

Victorian & Edwardian Studies



Francesco Marroni, Renzo D'Agnillo &  
Massimo Verzella (eds)

# Elizabeth Gaskell and the Art of the Short Story

Peter Lang



CENTRO  
UNIVERSITARIO  
DI STUDI  
VITTORIANI  
E EDOARDIANI

This volume presents a collection of original and interconnected essays which aim to chart Elizabeth Gaskell's literary imagination by focusing on diverse aspects of her short stories. It includes the papers read at the conference on "Elizabeth Gaskell and the art of the short story", organized by the Centre for Victorian and Edwardian Studies (CUSVE, "G. d'Annunzio" University, Pescara, 2010), to celebrate the bicentenary of her birth. While offering fresh insights into Gaskell's shorter fiction, this collection provides an introduction to the many issues that absorbed her literary attention. Most importantly, by considering the growing significance of some neglected aspects of her works and the cultural and ideological context in which she lived, the contributions collectively delineate Gaskell's artistic tensions, ethical sensibility and social commitment in a rapidly changing world. In their overall critical design, the contributors intend to shed light on the complex web of dialogic suggestions underlying her fiction, while at the same time revealing the extraordinary and multifaceted inventiveness of one of the most important Victorian writers.

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ISBN 978-3-0343-0678-2



www.peterlang.com

Bibliographic information published by Die Deutsche Bibliothek  
Die Deutsche Bibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie;  
detailed bibliographic data is available on the Internet at <<http://dnb.ddb.de>>.

A catalogue record for this book is available from The British Library, Great Britain.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Elizabeth Gaskell and the art of the short story / Francesco Marroni,  
Renzo D'Agnillo & Massimo Verzella (eds).

p. cm. -- (Victorian & Edwardian studies, ISSN 1423-5587 ; v. 1)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-3-0343-0678-2

1. Gaskell, Elizabeth Cleghorn, 1810-1865--Criticism and interpretation.
2. Short story. I. Marroni, Francesco, II. D'Agnillo, Renzo. III. Verzella, Massimo.

PR4711.E44 2011

823'.8--dc22

2011020431

Cover illustration: George du Maurier, "Matty – Miss Matilda – Miss Jenkyns"  
(*Cranford*, London, Smith, Elder & Co., 1864)

ISSN 1423-5587

ISBN 978-3-0343-0678-2

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Hochfeldstrasse 32, CH-3012 Bern  
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Printed in Switzerland

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## INTRODUCTION

# Elizabeth Gaskell's narrating voices: Signs and metaphors for a changing world

Two centuries after her birth in 1810, Elizabeth Gaskell can no longer be considered the shy peevish little dove David Cecil describes in his *Early Victorian Novelists* (1934)<sup>1</sup>. Today – to keep to the ornithological metaphor – she stands out clearly in the double guise of a dove and an eagle. Indeed, one is almost tempted to say that Gaskell is an eagle that loves to disguise itself as a dove so as to be able to fly through all the rooms of the *house of fiction* and, in order to approach reality most effectively, adopts multiple voices, whilst choosing, at the same time, to combine the penetrating vision of an eagle with the familiar low flight of the dove, knowing full well that society is constructed from below. However, leaving the stimulating images from Cecil's seminal study to one side, it is important to observe that, even now in the twenty-first century, any attempt to fully acknowledge Gaskell's greatness is still met with resistance, especially in view of the fact that her bi-centenary celebrations have not only been ominously low-key but have failed – particularly from an editorial point of view – to give the writer the full attention she deserves.

On the other hand, it is also true that, in terms of the canon, Harold Bloom does not even mention her in his self-important volume *The Western Canon*. Compared to the ten pages Bloom dedicates to George Eliot<sup>2</sup>, Elizabeth Gaskell does not receive a single mention beyond a few quotations in the bibliographical section from *Cranford*,

- 1 David Cecil, *Early Victorian Novelists*, London, Constable, 1966. Cecil observes: "In the placid dovecots of Victorian womanhood, [Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot] were eagles. But we have only to look at a portrait of Mrs. Gaskell, soft-eyed beneath her charming veil, to see that she was a dove" (pp. 197-198).
- 2 Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon. The Books and Schools of the Ages*, New York, Riverside Books, 1995, pp. 298-309.

