

CALM AND BLEAKNESS MAKES FALLEN WOMEN: SPECIAL REFERENCE WITH GASKELL'S LIZZIE LEIGH

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ABSTRACT

Gaskell's fiction was an outgrowth of her philanthropy. Through her social work and personal experiences, Gaskell became cognizant of the many problems in society, and she determined to resolve those problems. In fact, Gaskell judged her own fiction not on artistic or literary merits, but on the social message it relayed. While the plots of "Lizzie Leigh" (1850) and Ruth (1853) focused upon the fallen woman, other works such as Mary Barton (1848) also covered issues of fallenness to a lesser degree. Gaskell kept revisiting the theme, and continued to revise her understanding of fallenness with each new work. Using the traditional fallen woman trope but embedding it with new meaning, Gaskell forwarded a new understanding of fallenness and social blame. This paper takes Gaskell's "Lizzie Leigh" and various critics' view on this work. This paper also attempts to ensure that calm and bleakness play a major factor in the initial or continued fall of the women.

KEYWORDS: Gaskell's Lizzie Leigh, Various Critics

INTRODUCTION

Using the traditional fallen woman trope but embedding it with new meaning, Gaskell forwarded a new understanding of fallenness and social blame. This paper takes Gaskell's "Lizzie Leigh" and various critics' view on this work. This paper also attempts to ensure that silence and harshness play a major factor in the initial or continued fall of the women. In "Lizzie Leigh, Gaskell focuses upon the importance of open dialogue. Through her use of characters who act as representations of patriarchal Victorian society, Gaskell places the blame of fallenness less upon the individual and more upon society's silenced treatment of the subject. Specifically, she faults society's polite euphemisms, silences, harsh words, and fictions as perpetuating fallenness in women. Furthermore, she illustrates that by breaking silences and by speaking kindly and truthfully; fallen women can be redeemed, allowing them to return to virtuous lives and afterlives. At a time when more attention was being directed towards understanding and solving the Great Social Evil, Gaskell provided a clear solution to the problem; Victorians only needed to be brave and speak up, as she did.

The harsh words of the father, John, coupled with his command of silence causes problems in his marriage and also further perpetuates Lizzie's fall into prostitution. Elizabeth Gaskell's short story "Lizzie Leigh," while not widely read today, held a position of honor in Charles Dickens's weekly publication, Household Words (1850); the text appeared as the very first creative piece in the first edition of the publication. This story is the first by Gaskell to focus entirely upon the fallen woman, as the narrative centers around a mother, Anne, and her quest to find her fallen daughter, Lizzie. For Gaskell to elicit such appreciation from the most well-known author of the time is quite impressive.

Let us look briefly at the plot of the tale. Three years prior to the opening of the narrative, Lizzie was dismissed

from her position in Manchester for being pregnant. The Leigh's, who live in the countryside, did not find out about her fall until a letter to Lizzie was returned with a note attached. Upon finding out, James Leigh, Lizzie's father, decided that they would no longer have a daughter, and Lizzie's name was forbidden to be spoken. While the oldest son, Will, knew of Lizzie's "shame," the youngest brother, Tom, believed her to be dead. The order of silence created tension in Anne and James's relationship because Anne yearns to save her daughter but James prohibits it. However, three years after the fall, James passes away, and shortly before doing so, he forgives Lizzie. Anne, now free to find Lizzie, moves her family to Manchester and searches for Lizzie at night. Lizzie is rightfully presumed to be a streetwalker. Meanwhile, Will falls in love with a girl named Susan Palmer, but thinks she cannot love him because of his association with Lizzie. Anne decides to visit Susan and tell her about Lizzie because she believes Susan will understand, and she does. Susan reveals that a toddler, Nanny, whom she has been caring for is likely Lizzie's child, Anne confirms this from a piece of clothing, and thus discovers that Lizzie is alive. Furthermore, Lizzie has been putting money under the door of Susan's house for her daughter.

Later that same night, Susan's father comes home late at night drunk. Susan rushes to help him get inside safely, but in doing so, she leaves Nanny alone upstairs. Nanny tries to reach Susan, and she falls down the stairs. Susan goes for the doctor and discovers Lizzie outside. All three returns to Susan's house, but Nanny is dead. Susan calls for Anne, and she comes to comfort Lizzie. After being reunited, Lizzie and Anne move back to the countryside. Lizzie works towards her redemption by nursing the ill and by visiting her daughter's grave every Sunday. Will marries Susan, and they move back to his father's farm. They have children, one of whom they name Nanny.

