worse than the capital punishment of society, which shows the extent to which religious concepts propel moral sense.

Mr Carson is the bearer of the essential moral of the story. The death of his son Harry is a great trial for him and ignites a tremendous change within him. He says to John, “you, who did not show pity on my boy, shall have none from me” (*Barton* 360) which does not only show the depth of his despair but also his revengeful tendencies. His menace reveals the very nature of mankind in times of trials, although it is by no means in line with religious teachings. Nonetheless, broken by the loss of his son, he says: “He was my sunshine, and now it is night! Oh, my God! Comfort me, comfort me!” (*Barton*

362). His desire for God's assistance results in his momentous epiphany – “the vengeance which he had cherished, had been taken away from before his eyes, as by the hand of God” (*Barton* 376). When he takes his Bible, the narrator mentions that it had not been much used as if to suggest the former absence of a need for religiosity (*Barton* 366). The final discussion between him, Job and Jem suggests that the essence of injustice lies in the absolute extremes of material means and apathy between these two classes. He eventually learns “to acknowledge the Spirit of Christ as the regulating law between both parties” (*Barton* 384).

Mary, the official protagonist of the novel is a very profound character outlining the discrepancy between reflecting on holy writings and complying with socially embedded traditions. She comments on the traditions regarding funerals, “if what the Bible tells us be true, we ought not to be sorry when a friend, who's been good, goes to his rest; and as for what good comes out o' wearing mourning” (*Barton* 46). This critical exploration of the social traditions in the light of the holy writings demonstrates her naturally inquisitive character and reverent faith. Her faith is nurtured and sorrow soothed by the memories of her mother, who died during her early childhood. Thus in times of trials, she recalls a passage that her mother used to read to her: “Where the wicked cease from troubling, and the weary are at rest” (*Barton* 219). These quotations give the novel its specific undertone that combines transient hardships with eternal hope.

Thus, *Mary Barton* stresses the “need for dialogue between classes, searching for an explanation of human misery in a supposedly divinely ordered universe” (Uglow 4). In this novel, religion plays a pivotal role in empowering individual growth and establishing social concord.

5. Ruth

Ruth, which was written in 1853, is the least popular novel written by Elizabeth Gaskell, supposedly because the popular concept of love is presented as the cause of ruin rather than attainment (Dolin 7). The novel is essentially defined by its “moral earnestness and aesthetic unity” (Dolin 8). Religion in *Ruth* is depicted in its diverse forms and interpretations – on the one hand, it is a source of misinterpretations that reinforce twisted moral standards of the society and on the other hand, it is a solace to humankind that soothes the cruelty of the world.

5.1 Ruth as the protagonist

Ruth is essentially a bildungsroman where the protagonist develops from a girl indulging in vain imaginings to a woman making tremendous sacrifices. This change is essentially reflected in the profound grasp of God’s teachings, and in the everlasting faith in God’s will that she gradually acquires. Her faith grows together with her character, which is refined to the utmost righteousness throughout the novel. The initially immature understanding is revealed in the first chapters of the novel. When she runs after the carriage that is disappearing together with her beloved, the readers learn that “she prayed with wild eagerness; she prayed that she might see his face once more, even if she died on the spot before him” (*Ruth* 76), which was a mere manifestation of her intense love towards Bellingham, far from subservience to the will of God. Yet, the carriage disappears and so does her plain notion of what it means to have faith in God.

Ruth remembers God in her thoughts from the very first chapters. The readers notice her sincere gratitude to Him, often even at times that may not be considered appropriate. Upon her meeting with Mr Bellingham she says, “I can thank God for the happiness I have had in this charming spring walk” (*Ruth* 35), unaware that it is His provident trial. When she learns about her pregnancy, she says: “Oh, my God, I thank thee! Oh! I will be so good!” (*Ruth* 96). Mrs Benson is rather shocked by this reaction and mentions that she does not “seem to understand how it ought to be viewed” (*Ruth* 96).

