

Victorian Realism Revisited: Elizabeth Gaskell's Subject in *Ruth*
Retorno ao Realismo Vitoriano: o Sujeito em *Ruth*, de Elizabeth Gaskell

Marcela Zaccaro Chisté ¹

Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul

Resumo: O presente artigo pretende apresentar uma leitura do romance *Ruth* (1853), da escritora Elizabeth Gaskell, à luz do Realismo Vitoriano, sobretudo no que diz respeito à protagonista de mesmo nome Ruth Hilton, uma *fallen woman* a quem uma chance de redenção é dada. Além disso, considerando o estigma social entorno da imagem da *fallen woman* durante o século XIX e a falta de personagens representativos de tal categoria em toda literatura vitoriana, o artigo propõe uma leitura de como as escolhas de Gaskell para a composição de *Ruth* influenciaram a maneira como sua obra foi recebida à época. De início, faz-se necessária uma breve contextualização do cenário literário do século XIX, da prática de crítica literária da época e da definição do gênero Realismo Vitoriano. Partindo para a análise da obra, a segunda parte do artigo lida com os elementos narrativos empregados na construção da personagem na intenção de pontuar quais foram importantes para a aceitação da obra. Como exemplo, serão trazidos à discussão comentários sobre a obra na intenção de ilustrar como, ao dar a sua personagem uma jornada inesperada, Gaskell atenuou possíveis críticas. Para tanto, a discussão conta, principalmente, com Shirley Foster (2002) e Nina Auerbach (1980), cujos estudos estão voltados à vida e obra de Elizabeth Gaskell.

Palavras-chave: Literatura vitoriana; Elizabeth Gaskell; *Ruth*.

Abstract: The article aims to provide a reading of Elizabeth Gaskell's novel *Ruth* (1853) in the light of Victorian realism, more specifically on the characterization of the homonymous protagonist Ruth Hilton, a *fallen woman* who is given a chance of redemption. Moreover, considering the social stigma surrounding the myth of the *fallen woman* throughout the nineteenth century and its lack of protagonism in Victorian fiction, the article focuses on how Gaskell's choices for *Ruth* influenced the reception of the novel. In the first part, a brief contextualization of the nineteenth-century literary scenario is carried out, followed by a discussion of what defines Victorian realism and how literary criticism was conducted during that period. In a second moment, the discussion turns to the novel by analyzing which specific narrative elements contributed to its general acceptance within the literary sphere. For that purpose, commentary on *Ruth* will eventually be brought over to illustrate how Gaskell managed to lessen criticism by giving her character an unexpected journey. For that matter, scholars Shirley Foster (2002) and Nina Auerbach (1980) provide useful information on the life and work of Elizabeth Gaskell.

Keywords: Victorian literature; Elizabeth Gaskell; *Ruth*.

¹ Mestranda pelo Programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras da Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, na linha de pesquisa Sociedade, (inter)textos literários e tradução nas Literaturas Estrangeiras Modernas. Graduada em Letras, com ênfase em Língua Portuguesa e Língua Inglesa e suas respectivas literaturas pela Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul. Durante a graduação, atuou como bolsista de extensão pela PROEXT no Projeto Contato - Uma ponte entre a universidade e a comunidade, sob orientação da Profa. Dra. Sandra Sirangelo Maggio. Atuou também como bolsista de iniciação científica nos programas PROBIC FAPERGS-UFRGS e PIBIC CNPq-UFRGS junto ao projeto de pesquisa Sociedade, História e Memória nas Literaturas de Língua Inglesa, coordenado pela mesma professora. Email: marcelazchiste@gmail.com

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Introduction

In the latter part of the twentieth century, many literary works started to be reevaluated as consequence of a change of paradigm in many spheres of society and the emergence of new fields of studies related to identity, gender, and authorship meant a revision of previously established literary canons. Overshadowed by male tradition at their time, works from Victorian women writers started being put under the spotlight by academic criticism that, inspired by mid-century feminist movements, started the recovery process of the long-lost and long-overlooked female literary tradition. Through many revisions and reinterpretations over the decades, their works started to become more and more relevant as means of assessing both cultural and political backgrounds in female experience due to their symbolic potential, proving that the *feminine* in “feminine novel” did not refer to a specific genre, but to the way they found for self-expressing in a male dominated society.