The admiration Gaskell's short story received from Dickens and his peers far exceeds that shown the story today, but many critics are still able to see the value in this overlooked tale. Emily Jane Morris argues that while many critics emphasize "Lizzie Leigh" only as "a stepping stone in a progression which culminates with Ruth," the text is actually "progressive in its own right" (40). She argues that "In 'Lizzie Leigh,' Gaskell juxtaposes feminine agency with masculine social paralysis and shows that tragedy can be rectified, if not avoided, by the act of doing instead of judging. In doing this, she overthrows the traditional depiction of the fallen woman and challenges her status as irretrievably lost" (41). Joanne Thompson also focuses upon feminine agency and overthrowing the traditional fallen woman story.

The way Gaskell depicts other characters' silences rather than their given responses makes this text progressive. Gaskell shows the ways that silence and fictitious stories, rather than saving the family from disgrace, actually further the disgrace and sin of the daughter and thus of the family. Gaskell shows that Lizzie could possibly have been saved from further ruin had her father and brother not kept silent and not told the fictitious story of her death. She further shows how breaking the silence helps to rectify the situation. Through her taboo conversation with Susan Palmer, Anne is reunited with her daughter. Through her use of James and Will Leigh as patriarchs and symbols of Victorian society, Gaskell illustrates the ways in which silence and fictitious stories about fallen women harm not only the fallen woman herself, but also those in her life. It is through the use of speech that the fallen woman can be redeemed and the family can be reunited.

James's embarrassment regarding Lizzie's fall causes him to order his family to silence in an attempt to ignore the problem. When James first heard of Lizzie's sexual transgression, he "had forbidden his weeping, heart-broken wife to go and try to find her poor, sinning child, and declared that henceforth they would have no daughter; that she should be as one dead, and her name never more be named at market or at meal time, in blessing or in prayer" (7). James bans the use of Lizzie's name both in public—"at market"—and in private—"at meal time," "in blessing or in prayer." By saying that her

name will never be mentioned “in blessing or in prayer” he further tries to silence her even from the thoughts of his family. In essence, by treating Lizzie as dead and by denying his family the right to even mention her name, James commands total silence about Lizzie’s fall. The family obeys James’s orders. Anne “never named her” until after James’s death, and the youngest son, Tom, even believes Lizzie to be dead, as he cried for his “poor, pretty, innocent, dead Lizzie” (8). The silence was so absolute that no one told Tom that Lizzie was not “innocent,” and he lived for years believing Lizzie to be dead. John’s reaction to Lizzie was, by Victorian standards, befitting of a father; he had to do what he thought best for his family. Sally Mitchell explains the popular Victorian belief that “a woman who lost her chastity had to be totally cut off from society so that she would not contaminate decent people” (33).

Fallenness was viewed similarly to a disease—it could spread to anyone in close vicinity; it could poison the morals of others. James believes he needs to cut off Lizzie so she will not taint the respectability of the Leigh family. Had he allowed her to come home, the family likely would have been cut off from society. However, even though James’s actions make sense due to Victorian standards, Gaskell shows his actions as harmful. His silencing aids in sending his daughter towards further sin. Because she cannot return home, Lizzie’s lack of resources leads her to prostitution. A pregnant Lizzie, living away from home in Manchester, has nowhere to go after being dismissed by her mistress. Lizzie’s situation was even worse. She was not only abandoned away from her family, but when they found out, they refused to support her. Having nowhere to turn, she goes to the workhouse, her last option; Lizzie is turned away after giving birth because she is young enough to find work. Critic Deborah Logan explains the problem with workhouses: “Some critics claim workhouses—ironically named, in that those driven to them out of desperation did so out of economic need due to unemployment—were designed more for the purpose of discouraging the able-bodied from exploiting the system than for materially aiding the ‘deserving’ poor” (79). Although they tried to discourage the “able-bodied” from staying, who were the able-bodied that tried to exploit the system? Fallen women like Lizzie had no viable work options while supporting illegitimate children, yet the workhouse “turned her out as soon as she were strong, and told her she were young enough to work” (13). Lizzie’s last option, her safe haven, denied her refuge, forcing her out onto the streets.

A rhetorical question Anne poses to Will illustrates exactly what options Lizzie has left, after being forced out of the workhouse: “‘but whatten kind o’ work would be open to her, lad, and her baby to keep?’” (13-14). The implications of Anne’s words are obvious, leading critic Joanne Thompson to write, “Anne then asks her son a question to which he, and she, and we, and the Victorian reading public, know there is only one likely answer” (23). The answer is prostitution. Perkin notes, “a woman alone had a hard time trying to keep herself and her baby alive” because few career options were open for them (181). James’s unwillingness to talk about Lizzie and his unwillingness to let Anne save her daughter, both aid in Lizzie’s continued downward fall because she cannot return to the safety of her home. Logan writes that James “places Lizzie in a situation she is not equipped to cope with and then rejects her when she fails . . . and he keeps them apart after the fall, thus providing the circumstances for Lizzie’s further descent into prostitution” (78). While Logan focuses more upon James’s actions, his silence also causes Lizzie’s fall. By refusing to discuss Lizzie, he allows himself to believe in his own fiction that she is dead. He enables her fall and ignores his own faults. The reaction James has to Lizzie harms not only Lizzie, but also his relationship with Anne.