She seems to be completely unaware of the fact that her conduct is highly condemned by society. Being an ostracised and an abandoned child, without anyone to advise her,

she “must be as nearly as possible exempt from responsibility for being seduced” (Horsman 278). When she is forsaken by Mr Bellingham she finds it hard to regard the course of events as true and it causes her a great deal of anguish, she is convinced that life is “a horrible dream, and God would mercifully awaken her from it” (*Ruth* 77), heedless of the fact that it may be part of His divine plan. This attitude manifests her tender nature and pure intentions. In her desolate state, the narrator says that Ruth “felt in her heart that there was no pity anywhere” (*Ruth* 78). Nevertheless we learn that, “while she thus doubted God, a shadow fell across her garments, on which her miserable eyes were bent” (*Ruth* 78). This mysterious shadow, which comes conjointly with her doubt, is revealed to be her propitious saviour Mr Benson.

He has a great share in the religious devotion Ruth gradually acquires. When she first attends the chapel, she is very touched by his reading. The readers learn that “she sank down, and down, till she was kneeling on the floor of the pew, and speaking to God”, she says: “Father! I have sinned against Heaven and before Thee, and am no more worthy to be called Thy child!” (*Ruth* 125). Yet, when her child is born and Ruth reflects on her love for Harry, the readers learn that “she could not bid it be gone as sinful, it was so pure and natural, even when thinking of it, as in the sight of God” (*Ruth* 157). Nevertheless, the aforementioned spiritual growth is visible in end of the novel when with hindsight she confesses, “I was very young; I did not know how such a life was against God’s pure and holy will” (*Ruth* 242). In fact, this ambivalence between her spiritual aspirations and natural feelings consolidates her growth.

Religion becomes a source of strength for Ruth. Her strength is tested the most when she encounters her former lover while living with Bensons. She is desperate for assistance. We are told that she “trembled away from contemplating what the reality had been; only she clung more faithfully than before to the thought of the great God, who was a rock in the dreary land, where no shadow was” (*Ruth* 254). She prayed with the words: “Oh, my God, help me, for I am very weak. My God! I pray Thee be my rock and my strong fortress, for I of myself am nothing. If I ask in His name, Thou wilt give it me. In the name of Jesus Christ I pray for strength to do Thy will!” (*Ruth* 223). This prayer portrays the immense spiritual growth she has attained as these mature and detached words are enunciated. The narrator ponders: “It sometimes seems a little strange how, after having earnestly prayed to be delivered from temptation, and having

given ourselves with shut eyes into God's hand, from that time every thought, every outward influence, every acknowledged law of life, seems to lead us on from strength to strength" (*Ruth* 231). During her last conversation with Mr Donne, when he tries to persuade her of his love and tempts her to be his wife, her dedication flourishes. She says: "I dare not think of happiness – I must not look forward to sorrow. God did not put me here to consider either of these things" (*Ruth* 242).

Ruth's character is naturally tender and brave, we learn that "she could never bear to hear or see bodily suffering in any of God's meanest creatures, without trying to succour them" (*Ruth* 79). This is prominent at the end of the novel when her natural tendency and strong devotion evolves to such extent that she volunteers as a nurse during a plague. Upon making this decision, which involves sacrificing her life, she says, "if I have a little natural shrinking, it is quite gone when I remember that I am in God's hands" (*Ruth* 344). She is also rather melancholic – tears "flood the book from start to finish" (Dolin 4). The narrator comments, "she would sit at the window, looking out on the dreary prospect till her eyes were often blinded with tears" (*Ruth* 29). What instils hope in her is the faith in God. Sally nurtures Ruth's faith in God's providence when she questions her dispirited attitude, which springs naturally from her melancholic character, with the words, "thou'rt wanting for nothing, nor thy child either; the time to come is the Lord's, and in His hands" (*Ruth* 143).

Before her secret is revealed, Ruth has a remarkable reputation for her gentle manner and refined character. Nevertheless, the latent stain on her pure character, referred to as the sin, abates her self-esteem and makes her self-conscious. When Jemima praises her goodness, Ruth asks her not to mention it and says, "God knows I am not" (*Ruth* 192). This shows her natural refusal of the necessary pretence. When she tries to soothe Elizabeth who is frightened because of dreadful thunder, we learn that "she spoke of God's tender mercy, but very humbly, for she feared lest Elizabeth should think her better and holier than she was" (*Ruth* 224).

There is a lot of foreshadowing throughout the novel. When Ruth is to go for a walk with Mr Bellingham she says that she feels "as if it were not right" (*Ruth* 35), however she reasons herself otherwise, and thus suppresses her innate intuition, unaware of the danger that lies ahead of her. Tomas, whom they meet during their trip, shares this

clairvoyance and using the language of the Bible, he forewarns her by saying, “remember the devil goeth about as a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour” (*Ruth* 43).