Among Victorian women writers, Elizabeth Gaskell was a prolific one during her life and most of her works have been revisited multiple times ever since their publication. Despite being overtly well-known and studied in the academic sphere, the author has often been set apart from the Brontës and George Eliot, for instance, who occupy the highest ranks nowadays, giving her the status of “neglected writer”. Often associated with a more domestic and gender-coded literature during the Victorian period, Gaskell’s “scholarship has found itself poised somewhere between the social pamphlet and the ladylike travel guide; between city and country, prophecy and nostalgia, the ideological and the local.” (SCHOR, 1990, pp. 350). In other words, Gaskell was Victorian in the most complete sense, and while studies on her recent scholarship have proved her novels are a fertile ground for contemporary analysis due to their socially motivated plots, Victorian (and some recent) criticism of her novels fail to give her credit for her affiliation to domestic realism, a genre that appeared as a way of minimizing the transgressive nature of literature. Therefore, this paper intends to analyze Elizabeth Gaskell’s novel *Ruth* (1853), whose reception by Victorian critics disappointed the author, in order to understand how it adapts to Victorian realism.

1. Victorian realism and women writers

The Victorian era is the denomination given to the span of time during which Queen Victoria reigned in England, from 1837 to 1901. Traditionally, the nineteenth century has been well-known for its constant progression in the political and cultural spheres, but it was during the Victorian period that Britain was at its highest peak. With the Industrial Revolution and the expansion of the British Empire, England saw crucial developments that reflected in the way people lived, with cities starting to grow not only in territory, but also in population and wealth.

Due to changes in aesthetic values and readership, the literary market was also heavily influenced by the economic progress England saw during those times. On the one hand, the periodical press was starting to grow, with books, magazines, newspapers, and journals becoming more present in the day-to-day life of both working class and bourgeois society. In the beginning of Victoria's reign, investments in the construction of new schools were made, and the job of teaching reading and writing skills to children (mostly boys) was the church's responsibility. It is important to note that the Industrial Revolution did play a good part in promoting intellectual and scientific thinking into all social classes, but it was only at the end of the nineteenth century that an educational system with compulsory attendance for children started to be obligatory. Although with little space for critical thinking, this initial promotion of literacy helped accelerate the growth in literacy levels² within those with an underprivileged background (BLOY, 2014). This meant that more people were reading, and their reading habits varied depending on their social class.

On the other hand, poetry – the most elevated form³ of literature in eighteenth-century Romanticism – was no longer interesting in this new setting in which the middle class was progressively expanding. In his study on the fall of Romanticism, Andrew Franta states that although the public's opinion “[...] is central to poetic practice in the Romantic period because it is through reflection on the idea of the reading public that

² Although many scholars have tried to compile data on literacy levels during the Victorian period, the task has been proven insufficient and unclear, mostly due to lack of records that separated the literate from the illiterate. However, numbers on publishing material available attest to an increased consumption of print, as compared to the previous century.

³ Further discussion on different literary formats and their status among scholars is provided by Deirdre David, in her introduction to the *The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel* (2001). There, the author summarizes the ascension of the novel among Victorian authors and how its visibility was shadowed by its ambition and demand of the reader.

poets seek to come to grips with the implications of an emergent mass society” (2001, p. 4), there is historical evidence that there was an impending sense of discrimination from these poets towards this new mass reading public that emerged from the lower social classes. While poetry was considered too difficult to be relatable to this new audience, the popularity of the novel started to grow. Different from poetry, the novel was considered an easier format, and its understanding more accessible to the general reader.

