

WIVES AND DAUGHTERS

by Elizabeth Gaskell



THE AUTHOR

Elizabeth Cleghorn Stevenson (1810-1865) was born in London, the daughter of a Unitarian minister, but after her mother died in 1811 she was largely raised by her aunt in the village of Knutsford, which became the model for both Cranford and Hollingford in *Wives and Daughters*. Her brother, somewhat like Frederick Hale in *North and South*, joined the navy, but disappeared on a voyage to India and was never heard from again. Her father died in 1829, and in 1832 she married a Unitarian minister in Manchester named William Gaskell. She gave birth to six children, two of whom died in infancy. Her writing career began with the publication of a poem, *Sketches Among the Poor*, written with her husband in 1837. Her first novel, *Mary Barton* (1848), was rejected by critics because of its strong social message, defending industrial workers against their masters. In some senses, *North and South* (1854-55) was a response to this, since the book tries very hard to present both sides in the conflict. She came to know many of the literary lights of the age, including Charles Dickens, in whose magazine some of her works were serialized, William Wordsworth, and Charlotte Brontë, whose biography she published in 1857. Other notable works include *Cranford* (1853), *Ruth* (1853), and *Wives and Daughters* (1866), considered her best novel but left unfinished at her death.

Gaskell is best known as a social critic, and was influenced not only by lesser-known works of Charlotte Brontë such as *Shirley* and the social criticism of Dickens, but also by the work of Frederick Engels, who was living and writing in Manchester at the same time Gaskell was there. *Wives and Daughters*, however, is a departure from her earlier themes and in some ways reads like the domestic novels of Jane Austen, giving little attention to the great issues of the day. Her concern about the role of women in society runs as a steady current throughout the story, however, and thus presents social criticism from a less-obvious but equally powerful perspective.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

- Molly Gibson – The heroine of the story, she is seventeen when the story begins, and the narrative traces her growth from girlhood to womanhood.
- Robert Gibson – Molly’s father, he is the town doctor of Hollingford. He loves his daughter dearly, though he is often oblivious to her feelings and desires.
- Lord Cumnor – “The Earl” is the landowner who controls most of the real estate around Hollingford. He and his wife live in Cumnor Towers outside the town. He enjoys interacting with his “vassals,” though he often appears a bumbling fool in the process.
- Lady Cumnor – “The Countess,” she is the Earl’s wife. She keeps her distance from the townsfolk as she thinks proper for one of her station, but is in reality a terrible snob.
- Lord Hollingford – The Earl’s eldest son, he is quiet and shy, but develops a reputation as somewhat of a scientist. Dr. Gibson enjoys his company and that of the scientists he often invites to the Towers. He and his friends sponsor Roger Hamley’s expedition to Africa.
- Lady Harriet - The Earl’s youngest daughter, she grew up under Clare Kirkpatrick’s tutelage and becomes a staunch friend and defender of Molly when she becomes the object of unjust gossip.
- Hyacinth (Clare) Kirkpatrick – A former governess at the Towers, she marries and is soon widowed by a young curate. She later marries Gibson, thus becoming Molly’s stepmother. She is self-centered and makes life unpleasant for Molly, always disparaging her in favor of her daughter.
- Cynthia Kirkpatrick – Clare’s daughter, she is wild and uncontrollable and serves as a foil for Molly in the narrative. She forms a secret engagement with Robert Preston at the age of fifteen, then becomes engaged to Roger Hamley without revealing her prior entanglement. When the truth is revealed she breaks both engagements and marries Walter Henderson.
- Mr. Kirkpatrick - Clare’s brother-in-law is a wealthy London lawyer who takes an interest in advancing Cynthia’s prospects.
- Squire Roger Hamley – Dr. Gibson’s best friend, he comes from an old family but prefers informality and enjoys bantering with the doctor.
- Mrs. Hamley – The Squire’s wife is from London. Though he loves her dearly, he fails to realize that country life does not agree with her and gradually reduces her to the state of an invalid. She enjoys art and literature and opens a new world to Molly during her visits, but soon dies, causing great grief to Molly and her family.

- Osborne Hamley – The Squire’s handsome elder son, he is an academic star at Rugby and expects to do as well at Cambridge. Despite his family’s high expectations, he barely earns his degree and comes home in disgrace and deeply in debt, at the same time hiding the secret marriage he has contracted. He grows ill and dies, but after his death his father is reconciled to his widow and young son.
- Aimee Hamley - Osborne’s French Catholic wife, she is a former nursemaid and governess who came from Alsace lives in a cottage in Winchester, the cost of which is the main source of Osborne’s debts. After Osborne dies, she and her young son come to live at Hamley Hall.
- Roger Hamley – The younger Hamley offspring, he is large and clumsy, quiet and reserved, kind, good, generous, and loves science. Despite his family’s low expectations for him, he becomes senior wrangler (valedictorian) of his class at Cambridge and earns a fellowship in mathematics. Molly falls in love with him, but he falls in love with Cynthia. He travels to Africa on a two-year scientific expedition but returns when Osborne dies. After his return his engagement to Cynthia is broken, but by the end of the story longs for the day when he can openly express his devotion to Molly.
- Sally Browning - A longtime friend of the Gibsons, she hopes in vain to become the doctor’s second wife. She is asked by Mr. Gibson to take care of Molly and help with preparing the house for the arrival of his new bride.
- Phoebe Browning - Miss Browning’s younger sister, she is lively and cheerful, though somewhat lacking in intelligence and insight.
- Mrs. Goodenough - One of Hollingford’s leading gossips and busybodies.
- Robert Preston - The land agent at the Towers, he fancies himself a ladies’ man, though the ladies seem not to agree. He contracted a secret engagement with Cynthia in repayment of a debt when she was sixteen years old.
- Mr. Coxe - One of Mr. Gibson’s apprentices, he is in love with Molly, but the doctor strongly discourages the relationship. He later returns after inheriting an estate to propose to Molly, but ends up proposing to Cynthia instead, who refuses him and sends him on his way.
- Walter Henderson - A wealthy London lawyer and colleague of Mr. Kirkpatrick who falls in love with and marries Cynthia.

PLOT SUMMARY

The story begins in fairy-tale fashion, barely avoiding the stereotypical “Once upon a time,” in the bedroom of a twelve-year-old girl named Molly Gibson, the heroine of the tale. Her father is the town doctor, but her mother died when Molly was very young. It is the late 1820s, and Molly and her family live in the town of Hollingford, which is under the sway of Lord and Lady Cumnor of nearby Cumnor Towers, who rule over their domains with kindness and condescension. Lady

Cumnor has founded a school to train young girls in the skills needed for ones of their station, and one day each summer invites some of the women who assist at the school to the Towers for a day of festivities. This year, Molly, despite her youth, is invited to join them for the first time because of an offhand invitation from the Earl himself.

When the big day finally arrives, Molly is brimming with excitement. After two hours of anxious waiting, she is picked up by the carriage that is to take her to the Towers. After being given a tour of the grounds, Molly wanders around on her own and soon falls asleep on a bench under a large tree. She is awakened from her slumbers by two ladies talking nearby – Lady Cuxhaven, the daughter of the Countess, and a pretty woman named Clare Kirkpatrick. They kindly offer to bring Molly some food, which she gratefully accepts, though her headache prevents her from eating more than a bunch of grapes. Clare, meanwhile, eats the rest of the food while she waits for Molly to regain sufficient strength to return to the house. When they get back, Clare takes Molly up to her own bedroom and puts her down for a nap. When the carriages leave to return the guests to their homes, Molly remains asleep in the upstairs bedroom. When Clare realizes that she is still there, she offers to feed her, give her a bed for the night, and take her back to Hollingford in the morning.

As they dress for dinner, Clare explains that she was formerly the governess at the estate, had married a curate named Kirkpatrick, borne a daughter named Cynthia, and had recently been widowed. Molly feels out of place all evening, embarrassed about having overslept, and is greatly relieved when her father arrives to take her home. He had come home from a long round of visits to the sick and, finding Molly not yet at home, had declined his own dinner in order to fetch her.

At this point the author gives the reader a flashback into Molly's childhood. Her father had been brought to Hollingford sixteen years before the events narrated in the first to chapters because the local doctor's health was failing. The community was slow to accept him, and the ladies generated and spread all kinds of rumors about his background. He was quickly taken into the bosom of the locals, however, even by the inhabitants of the Towers, and soon married the old doctor's niece. Sadly, the new Mrs. Gibson died five years later, leaving behind her a three-year-old daughter – our heroine, Molly. The little girl was thereafter raised by her father and her nurse Betty. Later he hired a governess named Miss Eyre for his little girl to teach her the basic skills every girl would need, insisting that he himself would undertake her education, though most of what she learned she picked up herself from reading her father's library.

In the years that follow, Molly learns and grows, becoming a visitor at the school, but never again until the age of seventeen visits the Towers. Among the inhabitants there, Lady Agnes marries and her eldest brother, Lord Hollingford, loses his wife and becomes a man of some scientific accomplishments, though he is shy and withdrawn among the people of the neighborhood. Dr. Gibson is always welcome to dine at the Towers, though he hates the formality of the meals in the grand dining room. The presence of Lord Hollingford and his frequent guests of scientific bent make dinners much more attractive to the doctor, whose contacts with intelligent men are few and far between. Even the new vicar, Mr. Ashton, knows little beyond the safe subject of the Thirty-Nine Articles and can converse only in vague platitudes on anything else. He is not even a good minister, feeling uncomfortable among his charges and leaving benevolent work to Gibson and others who have regular contacts with the townsfolk. Before Lord Hollingford's return, Gibson's favorite companion was Squire Roger Hamley, whose family had owned land in the town of Hamley for longer than anyone could remember. The Hamley family had little wealth and almost no education to speak of, but the Squire is pleasant company and is welcomed by people of all classes. His wife is from a fine London family, but his dislike for the city – he always boasted that “he had got all that

was worth having out of that crowd of houses they call London” – was such that he never went back there again, though he had no objection to his wife visiting on occasion. She does not take well to the isolated life of the country, however, and soon becomes an invalid. Their two sons take after their parents – Osborne, the scholar, after his mother and Roger, a bit of a dullard, after his father. Because of Mrs. Hamley’s infirmity, Dr. Gibson is a frequent visitor in the Hamley home. The husband enjoys their conversation and the wife appreciates relief from her loneliness by one who so much values learning. She often invites Molly to come for a visit, but the doctor always refuses, not wanting to be deprived of her company and fearing to leave her with a nervous invalid or her two lively sons. He changes his mind, however, when he perceives that one of his apprentices, the son of Major Coxe, an old friend from India, is taking an interest in his seventeen-year-old daughter. He promptly accepts Mrs. Hamley’s offer and packs Molly off to the home of the Squire for a visit of indeterminate duration.