Ruth and her tender and selfless care of the sick has an immense impact on her reputation. It is said that, “she gradually became known and respected among the roughest boys of the rough populace of the town” (*Ruth* 316). Leonard, her son, catches a conversation about his mother, where a stranger reacts to harsh remarks on her account, he says: “Such a one as her has never been a great sinner; nor does she do the work as a penance, but for the love of God, and of the blessed Jesus. She will be in the light of God’s countenance when you and I will be standing afar off” (*Ruth* 347). This moment represents a victory of justice and feels as the joyous zenith of the story. It is ironic that the first time she meets Mr Bellingham is during a ball full of people and she is visibly inferior to him. The last time they meet is in a deserted room where he is on the verge of death and she has complete power over him. Nevertheless, he is eventually the cause of both her distress and death. When writing a funeral sermon for Ruth, Mr Benson “remembered some fresh proof of the humility and sweetness of her life” (*Ruth* 367) and he tried his best to do her justice. This does not only convey the attitude of the novel towards the concept of the fallen woman but also towards true religiosity.

The embodiment of her sin, her child Leonard, plays a vital part in her life. There is an extremely intense bond between them. Upon his birth she says to him: “If God will but spare you to me, never mother did more than I will. I have done you a grievous wrong – but, if I may but live, I will spend my life in serving you!” (*Ruth* 133). After his baptism she says, “God bless thee, darling! I only ask to be one of His instruments” (*Ruth* 153). She is committed to him just as she is devoted to God. In fact, the readers learn how “she often feared that she loved him too much – more than God Himself” nevertheless, “her love for her child lead her up to love to God” (*Ruth* 171), which emphasizes the purity and selflessness of her love.

Their love is tried when Ruth has to confess her sins to him. She does so with a reverend attitude and tender simplicity. She says: “Leonard – when I was very young I did very wrong. I think God, who knows all, will judge me more tenderly than men – but I did wrong in a way which you cannot understand yet” (*Ruth* 278). She urges him

to be strong and righteous: “It is a bitter shame and a sorrow that I have drawn down upon you. A shame, Leonard, because of me, your mother; but, Leonard, it is no disgrace or lowering of you in the eyes of God” (*Ruth* 279). She eventually soothes him by saying, “remember, darling of my heart, it is only your own sin that can make you an outcast from God” (*Ruth* 280). All of this depicts her profound grasp of the teachings. They are succour to one another, the narrator says: “The child and the mother were each messengers of God – angels to each other” (*Ruth* 298). Ruth internalized a deeply pious attitude. Reflecting upon how everything has evolved, the readers learn that: “She, for her part, wondered at her own cowardliness in having even striven to keep back the truth from her child – the truth that was so certain to be made clear, sooner or later, and which it was only owing to God’s mercy that she was alive to encounter with him, and, by so encountering, shield and give him good courage” (*Ruth* 340).

5.2 Religious discourse

There are many complex discourses that spring from the various interpretations of religious writings – some strive for fully independent comprehension, while others adhere to socially approved interpretation. Mr Benson and Mr Bradshaw epitomize these two divergent approaches throughout the novel. Their perception of faith and reprimand for sin greatly varies. Yet, there are other examples as well. The first one of such discourses appears when Thurstan expresses joy to his sister Faith over the fact that Ruth will have a child, it is to her dismay that he claims it will teach her “reverence” and become a source of “purification”. Although she regards his argument as “sophistry”, Thurstan says, “sin appears to me to be quite distinct from its consequences” (*Ruth* 97). He perceives that the child “may be God’s messenger to lead her back to Him” and thus strives to seek wisdom from the religious writings. Faith, who is initially reluctant to comply with this notion, sticks to the social conviction and calls the child a “badge of her shame” (*Ruth* 97). It is at this moment that Ruth is compared to Magdalen, and with this in mind the Bensons determine to lead her aright. The dispute concerning her sin remains ambiguous when Thurstan says: “The world has, indeed, made such children miserable, innocent as they are; but I doubt if this be according to the will of God, unless it be His punishment for the parents’ guilt” (*Ruth* 97).