In her study on Victorian readership, Flint (2001) affirms the increasing interest in the novel was deeply related to this fast-moving economic progress England saw in a short period of time. According to the author, the propelling engine of industrialization entailed better product distribution systems to a market that was already growing, meaning that books were no longer restricted to an academic circle or to the higher social classes, but were instead travelling farther away and reaching the middle-class household. With the advent of the periodical press and the widespread access to information, there came a new preoccupation with this new audience and what was considered interesting and adequate material for them. Reading novels was now the source of anxiety, and:

At the centre of this anxiety about what constituted suitable reading material and ways of reading lay concerns about class, and concerns about gender. In both cases, fiction was regarded as particularly suspect: likely to influence adversely, to stimulate inappropriate ambitions and desires, to corrupt. (FLINT, 2001, p. 17)

Eventually, this concern with a novels’ effect and the belief that its content was capable of perverting people led to the over-criticizing tone of literary reviews during the Victorian period, and “the assumption that novels were a particularly influential form of communication meant that their effects, or presumed effects, on these groups of readers were repeatedly put under scrutiny” (2001, p. 17-18). Among fiction targeted at the working-class, such preoccupation with prudery and morality was found, for instance, even in the most prominent novelists like Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy, who would present very coherent plots with rising and falling actions, and a clear resolution towards the end. Added to that is the fact that, although reading habits were changing due to modernity and the advent of different modes of transportation - people started to read while travelling by train, for example -, reading was still commonly associated with the domestic environment and “The fact that reading was a common sociable family activity within the middle-class home, members taking it in turn to read aloud from the current volume, set up a demand that nothing should appear in print which was not suitable for

every potential listener” (2001, p. 24).

This provoked a heightened sense of precaution and directly influenced the way authors created, with an increasing interest in conveying what they considered the “reality” of the traditional domestic household. Literary critics who evaluated the new publications were, too, often careful with what type of stories they recommended to their public, preferring plots that depicted real life, with clear and straightforward actions and their implications. So, if the work of fiction presented a morally deviated character, his/her actions should have consequences that would teach him/her out of it.

Thus, in a sense, although nineteenth-century novelists intended to convey realistic portrayals of real life, their representations of truth were not always similar because different authors employed different techniques in their writings. This point of view explains why Victorian fiction is so diverse, with many supernatural, gothic tropes, sensational plots, or different types of narrators. This lack of a shared, fixed set of characteristics among the novels, as according to Levine (2012), makes it impossible to conceive it as a genre:

If George Eliot is a consummate realist, then what are we to make of the allegorical ending of *The Mill on the Floss* or the improbable coincidences tying Daniel to Mordecai in *Daniel Deronda*? Dickens may be a realist in his attempt to capture the social life of the modern city, but his characters range from the cartoonishly distorted to the impossibly mawkish. As for *Jane Eyre*, who has felt to many readers like one of the most powerfully realistic protagonists in fiction, her plot turns strangely supernatural at crucial moments. (LEVINE, 2012, p. 85)

The author’s concern with the definition is solved by perceiving it as a *syndrome*, that is, a set of intersecting features in which even “novelists as different as Dickens and Eliot, the Brontë’s and Trollope, Gaskell and Thackeray, may all be productively read as realists” (2012, p. 85). At this point, a distinction between realism and Victorian realism is needed.