Although Anne obeys James’s order of silence, she does so with resentment, which creates a rift in their marriage. Anne feels confined in her relationship, and “for three long years the moan and murmur had never been out of her heart;

she had rebelled against her husband as against a tyrant, with a hidden, sullen rebellion, which tore up the old land-marks of wifely duty and affection, and poisoned the fountains whence gentlest love and reverence had once been for ever springing” (3). The comparison between James and a “tyrant” shows that Anne felt James to be cruel and oppressive. She did not feel free to be herself with him, and he was clearly no longer a partner but a ruler. Because of his tyranny, the “moan” and “murmur” stayed in Anne’s heart for three years. Where “moan” evokes images of intense pain and “murmur” means a low sound, the two together suggest that Anne had to keep her pain hidden in her heart, away from James. She could not tell him how she felt, so instead she silently sulked in her pain. She did, however, rebel against him, for although she continued to do her wifely duties, she did so without the “love” and “reverence” she previously had. James’s command seemed tyrannical to his wife, and she could not talk to him because of his cruelty.

The true effect of James’s tyranny on Anne’s countenance is most clearly illustrated through the change in her spirit after James’s death. After Lizzie’s sexual transgression, neighbors, who believed her to be dead, see a major change in both James and Anne. They tell Will, “poor Lizzie’s death had aged his father and his mother, and how they thought the bereaved couple would never hold up their heads again” (8). For the neighbors to call the Leighs “aged” suggests that they seem haggard and worn, and to discuss the way they hold their heads up suggests that the Leighs seem saddened, morose, even. While they certainly did look this way, for Anne, at least, her mood was not due entirely to Lizzie’s fall. The worn, sad look Anne wore on her face was related to her husband’s order of silence, which is evidenced in her changed demeanor after James’s death and forgiveness of Lizzie. Only one page after looking dispirited, Anne moves to Manchester and “had more spirit in her countenance than she had had for months, because now she had hope” (9). This emphasis on her having more spirit than she had in “months” coupled with the fact that she now has “hope” shows that initially James had ruined Anne’s hopes of finding Lizzie and bringing her home. He crushed her hope through his silence. However, his deathbed forgiveness of Lizzie restores Anne’s hope and also her love for James.

In many ways, James Leigh’s forgiveness of Lizzie comes too late, but forgiving her does restore him in his wife’s eyes, thus bringing peace to the family. The last words James whispers before death are those of forgiveness: “I forgive her, Anne! May God forgive me!” (3). His words suggest that he realizes just how wrong he was in his anger at Lizzie, and now he needs God to forgive him for his actions. Although his forgiveness comes too late to save Lizzie from further degradation, it does restore him in Anne’s eyes. After his vow of silence, we learn that Anne “rebelled against her husband as against a tyrant,” but “those last blessed words replaced him on his throne in her heart” (3). James appears to be the king of Anne, replaced to his “throne.” She looked up to him, and after he forgives Lizzie, Anne is able to look up to him once more. By breaking the silence surrounding Lizzie, James restores his position in Anne’s heart, and thus their marriage is set right again, though, sadly, not soon enough for either of them to benefit from it. Furthermore, by forgiving Lizzie, he gives Anne the freedom to go to Manchester and find Lizzie.

The narrator argues that had Anne been gentler with her husband, he would have forgiven Lizzie much earlier, and thus Anne’s choice to rebel seems a mistake. Furthermore, even if Anne had wanted to rebel more openly, she likely had not the resources to do so. According to Victorian law, as a married woman, “All her property, including inheritances and earnings passed automatically into the ownership of her husband, and he was legally free to do with it whatever he wished—if he chose, he could disinherit her” (Harris 7). Anne could not leave James to go looking for Lizzie because she had no resources to do so; everything belonged to James, and he had already forbidden her from rescuing Lizzie. Upon James’s death, Will, as the oldest son, steps up to fulfill his father’s role as family patriarch and as a symbol of patriarchal

Victorian belief. He transitions into the role seamlessly due to his similarity to his father: "Will, the elder, was like his father, stern, reserved, and scrupulously uptight" (6). The description of Will and his father as serious slow to show emotions, and prudish perfectly describes Victorian attitudes, illustrating once again how they symbolize society. Joanne Thompson, a scholar, notes Will's resemblance to James in his interactions with his mother: "the contrast between James and Anne is continued between Will and Anne; the man stern and righteous, the woman gentle and sympathetic" (23). Will takes the stern, righteous role of his father, and after his father's death, he is even treated by others as the family's patriarch.