Another discourse of this nature emerges from the revelation of Ruth's sin. Mr Benson explains his stand "that not every woman who has fallen is depraved; that many – how many the Great Judgement Day will reveal to those who have shaken off the poor, sore, penitent hearts on earth – many, many crave and hunger after a chance for virtue – the help which no man gives to them – help that gentle tender help which Jesus gave once to Mary Magdalen" (*Ruth* 284). This profound statement, which once again alludes to Magdalen, represents one of the crucial issues raised in this novel. To his exhortation Mr Bradshaw replies, "if I could have respected your conduct in other matters. As it is, when I see a man who has deluded himself into considering falsehood right, I am disinclined to take his opinion on subjects connected with morality; and can no longer regard him as a fitting exponent of the will of God" (*Ruth* 285). These conflicting views emphasize the complexity of apprehending the true nature of religious teachings.

Some characters manifest sincere and profound faith, some treat it merely as a hypocritical and superficial tradition. They are particularly prominent in the treatment of Ruth. The readers learn that Mr Benson feels that "tenderness" is "required towards poor Ruth" (*Ruth* 127) Mr Bradshaw on the other hand treats her with merciless cruelty. Upon the revelation of her sin, he says: "If there be one sin I hate – I utterly loathe – more than all others, it is wantonness. It includes all other sins. It is but of a piece that you should have come with your sickly, hypocritical face, imposing upon us all" (*Ruth* 273). He talks with apparent passion, which is something that Jemima was often rebuked for and thus shows his own hypocrisy. Ruth endeavours to justify herself by mentioning her young age and former ignorance, however he daunts her by saying: "The more depraved, the more disgusting you" (*Ruth* 273). Mr Benson comforts and empowers her with his words of wisdom, which strengthen the sense of mutual support among them. He says: "Now, let us stand firm on the truth. You have no new fault to repent of. Be brave and faithful. It is to God you answer, not to men. The shame of having your sin known to the world, should be as nothing to the shame you felt of having sinned. We have dreaded men too much, and God too little, in the course we have taken" (*Ruth* 288). He reminds her of Christ and his sufferings and says: "The world is not everything, Ruth; nor is the want of men's good opinion and esteem the highest need which man had. Teach Leonard this" (*Ruth* 289).

Diverging ideas also arise from the political discussion between Mr Benson and Mr Bradshaw. Mr Benson adheres uncompromisingly to Christian values, when others desperately try to justify their corrupt intentions. He says, “we are not to do evil that good may come” (*Ruth* 207). Readers may regard this statement as hypocritical for Mr Benson himself conceals the truth for the prospect of the future. Yet, the hypocrisy of Mr Bradshaw is more visible. For instance when he decides to take the political visitors to the seaside on Sunday, as he knows that Mr Benson is determined to “write a sermon on the Christian view of political duties” (*Ruth* 209) and begins “to dislike the idea of attending chapel” (*Ruth* 211). Mr Bradshaw manifests hypocrisy even more after the election. The readers learn that he has “tacitly sanctioned bribery” and that he had not suffered from his pangs of consciousness as much as he had suffered from the fact that “in the eyes of some of his townsmen, his hitherto spotless character had received a blemish” (*Ruth* 249). This contrasts with Mr Benson who on another occasion says to his sister, “let us try simply to do right actions, without thinking of the feeling they are to call out in others” that “God alone knows when the effect is to be produced” (*Ruth* 104).

The essential role of religion is to provide concord and harmony. Those that sincerely adhere to the scriptures are apt to establish it. The Bradshaw ménage fail to uphold this unity for they strictly follow their household rules merely because they are frightened of their authoritative father. Contrastingly, the Benson household despite its shortcomings was “but human, and, with all their loving desire to bring their lives into harmony with the will of God, they often erred and fell short; but, somehow, the very errors and faults of one individual served to call out higher excellences in another” (*Ruth* 115). Thus, they managed to create an atmosphere which was praiseworthy in the sight of God.

Thus, *Ruth* through her protagonist displays, how moral empowerment fosters spiritual growth and how social traditions hinder true comprehension of religious teachings. The discourse between Mr Bradshaw and Mr Benson illustrates the complexity of discerning between the right and the wrong permeating the novel.