One day Mr. Gibson returns unexpectedly at lunchtime and sees a maid carrying a letter addressed to Molly. He intercepts the letter and reads it without allowing Molly to do so; it is a passionate love note from Coxe, one of his assistants. He answers the note, advising the young man to pursue “modesty, domestic fidelity, and deference,” then sends it off. Coxe finds the letter insulting and seeks out the doctor after dinner. Gibson tells him he is a young fool, that he should have taken the honorable course of approaching him first rather than seeking clandestine communication with his daughter, and that his behavior has cost the maid her place and forced him to write to Coxe’s father and request his transfer to another establishment. Coxe begs him to reconsider, and he relents if the young man will promise to have no further contact of a romantic sort with Molly. Coxe agrees, but to be on the safe side Gibson sends Molly for a visit with Mrs. Hamley, an invalid who wanted her as a companion for a week or two. Her sons Osborne and Roger are both away at Cambridge, much to the relief of both fathers, but a cause of disappointment to the romantically-inclined Mrs. Hamley. Molly is not consulted about any of this, but when she is told about the visit she insists on getting some new clothes for the purpose. Gibson, meanwhile, finds himself increasingly perplexed over how to rear a daughter rapidly approaching womanhood.

The day arrives for Molly’s visit to Hamley Hall, and as the carriage departs for the noble estate two men follow it with their eyes until it disappears around the bend – Mr. Gibson and Mr. Coxe. She arrives at her destination and is greeted by her hostess, Mrs. Hamley, who shows her to her room. After Molly settles in, she and Mrs. Hamley relax in the sitting room, reading poetry and discussing the pictures on the wall, one of which portrays Mrs. Hamley’s sons, Osborne and Roger, both of whom are away at Cambridge. Dinner is more formal than that to which she is accustomed, but conversation becomes awkward when the Squire begins speaking of the death of Molly’s mother and his expectation that her father would have by now remarried. The thought of her father taking another wife troubles Molly even after dinner is over, but she is relieved of her anxiety when Mr. Gibson himself appears to look in on Mrs. Hamley, who is not physically strong. After her father leaves, Molly plays cribbage with the Squire, who insists on prattling on about his sons. When she goes to bed, her mind is again filled with the thought of her father’s remarriage; she speculates as to whom he might marry, but rejects all of the obvious candidates as unsuitable. The next morning after breakfast Molly reads a novel from the Hall’s library, then is invited by the Squire to accompany him on a walk around the grounds. During the walk Molly asks him who people thought her father might marry, but he insisted that no particular name had entered the gossip at the time. Conversation again turns to the Hamley boys as the walk draws to a close.

Meanwhile, back at the Gibson household things are not going smoothly at all. Mr. Gibson had dismissed one servant for dallying with one of his apprentices, and his cook was now threatening to leave in sympathy with the girl. Furthermore, Molly's governess, Miss Eyre, was called away to attend to nephews who had come down with scarlet fever. Because he is now so short-staffed, the doctor decides that Molly must remain at Hamley Hall longer than the intended fortnight. Mrs. Hamley eagerly agrees, but Molly, despite the fact that she is enjoying her visit, really would prefer to return home to her father (he suspects that she really wants to be near Mr. Coxe again, but that is the farthest thing from her mind). The Squire, fond as he is of Molly, is displeased to hear that she is remaining for several months. In particular, he fears that his sons, two boys in their early twenties, might fall in love with a spirited girl of seventeen, and he clearly has higher aspirations for the matches to be made by his offspring. Soon news arrives that Osborne will be spending the vacation abroad with a friend and that only Roger will be returning home. Until then, Molly spends her days happily as a companion to Mrs. Hamley, riding in the carriage, walking the grounds, and reading in the library.

As Roger's arrival approaches, the mood in the household becomes somewhat somber, though Molly has no idea why. The fact of the matter is that Osborne had done very poorly on his examinations, bitterly disappointing his parents, and the Squire still feared that Roger would become entangled with his pretty young guest. While Molly waited in her room for Roger's arrival, she spent her time copying several of Osborne's poems, which Mrs. Hamley had shared with her. Roger arrives, but soon Mrs. Hamley rushes into the sitting room in tears; the Squire apparently began questioning Roger immediately about his brother, and further details of the young man's failure throw him into a rage. When she goes downstairs for dinner, Molly finally meets Roger in person. Neither is impressed by the other; she views him as serious and unfeeling, while he views her as awkward and coltish. When he tries to draw her into conversation to overcome the depression into which his parents have fallen, she thinks him unfeeling and refuses to respond. In the days that follow, the two studiously avoid one another; this becomes a special burden because Roger likes to work in the library, Molly's favorite haunt. Every time her father visits, she begs him to allow her to return home, but he repeatedly demurs without giving a reason. The reason, however, is that the good doctor is being drawn toward matrimony by Clare Kirkpatrick, the former governess of the Cumnor daughters who is now a widow with a teenage daughter of her own.

Clare Kirkpatrick was now a schoolmistress, and a poor and rather unsuccessful one at that, but her opportunity to establish a relationship with Mr. Gibson comes when she is invited to the Towers during her summer vacation as a companion to Lady Cumnor. The occasion arises when Lady Cumnor, increasingly ill, asks Clare to summon the doctor to see to her ailments. By the time the visit is over, Gibson is beginning to think of Clare as a possible remedy for his disordered household. Soon Lord and Lady Cumnor begin matchmaking, and Clare quickly begins to think of the well-established surgeon as her means of escape from an unpleasant schoolroom. Within a matter of days Gibson proposes marriage and Clare accepts his offer immediately. They tell Lady Cumnor, but Clare is embarrassed and Gibson is nonplused when he discovers that the match had been the subject of correspondence between Lady Cumnor and her husband.

Such words, once spoken, can never be taken back, however, and the doctor sets off to tell Molly the news. When he begins his awkward presentation, she quickly guesses its import and sees it as the fulfillment of all her fears. She angrily asks if she had been sent out of the house so all this could be arranged behind her back. In order to avoid further unpleasant exchanges, her father leaves, promising to come back the following day after she has had a chance to think things over more

calmly. Afraid she has lost her father's love forever by her outburst, she runs into the woods to cry her eyes out in solitude. Soon Roger Hamley, heading home for lunch, hears her sobs and awkwardly tries to comfort her. He tells her that her father's remarriage is for his happiness as well as hers, and shared the story of Harriet Cumnor, who had learned to accept and indeed love her father's second wife under much the same circumstances. He pleads with Molly to give her father and stepmother a chance. He then walks her back to the house and she rushes upstairs to be alone and get herself in a proper state to see Mrs. Hamley. By the time she comes downstairs, she is thoroughly ashamed of her own behavior toward her father, appreciative of Roger's advice, and determined to follow it. That evening after dinner Roger takes out the specimens he had collected during the day and shows them to his mother and Molly under a microscope. This has the desired effect of taking Molly's mind off her troubles and engaging her natural curiosity. The next morning Molly intends to apologize to her father, but he stops her before she can even speak, insisting that he knows what is in her heart. He then tells her that she has been invited to the Towers the following Thursday to spend the day with "Hyacinth" (Clare's real name) and renew old acquaintances. He also tells her that Cynthia Kirkpatrick will be returning from school in France to attend the upcoming wedding.

Mrs. Kirkpatrick immediately begins making plans for the wedding in her mind. She intends for it to occur as soon as possible, certainly before the new school term starts; she never wants to see that schoolroom again. Furthermore, she doesn't want her daughter to come to the wedding, let alone to serve as a bridesmaid, fearing that her own beauty would seem pale by comparison with that of Cynthia. She is displeased to find, however, that Lady Cumnor has assumed control of the wedding plans and that Gibson is quite content to wait until after Christmas to take his new bride, though she does succeed in convincing him to move the date up to Michaelmas (September 29).

The day Molly spends with her future stepmother passes awkwardly. Though both insist they want nothing more than to please Mr. Gibson, Molly quickly discovers that Mrs. Kirkpatrick intends to change any of the doctor's habits and preferences that she finds disagreeable. The conversation then turns to Cynthia, and Mrs. Kirkpatrick expresses doubts that her daughter will be able to attend the wedding, but assures Molly that she will be home the following summer after completing her schooling in France. They then go to see Lady Cumnor, who imperiously decides that the best plan would be for Molly to spend the fall semester at Ashcombe, Clare's school, so the two could get to know one another better. Both are horrified at the thought, but Clare keeps her thoughts to herself. Molly lacks the self-control to do so, however, and blurts out her complete refusal to consider such a thing; she wants to spend the time before the wedding with her father, since this will be her final opportunity to have him to herself. Gibson, however, favors the plan, and Molly silently submits, though with great sorrow because she believes that her father no longer is sensitive to her feelings. She cries all the way back to Hamley Hall, where she is met by Roger, who detects her grief immediately. She explains that she tried to put his advice into practice, but it made her miserable; in fact, she is convinced that if she lives for others she will be unhappy for the rest of her life. In the days that follow, Molly receives nothing but sympathy from the Hamleys, though each in his or her own kind; the Squire regrets having brought up the idea of Gibson remarrying at all, while Mrs. Hamley lends a sympathetic ear to each detail of Molly's struggles and Roger seeks to keep her occupied with his hobby as an amateur naturalist. As his sympathy for her continues to grow, she becomes ever more comfortable in his presence.

As the wedding plans proceed, Lord Cumnor is convinced that he deserves some of the credit for having thought of bringing the two together (though he had actually done nothing about it), and

Lady Cumnor continues to insist that the marriage should take place after Christmas. Clare refuses to give in on the date, but she is not reluctant to use for her own purposes money she is given by others. When Lord Cumnor gives her a hundred pounds for her trousseau, she uses it to pay off her debts instead, and when Gibson gives her fifteen pounds to finance Cynthia's trip from France for the wedding, she instead writes the headmistress of the school, convincing her that her daughter cannot possibly spare the time away from her studies, then keeps the money for herself. The doctor, meanwhile, asks Miss Browning and Phoebe, two spinster sisters and longtime family friends, to do him the favor of hosting Molly until the wedding and taking charge of preparing his home for its new occupant.