The realist movement, originated in France in the mid-nineteenth century, came to light as a response to the concept of art that, for long, had been associated with the sublime and with the ideal beauty. Attempting to shock by showing the real conditions of the working-people and peasants, realism was first introduced by painters who decided to portray the crude reality of these people, and shortly permeating different artistic areas; in the words of Levine, “rather than distracting us with ideal beauty, writers should prompt audiences to recognize the dignity of commonplace lives” (2012, p. 89). Although

there are a few examples of marginal characters in English literature before this movement, such as in *Moll Flanders* and *Pamela*,

[...] nineteenth-century writers continued to widen the field of representation to capture the truths of prosaic, gritty, and hideous experience. Thanks to the realists, poor, marginal, and hitherto neglected figures, such as seamstresses, pawn-brokers, factory workers, drunks, prostitutes, and beggars came to be seen not only as serious artistic subject matter, but also subjects in the philosophical sense, sources of knowledge and action in the novel rather than picturesque or comic objects. (LEVINE, 2012, p. 89)

Yet, in Victorian literature, this intent of widening the scope of subjects in the novel posed a problem of who could actually be considered a good representation of these real people. As a general rule, many Victorian authors have turned to children protagonists through the classic coming-of-age storytelling, for instance. Others, like George Eliot, believed “it was also crucial to expose social and economic interconnections between comfortable, middle-class lives and desperately deprived and difficult ones” (2012, p. 91). Although the intent of such novelists was to depict real life, Victorian realism lies not, in Ian Watt’s words, “in the kind of life it presents, but in the way it presents it” (WATT, 1957, p. 10). However, a good share of writers did struggle to convey the social importance of their characters as representatives of a determined social group.

Despite their use of more common subjects, the “reality effect” in these novels was also heavily based on description, with many objects and narrative arcs being employed to this purpose. This overuse of descriptive elements was probably influenced by the way nineteenth-century novelists used to publish at the time. Many novels from the Victorian period were first published in serialized form, a format that allowed writers to develop their plots more carefully and intentionally, adding cliff-hangers, observing the reception of the audience week by week, and writing the following chapters accordingly. In a way, their intention was to keep readers interested in the bulk of the story so that they would keep buying the magazine or newspaper in which the story was published.

This freedom to enlarge the story, adding different twists and turns to it, propitiated an exploration of different narrative mechanisms, with little preoccupation with the conformity of the ending, but also complicated the overall verisimilitude of it. It is not by chance that most Victorian novels return “[...] again and again to the neat

resolutions of the marriage plot, or the fascinating mysteries of detection, and incorporat[e] sensational events, sentimental love, and even pivotal coincidences along the way" (LEVINE, 2012, p. 101). Real life was considered too boring to be put into fiction word by word, so novelists resorted to these tropes in order to keep their plots more interesting.

The ending, in this context, is not so much a logical or natural result of narrative unfolding as it is one among many plausible outcomes. Indeed, realist novels sometimes foreground this fact: *Great Expectations*, with its two different conclusions, or *Villette*, which leaves us suspended, remind readers that realist narratives do not always end in satisfying closure. (LEVINE, 2012, p. 102)

Consequently, as Levine (2012) points out, the very concept of reality started being questioned, inciting different answers. The most accepted one, based on a Cartesian model, “imagines that truth may best be found by the individual, depending on her own lived experience, independent of tradition” (2012, p. 86), meaning that reality is a concept that could change according to the person who experiences it. In a sense, there is no universal truth, and one could only write based on his/her experiences.

In respect of women writers, this is particularly interesting. Scholars such as Joanne Shattock (2001) and Elaine Showalter (1977) provide extensive information on women’s contributions to literature during the nineteenth century and both agree that, in being women, these writers have suffered differently - and been received differently by the critics - inside the literary sphere mainly because of their role as women in their personal lives. Shattock affirms the critics’ disdain towards novels written by women came from their belief that their writings were mainly autobiographical, stating that “the charge that they could only write of what they knew, and that what they knew best was themselves, was made regularly by reviewers. The easy association of the life and the work [...] was crucial to the reading of these writers by their contemporaries” (SHATTOCK, 2001, p. 8), which meant that their value as writers depended on the themes and situations described in their stories; if the critics thought their work was too inappropriate, the woman would be judged likewise. At the same time, as Showalter points out, “Victorians expected women's novels to reflect the feminine values they exalted” (SHOWALTER, 1977, p. 7), but a novel too feminine would also compromise its aesthetic value:

