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My dissertation examines how some nineteenth-century British novels offer a critique of the dominant narrative of sympathy by suggesting that the most ethical encounter will preserve distance between self and other while retaining the ability to exchange sympathy in the face of difference. This distance prevents the problem of assimilation, the unethical practice of turning the other into the same that was a common way of performing sympathy in nineteenth century Britain. I propose that these critiques are best identified through a reading practice that utilizes discourse systems; the discourse systems I include are gossip, gazing, silence, and laughter. In the texts examined here (including Harriet Martineau's *Deerbrook* (1839), Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* (1851), George Eliot's *Silas Marner* (1861) and *Daniel Deronda* (1876), Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853), and William Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1848)) one encounters each of the elements listed above as more than just plot devices or character markers. For example, gossip occurs in Martineau's and Gaskell's texts as a communicative act used by characters, as a rhetorical device used by narrators, and as a narrative technique used by the authors. The cumulative effect of gossip's engagement with social relations thus critiques unethical uses of sympathy and illustrates more ethical encounters between self and other, challenging, in some cases, the limits of sympathy as a technique for approaching difference.

I elucidate these literary revisions of sympathy by reading them in relation to

changes characterizing British society in the Victorian period. During the years from 1830-1870, British life was marked by sweeping technological changes (railroads, printing), paradigm shifts (higher criticism, Darwinism, middle class moral code), and the climax of British imperialism. Writers responding to these tumultuous changes to the structure of nineteenth-century society used sympathy to undermine us/them categories that created unnecessary differences and to reveal the ability to sympathize when faced with difference. However, these texts also reveal ambivalence over sympathy: its reliance on identification and therefore the possible limits to sympathy's ability to negotiate difference. This ambivalence either restricts the extent to which these writers revise the model for using sympathy, or, when pushed passed the limits, revise not only social relationships but also the form of the novel itself. This project thus refocuses realism in the nineteenth century as a form concerned with relationships and not just representations.

These authors' treatments of sympathy led to the radical reformation of certain narrative techniques so that the distances modeled through character exchanges of sympathy are emulated in the text itself through narrative gaps. As difference requires characters to revise how they engage with the other, so too must readers revise their reading practices. The novelists addressed in this study attempted to form a different kind of reader in the nineteenth century, one who would not easily elide the difference between self and other by immediately identifying with characters or narrators, and who would understand the import and rhetorical effect of elements (gossip, gazing, silence, laughter) usually disregarded as trivial at best or innately unethical at worst. Such thematic treatments of sympathy necessarily lead to a different understanding of

sympathy's trajectory in the nineteenth century as well as in our own time. These authors' unconventional use of gossip, gazing, silence, and laughter asks that we reconsider how these elements can play vital roles in the negotiation of identity and the interactions between self and other, broadening the scope of discourses that define an ethical encounter.

THE IMPULSE TO TELL AND TO KNOW: THE RHETORIC AND ETHICS
OF SYMPATHY IN THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRITISH NOVEL

by

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For Justin My Love and My Life
and for the Reckoners My Muses

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It seems appropriate that at the same time I complete this project and leave behind the toil and weariness, spring begins to slowly unfurl and ward off winter's desolation. My project is founded on the hope that spring presents: out of grayness and deadness and unkindness, there is always the hope of starting over, beginning anew. Despite the atrocities history bears witness to, I have faith in the ability of humans to respond with unselfish sympathy. This belief, and thus this project, is grounded in the attributes of my God, who has taught me that this is how to imagine and to pursue a full life.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Novel gives a familiar relation of such things, as pass every day before our eyes, such as may happen to our friend, or to ourselves. . . the perfection of it, is to represent every scene, in so easy and natural a manner, and to make them appear so probable, as to deceive us into persuasion (at least while we are reading) that all is real, until we are affected by the joys or distresses, of the persons in the story, as if they were our own.