When Molly moves in with the Browning sisters, the denizens of Hamley Hall miss her terribly, though each for different reasons. The Squire misses her banter, Mrs. Hamley misses the female companionship of one who had become like a daughter to her, and Roger misses the intellectual stimulation of mentoring the curious girl. Molly misses them as well, realizing that the Browning sisters suddenly seem backward and provincial in comparison to her friends at the Hall. Miss Browning loves gossip, and is constantly questioning Molly about her experiences at Hamley Hall. One day, however, she begins to tease Molly about her closeness to Roger, with Molly insisting that no such relationship exists. Their anger soon dissipates, however, as they apologize to one another before bedtime. The next day Miss Browning takes Molly to see the changes she is making in the Gibson house, and Molly is appalled that it no longer looks like the home she loves. At this point Molly is inclined to skip the wedding altogether, but she changes her mind when her lovely bridesmaid's dress appears. When she and her father go to Ashcombe the day before the wedding, she is introduced to Mr. Preston, the handsome and athletic land agent, who has decided to be particularly attentive to the doctor's daughter in order to hide his affections for another.

The day of the wedding so dreaded by Molly arrives, and the ceremony itself takes no more than ten minutes. Molly is appalled to find that she is to spend the afternoon at the Towers in the company of Lord Cumnor's daughter, Lady Harriet, while her father and his new bride leave for their honeymoon. Harriet rambles on and on in the carriage about her neighbors in a most patronizing fashion, and Molly asks to be returned to the home of the Browning sisters rather than going back to the Towers. The sisters are glad to see her and want to hear every detail of her experience that day. A few days later Roger pays a visit to deliver a note from his mother and bring Molly a wasp's nest for her perusal. The note invites Molly to visit Hamley Hall the following Thursday – a visit to which she very much looks forward. The purpose of the visit is for Molly to keep Mrs. Hamley company while the Squire and his sons are gone for the day at an agricultural fair, but much to Molly's surprise, Osborne, whom she has not yet met, suddenly appears, announcing that he has no real interest in bullocks and thus decided to return home. In appearance Osborne is much as Molly expected, but his personality is more weak and feminine than she had imagined. Her image of him is greatly improved, however, when she sees the obvious love and respect shared by mother and son, and later by Osborne and Roger. When Molly returns to the Browning home, she is told that Lady Harriet has paid a visit that afternoon, which Phoebe Browning narrates in excited detail.

The following Tuesday the newlyweds return from their trip and Molly returns to a house that has been drastically altered from the familiar home in which she grew up, and which is as distressing to the servants as it is to her. The first problem to be confronted is what Molly will call her stepmother; "Mamma" in her mind applied only to one person, and she was gone forever. Within hours of arriving, Gibson is called out to visit a patient and Molly is left alone with the new Mrs. Gibson, whom she finds she is expected to wait on hand and foot. After Clare goes to bed, Molly

goes downstairs and arranges a simple meal for her father, who soon returns to report that his patient died that night. Upon his pleading, Molly agrees to call the new Mrs. Gibson “Mamma” in order to please her father. But the new mistress of the house soon alienates the servants with her demanding ways; Betty, Molly’s old nursemaid, even decides to leave the household after serving there for sixteen years, followed shortly thereafter by the cook. Coxe also leaves the fold, having been summoned by an elderly uncle, but is replaced by another pupil, this one too young to be of romantic interest to Molly. Meanwhile Gibson makes a habit of yielding to his new wife in small things, but soon discovers that almost all the daily affairs of life are “small things,” meaning that his existence comes to be increasingly dominated by a woman who cares much for her own comfort and little for the comfort of others.

In the weeks that follow Clare fusses interminably over Molly’s appearance, insisting that she dress more formally and attend to her complexion. One day Osborne and Roger pay a visit; the former is impressed by Molly’s altered appearance while the latter seeks to discern whether or not she is happy. Osborne and Clare talk of the latest news from the London stage while Molly and Roger speak of family matters, including the fact that Osborne is not in good health, still suffering from the disappointment of his unsatisfactory examination results. As they prepare to leave, Roger tells Molly that both brothers are soon leaving Hamley Hall. Not surprisingly, Mrs. Gibson is very impressed with Osborne, especially since he is heir to the Hamley estate, and immediately takes a dislike to Roger because of his lack of aristocratic bearing. She then begins to speak of Cynthia’s return from France, waxing enthusiastic over her intention to redo her bedroom, at the same time refurnishing Molly’s to match it. Molly is horrified at the thought, since her room used to belong to her mother, and begs her stepmother to reconsider, but Clare will hear none of it. How could she think of giving new furniture to her daughter without doing the same for her stepdaughter? Later Squire Hamley pays a call. Mrs. Gibson is determined to make a good impression, and so rambles on at great length, but Molly recognizes that something is bothering the Squire. He takes her aside, tells her of his disappointment in Osborne’s failure to earn his degree and gain a fellowship, and begs her to visit Hamley Hall because his wife is doing very poorly. She agrees immediately to go back with him. Despite her father giving prior permission for the journey, Mrs. Gibson refuses her consent, jealous because Molly had received such attention from the Hamleys, because she wants Molly to join her for a neighborhood visit that evening. The Squire is offended at her attitude, but agrees to return to pick Molly up the following morning. Clare, meanwhile, can’t decide whether she is more annoyed at the Squire’s pique or fearful lest she may have alienated a man she desired to cultivate.

When Molly arrives at Hamley Hall, she quickly perceives that all is not well. The root of the problem is the huge debt run up by Osborne at Cambridge, which now becomes the Squire’s responsibility. Molly finds Mrs. Hamley worse than ever and tries to distract her by telling her all about the events surrounding the wedding. Though she omits her own struggles, her friend reads between the lines and seeks to offer comfort. After resting for a time, Mrs. Hamley then tells Molly of their family’s problems. Osborne’s debts are so great that the Squire will need to mortgage some of their estate to pay them off. Molly leaps to Osborne’s defense, arguing that the debts must have been motivated by some secret generosity or that he had been taken advantage of by unscrupulous tradesmen, but Mrs. Hamley points out that the first is impossible because of the nature of the debts, while the second would portray Osborne as a weak man indeed. The Squire, meanwhile, becomes increasingly angry as his wife’s health fails and as he is confronted with the reality of his money problems. Gibson, however, realizes that Mrs. Hamley is near death and writes letters to Osborne

and Roger without their father's knowledge or permission. Molly is left to tell the Squire about the letters and their implied significance. Shortly thereafter Molly is called home by her stepmother, who seems jealous whenever she doesn't have the girl under her thumb. She insists that Molly accompany her to a dance that night, but Molly has no desire to make merry in her sorrow over Mrs. Hamley's condition. She appeals to her father, who sides with her, though he hates to be placed in the middle of their disputes. Clare gets her revenge by deciding that a gown she had bought for Molly will be given to Cynthia instead.

When Molly returns to Hamley Hall she finds that Roger has already arrived and that Osborne is to join them shortly. Mrs. Hamley is failing fast, often under the influence of opiates and thus barely able to communicate intelligibly. One day Molly asks Roger about Osborne. On much he is sworn to secrecy, but he tells her that the Squire has refused to pay Osborne's debts and that he has fled to Belgium to avoid his creditors. Furthermore, Roger assures Molly that Osborne's debts were not contracted through vice of any kind. Mr. Gibson tells Molly that she can do little to help Mrs. Hamley anymore and should come home, but Molly begs for a few more days. That evening Osborne arrives. His father refuses to speak to him and his mother is too weak to allow him to visit her. Two days later Molly, who now has little to do, is reading in the library while Osborne is writing a letter. Roger rushes in and, unaware of Molly's presence, inadvertently reveals Osborne's secret – that he is married without his parents' knowledge or permission. Molly promises to keep the secret, and the next day leaves for Hollingford, bearing with her the thanks and affections of the entire Hamley family along with flowers gathered by Osborne, books from Roger, and a kiss worthy of a beloved daughter from the Squire himself.

Molly arrives home to discover that Cynthia is expected on the following day. She is excited finally to meet her new sister and is bursting with questions about her. When she finally arrives, Molly sees a tall, beautiful young woman, full of energy, but not quite comfortable with her mother. The two girls make good first impressions on one another. Mrs. Gibson, however, seems little pleased with her daughter's presence, doing little but complain about how few dresses she has and the fact that she has not brought back from France a bonnet for her mother. Cynthia, who turns out to be an accomplished seamstress, refurbishes her mother's wardrobe with small touches she saw in the streets of Boulogne, which pleases Clare greatly. Meanwhile, Mrs. Hamley continues to sink inexorably toward death. Less than two weeks after Molly's return to Hollingford, Mrs. Hamley dies. Roger and the Squire send Molly words of appreciation and her father and Cynthia seek to comfort her. Cynthia confides something of her own history – her father died when she was four, her mother sent her away when she became a governess, and after that the two rarely saw one another and did not get on when they did because of Cynthia's wild streak. Now, however, Clare longs to introduce her daughter into society but finds little opportunity to do so in the neighborhood of Hollingford.

One day Preston, the land agent from the Towers, pays a call at Hollingford. Molly learned to dislike him from previous experience in his company, but she is puzzled by the unreadable response of her stepmother. When Preston asks Molly to reserve a dance for him at the first ball in the coming season, she deflects his request. Soon Cynthia arrives and rudely ignores the newcomer. Conversation then turns to events at Hamley Hall; unlike poor Osborne, Roger has completed his university studies by finishing first in his class. Preston then continues, speaking disparagingly of the Hamleys at every opportunity. Cynthia leaps to their defense despite the fact that she doesn't even know the family because of her affection for Molly. Later Osborne visits, and Molly quickly perceives that her stepmother is attempting to throw him and Cynthia together; she is, of course,

unaware of Osborne's secret marriage. After he leaves, Mrs. Gibson praises him highly, implying not very subtly that she desires a match between him and her daughter, though she is willing, because she considers Roger inferior to his brother, to invite him over for dinner sometime in order to improve Molly's chances. Both girls entirely dislike her matchmaking ways; Cynthia thinks Osborne agreeable but weak, while Molly has never given a single thought to a union between herself and Roger.

Osborne begins visiting the Gibson household frequently at the urging of the new Mrs. Gibson. He speaks casually of life at Hamley Hall and his occasional journeys to London and abroad. Molly, who knows of his secret marriage, finds all of this very strange; after all, a man should live with his wife and family, shouldn't he? Though Osborne seeks out Molly whenever he wants to speak of anything serious, Mrs. Gibson becomes convinced that he is attracted to Cynthia. Osborne rarely speaks of Roger, though his admiration for his brother is clear, but Molly is reluctant to bring up the subject of the successful younger brother. Meanwhile, Mrs. Gibson is looking forward to the Easter ball, which she views as a sort of coming-out party for the girls, and frets that they might not have partners for the dance since the Hamley brothers are still in mourning. She also uses the ball as an excuse to keep the girls from going anywhere they may be invited without her, even to the Brownings, since they are "not out yet" - an idea at which Miss Browning is highly affronted, seeing it as nothing but putting on airs. Finally Clare gives in, though only because of the sarcastic comments of Cynthia, who fears her mother not at all. When they arrive at the Brownings, Molly is pleased to find Roger there, and at his request introduces him to Cynthia. He soon succumbs to Cynthia's charms, depriving Molly of the opportunity of speaking to him about his life and the condition of his family. While Roger tells Cynthia everything Molly longs to know about himself and the family, poor Molly is trapped into a game of cards with two young girls invited by the Brownings. Even when she does get Roger alone for a few minutes, he tells her nothing of what she wants to know; his mind is evidently still focused on Cynthia. When Roger calls at the Gibson home the next day, Molly discovers that the Squire is still suffering from depression, that Osborne is estranged from his father, and that Roger is becoming infatuated with Cynthia.