*Mary Barton* and *North and South*. Fortunately, we now know better than to rely on a critic like Bloom, even if his obvious comments may continue to exert their fascination on inexperienced readers. We believe – in fact we are certain – that Bloom never read any of Gaskell’s novels, or at the very most had only given them a superficial glance. But this is not a satisfactory reason to justify his superficial critical methodology. Besides, the editorial market surrounding Elizabeth Gaskell, even after 1965 – the year that signaled a critical turning point and the beginning of her reassessment – has produced very few critical studies that have explored her macrotext by focusing on a critical disambiguation of her works. In fact, if the biographical studies have proven to be of immense value<sup>3</sup>, the same thing cannot be said of the criticism, which continues to suffer from a lack of the interpretative approaches that Gaskell’s artistic greatness merits. A missed opportunity, in this respect, is *The Cambridge Companion to Elizabeth Gaskell*, which, as is evident from the very first pages of the introduction by Jill L. Matus, has obviously been conceived for the sole purpose of reiterating what has already been written about Gaskell whilst adding nothing new in terms of a critical re-evaluation which, in our view, is of the utmost urgency. Matus’s focus is on the past rather than the future: “Gaskell’s canonical status today is a restoration rather than a continuity of her reputation in her own day [...] In her lifetime she was a well-respected, even lionized author”<sup>4</sup>. Matus’s intention to rescue Gaskell from the shadows of obscurity which followed her fame during her lifetime is certainly not the proper attitude to adopt. The real critical task is to read and study Gaskell’s works with a new eye that is capable of detecting the dialectic play in her novels and short stories between text and context. For Gaskell reveals an extraordinary ability to transcoding social phenomena with an acute sense of realism that never relinquishes the metaphorical power of her literary

3 Annette B. Hopkins, *Elizabeth Gaskell: Her Life and Works*, London, John Lehman, 1952; Winifred Gérin, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Biography*, Oxford and London, Oxford University Press, 1976; Jenny Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories*, London, Faber and Faber, 1993; J.A.V. Chapple, *Elizabeth Gaskell: The Early Years*, Manchester and New York, Manchester University Press, 1997.

4 Jill L. Matus (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Elizabeth Gaskell*, Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 1.

imagination. In this sense, it seems significant that Alan Shelston begins his compact biography on Elizabeth Gaskell with a series of questions:

Is she the writer who never lost her affection for the pastoral world of her childhood, and whose *Cranford* is still regarded as her representative text, or is she the novelist of social conscience, author of works of fiction about the challenging new industrial environment of Manchester? Are her novels primarily about social problems, or do they focus more upon the situations of their heroines? Is she the biographer of Charlotte Brontë whose efforts did so much to establish the Brontë legend, but whose sense of justice got her into more trouble than she bargained for? Is she the home-builder and mother of four daughters or the restless traveller who would often leave her family behind in order to escape the city with which she has always been associated?<sup>5</sup>

Elizabeth Gaskell continues to question her readers and still continues to pose problems for critics and biographers simply because her complexity reflects the complexity of a period of immense transition.

The questions posed by Gaskell's narratives are never simplistic or monologically programmed to arouse an unambiguous reaction in her numerous readers. As is always the case with great novelists, her stories can be transformed into metaphors for the future, projections of a world the writer cannot see but, by means of her genuine artistic talent, is able to imagine in every detail. In this context, while works such as *Ruth* (1853) and *Sylvia's Lovers* (1863) not only question the reader, but they also project his/her vision towards future scenes in which silent female figures play a much more active part than other heroines of Victorian novels who are all too often assigned the liminal, passive and resigned roles of the woman at the window. In her novels and short stories, Gaskell only traces those spaces she knows how to map and of which she possesses a great deal of direct experience – unlike many Victorian writers. For Gaskell is familiar with both the maddeningly frenetic world of the city and the static, reassuring rural scenes of the country which still look to a past system of unaltered values. Her wide-ranging vision necessarily entails a wide-ranging metaphorical representation which presents a different point of view to the leisurely classes or to