~ Clara Reeve qtd. in Ellis 16

The Imaginative understanding of the nature of others, and the power of putting ourselves in their place is the faculty on which virtue depends. ~ John Ruskin 27:627

[Narrative involves] somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose(s) that something happened. ~ James Phelan 3

I am intrigued by two impulses that drive our human encounters: the impulse to tell and the impulse to know. These impulses, I argue, form the basis for how we negotiate the tensions of difference between self and other and the role sympathy plays in forming ethical relationships. My project grapples with the most ethical way for self and other to interact. This was a pressing concern for the nineteenth-century audience of the novels I examine and still is a concern for audiences today. I define ethics as the choices related to how we treat other people. Rather than focus on the choice itself, which is the domain of morals, I instead focus on ethics as critical attention to a way of living and being in the world. *Ethical*, then, does not focus on the choices we make when

following rules, per se, but rather refers to how we live in relationship.¹ To approach the other ethically requires sympathy in order to allow the limits of one's understanding, trapped within one's horizon of experience, to form a meeting point with the other's horizon.

Reading is one way to extend horizons. The development of sympathy through reading as an established tradition reaches back at least into the eighteenth century. With the growing popularity of the novel, eighteenth and nineteenth-century debates focused on whether or not reading could help people make better moral choices, demonstrated in the epigraph that opens this introduction. In 1785, Clara Reeve defends the novel by connecting its formal qualities with the ability to make readers "affected by the joys or distresses" of the characters in the story. This is not a naïve assumption about the nature of such attachment, for Reeve says readers are "deceived" and "persuaded" into a feeling that probably only lasts "while we are reading." Nevertheless, the connection between reading, sympathy, and ethical living only grew stronger in the nineteenth century and reached its heyday with such "social problem" novels as Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* or Benjamin Disraeli's *Sybil*. This connection relied in part on the development of the realist novel, a mode committed to exploring ordinary life and common people that fed into the assumption that readers would need a great deal more sympathy to connect with imperfect heroes and heroines than with the idyllic ones of epics and romances.

Although the nature and origin of sympathy continued to be the subject of many

¹ Appiah also distinguishes between these two terms so that morality has to do with governance, society, and laws while ethics has to do with being in relation to others, with one's community (231).

debates in the nineteenth century, sympathy as a moral virtue became widely accepted. While I am concerned to show how sympathy and ethics are connected, in the nineteenth century most discussions about sympathy did not focus on how it could influence relationships so much as how it could help a person make moral decisions. Because sympathy and empathy are often conflated in our usage, I want to be clear about my choice in using the term sympathy. Empathy usually connotes that one feels *with* another, while sympathy connotes that one feels *for* another, or, as Lauren Wispe distinguishes them: “Sympathy is a way of relating. Empathy is a way of knowing” (318). The attempt to know an other can have unethical implications when we replace motives, actions, traits, or some additional component of the other’s difference with something that we recognize. This constitutes the erasure of difference, the assimilation and homogenization of the other. Thus, “to know” the other refers to the assumption that the other is just like the self; we overlay our own emotions and experiences onto the other, subsuming their unique identity into our own.

I am privileging the preservation of difference as necessary for an ethical encounter with the other. The common understanding of sympathy in the nineteenth century employed the term in ways similar to how we understand empathy as predicated on the ability to know. The writers I examine in this dissertation revise that usage by employing the more ethical notion of extending care and concern without the need to understand based in similar experiences or even in agreement. Ethical sympathy, in this dissertation, refers to the concept of sympathy as a way of relating rather than a way of

knowing. The focus shifts to engaging with the other's difference rather than trying to re-define and re-categorize those differences.²

Some nineteenth-century philosophers define sympathy in ways similar to our modern conception of empathy. For example, the epigraph from Ruskin highlights the most common way of talking about how sympathy necessitates understanding “the nature of others” in order to put “ourselves in their place.” The role of the imagination was central to Victorian conceptions of how sympathy worked; imagination presented the possibility that one could fully understand what another was experiencing.³ The impulse to know—the desire to claim accurate insight into the other through shared experiences or feelings—was the special province of reading and the imagination. This dominant narrative about the workings of sympathy did not go unchallenged, and the writers that I examine in this dissertation were part of the voice of discontent that rose to contest, not the notion that sympathy was needed, but how sympathy was structured as a way of knowing. These writers constructed sympathy both as a way of engaging the other and as a way of reading that resisted the assumption that sympathy required knowing.