In reality, the situation at Hamley Hall is far worse than Roger indicated. The Squire, drowning in his misery, has become a domestic tyrant with no gentle wife to sooth his nerves in the face of his mounting troubles - besides the death of his wife and the estrangement from Osborne, the price of corn is down, a government loan needs to be repaid in addition to Osborne's debts, and the roof of Hamley Hall has begun to leak badly. Every little thing causes a quarrel between Osborne and his father, from the way the young dandy dresses to the accuracy of his watch. At one point Osborne becomes so frustrated with his father's continual disparagements that he offers to leave home and make his own living, though he is not qualified for any occupation, so he asks his father for money to train for one. The Squire furiously compares him to the Prodigal Son, but admits he has no money to give him. He then leaves the room and locks himself in his study, where he despairs over his predicament, from which he sees no way out, and devoutly wishes that Roger were at home.

Osborne, meanwhile, ponders the dilemma of how to obtain an income. No profession appeals to him; he would need to be supported for two or three years in order to study law, he would hate the army, which in any case would not pay sufficiently well, and the thought of becoming a clergyman and spending his days with people far beneath him appalls him. Yet how is he to support his wife? He knows his father would never approve of his marriage to a French girl who had been in service, and a Catholic at that! The only possibility he can think of is to sell his poems, though

he wonders if anyone would buy them. When Roger gets home, Osborne asks his advice. Roger is reluctant to give it because his brother never takes the advice he offers, but Osborne pleads with him to use his influence to sell his poems to a Cambridge publisher, hoping to get at least a hundred pounds for them.

The night of Mrs. Gibson's dinner arrives, and the girls are decked out in their finest dresses. Mrs. Gibson gives all her attention to Osborne during the meal, while Roger is occupied in some abstruse scientific discussion with the doctor. Cynthia, terribly bored with the whole affair, struggles to stay awake, while Molly tries as hard as she can to understand the conversation on science. Roger soon glances once too often at Cynthia, and she takes advantage of the situation to draw his attention to herself. Mrs. Gibson immediately leaps to her defense, running down Molly in the process, before the ladies leave the room. The same tendencies appear later in the evening when the two girls entertain by playing the piano, which Cynthia does brightly and Molly does accurately.

As Easter approached, preparations for the ball, a charity event to benefit the local hospital, moved forward. Townsfolk call on one another and receive guests from abroad, and Mrs. Gibson receives an invitation to the Towers, where she is largely ignored among the august company. On the day of the ball, Cynthia and Molly receive bouquets of flowers from Osborne and Roger. Cynthia tears hers to pieces in order to pull out the blooms that best match her dress and her complexion, while Molly insists on leaving the bouquet, which has clearly been carefully and thoughtfully arranged, exactly as it is. As they are preparing to leave, another bouquet arrives - this one for Cynthia from Mr. Preston, requesting the first dance. She angrily throws it into the fire, insisting that she will never dance with the land agent. Molly begins to perceive that both she and her mother have something against the man, though she has no idea what it might be.

The charity ball after Easter provides an opportunity for the young to dance and their elders to observe and gossip, and everyone who is anyone is there. One prominent subject of gossip among the Miss Brownings and their friends is Mr. Preston's past relationship with the former Mrs. Kirkpatrick and her daughter. When the dancing begins, Molly and Cynthia eagerly dance with anyone who asks them, much to the consternation of Mrs. Gibson, who wants them to be available when the aristocratic contingents arrive fashionably late. When Preston approaches Mrs. Gibson, he is noticeably angry because Cynthia has ignored his offer of the first dance. The party from the Towers finally arrives shortly after midnight, though their guest the Duchess disappoints everyone in the crowd by dressing like a young woman rather than wearing her fabled diamonds. Later Molly is asked to dance by Lord Hollingford, the son and heir of Lord Cumnor. He is impressed by her intelligence, especially given the interest she shows in a scientific paper recently published by Roger Hamley. Her stepmother, however, is of two minds; she is delighted that Molly is making such a good impression on a highborn aristocrat, but wishes that it had been Cynthia instead.

Back at Hamley Hall, matters continue to get worse. The Squire and his firstborn continue to be estranged, and poor Roger is stuck in the middle, the confidant of both yet unable to effect a reconciliation. The Squire's health declines as he wallows in his depression and refuses to go out of doors or get any exercise, while Osborne spends all his time refining his poetry and surreptitiously writing letters to his wife in Winchester. A few days after the ball, Lord Hollingford pays a call on Roger to discuss his scientific paper, but Roger is out walking with his father, having finally talked the old man into leaving his library. Hollingford leaves a note inviting Roger to dinner at the Tower to meet a French scientist friend of his, but when the Squire sees the note he unreasonably takes it for a trick to solicit Hamley family support in the coming parliamentary election and refuses permission for Roger to go. Roger, thoroughly disappointed but unwilling to disobey his father, jots

a note refusing the invitation. Later in the day, the Squire relents and gives permission for Roger to go. Osborne, meanwhile, has little confidence in his poetry as a source of income, but Roger assures him that, when his fellowship is secured, he will be able to afford a trip for both of them to Winchester to visit Aimee, whom Roger has never met. (At this point the reader learns how Osborne met his wife. The two met while walking in Hyde Park while Aimee was trying to shepherd her unruly charges. Osborne assisted her, the two became friends, but she was fired by her employer when she found Aimee involved with someone above her station. Osborne at that point rescued the distraught girl by marrying her.)

Once the ball is over, Molly looks forward to discussing it with Cynthia, but the latter has no interest in any postmortems. Mrs. Gibson can talk of nothing else, but her conversation is of little consolation to Molly. Osborne visits Hollingford often, and Roger comes when he can. Both Cynthia and Molly quickly discern that, while Osborne views the girls merely as good friends (for a reason that only Molly knows), Roger is rapidly falling in love with Cynthia. Mrs. Gibson, of course, is oblivious to all of this, still convinced that her scheming will bring Osborne and Cynthia together. Cynthia, meanwhile, is becoming uncharacteristically quiet and listless. Roger is the first one outside the household to notice Cynthia's indisposition and immediately sets himself the task of cheering her up by bringing her little gifts of fruit or flowers almost daily. As the connection between Cynthia and Roger becomes more obvious, Mrs. Gibson does everything in her power to discourage it, fearful that the "uncouth" Roger should move ahead of his brother in Cynthia's favor. Finally she is openly rude to him and strongly suggests that his visits are unwanted. Cynthia is taken aback by her mother's attitude, but Molly is furious at the treatment of her friend and rushes upstairs to her room, where she bursts into tears.

When Osborne and Roger leave for a time, life at Hollingford grows boring. Soon Osborne returns from Winchester, but he is not in good health, largely because of his despair over his seemingly irremediable situation. When Osborne comes to visit he is in better spirits, but in the course of their conversation Molly mentions that Mr. Preston is soon to move into the neighborhood. Cynthia's reaction is strong and immediate; after Osborne leaves, she tells Molly she must leave the house and take work as a governess, though she refuses to explain her reasons. When Roger gets back from Cambridge he is reluctant to visit Hollingford because of Mrs. Gibson's rude and insulting behavior prior to his departure, but Osborne assures him that she was merely having a bad day and when she sends him a note of apology and invites him to visit, he accepts. His love for Cynthia grows increasingly obvious, though she is unable to return his affection. In reality, their union would not be practical, since Roger would lose his fellowship if married and he had little in the way of inheritance as the younger son, but to Roger love is all. Osborne, meanwhile, willingly accepts money from Roger's fellowship to pay periodic visits to his now-pregnant wife.

One day the Squire receives word that his old gamekeeper is on his deathbed, and he determines to pay him a visit. As he approaches the man's cottage, he discovers that Preston has hired workers to make some improvements on a piece of Lord's Cumnor's property adjacent to his land. His jealousy of the upstart Cumnors (after all, they had only been in the county for a little more than a hundred years) is such that his blood boils. After calling on the old gamekeeper, he encounters Preston, whose rudeness leads to a quarrel that is only stopped short of violence by Roger's arrival on the scene.

Preston is determined to get revenge on Roger for what he perceived as condescension on his part; he further justifies this because the Hamleys are Tories and his employers are Whigs and because of his general envy of the Hamley brothers due to their standing and popularity in the

neighborhood. He sees his opportunity for revenge when he is invited to a series of gatherings in his new neighborhood. He accepts every invitation, especially when he knows that Cynthia will also be present, and does everything possible to spend time in her company. Meanwhile, Mrs. Gibson has for some reason changed her attitude and is making every effort to bring Roger and Cynthia together. Cynthia is oblivious to all of these machinations, but Molly observes them with some puzzlement.

Roger, in order to ease his father's distress, offers him money to drain a field that had been left unfinished because of Osborne's debts, but is at a loss as to how to obtain the promised funds. The fact that Osborne's wife is pregnant adds a further complication, since the estate is entailed to the firstborn son and any legitimate male heirs. Roger thus questions Osborne about the precise circumstances of his marriage. He learns that Osborne and Aimee had been married by an absent-minded professor at Trinity College while they were in France, though said professor somehow neglected to provide the proper paperwork. Roger urges his brother to marry his wife again in England in order to get the necessary documentation before the birth of the child. Soon the deed is done.

The season again arrives for the nobility to gather at the Towers. Cynthia, strangely, cares less for the gaiety of visits and parties than she does for the adoration of the absent Roger, despite the fact that she does not love him at all - a terrible waste that Molly feels deeply. Mrs., Gibson, on the other hand, basks in the reflected glory of the Cumnors and is jealous if anyone else in Hollingford receives their attentions, so much so that she schemes to keep Lady Harriet and Molly from seeing one another. When Lady Harriet does visit Mrs. Gibson, she shares some of the local gossip, the most noteworthy of which is the fact that her brother, Lord Hollingford, is trustee to the estate of a rich eccentric named Crichton, who required in his will that his money be used to finance a two-year scientific voyage to gather specimens from foreign lands, which were then to be placed in a museum named after the benefactor. Lord Hollingford is prepared to choose Roger Hamley as the recipient of the grant; this will satisfy his need for money as well as aligning with his scientific interests. When Molly and Cynthia hear of this from Mrs. Gibson, both insist that they will miss dear Roger, though for very different reasons.