6. Ruth & Mary Barton

Both novels are titled after their protagonists – heroines demonstrating the moral challenges and guidance of the story. They both suffer from frivolous love affairs and have abominable lies to bear. Ruth must accept the burden of a different identity and Mary must conceal the murder committed by her father, which reinforces a strong sense of prudence in both. They are exceptional for their beauty which, blessed by the superficial society, fosters the notion that they are inherently innocent. Nevertheless, their beauty is the reason of their debasement. Sally in *Ruth* insightfully mentions: “Beauty is deceitful, and favour a snare, and I’m thankful the Lord has spared me from such man-traps and spring-guns” (*Ruth* 170). This twofold dimension of beauty being both a gift and a curse highlights its social and spiritual significance. As summarized by Horsman, the character of Mary in *Mary Barton* is turned “into the idealized heroine of romance, of unusual personal beauty, never coarsened by the conditions of her life, and lacking even the dialect of contemporaries”. She maintains her goodness even in the direst situations (274). The protagonist in *Ruth* is bestowed with similar attributes. Therefore, it is not the appearance and qualities that make them round characters but the trials and tribulations they have to endure. They soften any potential prejudices against them by their outstandingly virtuous behaviour and refined character, which is primarily the result of their faith. Faith in God fortifies the protagonists’ conscience. Ruth reproaches herself for loving Leonard more than she thinks is healthy in the sight of God (*Ruth* 171). Mary repents of the joy she feels at the thought of meeting Jem when taking care of sick Alice (*Barton* 216). These examples emphasize their wholehearted devotion, which represents a crucial theme of both novels.

6.1 Response to trials

The severity of the protagonists’ distress naturally results in their emotional breakdowns. Emotions evoked by trials provide an insight into the role of religion which, in this case, is not to eradicate sorrow but to alleviate its consequences. The following quotes show that the novels portray grief as a natural part of life and emphasize the bleak undertone of the stories where spirituality is the sole glimmering of hope. In *Mary Barton*, Mary says about the crime of her father: “I mourn because what

has occurred to me cannot be helped. The reason you give me for not grieving, is the very sole reason of my grief” (*Barton* 244). In *Ruth*, when the protagonist mourns over her dead parents and her lover tries to soothe her by saying that “it cannot bring back the dead”, she says, “I cry, because nothing will bring them back again” (*Ruth* 41).

Crises and victories, as two profound spiritual concepts, permeate both novels. In *Mary Barton*, they are more of a material nature. Severe poverty as the ultimate crisis that is described throughout the novel is summarized in this paragraph: “In times of sorrowful or fierce endurance, we are often soothed by the mere repetition of old proverbs which tell the experience of our forefathers, but now, they all seem as false and vain sayings. So long and so weary is the pressure of the terrible times“ (*Barton* 113). Yet, the story ends in a joyful tone that portrays the victory: “At the door of the house, looking towards the town, stands Mary, watching for the return of her husband from his daily work; and while she watches, she listens, smiling,

Clap hands, daddy comes,

With his pockets full of plums

And a cake for Johnnie” (*Barton* 389).

In *Ruth*, crises and victories are of a spiritual nature. Ruth experiences a dreadful shudder of faith after Bellingham leaves her. When Mr Benson tries to comfort her with words alluding to God, they do not seem to have any effect on her and she regards them “with a blasphemous defiance of the merciful God” (*Ruth* 82). Nonetheless, when Ruth’s child is to be baptised, we learn that she “came to the presence of God, as one who had gone astray, and doubted her own worthiness to be called His child” (*Ruth* 147), at that point she “craved for more faith in God to still her distrust and fear of the future that might hang over her darling” (*Ruth* 148).

6.2 Characteristics of society reflected in both novels

There are certain social features that recur in both novels. The social aspects discussed below, such as the perception of fallen women or the phenomenon of mutual support, heavily reflect how religion shapes the attributes and attitudes of society.