5 Alan Shelston, *Brief Lives: Elizabeth Gaskell*, London, Hesperus, 2010, p. 7.



those in authority. *Mary Barton* (1848) introduces readers to a world that was, until then, unknown – Mary Barton is a metaphor for both an impossible and a possible world. As Martha Nussbaum has written: “the novel presents itself as a metaphor. See the world in this way, and not in that, it suggests”<sup>6</sup>. This is also the case in *North and South* (1854-55) and *Ruth* where Gaskell suggests her readers must assume another point of view if they are to overcome the barriers that divide them from those who speak another minority language, follow a different religion or live outside dominant orthodox thought.

It is in this that Gaskell’s greatness lies. Her position in the gallery of Victorian novelists is crucial precisely because her response to change is authenticated by her own real life experiences. While Dickens felt the urge to travel to Preston before writing *Hard Times* (1854), he ended up relying much more on his imagination than on what he saw there, as his letters make clear. A strike-bound Lancashire was cold and uninspiring to him. On the contrary, Gaskell experienced the industrial world above all in terms of an authentic human response – her sympathy is not exactly grafted onto an ideological corpus (as with George Eliot who explicitly draws on Auguste Comte and his Religion of Humanity<sup>7</sup>), but emerges from a genuine and humanly rich contact with the most forsaken elements of the population of Manchester. As Kundera has acutely observed: “the novel has an extraordinary power of incorporation: whereas neither poetry nor philosophy can incorporate the novel, the novel can incorporate both poetry and philosophy without losing thereby anything of its identity”<sup>8</sup>. Gaskell’s novels exploit this capacity of incorporating thought and poetry to the utmost, and they always do so with the wisdom of one who is well aware that only those who have a thousand

6 Martha C. Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice. The Literary Imagination and Public Life*, Boston, Beacon Press, 2004, p. 43.

7 As is well known, it was Auguste Comte who coined the French term *altruisme*, which his translators introduced to England in the nineteen-fifties as *altruism*. See Suzanne Graver, *George Eliot and Community. Study of Social Theory and Fictional Form*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, University of California Press, 1984, pp. 56-57.

8 Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, London and Boston, Faber and Faber, 1990, p. 64.

stories to tell have the right to tell a story. In this respect, Dickens was right to call her “my dear Scheherazade”.

In preparing the present collection the editors have aimed to present a different writer to the one handed down by traditional criticism. To be more precise, we want to show an author observed from an original, innovative and dialogical perspective. This does not mean, of course, that we wish to seek originality merely for the sake of it. But we do wish to discover, through appropriate critical methods, new hermeneutical approaches, possible ideological convergences, textual and intertextual intentions and new epistemic ground with which to evaluate the linguistic and rhetorical aspects of the writer’s works. In other words, we want to show how Gaskell’s macrotext still holds unexplored or partially covered critical possibilities and dialogical territories. The primacy we have given to her short stories is an attempt to retrieve, on a diegetic and discourse level, an aspect of Gaskell’s narrative activity which has until now received scant critical attention. Besides the series of papers presented at the conference on “Elizabeth Gaskell and the art of the short story” (Pescara, 30 September/1 October 2010), organized by the University Centre of Victorian and Edwardian Studies (CUSVE, Università “Gabriele d’Annunzio”, Pescara), the volume also includes contributions that have enriched its overall critical design. It is not the aim of this introduction to give an account of individual contributions. We would rather prefer the words of these introductory pages to reflect, in some way, the critical and methodological approaches and ideological frameworks which so positively characterised the debate surrounding Gaskell’s narrative works that developed among the various collaborators before and after the conference dedicated to the “narrating voices” created by the Elizabeth Gaskell.

Katrin Forrer at Peter Lang has been a very scrupulous and encouraging editor. She believed in the project from the very start. Here we would also like to thank warmly Ian Campbell for his invaluable help and advice throughout the preparation of the volume.

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