Meanwhile, Osborne's condition continues to worsen. Gibson is convinced that his disease is fatal, though he might linger for years in his current state. He wonders about the wisdom of Roger undertaking a lengthy journey while his brother's health is so precarious. When he arrives at Hamley Hall, however, he finds that the arrangements for the trip have already been made; in fact, the stipend has already been directed toward the long-neglected drainage project by means of Roger insuring his life and borrowing money on the insurance policy in preparation for the trip. He is to leave as soon as he gathers the necessary equipment and materials. Conversation then turns to Osborne. Gibson brings up the matter of his health in vague terms, but the Squire is much more concerned with his prospects. He somewhat rudely voices his concern that Osborne might be getting involved with Molly or Cynthia, because, as heir to the estate, he will need to marry for money in order to clear the property of its debts, which are largely of his making. Gibson tells him he should openly talk to Osborne, and if he finds that danger of that kind exists, he can simply forbid him from coming to Hollingford, and if not, then the visits can continue as usual with no fear of unwanted attachments. The conversation, however, does not go well. Osborne insists that his father has no right to prevent him marrying anyone he chooses, though in the end he promises not to pursue Molly or Cynthia. The interchange is so heated, however, that they part more estranged than ever, and Osborne's health continues to decline. Roger comes home for two days prior to his departure for Africa and plans to visit Hollingford on his way to London. Should he confess his love to Cynthia?

On the day of Roger's farewell visit, Cynthia is home alone. Her mother has gone visiting, and Molly is on one of her daily long walks - in this case pondering whether she should say something to her father about her stepmother's continual habit of bending the truth for her own advantage. Molly gathers blackberries, which she knows Cynthia loves, tearing her gown in the process, but when she gets home she finds that Mrs. Gibson is already there. Her stepmother cautions her to stay out of the sitting room because Roger has come and is having a private conversation with Cynthia. Molly rushes upstairs to her room and breaks down in tears because she knows that Roger is throwing his love away on one who is incapable of returning it. When she goes downstairs to say goodbye to Roger, she discovers that Cynthia has accepted his offer of love, but that he has refused to contract an engagement now because of the uncertainties associated with his voyage. He considers himself bound to her but insists that she is free until he returns. All agree that the informal engagement should be kept secret. As Roger runs down the road to catch his coach, Molly's eyes follow him longingly from the attic window.

When Mr. Gibson gets home from his rounds that night, his wife tells him Cynthia's news. He is surprised, but notes that the engagement will need to be a long one because Roger will be away for two years, and upon his return must take up some profession that will enable him to support a wife. Mrs. Gibson, however, intimates that the wait may not be as long as all that because of the state of Osborne's health. The doctor demands to know the source of her information, and she admits to eavesdropping on one of his conversations with a fellow doctor in which he revealed that Osborne had an aneurism in his aorta that was likely to be fatal. This, of course, explains Mrs. Gibson's change in attitude toward Roger in recent months; she now wants him for Cynthia because he is likely to become the heir of Hamley. Gibson is furious that his wife would use confidential medical information to advance the cause of her daughter. He insists that he must tell the Squire immediately, since he had promised to let him know of any entanglements involving his daughters and the Hamley boys. With the end of the interview, Gibson finally realizes that his new wife is lacking in character and is not to be trusted. Cynthia, on her part, is appalled at the idea of sharing her secret with the Squire. The Squire thinks his sons' actions foolish, but is willing to invite the Gibsons to Hamley Hall the following week for lunch so he can have the opportunity to meet Cynthia.

All in all, Mr. Gibson is quite pleased with the result of his conversation with the Squire and goes home to give a report to the women of the household. When he tells them that they have all been invited to Hamley Hall for lunch the following Thursday, his wife gives him a hard time about it for no good reason other than her desire to be contrary and to manipulate others for her own gratification, but in the end the invitation is accepted. On Friday the doctor, still annoyed with his wife, gets Molly alone and asks her about the visit. It went well, and Cynthia and the Squire got along swimmingly. When her father asks Molly whether Cynthia is worthy of Roger, however, she hesitates to answer, not because of any disparagement of Cynthia in her mind, but because she holds Roger in such high esteem and knows that Cynthia does not love him.

Much to everyone's surprise, young Coxe, after a two-year absence, returns to the Hollingford. He has now inherited his uncle's estate, making him a wealthy young man, and he intends to fulfill his earlier promise and secure Molly's hand in marriage. Gibson agrees to let him pursue his suit, fervently hoping that Molly has the good sense to refuse him. His wife, however, has other ideas and thinks that she can regain her husband's favor by facilitating a match for Molly. Coxe is in the house when Molly and Cynthia return from a walk; his openness about his feelings turns Molly off quickly and obviously, while Cynthia's typical warm and willing ways turn the

young man's attention from his original object of desire. Within two weeks he asks Gibson for permission to seek Cynthia's hand. The doctor warns him that her affections are otherwise engaged, but he persists. Cynthia refuses him and he leaves immediately, but Gibson then rebukes his stepdaughter for leading on an honest man whom she had no intention of accepting - especially since she is already engaged, secret or not - and then leaves the room. When Molly asks Cynthia if she intends to tell Roger about the proposal, she says she never shares her secrets with Roger, and in fact doubts that they will ever be married. Out of the blue, Cynthia then asks Molly if she should marry Mr. Preston, whom they both loathe. When Molly presses her further, she tells her that his relationship with her and her mother goes back to their days at Ashcombe, where Clare ran a school, and had to do with money, but says no more. After Cynthia leaves, Molly ponders her own heartache; she is now full convinced that her father regrets his choice of a wife, resigning himself to a bad situation by telling her that there is no point in crying over spilt milk. Molly sees no solution for this problem. Furthermore, she is upset by Cynthia's cavalier attitude toward Roger and his letters. She hardly glances at them, allows Molly to read them because she finds them boring, and is tardy in her replies. Molly, on the other hand, cherishes every word, dreams of Roger at night, and prays for him when she finds he has contracted a case of fever - even to the extent that she compares herself to the mother who begged King Solomon to give her child to another woman as long as he let him live.

Throughout the dull winter that follows little visiting takes place and Molly notices that Cynthia increasingly withdraws into herself; Molly's curiosity about her history with Mr. Preston remains unsatisfied because of her unwillingness to press Cynthia too hard on the subject. The monotony of the winter is broken by the visit of Mr. Kirkpatrick, Mrs. Gibson's brother-in-law, who is a prominent London barrister. He has not seen Mrs. Gibson in many years and hardly remembers Cynthia at all. During his visit he is kind enough to Mrs. Gibson and Molly, but quickly forms a bond with the doctor based on intelligence and kindred interests. Cynthia he finds fascinating, so much so that he insists that his wife invite her to London to visit their children, her seven cousins. When the invitation arrives, Mrs. Gibson immediately starts complaining because she was not invited, and Cynthia inexplicably refuses to go on the pretext that her clothes are not nice enough. Her mother insists she should buy some new ones out of her allowance, but apparently her money is gone, though no one in the family can imagine where. The doctor offers to give her ten pounds for new clothes, and Molly goes upstairs to tell her the good news.

Cynthia thanks Mr. Gibson warmly for his gift, but refuses to tell her mother how she is spending her allowance. Squire Hamley, however, is not so careful with his secrets. On boring rainy Sunday afternoon he confides in Osborne about Roger's engagement to Cynthia. Osborne is not surprised, though he knew nothing of it, but soon the conversation turns to Osborne's marital prospects. His father again insists that he must choose a wife who will bring money to the estate, while Osborne tells him in no uncertain terms that he will not be governed by his father or anyone else in his choice of a bride. The ensuing quarrel deepens Osborne's depression, but he seeks to lift his spirits by visiting Hollingford and giving Cynthia his congratulations. She is more annoyed than gratified, however, and warns Osborne not to let her secret spread any farther. Meanwhile, her mother decides that she will accompany Cynthia to London for a few days despite the lack of an invitation.

Cynthia is, needless to say, less than pleased by her mother's intention, but Molly is secretly overjoyed by the thought of a whole week alone with her father. Cynthia discerns her feelings and regrets that she and her mother have become interlopers in Molly's happy home. Molly assures her

that she is no such thing (implying that her mother is), but Cynthia warns her that she is not so good as everyone seems to think she is. Once they leave, Molly is in her glory. The only impediment to her happiness is that the women of the neighborhood, knowing that Mrs. Gibson is away, insist on inviting them to dinner almost every night, thus depriving Molly of time alone with her father. One day when she is visiting the Browning sisters, they tell her a juicy piece of gossip that they have heard - that Cynthia was seen in the company of Mr. Preston, and in fact that the two are engaged. Molly hotly denies that such a thing is possible and begs them to spread the story no farther. The sisters, unfortunately, draw the wrong conclusion from the conversation, namely that Molly herself was the one seen with Preston. They then determine that they will not permit her to give herself to such a scoundrel, a man who has a reputation for womanizing, gambling, and drinking.

When Mrs. Gibson returns from London, she is full of praise for the high society in which they traveled. Molly is troubled, however, because Cynthia appears to be giving no thought to Roger whatsoever, even to the extent of spending the evening in dancing and gaiety immediately after hearing of Roger's illness. Soon Molly longs for Cynthia's return, largely because she is forced every night to spend time listening to her stepmother's complaints, most of which center around the thought that her life would be so much better had her first husband not died. Cynthia finally does arrive, full of tales about her time in London, but seems somehow distant from Molly. One day Mr. Gibson walks excitedly into the room and places a pamphlet before the girls. Cynthia pays it little heed, but Molly is as excited as her father because it contains an account of a letter from Roger received with great acclaim by the Geographical Society giving an account of his visit to a part of Africa where white man had never before set foot. Cynthia again insists that her arrangement with Roger not be spoken of or shared with anyone and alludes to some other secret that she fears that Molly will discover. When later Molly mentions mistaken suspicions that Miss Browning has concerning her and Mr. Preston, Cynthia becomes angry and insists that his name should never be mentioned in connection with her.