There was a place for such fiction, but even the most conservative and devout women novelists, such as Charlotte Yonge and Dinah Craik, were aware that the "feminine" novel also stood for feebleness, ignorance, prudery, refinement, propriety, and sentimentality, while the feminine novelist was portrayed as vain, publicity-seeking, and self-assertive. At the same time that Victorian reviewers assumed that women readers and women writers were dictating the content of fiction, they deplored the pettiness and narrowness implied by a feminine value system. (SHOWALTER, 1977, p. 20)

Among the many women that have been affected by this strange value system, Elizabeth Gaskell stands out. Although her reputation has risen nowadays, she was considered a minor novelist during her time, which seems rather incompatible since her fame of being “the heroine of a new school of ‘motherly fiction’” (SHOWALTER, 1970, p. 71) did go along the lines of the Victorian’s conventionality. Famous for her portrayals of domestic life, and being a wife and a mother herself, the author was also the subject of controversies due to her choice of subjects in her novels, hence the occasion when she published her novel *Ruth*, in 1853:

We know that “Mrs. Gaskell” offended, even outraged critics with not one but several politically engaged works of fiction. She was threatened with libel suits by individuals angered over her handling of sensitive material in her role as biographer. Parishioners of her husband’s congregation at Manchester’s Cross Street Chapel actually burnt their copies of *Ruth* (1853), protesting against the perceived immorality of Gaskell’s sympathetic portrayal of a “fallen woman”. (D’ALBERTIS, 2007, p. 10)

Considering the rise in Gaskell’s reputation in the past decades and the response to the novel *Ruth*, the next section will bring aspects of the novel and analyze them in the light of Victorian realism convention.

2. The choice of subject in *Ruth*

By the time *Ruth* was published, in 1853, Elizabeth Gaskell was already a familiar name and face among Victorian literary circles. Different from most women writers from her time, Gaskell was married, had children, and a domestic life besides her job as an author and literary critic, a situation that definitely helped her navigate between the gender-coded public and private spheres of Victorian society. Although many studies on her biography attest that Gaskell’s personal life followed to the letter the Victorian expectations of how a proper woman should act and what responsibilities she should have, studies on her novels also prove she was a very open-minded person with an attentive eye to social problems that were happening at the time:

This is evident in her early fiction in the treatment of the problems of working-class life and prostitution as well as in her last novel's [*Wives and Daughters*] magisterial representation of provincial life in the context of changing social structures and gender and class relations. Generations of readers have valued her for her geniality, sympathy, and imaginative expressiveness, but critics are increasingly coming to acknowledge that she is neither artless nor transparent. They are also granting growing recognition to her intellectuality, her familiarity with matters of scientific, economic, and theological inquiry, and her narrative sophistication. (MATUS, 1990, p. 1)

By 1853, the author had already published *Mary Barton* and *Cranford*, two works that alone provided a good scope of the diversity of themes she could possibly write about: the former was the author's first social-problem novel, published anonymously in 1842, and it tells the story of a working-class family living in Manchester, showing the effects of the Industrial Revolution in that social context; the latter, first published in serialized format in 1851, provides an ironic but clever portrayal of the social practices of a female-dominated community. In a sense, this diversity impacted Gaskell's early criticism, which could "[...] be comfortably divided between two views of the novelist, views as polarized as "the two nations." One is the Gaskell of the social novel, the other, the Gaskell of *Cranford* - a division of Hebraic and Hellenic proportions" (SCHOR, 1990, pp. 350). From this point of view, it is possible to assume that critics and readership audiences did not expect Gaskell's choice of subject in *Ruth*.