The critiques writers like Eliot, Brontë, and Thackeray constructed were aimed at the notion of sympathy emerging from philosophers like Hume, Smith, and Ruskin, all of

² For other accounts differentiating sympathy and empathy see Suzanne Keen's *Empathy and the Novel* where she defines empathy as a “spontaneous, responsive sharing of an appropriate feeling” that occurs prior to the more complex feeling of sympathy. Empathy that is outward-directed can result in sympathy (4-5).

³ Adam Smith argued that the ability to enter another's experience relied solely on the imagination “By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him” (12). Thus, although he clearly places limits on the ability to know the other, he also underscores the importance of the imagination as enabling that knowledge.

whom predicated sympathy on knowledge of the other to varying degrees.⁴ The novelists complicate sympathy by representing not only its positive aspects, as philosophers tended to do, but also by representing its negative aspects. In fact, they seemed to recognize that narrative could help tease out a broader view of sympathy, presenting the complexity of sympathy in all its glory and ruthlessness. One can desire to know out of genuine sympathy, or one might want to learn about the other for self-serving reasons. Similarly, the desire to tell (one's story, someone else's story) can also be driven by sympathetic motivations or devious ones. In other words, the two impulses of knowing and telling are not innately ethical. In either case, this impulse to tell and to know forms the very basis of the narrative drive in realist novels. James Phelan's epigraph describes narrative as rhetorical because it contains these impulses. "Somebody telling somebody else" assumes both the impulse to tell ("somebody telling") and the impulse to know (the "somebody else" who wants to listen). He also underscores that these are not aimless impulses, but exist with a purpose.

I argue that sympathy is intimately connected with narrative because of the relationship between knowing and telling, that is, the relationship between self and other. Central to understanding the connection between narrative and sympathy, then, is the rhetorical nature of narrative. To understand literature as rhetorical is to understand that

⁴ Both Hume and Smith held to the popular eighteenth-century notion that sympathy was innate. Ruskin, among others, claimed that virtue depended on sympathy. These theorists never debated the capacity for sympathy or the possible negative effects of sympathy. See Morris, Anger, and Mercer for more detailed accounts of these three philosophers arguments about sympathy.

writers intend their works to influence readers.⁵ The task of interpreting literature, then, is the task of discovering how it influences us. We can only begin to understand how literature affects readers by considering form, an exploration with much at stake because, as Phelan claims, form has consequences for how readers respond and thus influences their ethical engagement with the text (*Living to Tell* 5). Understanding literature as rhetorical also means that, while readers will have different reactions to certain rhetorical techniques, they can also have some of the same reactions. In this dissertation I am looking specifically at how these novels call for sympathy from the reader. My methodology for revealing these writers' complex revisions of sympathy uses the discourse systems of gossip, gazing, silence, and laughter. These discourse systems draw attention to the transformation of social relationships in the novel through ethical sympathy as a way of relating, not as a way of knowing.

Nineteenth-century Britain used sympathy to articulate an increasingly complex relationship with the other, whether on a national level between England and its growing colonies, or on a personal level between the sacred domestic realm and rising tensions with industrialization and urbanization. In novels, as well as other texts like moral treatises, conduct books, and newspapers, the term sympathy became an "attempt to ameliorate social differences with assurances of mutual feeling and universal humanity" (Jaffe 15). Gaskell and Dickens, for example, tried to improve the conditions of the

⁵ In *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Kenneth Burke defines the basic function of rhetoric as "the use of words by human agents to form attitudes or to induce actions in other human agents" (41). As an "art of persuasion," Burke highlights the intention of rhetoric to effect change in an audience. By insisting on the rhetorical nature of literature, then, I am emphasizing the active nature of literature to create real change in readers and social structures.

working class by stirring up sympathy in their readers as they used individualized characters to represent working class people and situations in their novels. In her preface to *Mary Barton*, Gaskell states that the more she witnessed the “unhappy state of things” between workers and employers, the more she determined to “give some utterance to the agony which, from time to time, convulses this dumb people; the agony of suffering without the sympathy of the happy” (3). In *Oliver Twist*, Dickens uses Oliver to critique the orphanage and workhouse system. This example in particular demonstrates the realist technique of providing an individualized picture that more easily produces sympathy in a reader, which directs the reader’s judgment toward the institution rather than the suffering individual. Sympathy in these two novels is relatively uncomplicated, assuming the ability of readers to understand what it was like to be poor, even though they most likely never experienced anything like the destitution of many working class lives. The sympathy extended toward the poor, then, was based on a distorted understanding of this group of “others.”