In the months that follow, Cynthia withdraws more and more into her shell, especially where Molly is concerned, while Mrs. Gibson becomes more overbearing than ever. One day Mr. Gibson invites Molly to take a ride with him; they enjoy one another's company for a few miles, then Molly gets down to walk home while her father continues to one of his appointments. On her way home she hears a voice screaming in the woods. Crashing through the underbrush, she comes upon Cynthia and Mr. Preston, who have clearly been quarreling. Preston astonishes Molly by telling her that he and Cynthia have been engaged to be married for a long time; in fact, he has letters proving that they are to wed as soon as she turns twenty years of age. Molly refuses to believe him and Cynthia denies it, but promises to tell Molly the whole story when they get home. When Preston persists, Cynthia admits that at the age of sixteen she promised to marry him in return for a large loan, but insists that now she could not possibly bring herself to fulfill that contract. In fact, she has been saving her allowance to repay the debt, but Preston refuses to accept the money, swearing that he loves her and will never give her up. When Cynthia blurts out, "I hate you!" Preston abruptly takes his leave and the two girls return home in silence, go through the usual dinner ritual pretending everything is normal, then go upstairs to bed, at which time Molly crosses the hall to Cynthia's room.

Finally Cynthia pours out the whole story into Molly's sympathetic ears, first eliciting a promise that she will tell no one else; Cynthia is convinced that, should Mr. Gibson discover the truth, he would immediately cast her out. Molly knows her father would do no such thing, but actually might be able to help Cynthia out of her plight; she agrees to secrecy, however. Cynthia then tells her that the whole situation had begun four or five years earlier when she and her mother

were at Ashcombe. They saw Preston frequently because Lord Cumnor owned the school building and Preston was his land agent. When Cynthia was home on vacation, her mother decided to travel to visit friends, leaving her young daughter alone. Cynthia had been invited to a festival with the Donaldsons, but she had no money to get there and no appropriate clothes to wear. Preston came upon her in her sorry state and offered to lend her twenty pounds, which she accepted. She promptly spent it all and enjoyed herself enormously, for the first time realizing how attractive she was to men. When Preston came to the ball and saw her in her finery, he proclaimed his love for her and offered to forgive the debt if she would agree to marry him. When her mother came home and Cynthia was faced with the need to tell her about the loan, she instead wrote Preston and promised to marry him when she reached the age of twenty, insisting that the arrangement be held in strictest secrecy. Almost immediately, however, she began to hate the sight of him because of the liberties he took, acting as if he owned her. While she is at school in France, she discovers through a relative of Preston's that he has been flirting with other women, including Lady Harriet and Cynthia's mother! She writes to him swearing that she will never marry him, but he then started threatening to let her letters to him be seen in public, ruining her reputation in the process. Furthermore, the letters revealed some harsh truths about her mother's character, and Preston threatened to show them to Mr. Gibson if Cynthia refused to marry him. For her, engagement to Roger meant escape from Preston and an assertion of her freedom from her foolish promise. She can only imagine what Preston would do if he knew of her engagement to Roger. She had gathered the money she owed and offered to buy back the letters and thus her freedom, but Preston always refused. Molly promises to go to Preston and make him take the money and return the letters, though she has not the faintest notion of how this might be accomplished.

The next morning Cynthia is understandably moody, and eventually presses Molly about her promise to meet with Preston and seek return of the letters. Cynthia sets up the rendezvous, and Molly undertakes the journey with considerable reluctance. When she arrives at the appointed place, Preston is surprised to see her rather than Cynthia. Molly pleads her case, but Preston is immovable, insisting that if Cynthia will never marry him, he at least will get revenge upon her for her faithlessness. Molly then takes another tack, threatening to tell all to Lady Harriet and encouraging her to reveal Preston's behavior to her father, Lord Cumnor. The threat finds its mark since such a revelation would certainly cost the land agent his job, but Preston refuses to admit this to Molly at the time, desiring instead to prolong Cynthia's agony as long as possible. Molly then returns to Cynthia convinced that she has failed, all the while unaware of how effective her intercession had been.

The next day Mrs. Gibson receives a letter from her brother-in-law in London inviting Cynthia to visit in order to cheer up her cousin Helen, who is ill. While Molly is reading a letter Roger sent to Cynthia, the latter bursts into the room in ecstasy because she has just received a packet containing the incriminating letters to Preston; he had responded to Molly's threat after all! She then begs Molly to return the money she had borrowed years earlier (with interest), which Molly reluctantly agrees to do. Mr. Gibson goes to London with Cynthia to check up on Lady Cumnor, who appears to be getting worse. Mrs. Gibson is asked to go to the Towers, leaving Molly blissfully alone. When Osborne pays a call, she is astonished at how weak and sickly he looks. He speaks to her of his wife and their child - the first she has heard of the birth of the baby. Their conversation is interrupted by the arrival of Phoebe Browning.

Phoebe, of course, puts a wrong construction on finding Molly and Osborne together, but Osborne explains that he had come to see the doctor, then leaves. Molly disabuses Phoebe of her

misapprehension, at the same time denying any connection between her and Mr. Preston, which Phoebe's sister had deduced from the slimmest of evidence. Phoebe then invites Molly to accompany her to the Hollingford bookshop, the center of neighborhood gossip. Mr. Preston happens to be there, and Molly surreptitiously slips him the envelope containing Cynthia's money. Unfortunately, she is seen to do so by Mrs. Goodenough, one of the local busybodies, who of course believes the envelope contains some love note from Molly to the disreputable land agent. That evening over a game of cards with her fellow gossips, Mrs. Goodenough spills the news she is bursting to tell, and the interlude at the bookshop is soon supplemented by word of the meeting in the forest between Preston and Molly. Though the women swear themselves to secrecy, one is certain that all of Hollingford will soon know that Molly is carrying on a secret romance with Mr. Preston.

When Mr. Gibson returns from London, having performed successful surgery on Lady Cumnor, he is kept very busy catching up on the work he missed at home. Molly tells him about Osborne's visit and his sickly appearance, but the doctor is unable to visit him for a few days. Meanwhile the gossip about Molly and Preston spreads rapidly, accompanied by the distortions that are common in such cases. When the news reaches the ears of Preston himself, he does nothing to contradict it, figuring that Molly deserves whatever she gets for having come between him and Cynthia. When the gossip reaches the ears of Phoebe Browning, she hesitates before telling her sister. When she does, Miss Browning, breathing fire, immediately goes to confront the source of the rumors. Despite her incredulity, the evidence she hears is sufficient to convince her, and she promptly sends a note asking Mr. Gibson to attend on her in her home. There she pours out what she has heard, but he refuses to believe a word of it and heads straight home to get the truth from his daughter, whom he believes to be completely innocent.

When he gets home, he sternly confronts Molly with what he has heard. She admits to the few meetings with Preston that have occurred, but refuses to explain them because the secret she hides is not hers to reveal. Understandably, this is of small comfort to her father. He guesses that Cynthia is the one Molly is trying to protect, but she will not budge when he presses her to tell him the whole story. She insists that the rumors will die out eventually, but he fears for a permanent stain on her reputation. In the days that follow, Molly continues to receive invitations, but is received coolly at best and can hardly help noticing the barely-concealed whispers of those around her.

When Lady Cumnor recovers from her surgery, she and her husband return to the Towers. Lord Cumnor's favorite occupation in the evenings is gossip around the fire, and one evening he excitedly reports what he heard that day about the clandestine meeting between Preston and Molly. Harriet thinks the whole story preposterous and is convinced that Cynthia must be at the root of the situation somehow. She visits the Browning sisters to find out more and finds that, despite their disinclination to believe anything ill of Molly, the facts seem to stand against her. As Lady Harriet travels home with her father, however, they encounter Preston himself, who under questioning from Lady Harriet protests that no relationship between him and Molly exists or is ever likely to do so, and that she was serving as an intermediary for Cynthia in the latter's efforts to break a longstanding engagement. Preston begs them to keep his secret, which Lord Cumnor promises to do, but as soon as he gets home he tells the entire household - in confidence, of course - guaranteeing that the news will soon be spread everywhere. Lady Harriet then fetches Molly and takes her around Hollingford with her in such an ostentatious way that no one can doubt her support for the girl.

Soon Cynthia returns from London, but she seems more reserved than ever. After several mysterious allusions to some outstanding act of virtue on her part that she nonetheless refuses to

discuss, her mother finally forces out of her the fact that she had received a proposal of marriage from Mr. Henderson, which she had refused because of her engagement to Roger Hamley. A few days later Mrs. Gibson is invited to spend a few days at the Towers. During one conversation with Lady Cumnor, the old woman becomes exasperated with Clare's assumption that every conversation must have her as its subject and tells her openly that her biggest fault is that she has spoiled her daughter. She then addresses the longstanding secret engagement between Cynthia and Preston, of which Mrs. Gibson knows nothing. Lady Harriet quickly pulls Clare out of her mother's room and explains the situation to her. When she gets home she confronts Cynthia, who seems confused about how the information became public knowledge. Gibson expresses his desire to protect her, but insists that he cannot do so unless he knows the full story, which she refuses to tell. She then rushes upstairs and locks herself in her bedroom, not wanting to talk to anyone.

Molly goes out for a walk, and when she returns she finds Cynthia calmly doing her needlework. She then tells Molly and her mother that she has written letters to Roger and Squire Hamley breaking off their engagement, both because she does not love Roger and because she has no desire to explain to him the actions that have brought her to her present state. She then takes her stepfather aside and tells him all, asking him to help her find a job as a governess far away from the gossip that she has brought down upon her own head. He encourages her to trust in Roger's kindness and goodness for forgiveness, but she has no desire to humiliate herself before a man she really doesn't want to marry. When they are alone, Cynthia tells Molly that maybe now Roger will marry her, not realizing to what extent she had voiced her stepsister's long-suppressed hopes.

Their conversation is interrupted, however, by a messenger at the door bearing the news that Osborne Hamley is dead and asking the doctor to come immediately. But Gibson is nowhere to be found, so Molly prepares to go to Hamley Hall and comfort the old Squire. When the doctor arrives, he manages to get the Squire to bed, but asks Molly to stay to help with matters at the Hall. She agrees, but before he leaves she confides in him about Osborne's great secret - the existence of his wife and child. The next morning the doctor returns and encourages Molly to tell the Squire what she knows of Osborne's secret. Contrary to Osborne's very real fears, Squire Hamley wants to find out more about his son's widow, and especially about his grandchild, and asks Molly to help him search through Osborne's papers. She also agrees to write to Aimee, informing her of her husband's death. That night Molly tells Mrs. Gibson and Cynthia about Osborne's wife and child.