6.2.2 The fallen woman

The concept of the fallen woman, discussed in 1.2, represents one of these crucial issues that strongly penetrated values of the society. A woman who loses her innocence by succumbing to a man before marriage is considered to be doomed. In *Mary Barton*, the protagonist seems to be fully aware of this fact. Upon her last conversation with Harry, she says, “I scorn you sir, for plotting to ruin a poor girl” (*Barton* 137). Misdemeanour in this aspect is highly treacherous, its results are fully portrayed in the character of Esther, who unlike Ruth, perishes in a state of despair. The role of conscience is prominent in this aspect as despite their sustained goodness and pure intentions, both consider themselves great sinners mainly because their acts are severely condemned by society. When Jemima goes to the dressmaker and discovers the truth about Ruth, the dressmaker refers to such females as “degraded women, who, after all, are a disgrace to our sex” (*Ruth* 260). Jemima ponders the sin with a considerable fright, comparable to the manner in which society nowadays regards the act of murder. Her father has raised her so that she would “look upon those who had gone astray with shrinking, shuddering recoil, instead of with a pity” (*Ruth* 262), which demonstrates his rigidity which is far from the ideal Christian approach to such matters. Mr Bradshaw perceives it as something toxic. He says about Leonard: “That very child and heir of shame to associate with my own innocent children! I trust they are not contaminated” (*Ruth* 275). Nevertheless, his idea of this concept is based on mere superstition.

6.2.3 Superstition

Superstition, which is generally discouraged in religious doctrines, is also strongly present among the working class society. It is particularly visible in connection with sicknesses. In *Mary Barton*, when the Wilson twins are on the verge of dying Alice says: “There’s none can die in the arms of those as holds them won’t let the dying soul go free; so it had a hard struggle for the quiet of death” (*Barton* 76). In *Ruth*, upon the sickness of Mr Bellingham, Mrs Mason mocks the doctor’s guidance by saying, “who ever heard of a sick person taking a turn on an even number of days; it’s always on the third, or the fifth, or seventh, or so on” (*Ruth* 67). Some of the characters in *Mary Barton* are even prone to believe in supernatural elements, which attenuate the validity of their faith in God. For example, Will firmly believes in the existence of mermaids, which Job adamantly denies. His understanding is more profound due to his knowledge.

6.2.4 Mutual support

The concept of mutual support is extremely strong among the working class people. In *Mary Barton*, George Wilson assists Mrs Davenport and her family in their hard times and when Alice Wilson falls sick Mrs Davenport stays up all night with her and assists her family in return. The solicitous statement Margaret makes when she says that the “Lord was not above letting folk minister to Him, for He knew how happy it makes one to do aught for another” once again demonstrates the divine source of their wisdom (*Barton* 261). This sense of solidarity is a vital feature of their society and it is one of the techniques in which Elizabeth Gaskell suggests that the poor are in some aspects superior to the rich. In *Ruth*, the Bensons decide to take Ruth under their care knowing they will have to provide for her and share with her their limited means (*Ruth* 102). Nonetheless, the readers learn that such sacrifices are “endured so cheerfully, and simply, that they had almost ceased to require an effort, and it had become natural to them to think of others before themselves” (*Ruth* 108), which shows the extent to which they have internalized the religious teachings.

6.2.5 Selflessness and steadfastness

The virtue of selflessness, which is a fundamental aspect of most religious doctrines, is also visible in both novels. As it is mostly portrayed in relation to the protagonists, it supports the analogy of women as pillars mentioned in 1.2 and emphasizes their inherent strength. In *Ruth*, we are told that “Ruth put away every thought of the past or future; everything that could unfit her for the duties of the present” (*Ruth* 65), when she ministered to her beloved during his sickness. In *Mary Barton*, Mary suppresses her burdening distress and exhorts the uttermost effort to save Jem. Her conviction of his innocence is irrefutable, we learn that her companions “respected her firmness of determination, and Job almost gave into her belief, when he saw how steadfastly she was acting upon it” (*Barton* 258).

Steadfastness in faith is considered a praiseworthy attitude, generally nourished by devotions. Reading religious writings is a common occupation among the poor and studying religious scripts is generally regarded as “duty” (*Ruth* 35). Thomas, an old acquaintance from Milham Grange, is described to have “sighted with the satisfaction of having done his duty” after “spelling the psalms for the day” (*Ruth* 39). Allusions to the

Bible demonstrate characters' understanding of its teachings. For example, on the account of the concealed affair with Harry, Mary says to Margaret, "you have a right to judge; you cannot help it; only in your judgement remember mercy, as the Bible says" (*Barton* 260). There is no secrecy that such observances are not always performed with the utmost devotion. The narrator reveals about Mary that at one point she "pretended to read diligently, and not to listen to a word that was said, while in fact she heard all sounds" (*Barton* 83).