The novel starts with the eponymous character Ruth Hilton, an orphan girl who works as an apprentice seamstress. After being designed to work mending garments in a fancy party, the protagonist meets wealthy Henry Bellingham with whom she starts a series of chance encounters during her weekly outings to run errands for her employer, Mrs. Mason. Lured by Mr. Bellingham's special attention to her, Ruth becomes infatuated and accepts his invitation to go out of town with him on her day off work to visit some of her old acquaintances. The starting-point of Ruth's misery is when, during this daily trip, Mrs. Mason finds them and immediately dismisses Ruth due to what was considered an inappropriate behavior. Homeless and unemployed, Ruth has no other option than to stay under Mr. Bellingham's care. Eventually, both characters start travelling around and the consequence of their involvement is that Ruth becomes pregnant. Now a *fallen woman*, Ruth starts being treated with disdain by everyone around her. After serious fever, Mr. Bellingham is taken home with his mother and, afraid of the consequences, both abandon Ruth, leaving her alone in Wales. After an episode in which she tries to kill herself, she

is helped by Mr. Benson, a minister who decides to take her in and, alongside his sister Faith and their servant Sally, helps reestablish her life by making up a new story to conceal her downfall from this new society. Pregnant and with no one else to fend for her, Ruth is given a second chance.

The *fallen woman* was a recurring character in Victorian society. As stated, Victorian realism had already set the pattern of portraying these marginal characters in novels, but the fallen woman's presence was usually peripheral in relation to other female representatives. Associated with promiscuity, the image of these women also implied a certain lack of morality and had its most common representation in prostitutes - Gaskell herself had already introduced such a character in *Mary Barton's* outcast Esther, for instance. Thus, her initiative to put a character like Ruth in the spotlight stirred criticism, confirming the author's fear of the critics' response to her novel (FOSTER, 2002). However, the author was very attentive to details in her characterization of Ruth in order to make her more acceptable to the public:

Some [girls] held up admiringly the beautiful ball-dress in progress, while others examined the effect, backing from the object to be criticised in the true artistic manner. [...] But Ruth Hilton sprang to the large old window, and pressed against it as a bird presses against the bars of its cage. She put back the blind, and gazed into the quiet moonlight night. (GASKELL, 2003, p. 9)

In the scene, the other girls are admiring the dress they were making, a dress they could never afford to buy. Unlike them, Ruth is unconcerned by it and is placed by the window, looking into the night as if not interested in such futilities. By putting the protagonist in opposition to the other girls, the narrator is also clearly implying that Ruth is somehow different. Influenced by the winter night, Ruth is set into a suffering state because she misses her home, now gone alongside her parents, showing her emotional nature. From the beginning of the novel, Ruth is given the same treatment as any other female heroines in Victorian coming-of-age novels. The reason why Gaskell seems to exaggerate in describing Ruth as this romantic character with such innocent behavior seems like an attempt to balance out her unknowingly improper actions later in the novel, and to make her a more reliable character. Although Ruth is lured by Mr. Bellingham, it is important to show the readers that this only happened because she was innocent and did not know the extent of her actions because she was alone in the world, with no one else to teach her. The only person who could have done it was Mrs. Mason, but she was

too concerned with her own reputation. Therefore, had Ruth been presented as a futile young woman, the novel's Victorian audience would not have been so fond of her. Gaskell probably tried to avoid that impression due to her fear of the novel's reception, as stated by Shirley Foster (2002):

As Gaskell well knew, simple realism could be a double-edged sword, and in a novel dealing with such a risky subject, she could not go too far in establishing her heroine's real-life typicality. So, despite her avoidance of one kind of literary stereotype, she stresses Ruth's exceptionality rather than her normality. Ruth is represented as a kind of romantic figure, associated with flowers and nature. (FOSTER, 2002, p. 104)

From this starting point, it is possible to assume that, in trying to report a serious social matter, Gaskell had to submit to the conventions of realism in order to achieve the novel's fullest potential. Presenting the real life of fallen women was not an option because the novel's message would not have been fully conveyed. Ruth had to show some kind of innocence in order to make her redemption realistic. In a sense, she is allowed temporary redemption only because of her "moral and spiritual agency by [her] foregrounding sense of guilt" (FOSTER, 2002, p. 103), and by doing so, she learned from her mistakes. Had she not noticed the severity of her position and not dedicated herself to her son, such redemption would not have been socially allowed in the real world.