When Molly returns to Hamley Hall she finds the Squire in a state of great agitation. He has received letters confirming Osborne's marriage and now understands that the union had been kept secret out of fear of his reaction. He thus blames himself, not only for the estrangement between him and his elder son, but also for Osborne's premature death. The pile also contains Aimee's letters to Osborne - simple expressions of love and devotion - and a baptismal certificate for their young son, named Roger Stephen Osborne Hamley in honor of the child's grandfather, great-grandfather, and father. The Squire's immediate reaction is to bring the child to live at Hamley Hall while assuring Aimee's comfort and security in France, though Molly is sure that the mother would never agree to such a plan. She asks advice from her father about how to break the news of Osborne's death to his wife. Meanwhile Aimee, having received word of Osborne's illness, gathers her child and boards a coach for Hollingford, quite contrary to her husband's wishes. Her arrival is a shock to all concerned. She stumbles into the drawing room, exhausted from carrying her two-year-old son for several miles, and upon being told that her husband is dead, places the child into the arms of his grandfather and passes out on the floor. Molly puts her to bed while the Squire delightedly begins to feed his grandson. In his conversation he begins to warm to the poor widow, but still seems determined to send her back to her home country. Molly, meanwhile, sends for her father.

When Gibson arrives he immediately goes upstairs to attend to the severely-weakened Aimee. He finds her in shock and completely unresponsive, but she begins to stir when he brings the child to her bed. He then begins to speak to her gently in French, and she slowly regains consciousness, even to the point of taking some simple nourishment. She soon lapses into unconsciousness again, however, and the doctor fears that she is on the verge of some serious illness. In the days that follow Molly essentially holds Hamley Hall together as nurses tend the gravely ill Aimee and the Squire alternates between mourning his son and doting on his grandson. As Aimee grows stronger and finally takes a turn for the better and is no longer in danger, Molly weakens, having expended effort for weeks caring for others with no concern for her own well-being. Her father, observing her exhaustion, borrows a carriage and takes her home. She grows increasingly ill despite her father's ministrations. Mrs. Gibson keeps the news of her illness from Cynthia, who is in London with the Kirkpatricks, to avoid interrupting her round of parties, but Lady Harriet visits often and finally writes to Cynthia to make her aware of her stepsister's condition. Cynthia rushes home immediately upon receiving the news. Though her mother tries to minimize the severity of Molly's sickness and criticizes Cynthia for leaving the pleasures of London, her presence cheers Molly immensely and soon she is on the road to restored health. In Hollingford the words of the gossips are forgotten and Molly's heroism is admired and spoken of by all, most of all by the Squire, who visits her regularly and cannot do enough to provide small comforts and pleasures for one who has become to him like the daughter he never had.

Cynthia, too, sees her reputation restored in the eyes of many because of her kindness to and care for her sister, and as Molly's condition improves, she returns to London. A few days later Roger arrives from his long sojourn in Africa. Molly is startled by the news and immediately begins to pump her father for information. He apparently decided to return to straighten out his brother's affairs, but agreed with his sponsors to return to Africa later to finish the scientific work for which he had gone abroad in the first place. He is deeply hurt by Cynthia's decision to break their engagement and still hopes to change her mind, but has involved himself in making sure that Osborne's son is in a position to assume his rightful place as heir to Hamley Hall and in making Aimee feel welcome. A few days later he visits the Gibson home, staying only briefly to ascertain Molly's condition and thank her for her service to his family. Soon Cynthia returns, disappointing her mother terribly because she has not received another proposal from Mr. Henderson. When she hears that Roger wants to see her, she insists that she will see no one, marry no one, and will go to Moscow as a governess.

The next morning Cynthia receives a letter from Henderson containing a reiterated proposal of marriage along with the news that he intends to come to Hollingford that very day to obtain her answer. Mrs. Gibson is thrilled, of course, while Cynthia, despite the allure of moving to a strange country where no one knows her, has without enthusiasm decided to accept the proposal. While Cynthia and her new fiancé are in the garden, Roger arrives to try one last time to convince her to change her mind. When he sees her with her latest love, however, he flees the premises without speaking to her. When Molly and her father meet Henderson, they find him pleasant but rather commonplace, but both are pleased with the thought of Cynthia being safely married at last. Arrangements are made for the marriage to take place as soon as possible in the home of the Kirkpatricks in London.

As word spreads, everyone in Hollingford society pays a visit to the Gibsons to offer their congratulations, including Lady Cumnor, who cannot imagine why Cynthia is getting married in London rather than in her home parish, thus depriving the neighborhood of a festive occasion. As

the family prepares for the trip to London, Molly contracts a cold and thus must remain behind, but Lady Harriet offers to care for her at the Towers so that her father can attend the wedding. Molly is less than pleased with this arrangement because she considers the Towers oppressive, but has no choice in the matter. Much to her surprise, however, she enjoys her time with Lady Harriet and begins to recover her strength.

The Towers soon fills with visitors, among them Lord Hollingford and his scientific friends. Molly is surprised one morning to find Roger Hamley among them. Each of them wants very much to speak to the other, but circumstances conspire against them, what with Lady Harriet protecting Molly from overexertion and Roger constantly being drawn into scientific discussions. Their inability to speak does not prevent Roger from noticing, however, that his feelings for Molly are somewhat different than they had been two years earlier, when he had thought of her as nothing more than a firm friend. When they finally get a chance to speak, Roger gently rebukes her for recuperating at the Towers rather than at Hamley Hall, but she explains that she had no say in the matter. He then invites her to the Hall after she leaves the Towers, insisting that his father would be mightily pleased with her company and that she could do a great service by helping the Squire and Aimee grow more comfortable with one another. He then tells her that he is soon to return to Africa to finish the final six months of his commitment to his backers. As the two take a long walk around the property, Lady Harriet takes notice and makes a bet with her brother, Lord Hollingford, that the two will eventually wed.

As Molly prepares to go to Hamley Hall, she worries that people might get the wrong impression - that her mother is trying to arrange something between her and Roger. She therefore determines to concentrate on the Squire and Aimee and avoid Roger as much as possible, no matter how much this might be contrary to her personal inclinations. Within a short time after her arrival, she and Aimee become good friends. She quickly discovers that Aimee and the Squire continue to be uncomfortable with each other despite the fact that they have been in the same house for several months. She is nervous around him and dislikes the freedom with which he treats her son, often spoiling him with food, ale, and even puffs on his pipe, while he still views her as a foreigner. Meanwhile Molly keeps her distance from Roger, much to his consternation; even Aimee notices and asks Molly if she dislikes the brother who has treated her so kindly. One day Squire Hamley takes Roger out to examine the fields and asks him point blank why he does not court Molly. Roger, who is convinced by Molly's behavior that she is indifferent to him, insists that he never can and never will because it is too late. The Squire then relays these comments to Molly in the context of telling her that he encouraged Roger to pursue her, but her heart sinks as she misinterprets the tenor of his words, just as he had misinterpreted her behavior. The next morning Aimee's son wakes with a fever and Molly rushes home to get her father, but before she leaves, Roger gives her a bouquet of flowers and begs to know if he has done anything to offend her. She assures him that he has not, and they part with the confidence of mutual friendship.

Roger, meanwhile, has fully admitted to himself that he loves Molly and wants to marry her, but fears that she will reject him because of his al-too-recent overtures of love to Cynthia. He determines to be patient, serve out his last six months in Africa, then propose to her when he returns. Molly returns home and finds that she is too often alone with her stepmother and forced to listen to her interminable complaining and self-centered conversation. The doctor comes back from Hamley Hall and reports that the little boy has scarlet fever; the resulting quarantine means that Molly will not be able to see Roger again prior to his departure for Africa. As the child grows stronger, Gibson and Roger arrange for him and his mother to move into a cottage on the property; the boy's illness

has brought mother and grandfather together, so no further thought is given to parting mother and son, but the move out of Hamley Hall will allow Aimee to care for her boy properly without constant spoiling by his grandfather. Before he leaves, Roger confides in the doctor his love for Molly, but Gibson still refuses to allow him to see her so soon after the sickness at Hamley Hall. He can do no more than leave her a message conveying his regret at not being able to see her before his departure. On the day he leaves, however, he does stop by the Gibson house, stand outside the gate in the rain, and kiss his hand to Molly when she comes to the window.

Here the novel ends; the author died before finishing the final chapter. Frederick Greenwood, the editor of the *Cornhill Magazine*, in which the novel was serialized, added an epilogue in which he gives some closure based on his conversations with Mrs. Gaskell. Roger and Molly indeed marry shortly after his return from Africa and prosper, as he becomes famous in the world of science and earns a prominent professorship. Gibson, too, prospers in his medical practice, ultimately taking on an assistant, which allows him to make regular trips to London to visit Molly and give himself some relief from his increasingly overbearing wife. Squire Hamley is happy with his daughter-in-law and grandson, and Cynthia - well, Cynthia is Cynthia; what more can be said?

NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

“I think we shall be great friends. I like your face, and I am always guided by first impressions.” (Mrs. Hamley, ch.6, p.62)

“She did not answer. She could not tell what words to use. She was afraid of saying anything, lest the passion of anger, dislike, indignation – whatever it was that was boiling up in her breast – should find vent in cries and screams, or worse, in raging words that could never be forgotten. It was as if a piece of solid ground on which she stood had broken from the shore, and she was drifting out to the infinite sea alone.” (ch.10, p.111)

“Harriet thought of her father’s happiness before she thought of her own.” (Roger, ch.10, p.117)

“Thinking more of others’ happiness than of her own was very fine; but did it not mean giving up her very individuality, quenching all the warm love, the true desires, that made her herself?” (ch.11, p.134)

“It will be very dull when I shall have killed myself, as it were, and live only in trying to do, and to be, as other people like. I don’t see any end to it. I might as well never have lived. And as for the happiness you speak of, I shall never be happy again.” (Molly, ch.11, p.135)

“Every young girl of seventeen or so, who is at all thoughtful, is very apt to make a Pope out of the first person who presents to her a new or larger system of duty than that by which she has been unconsciously guided hitherto. Such a Pope was Roger to Molly.” (ch.13, p.147)

“He had made up his mind before his marriage to yield in trifles, and be firm in greater things. But the differences of opinion about trifles arose every day, and were perhaps more annoying than if they had related to things of more consequence.” (ch.15, p.178)

“I’ve made such an idol of my beautiful Osborne; and he turns out to have feet of clay, not strong enough to stand firm on the ground. And that’s the best view of his conduct, too!” (Mrs. Hamley, ch.17, p.194)

“A good number of people love me, I believe, or at least they think they do; but I never seem to care much for any one. I do believe I love you, little Molly, whom I have only known for ten days, better than anyone.” (Cynthia, ch.19, p.219)

“Something or other had happened just before she left home that made her begin wondering how far it was right for the sake of domestic peace to pass over without comment the little deviations from right that people perceive in those whom they live with.” (ch.34, p.371)

“Molly, you must never trifle with the love of an honest man. You don’t know what pain you may give.” (Gibson, ch.37, p.404)

“As Mr. Gibson was so kind to Cynthia, she too would be kind to Molly, and dress her becomingly, and invite young men to the house; do all the things, in fact, which Molly and her father did not wish to have done, and throw the old stumbling-blocks in the way of their unrestrained intercourse, which was the one thing they desired to have, free and open, and without the constant dread of her jealousy.” (ch.38, p.424)

“My dear, don’t repeat evil on any authority unless you can do some good by speaking about it.” (Miss Browning, ch.47, p.511)

“You do not know, Molly, how slight a thing may blacken a girl’s reputation for life.” (Gibson, ch.48, p.518)

“Well, all I can say is, never be the heroine of a mystery.” (Gibson, ch.48, p.519)

“I think the world could get on tolerably well, if there were no women in it. They plague the life out of one.” (Gibson, ch.48, p.520)

“I declare I don’t know which of her three lovers she may not summon at the very last moment to act the part of the bridegroom. I’m determined to be surprised at nothing; and will give her away with a good grace to whoever comes.” (Gibson, ch.57, p.612)

ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. Compare and contrast Mrs. Gibson in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Wives and Daughters* with Mrs. Bennet in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*. Which is the more effective comic figure? Which is the more annoying? Given that the two novels were written about fifty years apart, what social conditions are the two novelists satirizing through their portrayals of these two wives?