6.2.6 Diligence

Diligence is a highly valued virtue in both novels, emanating from the holy writings and constituting the basic moral code of the working class society. The diverse enactment and abuse of this virtue portrays and summarizes many of the attributes of Victorian society. In *Mary Barton*, Mary and Margaret strain themselves to finish mourning dresses which they are not even determined to receive payment for. In relation to the payment Margaret says: "I've thought it over once or twice, and I mean to bring myself to think I shan't, and to like to do it as my bit towards comforting them. I don't think they can pay, and yet they're just the sort of folk to have their minds easier for wearing mourning" (*Barton* 47). Margaret does so, despite her approaching blindness, which emphasizes the deeply embedded loyalty that permeates the working class society. In *Ruth*, diligence is used as a reward for the seamstresses to attend the local ball – although in reality Mrs Mason chooses the prettiest girls, which relays the foul atmosphere of hypocrisy that is frequently assigned to employers in both novels (*Ruth* 8). The owners of the sweatshops in both novels are extremely keen on the loyalty of their customers. Mrs Mason dismisses Ruth for fear of endangering her business, while Miss Simmonds suggests that she would benefit from having Mary in her shop as she might "prove quite an attraction to customers" (*Barton* 273) after the trial with Jem. Sally in *Ruth* brings up an important concept of the necessity to perform trivial tasks in, what she calls "Christian fashion" (*Ruth* 143) by which she means striving for excellence in everything she does and performing tasks in the spirit of service. This emphasizes the glorification of hard work among poor people, who do not have the luxury to spend their time in devotions. Conscientiousness is considered laudable and idleness reprehensible among the working class. Esther and her influence on Mary is accordingly criticized by her father who says, "I'd rather see her earning her bread by

the sweat of her brow, as the Bible tells her she should do, ay, though she never got butter to her bread, than be like a do-nothing lady worrying shopmen all morning, and screeching at her pianny all afternoon, and going to bed without having done a good turn to any one of God's creatures but herself" (*Barton* 10). This does not merely testify to the standards of the working class society but also it serves as a criticism of those above their rank.

Thus, the two novels *Ruth* and *Mary Barton* explore many recurrent aspects, perceiving the joyful and miserable events of everyday life as a spiritual path. They emphasize the role of religion in establishing social norms and values that shape individual conscience and conduct.

7. Conclusion

The thesis focuses on the role of religion in *Mary Barton* and *Ruth*. Through this theme, the practical and the theoretical part address some of the universal dichotomies, such as poverty and wealth, power and servitude, or superficiality and genuineness. These dichotomies then illustrate the diverse moral principles of Victorian literature and society.

Religion in the Victorian period, whether supported or questioned, played a vibrant role. It represented a source of strength for the exploited class and gender and shaped the code of conduct of the individuals and society. On the one side, the working class people were perceived as inferior, which reflected in their attitudes and ignited various social movements. On the other side, the oppressed female gender was compelled to be obedient, which established their social position and fostered the idea of the fallen woman. Religion, in its purest form, served to propel justice and solidarity.

The author of the discussed novels, Elizabeth Gaskell, was herself a genuinely devout person. She perceived living and writing as a coherent whole. Therefore, her philanthropic ideas and activities heavily projected in both her life and novels. Despite the purity of her intentions, the novels received much criticism for their controversial ideas and themes. Nowadays, Elizabeth Gaskell is cited among the most prominent and progressive Victorian female writers to explore social issues.

Ruth is a story of a victorious downfall. It contains elaborate discourses, which portray the diverse perspectives on religion. Some are profoundly contemplative, others show mere superficiality, yet many remain arguable and controversial. The protagonist is an epitome of a powerful woman who, despite severe social debasement, flourishes both mentally and spiritually and becomes a respectable and meritorious human being.

Mary Barton discusses social inequality between the masters and the workers, encouraging mutual dialogue that would establish a divine civilization within the industrial society. It depicts the divergent attitudes towards religion, portrayed either as a sacred source of consolation or as a mere reservoir of traditions. The main characters

experiences both material and spiritual trials that nurture and refine their grasp of the heavenly teachings.

The two novels provide a subjective insight into the dispute between the wealthy and the poor on both mundane and transcendent level, suggesting that material abundance impedes spiritual growth. They depict the ordeals people endured, and the values society pondered, which rendered religious teachings their sole assurance. Thus, faith in God was their hope, His providence their companion, and His nearness their desire.