In fact, the theme for *Ruth* is said to have been inspired by real life events which Gaskell had herself witnessed inside her own household, with her maid Anne and her illegitimate pregnancy. It is possible to infer that, by witnessing it first-hand, Gaskell's intention was not to denounce the woman, but to allow her readers not only a look into these social problems, but also a different perspective from the victim's point of view. In this case, the effect could only be achieved through Ruth's sublime aura. As stated by Audrey Jaffe (2007),

Despite its focus on a single character, *Ruth* exists within the rubric of the social-problem novel; it is directed at contemporary discussion of whether fallen women could be "rescued" or reformed. [...] Gaskell's intervention focuses particularly on the double standard that censures the woman while exonerating the man. *Ruth* proposes, however, not exactly or not only that fallen women can be saved, but that women who appear fallen in the eyes of society may in fact be virtuous. (JAFFE, 2007, p. 54)

Although from a more recent reading of the novel, this point of view could explain the source of anxiety in Victorian critics. Their comments on *Ruth* usually tackled her

characterization, as proved by the following anonymous excerpt in *The Gentleman's Magazine*, from the same year the novel was published:

We think it would have been more true to paint Ruth as both more alive and less simple. She ought not to have gone astray from stupidity or from fear, but with all her poetic love of beauty should have been less passive, more enkindled - more of the woman in short; ensnared from within as well as from without, though still possessed of a young heart's delicacy. [...] Had Ruth erred from passion rather than from ignorance, scenes must have been constructed in accordance with that view, and then we should have had the usual objectionable draggings through dangerous mazes of sentiment and suffering, which a pure writer would of course much prefer shunning altogether. (THE LADY, 1853, p. 22)

From this comment, it becomes clear that Ruth's innocence was not very well accepted by the critics because the fault of her actions could very easily be traced back to Mr. Bellingham, who saw an opportunity to take advantage of her naivety, exempting her of guilty behavior. But since Ruth is, in fact, the representation of the fallen woman, presenting her as a person with high morale would only contaminate the Victorian perception of prudery, compromising the effect of reality they longed for in novels. As a symbolic element,

The fallen woman becomes the abased figurehead of a fallen culture; her imaginative resonance justifies the punishment to which she is subjected. But Victorian social reformers found her as painful a presence as do contemporary feminist critics. Then and now, she seems to enlightened minds a pitiable monster, created by the neurosis of a culture that feared female sexuality and aggression and so enshrined a respectably sadistic cautionary tale punishing them both. To redeem the fallen woman from degradation, sympathetic critics, in her day and in our own, have turned from the denunciations of epic and myth to the more flexible reality of history. (AUERBACH, 1980, p. 31)

In regard of Ruth's morality, Shirley Foster (2002) believes "in presenting Ruth as both guiltless victim and self-accusing sinner, Gaskell is caught between the contrary impulses of social iconoclasm and adherence to a more conventional – albeit sincerely held – moral position" (FOSTER, 2002, p. 105), therefore subverting the conventions of the realist novel by allowing Ruth to fluctuate between being a victim and a sinner.

Moreover, by pointing out other characters' flaws, the concept of morality can also be questioned in a similar fashion to the concept of reality in realist novels. As Ruth moves into the Bensons abode as Mrs. Denbigh, she starts her life from zero. Decided to make herself useful and deserving of the Bensons' charity, she slowly begins to make friends with - and eventually work for – the Bradshaws, a family said to be highly

influential and devoted to their religious duties. The Bradshaws, in turn, hold Ruth in high-esteem despite her attempts to be invisible, and their opinion of her is what sustains her redemption for many years, until Mr. Bellingham – as Mr. Donne – suddenly appears and her secret is revealed. As Mr. Bradshaw learns the truth about Ruth and judges her severely, the reader also slowly begins to learn the family’s moral flaws. Then, the image of the family, at first presented as immaculate, starts to fall apart. At this point in the narrative, Ruth is as close to respectability as possible, dedicated to her domestic life and to Leonard.