2. Compare and contrast Mr. Gibson in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters* and Mr. Bennet in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Both men prove to be ineffective in dealing with their difficult wives. What personality traits in the two men cause this problem? Which of the two turns out to be stronger and more admirable in addressing the conflicts that arise in the course of the two stories?
3. In chapter six of Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters*, Mrs. Hamley, on first meeting Molly, says, "I think we shall be great friends. I like your face, and I am always guided by first impressions." *First Impressions*, of course, was the original title of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. To what extent does reliance on first impressions drive the plot of Gaskell's final novel? Do they play the same role as in Austen's famous story? Why or why not?
4. Compare and contrast the roles played by gossip in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters* and Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *The School for Scandal*. Consider the ways in which gossip is treated in the two stories, the extent to which it is looked at from a serious or comic perspective, the consequences of the wagging tongues in the two tales, and the ways in which the gossips do or do not learn the lessons they so richly deserve. Which more effectively portrays the evils of gossip as taught in the Bible? Why do you think so?
5. One reviewer of Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters* compares Cynthia Kirkpatrick to Becky Sharp in William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* in the following words: "Cynthia may never be good but, like *Vanity Fair*'s Becky Sharp, she will always be interesting." Compare and contrast the two young women with regard to social skills, ability to manipulate others, self-centeredness, and honesty. Which of the two do you find the more interesting, and why? Include specific details from both novels in your analysis.
6. In Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters*, the author portrays two sets of siblings who are in many ways opposites, yet nonetheless have strong bonds of love for one another. Choose one of the pairs - Osborne and Roger Hamley or Molly Gibson and Cynthia Kirkpatrick - and discuss what character qualities bind them together despite their differences.
7. In Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters*, brothers Osborne and Roger Hamley are foils for one another. What are their most important differences, and how do these differences serve to bring out the respective qualities of the two young men? Use details from the novel to support your arguments.
8. In Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters*, stepsisters Molly Gibson and Cynthia Kirkpatrick are foils for one another. What are their most important differences, and how do these differences serve to bring out the respective qualities of the two girls? Use details from the novel to support your arguments.

9. The very title of Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters* suggests her acceptance of traditional roles for women in society, yet critics have often seen in the pages of her final novel a challenge to those roles. Assess the view of women found in the story. Does the author accept contemporary expectations, challenge them, or ridicule them by the use of satire? Support your arguments with details from the novel, including both incidents and quotations.
10. Pam Morris, in her introduction to Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters*, argues that the novel is influenced by the publication five years before its opening chapters were written of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species*. Morris points out that the plot develops largely through gradual change produced by chance, and is thus a "Darwinian novel." Do you agree or disagree? Support your conclusion with specifics from the book.
11. Charles Darwin was Elizabeth Gaskell's cousin. In her final novel, *Wives and Daughters*, her male protagonist undertakes a scientific expedition modeled loosely on Darwin's voyage aboard the *Beagle*. Though we are told virtually nothing about the nature of Roger Hamley's experiences in Africa, we do gain a glimpse of the author's attitude toward science. What role does science play in the story? Is it viewed in a purely positive light or looked at with a jaundiced eye? Support your conclusion with specific incidents and quotations from the novel.
12. Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters* is full of dramatic irony, with plot reversals and foiled expectations occurring throughout. What does this frequent use of irony suggest about the author's view of man's ability to control his own destiny or chart his own course in life? Is the author portraying a world governed by impersonal fate or Darwinian chance? Support your conclusions with details from the novel.
13. Robert Gibson and Roger Hamley, the two men of science in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters*, both make foolish choices in where they choose to bestow their affections. Does this irony suggest that human behavior is not subject to scientific analysis, and that the powers of logic are insufficient to deal with the complexities of human relationships? What other incidents in the novel would support such an assertion?
14. Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters* is a novel full of secrets, primarily those kept by Osborne Hamley and Cynthia Kirkpatrick, into both of which Molly Gibson is drawn against her will. Evaluate the wisdom of such secrecy. Consider the motives, deceptions, and consequences involved. Use Scripture to support your conclusions.
15. In many ways Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters* is a coming-of-age novel. Describe the maturation process undergone by Molly Gibson from the beginning of the story to its end. What are the primary ways in which she changes? Consider factors such as moral development, emotional maturity, and awareness of and concern for the needs of others.
16. Other than the protagonist, which character in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters* changes the most over the course of the novel? Choose one character, describe the changes he or she undergoes, and discuss the causes and consequences of those changes.

17. In Philippians 2:3, Paul says, “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.” Choose one character from Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Wives and Daughters* and discuss how he or she demonstrates this quality of selflessness. Be specific, citing both quotations and incidents from the story. Is this a quality that is valued by the author? Why or why not? Support your conclusion.
18. In Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Wives and Daughters*, Cynthia Kirkpatrick repeatedly insists that she is not a good person. In what does her lack of goodness consist? How would her character be evaluated differently in the twenty-first century than it was in the nineteenth? What accounts for the differences? Evaluate her character from a biblical perspective.
19. Apart from Squire Hamley’s violent antipathy toward Catholicism, Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Wives and Daughters* contains few references to Christianity, or to religion in general, despite the marriages and deaths that occur throughout the novel. What is the significance of this omission? Does it suggest that Victorian society 150 years ago when Gaskell was writing was as secular as that of twenty-first century Britain (or America), or is it more reflective of the values of the author? Support your arguments with specifics from the novel.
20. Discuss the view of fatherhood presented in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Wives and Daughters*. Given the central roles played by Mr. Gibson, Squire Hamley, and Osborne Hamley as fathers, what qualities does the author believe to be essential to fatherhood. What qualities characterize a bad father? Use specific examples and compare Gaskell’s standards with those of Scripture.
21. Discuss the view of motherhood presented in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Wives and Daughters*. In bringing out qualities of good and bad mothers, use the examples of Hyacinth Gibson, Mrs. Hamley, and Aimee Hamley. Be specific, and evaluate Gaskell’s standards of motherhood on the basis of Scripture.
22. Discuss the concept of honesty as it is presented in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Wives and Daughters*. Which characters are noted for their honesty and which are marked by duplicity? What are the consequences of these personality traits? To what extent do these qualities in the main characters serve to drive the action of the plot?
23. In the book of Genesis, much trouble is caused by parents who show favoritism for one child over another. The same tendency may be seen in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Wives and Daughters*. Using the examples of Squire Hamley and Mrs. Gibson, discuss the nature and consequences of favoritism, both for the children who are favored and those who are not. In what ways are these parallel to the situations found in Genesis?
24. The moral of Aesop’s fable about the tortoise and the hare is that “slow and steady wins the race.” To what extent does this moral apply to the romantic adventures of Molly Gibson and Cynthia Kirkpatrick in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Wives and Daughters*? How is Molly like the tortoise and Cynthia like the hare? Use specific details from the novel to support your analysis.

25. An unusually large number of characters (all female) in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters* spend at least part of the book laid up in bed as invalids. Choose three of these characters and discuss how the invalid experience affects them. What does this aspect of the novel tell you about the nature of Victorian medical science and the way in which women were treated in that society?
26. In chapter 11 of Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters*, Roger Hamley seeks to comfort Molly Gibson, distraught over her father's remarriage, by encouraging her to put others' happiness before her own. Molly finds this advice hard to swallow, wondering if following it would involve the loss of self and any hope of happiness. To what extent does Molly follow Roger's advice? Does she find that it leads to dullness and misery, or, as Jesus taught, does she find that only in losing her life can she truly find it? Be sure to cite specifics from the novel in support of your arguments.
27. In chapter 13 of Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters*, the narrator says, "Every young girl of seventeen or so, who is at all thoughtful, is very apt to make a Pope out of the first person who presents to her a new or larger system of duty than that by which she has been unconsciously guided hitherto. Such a Pope was Roger to Molly." In what sense was Roger a "Pope" to Molly? Did he retain that status throughout the novel? What changes occur in their relationship as Molly matures?
28. Cynthia Kirkpatrick in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters* is surrounded by love - the love of her mother, the love of her stepsister Molly, and the love of every man she meets, yet she wonders whether or not she herself is capable of love. Do you believe she is capable of it? Why or why not? What experiences in her upbringing might have contributed to the difficulty he experiences in forming strong bonds with other people?
29. In chapter 34 of Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters*, Molly Gibson, thinking of her stepmother, says, "Something or other had happened just before she left home that made her begin wondering how far it was right for the sake of domestic peace to pass over without comment the little deviations from right that people perceive in those whom they live with." Both Molly and her father are reluctant to challenge the second Mrs. Gibson about her inappropriate behavior. Are they right in doing so, whether because of her desire to avoid making life difficult for her father or his desire to pick his battles without getting bogged down in trifles that would constantly disturb the harmony of the household? Should such hypocritical and selfish behavior be confronted? Would do so have done any good?
30. Both Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* and Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters* are accounts of a parent seeking to control the lives of his or her children in order to realize the parent's ambitions. Though the stories are in most ways very different, the negative impacts of this behavior on the children and their relationship to their parents are somewhat similar. Give particular attention to Biff and Cynthia as you discuss the negative consequences of what some today might refer to as "helicopter parenting." How and why did Molly manage to avoid similar consequences?