8. Works cited

Primary Sources

Gaskell, Elizabeth. *Ruth*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. Print.

Gaskell, Elizabeth. *Mary Barton*. London: Everyman's Library, 1994. Print.

Secondary sources

Blair, Emily. *Virginia Woolf and the Nineteenth-Century Domestic Novel*. Suny Press, 2012. Ebook.

Bloy, Marjie. "The Corn Laws", The Victorian Web. N.p., 18 November 2010. Web. 4 November 2015.

---. "Chartism", The Victorian Web. N.p., 26 March 2002. Web. 9 November 2015.

Chapple, John. "Unitarian dissent." *The Cambridge Companion to Elizabeth Gaskell*. Ed. Jill L. Matus. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Ebook.

D'Albertis, Deirdre. "The life and letters of E. C. Gaskell." *The Cambridge Companion to Elizabeth Gaskell*. Ed. Jill L. Matus. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Ebook.

Davis, Richard W., and Richard J. Helmstadter, eds. *Religion and Irreligion in Victorian Society*. New York: Routledge, 1992. Ebook.

Diniejkó, Andrzej. "Condition of England Novels", The Victorian Web. N.p., 22 February 2010. Web. 8 November 2015.

---. "Benjamin Disraeli and the Two Nation Divide", The Victorian Web. N.p., 10 January 2010. Web. 21 November 2015.

Dolin, Tim. *Oxford World's Classics Introduction to Ruth by Elizabeth Gaskell*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. Print.

Easson, Angus. *Penguin Classics Introduction to Ruth by Elizabeth Gaskell*. London: Penguin, 2014. Ebook.

Eberle, Roxanne. *Chastity and Transgression in Women's Writing, 1792-1897*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002. Ebook.

Engels, Friedrich. *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. Panther Edition, 1969. Ebook.

Evans, Robert J. *The Victorian Age: 1815-1914*. London: Edward Arnold Ltd, 1968. Print.

Ford, Boris. *From Dickens to Hardy: The Pelican Guide to English Literature*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1958. Print.

Foster, Shirley. *Elizabeth Gaskell: a literary life*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002. Ebook.

Hempton, David. *Religion and political culture in Britain and Ireland: From the Glorious Revolution to the decline of empire*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. Ebook.

Henry, Nancy. "Gaskell and social transformation." *The Cambridge Companion to Elizabeth Gaskell*. Ed. Jill L. Matus. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Ebook.

Horsman, Alan. *The Victorian Novel*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990. Print.

Ingham, Patricia. *The language of gender and class: Transformation in the Victorian novel*. London: Routledge, 2003. Ebook.

Inglis, Kenneth. *Churches and the working classes in Victorian England*. Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2013. Ebook.

Keen, Suzanne. "The Victorian Social Novel as a Genre", *The Victorian Web*. N.p., 11 December 2004. Web. 4 November 2015.

King, Jeannette. *The Victorian Woman Question in Contemporary Feminist Fiction*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. Ebook.

Lesjak, Carolyn. *Working Fictions: A Genealogy of the Victorian Novel*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006. Ebook.

Lii, Theresa. "Food and Famine in Victorian Literature", *The Victorian Web*. N.p., 8 May 2009. Web. 4 November 2015.

Macdonald, Daly. *Penguin Classics Introduction to Mary Barton by Elizabeth Gaskell*. London: Penguin, 2003. Ebook.

Mitchell, Sally. *Daily Life in Victorian England*. Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2009. Ebook.

Moran, Maureen. *Victorian literature and culture*. London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006. Ebook.

Outlon, Carolyn. *Literature and Religion in Mid-Victorian England: From Dickens to Eliot*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. Ebook.

Stoneman, Patsy. "Gaskell, gender, and the family." *The Cambridge Companion to Elizabeth Gaskell*. Ed. Jill L. Matus. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Ebook.

Uglow, Jenny. *Everyman's Library Introduction to Mary Barton by Elizabeth Glaskell*. London: Everyman's Library, 1994. Print.

Walvin, James. *Victorian Values*. London: Sphere Books Ltd, 1988. Print.

Watts, Ruth. *Gender, Power and the Unitarians in England*. Routledge, 2014. Ebook.

Wolfe, John. *God and Greater Britain*. Routledge, 2002. Ebook.