The Victorian notion of sympathy builds on the Romantic version such as one might find in William Wordsworth’s “The Cumberland Beggar.” In this poem, the speaker defends the beggar to the Statesman who is ready to “rid the world of nuisances” by arguing the beggar is a record of all “Past deeds and offices of charity” that would be forgotten if people could not look upon the beggar and see the “kindly mood in hearts” (70, 82, 84). Our sympathy is stirred simply by seeing the beggar, and he becomes the figure that binds an entire community together because, after all, “we have all of us one human heart” (146). Wordsworth may struggle with sympathizing with a stranger in other

poems, but in this one at least he represents confidence in the ability to know the other by subsuming him or her under a common ideal, erasing the possible differences of the other and thereby encouraging sympathy for an ideal rather than for an individual.

The above examples represent just a handful of texts that evoke an uncomplicated sense of sympathy, which relies on assimilation and homogenization. Although such examples abound, they do not represent the only conception of sympathy in the Victorian period. I argue that some writers in this period attempted to articulate a more nuanced understanding of sympathy. Specifically, they constructed an alternative form of sympathy that relied on differences and perceived a certain distance between self and other as necessary for ethical sympathy. A more ethical practice of sympathy abandons the premise that sympathy must bridge difference and instead preserves the distance between self and other in order to maintain, rather than erase, difference. Sympathy must be re-imagined as a mode of engagement and a way of approaching the other, not as a moment of understanding (usually predicated on sameness). The ethical moment, which for Emmanuel Levinas is the approach to the other, occurs when one's assumptions about universality are called into question through an encounter with the other. Levinas asserts that welcoming the other is an ethical practice of questioning our assumptions: "We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics. The strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics" (43). I look for the ways in which nineteenth-century texts employ sympathy in the service of an ethical encounter with the other, that is with a willingness to have one's assumptions

challenged by difference rather than simply covering over that difference. As I examine these texts more closely, and in particular their use of marginal discourses, I find that they resist common notions of sympathetic identification in favor of representing this more ethical form of sympathy through difference.

Theorizing Sympathy

My theory of sympathy responds to recent debates about the ethics of sympathy. Feminist theorists have prompted a more cautionary impulse toward sympathy, recognizing in it the tendency toward overgeneralization and assumptions based on binary thinking and self-interest.⁶ Criticism of sympathy tends to focus on the tension that arises when identification is posited as a solution for the division between self and other, erasing the other's subject position in order to create identification. Although these concerns are important, I argue that sympathy does not have to be unethical in these ways. Rather, I follow the lead of Max Scheler who insists on the importance of some emotional distance in acts of sympathy, thereby emphasizing the maintenance of difference rather than depending on sameness (qtd. in Bartky 80). He claims: "for sympathy presupposes that awareness of distance between selves which is eliminated by identification" (77).⁷ More recently, Kelly Oliver has suggested one solution to this

⁶For an example of how recent criticism views negatively the use of sympathy in the nineteenth century, see the following interpretations of Eliot's conception of sympathy as: narcissistic (Hertz), voyeuristic and sadomasochistic (Hinton), an "incentive to egoism" (During), and as the "spectacle of another's suffering" (Redfield).

⁷ Scheler delineates between different forms of sympathy, and it is "genuine sympathy" to which he refers here.

problem – a theory of non-recognition. Oliver objects to theories of identity that place the self in an antagonistic relationship with others:

Relations with others are described as struggles for recognition. But if we start from the assumption that relations are essentially antagonistic struggles for recognition, then it is no wonder that contemporary theorists spend so much energy trying to imagine how these struggles can lead to compassionate personal relations, ethical social relations, or democratic political relations. From the presumption that human relations are essentially warlike, how can we imagine them peaceful? (4)

Thus, while Oliver agrees with theorists like Charles Taylor and Judith Butler that identity is dialogic and intersubjective, she claims that the “tension at the heart of subjectivity need not produce antagonism between people” (5). Instead of recognition producing subjectivity, she posits the notion of witnessing as a way to construct identity without relying on division or assimilation.