Although Will proves less harsh than his father by acquiescing to his mother's plan of going to Manchester in search of Lizzie, he still continues on the same trajectory as his father. In perpetuating the fiction of Lizzie's death, Will shows that he is still harsh towards Lizzie. Will tries to make his mother believe that Lizzie is dead. Interestingly, Will does not state that it would be better for Lizzie to be dead, but better to think of Lizzie as such. This belief suggests that the comfort of believing Lizzie to be dead does not come from knowing that she no longer suffers, but from a disassociation from her. He no longer has to think about her depravity and his kinship to one such as her. Will's comfort comes from never having to think of or speak of Lizzie.

Susan gives Anne hope that Lizzie can be saved, while Will further tries to silence and hide Lizzie's fall. Like his father, Will tries to keep Lizzie's sexual transgression quiet, especially from Susan, whom Will views as too pure to be associated with Lizzie. His belief is that a woman as good as Susan would never associate herself with the fallen because doing so would be degrading. His belief does make sense from a Victorian perspective. Fraser Harris, author of *The Dark Angel: Aspects of Victorian Sexuality*, explains, "If a woman could not convincingly present herself as a reliable vehicle of legitimacy, she stood no chance of receiving a proposal" (31). Women like Susan had to distance themselves from the fallen to "convincingly present" themselves as pure, which was essential for a marriage proposal. To be seen interacting with a fallen woman put a woman's appearance of purity in jeopardy. Even Will's reaction to Susan proves this. After discovering that Susan has been caring for an illegitimate child, he says, "all these things startle me. To think of Susan having to do with such a child!" (22). For him to be "startled" by Susan's interactions with "such a child" suggests that even he had concerns about Susan after discovering her association with a fallen woman, even though that fallen woman was his sister! Because Anne has become accustomed to her silence, even she hesitates to speak when she should. Anne visits Susan so that she can tell Susan about Lizzie and then gauge Susan's worthiness.

Susan's sympathy allows Anne to open up, thereby suggesting that Anne's initial silence was caused by fear that she would receive a stern reaction from Susan as she did from James and Will. With the help of Susan, Anne overcomes her fear of speaking about Lizzie, and she also overcomes the oppression of silence. She begins to speak about the taboo subject. When Anne tells Susan about Lizzie, she broaches a topic James, Will, and Victorian society would rather keep quiet. Her unconditional method proves effective. When speaking to Susan about Lizzie, Anne "'told her all'" (21). For her to speak of Lizzie being "led astray" was considered highly improper, because "A woman, if she was to be considered as 'pure-minded' according to Victorian standards, must know nothing about sex, and above all not show such prurience as to want to discuss anything connected with such a subject" (Rubenius 189). Women, simply put, were not supposed to speak about fallenness; even knowing about sexual transgression was considered improper for women, who were "not supposed to know of its existence" (Mitchell 22). If knowledgeable about such subjects, women were not to speak about

them because they evidenced an unchaste knowledge. However, a desperate Anne decides to discuss this off-limits topic, and doing so proves beneficial. Linda Hughes and Michael Lund write about Anne's unconventional process of finding Lizzie; "knowing that her daughter cannot be reached within the system, [Anne] must herself escape conventional behavior in order to reclaim Lizzie" (74). Anne breaks conventions by breaking the silence, and, surprisingly, Susan does the same. In a pivotal scene, Susan reveals that Nanny is not her niece and likely belongs to Lizzie. From the belongings Susan received from the mother, Anne "recognized one of the frocks instantly as being made out of a part of a gown that she and her daughter had bought together" (18).

Through her illicit conversation, Anne discovers that her daughter is alive, and she also discovers her grandchild. Once again Gaskell shows the dangers of silence. Gaskell asserts there is a right way to use silence and a wrong way. If silence is used to protect the daughter after her fall, then that silence can be positive. However, the silence of families shunning their fallen daughters is extremely harmful to all involved. The continued silence of Victorian patriarchal society, as seen through James's and Will's actions, leaves fallen women like Lizzie open to further sin and requires them to resort to prostitution. Not only does Lizzie suffer; so, too, does the rest of the family. However, when Anne finally breaks free of the bonds of silence, the family as a whole begins to heal and progress, and Lizzie is finally found and brought back home to safety. While many may have tried to hide these issues or pretended they did not exist, Gaskell shows that a punitive silence tears families apart and causes a great deal of suffering. Gaskell appears to believe in speaking, and especially in speaking the truth. Lizzie could have been saved much suffering had her father been sympathetic and open from the beginning.

Gaskell successfully critiques society's silences and harsh words, but she also offers a logical solution. Gaskell shows that by breaking the silences and by speaking kindly and openly, the wrongs of society can be fixed. Gaskell, in fact, does this herself by writing, "Lizzie Leigh," Gaskell shows sympathetic and true depictions of fallen women, and she breaks the silence around these issues.

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