The same situation happens in relation to Mr. Bellingham and her son Leonard. While Mr. Bellingham seems unconcerned about Leonard finding out his illegitimacy, Ruth assumes the role of dedicated mother, protecting her son from the truth at all costs:

“To save Leonard from the shame and agony of knowing my disgrace, I would lie down and die. Oh! perhaps it would be best for him—for me, if I might; my death would be a stingless grief—but to go back into sin would be the real cruelty to him. The errors of my youth may be washed away by my tears—it was so once when the gentle, blessed Christ was upon earth; but now, if I went into wilful guilt, as you would have me, how could I teach Leonard God's holy will?” (GASKELL, 2003, p. 283)

Then, when Mr. Bellingham proposes, Ruth is faced with the possibility of fully gaining her respectability back, but ultimately dismisses him. From a conventional point of view, Ruth’s rejection of Mr. Bellingham’s proposal means that her redemption could only be completely attained through death. To this situation, Auerbach (1980) says marriage and death are the only two options for Ruth, and her death “is the one implacable human change, the only honorable symbol of her fall's transforming power. Death does not simply punish or obliterate the fallen woman: its ritual appearance alone does her justice” (AUERBACH, 1980, pp. 34-35). So, although Ruth’s ending displeased many critics who were either aggrieved or disgusted by it, her death of typhus fever after attending to an almost-dead Mr. Bellingham serves to put her in the highest moral position she has ever been. As stated by Nina Auerbach (1980), such punitive endings have more to do with the social impossibility of these fallen women being accepted back into society than with the authors’ preoccupation with the reception of the novel, and:

Ruth's “fall” touches her only as a benediction, allowing her to transcend the animal and thus the human condition; her martyr's death is the fullest expression of her rarefied life rather than a denial of it. For her fall is so spiritualizing that she dies long before the end of the novel, having refined herself, like Dickens's fallen Nancy in

Oliver Twist, to a pair of eyes that avenge and compel simultaneously. (AUERBACH, 1980, p. 42)

In other words, Gaskell's decision to have Ruth dying from fever - after keeping the one responsible for her downfall alive - transforms her into a martyr, sparing her from the guilt she carried all her life.

Conclusion

Ruth is a controversial novel partly because of Gaskell's choice of subject. In creating a character like Ruth and giving her protagonism, Elizabeth Gaskell made a bold move and expanded her range of work giving voice to an important but unheard class in Victorian fiction. Through the character Ruth, the author both reinforces some of the genre's traditions by allowing her an exaggerated domesticity, but also subtly denounces the hypocritical treatment of women who were marginalized during that period. As a representative of the fallen woman, the protagonist Ruth subverted the conventions of Victorian realism by being given some degree of decency from the people around her and dying as a martyr.

Elizabeth Gaskell herself assumed to be afraid of the critics' reception and this preoccupation with her readership probably influenced some of her narrative choices to make the novel less obviously controversial, benefiting from realism to make the novel more appropriate, hence Ruth's domesticity and complete devotion to a sanctified life. However, with Ruth's death she was able to prove her point in allowing Ruth the forgiveness she deserved, but that she would never be allowed by society.

Effectively, recent studies on the work of Elizabeth Gaskell state that nowadays "the book can be read as a pioneering, albeit cautious, deconstruction of contemporary sexual hypocrisy and a vindication of women's right to challenge patriarchal hegemonies which shape and define their actions" (FOSTER, 2002, p. 106). From this point of view, it is possible to affirm that, while respecting the aesthetic values of her time, Elizabeth Gaskell managed to create a novel that could both educate her readers, implying a deeper message of cultural criticism.

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