The problematic implications of recognition extend to the reading event as well. In *The Erotics of Talk*, Carla Kaplan asks, “How might we rethink the need for recognition – which suffuses both the private and the public spheres – in ways that do not also presuppose identification?” (26). The particular danger of using a recuperative paradigm to read texts, Kaplan argues, is that we may be reading only to see an image of ourselves reflected back to us. When we make the text our own, the subject, the other, is assimilated (37). Kaplan suggests that foregrounding desire in a text allows us to listen “without assuming, as identification tends to do, that we already know what the other is saying” (40). Desire thus structures *how* we identify with the other and even more importantly how we deal with *disidentifications* (45). Rather than separate desire and

identification, Kaplan argues that conflating the two can allow for both difference (which desire permits) and sameness (which identification requires).

As should be clear by now, what I am calling ethical sympathy departs from the dominant discourse about sympathy in the nineteenth century and, to some extent, from current critical discourses about sympathy.⁸ I argue that although sympathy may fall into objectifying and assimilative practices, it does not have to do so. Given the connection between identification and the violence of appropriation, one can see how sympathy could indeed further the unethical move of assimilation if it is always predicated on understanding (turning the other into the same).⁹ If we no longer assume, however, that sympathy requires understanding, then the possibilities open for a more ethical encounter. While Philip Mercer acknowledges that in practice we tend to sympathize with people we know and like, he contends this does not necessarily preclude the possibility of sympathizing with someone we are unfamiliar with (40). His definition of sympathy begins with the recognition that the other exists as a separate being from myself (16).¹⁰

⁸ Hinton is one example of recent work on sympathy that tends to define sympathy as an innately unethical practice, one that must always objectify the other. Shuman remains skeptical of the “great promise of narrative,” which claims to help us “transcend personal experience, both by allowing us to see our own, seemingly unexplainable, experiences in other people’s stories and by helping us to understand the otherwise unfathomable experiences of others” (149). The ethical dilemma immediately obscured by such a claim, Shuman points out, is how they naturalize both experience and the subjectivities that experience constructs (156). Keen expresses doubt about the translation of sympathy for fictional characters into real world altruism: “I find the case for altruism stemming from novel reading inconclusive at best and nearly always exaggerated in favor of the beneficial effects of novel reading” (vii). However, while Keen is interested in exploring if it is possible to actually prove the link between experiences of narrative empathy and altruism, I am more concerned to look at what the assumption that novels produce sympathy, indeed the obligation that they do so, tells us about the way social relations were conceived in the nineteenth century and what strategies were being constructed for encountering an other.

⁹ For more on the unethical nature of identification, see Fuss.

¹⁰ Mercer’s definition sounds much like Levinas’ emphasis on the approach to the other as the basis for an ethical relation. To always strive for understanding as the precondition for sympathy usually results in

This kind of sympathy, Mercer argues, is based solely on the other's "capacity to feel and to suffer. Differences based on class, race, nationality, religion, culture, possessions, education, character, intelligence, taste and all the other grounds which have been found for discriminating against people, are all pushed equally into the background" (4).

Against critics who insist sympathy is innately unethical, Mercer highlights the possibility for sympathy that preserves the other's difference and thereby produces ethical relationships.¹¹ The novels I explore in this dissertation imagine this kind of sympathy, at the same time that they recognize and grapple with the limits of sympathy in the face of unbridgeable difference.

Concern over the ethics of sympathy arises in part because sympathy is implicated in the construction of identity, a connection theorists make explicit by emphasizing the necessary role the other plays in the development of identity. Maurice Blanchot questions recognition as the basis for identity and insists instead that response is the most vital component of identity formation:

An ethics is possible only when – with ontology (which always reduces the Other to the Same) taking the backseat – an anterior relation can affirm itself, a relation

assimilation or misrepresentation. Rather than focus on understanding, then, Levinas suggests that simply listening and engaging in conversation, the approach to the other, is enough to make the encounter ethical: "the *relation* between the same and the other – upon which we seem to impose such extraordinary conditions – is language . . . the very fact of being in conversation consists in recognizing the Other a *right* over this egoism" (39-40).

¹¹ His discussion points to the tension of having sympathy that allows the other to remain other and not basing the sympathy on the self: "But it is not enough that I should imagine how I should feel if I were in the other person's place; I have to imagine how he feels, having the temperament and personality he has" (9). The eighteenth and nineteenth-century conception of sympathy as putting oneself in the other's shoes is not the best kind of sympathy, and Mercer proposes his theory as a corrective to a detailed analysis of Hume and Smith's theories of sympathy. For Mercer it seems sympathy means fellow-feeling combined with concern (the active element that spurs us to do something).

such that the self is not content with recognizing the Other, with recognizing itself in it, but feels that the Other always puts it into question to the point of being able to respond to it only through a responsibility that cannot limit itself. (qtd. in Jay 555)

Blanchot asserts the moment of recognition is not the most important component of encountering the other. Rather, it is the impulse to respond because of the responsibility to the other for his or her influence on one's own identity. For Blanchot that influence comes in the form of questioning the self. For theorists like Butler and Cavarero, that sense of responsibility comes from being hailed into being by the other (Butler) and from hearing one's story told by the other (Cavarero). The scene of sympathy, then, is also the moment of identity formation. To see this connection, we must acknowledge the way sympathy is "a psychic structure through which the subject is produced, consolidated, or redefined" (Ablow 2). By defining sympathy in this way, Rachel Ablow suggests, we move away from focusing on sympathy as a feeling to emphasizing "sympathy as a mode of relating to others and of defining a self" (2). Shifting the focus away from sympathy as a reaction, emotion, or feeling to a way of structuring reality makes more evident, not only the ways in which sympathy structures social relations, but also the ways in which social relations structure sympathy.

Theories about identity, like theories about sympathy, have recently been criticized for the tendency to homogenize groups within those categories where identity becomes a fixed concept. Identity is now more commonly understood in terms of subjectivity, constructed within and subject to myriad structures of power. While understanding identity as fluid and constituted within structures of power alters the way

we understand agency, this understanding does not necessarily do away with the idea of agency.¹² The concept of a fluid identity critiques not only the notion of fixed identity, but also the concept of identity as sovereign or completely controllable or constructed by oneself. For Butler, the implication of subjectivity constituted through interpellation means that there is no subjectivity outside of the address by an other and means, therefore, that the subject is always and only constituted through language: “untethering the speech act from the sovereign subject founds an alternative notion of agency and, ultimately, of responsibility, one that more fully acknowledges the way in which the subject is constituted in language...agency begins where sovereignty wanes” (*Excitable Speech* 15-16).¹³ The responsibility toward the other that emerges through a discursively constituted identity, articulated here by Butler, informs the way I read responsibility toward the other as an integral part of sympathy and the connection between identity and sympathy. Within my own project I work from this notion of identity structured by

¹²Feminist and postcolonial theorists complicate agency in important ways by striving to work beyond the binary of either/or, repression or resistance. Brown in "Feminism Unbound" contends that if we understand ourselves to be constructed by the very power we are subject to, resisting that power is more difficult than formerly conceived. She suggests feminism as a movement needs to complicate its understanding of agency and resistance. Mahmood's *The Politics of Piety* draws on this idea from an Islamic perspective by considering alternative forms of agency that work against liberalism's understandings of resistance: "The normative political subject of poststructuralist feminist theory often remains a liberatory one, whose agency is conceptualized on the binary model of subordination and subversion. In doing so, scholarship elides dimensions of human action whose ethical and political status does not map onto the logic of repression and resistance" (14). Mohanty in "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" argues similarly that "third world" women's resistance cannot be mapped onto a western hegemonic feminist idea of either oppression or resistance since woman as a category does not exist prior to or outside of individual socio-political contexts.

¹³ According to Butler, sovereign subjectivity is a false concept that potentially inhibits spaces for real agency. By rejecting the idea of a sovereign subject, then, she does not think she is inhibiting agency but enhancing it. Spivak comes to similar conclusions about the mutuality of identity as such in her concept of the call from the other before will (a Levinasian concept originally) in "Righting Wrongs" and other parts of her work and so also contributes from a postcolonial perspective to the concept of post-sovereign subjectivity.

language. Specifically I look at how gossip, gazing, silence, and laughter are elements of language usually ignored in discussions of identity formation. Because these elements are not usually found within dominant discourses, they have the ability to work outside of, and sometimes even within, power structures in ways not immediately recognizable. They can thus offer alternative methods for constructing the relationship between self and other in ways that can prove more ethical than assimilative or objectifying practices.

Sympathy must also be theorized alongside notions of the other since sympathy deals specifically with how the self relates to the other. Building from work by Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, and Emanuel Lévinas, J. Hillis Miller outlines the two major theoretical approaches to and definition of “the other”: “On the one hand, the other may be another version of the same, in one way or another assimilable, comprehensible, able to be appropriated and understood. On the other hand, the other may be truly and radically other” (2).¹⁴ In exploring alternative ways of defining sympathy, my project looks for a third way of constructing the other that does not have to fall into the binary described by Miller. Criticism of sympathy focuses on the first definition Miller outlines, turning the other into a “version of the same.” The limits of sympathy always seem to occur with the second definition of the “radical” other who remains so unknowable that sympathy is not possible. With this binary in place, there is no room for sympathy not predicated on sameness. I would like to add a third way of defining the other, one in which sympathy arises through difference, recognizing the other’s subjectivity as grounds

¹⁴ Miller’s approach to otherness examines this term not as a theoretical concept but as a verbal construct or, even more pertinent to my project, a performative aspect of literature that emerges during the reader’s engagement with the text.

enough to produce sympathy. We extend sympathy ethically by giving the other our attention and acknowledging his or her perspective. I will illustrate what this practically looks like in each chapter by showing how gossip, gazing, silence, and laughter can each be a way of extending ethical sympathy.

Sympathy and the Ethics of Reading

An evolving body of theory provides us with new ways of understanding the debates about sympathy in the nineteenth century. Recent awareness of the complexity of sympathy draws attention to the strategies used by some writers in the Victorian period who bring to light that complexity as well. My connection between sympathy and identity, outlined above, is not solely a twenty-first century conception; indeed, as Audrey Jaffe claims, “sympathy in Victorian fiction is always about the construction of social and cultural identities” (23). Thus, although I am claiming a dominant narrative emerged about sympathy in this period, this does not suggest that there was one single understanding of sympathy. Debates about sympathy were often folded into a larger discussion about the practice of reading in this period.¹⁵ I would argue also that the kind of realism developed in the nineteenth century felt obligated to participate in the discourse about sympathy, in part because realism’s verisimilitude was supposed to induce actual reactions in the reader, and sympathetic feelings were among the most valued of these. Indeed, George Eliot, whom critics herald as the iconic realist writer,

¹⁵ While I am concerned to show in this introduction the important role the reader plays in this particular historical moment, and thus the historical reader will always be in the background of every chapter, my focus on the effects of each novel is geared toward the implied reader. I do not make an effort to identify actual responses to the novels; rather, I am more interested to explore the possible rhetorical effect created through the use of specific techniques within the text.

declared enhancing sympathetic feeling in readers as the whole aim of her art. In Chapter 17 of *Adam Bede*, often cited as a type of literary manifesto, Eliot announces the realist aim of presenting common, ordinary life as absolutely vital to the development of sympathy. To always present beautiful, pleasing characters would only teach readers to sympathize with those who are beautiful and pleasing in life. Eliot's narrator declares:

It is more needful that I should have a fibre of sympathy connecting me with that vulgar citizen who weighs out my sugar. . . more needful that my heart should swell with loving admiration at some trait of gentle goodness in the faulty people who sit at my hearth with me . . . than at the deeds of heroes whom I shall never know except by hearsay. (179)

The novelist should not “straighten their noses, nor brighten their wit, nor rectify their dispositions,” but rather present characters with faults just like the people in readers’ lives. This is the kind of sympathy the realist novel fosters, and the kind of sympathy the narrator claims the novel should produce: “it is needful you should tolerate, pity, and love: it is these more or less ugly, stupid, inconsistent people, whose movements of goodness you should be able to admire” (176). The connection between sympathy and reading develops in part, I suggest, because of the stated aims of realist writers such as Eliot. The difficulty that some writers found in working out sympathy within fiction accounts for the increasing doubts about just how much sympathy can accomplish.

Although the height of realism is usually located in the mid-nineteenth century, the novel coexisted uncomfortably with debates about the dangers of reading, a

continuation of such discussions from the eighteenth century.¹⁶ Markman Ellis locates discussions about reading within the culture of sensibility's concern over manners and proper decorum; reading became a way of instilling a sense of virtue. Hugh Blair, the first professor of Rhetoric and Belle Lettres in Britain, wrote in 1762 that the novel provides "one of the best channels for conveying instruction, for painting human life and manners, for showing the errors into which we are betrayed by our passions, for rendering virtue amiable and vice odious" (qtd. in Ellis 43). This hopeful view of novels' ability to create moral citizens was not uncontested; many felt novels were more likely to corrupt readers. Vicesimus Knox argues in *Essays Moral and Literary* (1782): "If it is true, that the present age is more corrupt than the preceding...the great multiplication of Novels probably contributed to its degeneracy" (qtd. in Ellis 46). Metaphors of disease and infection were often applied to reading; Hannah More called novels a "complicated drug" whose corruption "has spread so wide and descended so low, as to have become one of the most universal as well as most pernicious sources of corruption among us" (1:190-191). If the benefit of reading for moral training was acknowledged, it was often attended by a need to qualify what kind of reading.

Advice about what and how to read often occurred in conduct books, such as one finds in Reverend Wetenhall Wilkes's conduct book *A Letter of Genteel and Moral*

¹⁶ Aliaga-Buchenau suggests that debates about reading swelled to such heights in the nineteenth century because the nature of reading changed so drastically. Printing shifted from the control of the church, patrons, and guilds, all of which restricted what was written and how, to commercial printing presses more concerned with profit than regulating reading material. Increasing literacy rates and cheaper books also meant that reading was no longer the domain of a limited group of elite readers who could ensure the "correct" interpretation (4-5). The debates centered on the lower classes and women as fears grew about the disturbance to social order if the poor became too educated through literacy and if women neglected their domestic duties.

Advice to a Young Lady: “Novels, Plays, Romances, and Poems must be read sparingly and with Caution; lest such Parts of them, as one not strictly tied down to sedateness, should inculcate such Light, over-gay Notions as might by unperceiv’d Degrees soften and mislead the Understanding” (qtd. in Ellis 47). Those who felt reading could instill morals continually reinforced the idea that novel writing and reading should have as its priority the development of virtue: “Novels should be wrote and read as books which are to teach by illustrating the moral by the facts, where precept is enlivened by examples, and imagination brought in to strengthen reason, not to confound it” (qtd. in Ellis 181). One of the potentially positive roles attributed to novels was the ability to teach readers how to feel for other people.

This sympathetic ability was felt to be particularly strong in women, a belief Kate Flint shows to be connected to the biological theories about women’s bodies and minds:

[woman] is thus especially constructed by nature so as to have a close intuitive relationship with her offspring, then such instincts as sympathetic imagination, and a ready capacity to identify with the experience of others are unalterable facts, about her mental operation, and hence by extension about her process of reading. (56)

In the case of women, then, sympathetic identification was a dangerous result of novel reading. Arguments about the danger of women reading were grounded on the conception of a strict gender binary.¹⁷ Many of the proclaimed attributes of women as angels – their compassion and care for others – also led to fears about their reading habits. Because of their caring natures, women were thought more prone to empathize and identify deeply

¹⁷ Pearson cites several good examples of articles that begin by warning of the danger of reading for both sexes but end by focusing on women (18).

with heroines. This identification could be dangerous if the heroine did not reflect the proper or ideal woman. The distinctive attention given to the problem of women readers in this period forms an important interpretative frame for how gossip, gazing, silence, and laughter – themselves gendered discourses – would have been viewed within these texts. It was a risky endeavor for these writers to create new conceptions of sympathy using not only a genre that was unsuitable for women’s overwrought imagination but also using discourses that were ineffective because feminized.¹⁸

Although concerns over reading’s influence were focused on the minds of women, children, and the poor, the connection between reading and the development of sympathy extended to all populations. Jaffe underscores the visual nature of Victorian identification through sympathy, a connection she argues is based on the “spectatorial character of Victorian culture” (9). Victorian novels created and circulated the images that became closely aligned with representing sympathy (14). The process of turning sympathetic feelings into visible representations, Jaffe argues, elides differences by representing the other as part of a larger human condition. This is the complicated ethical nature of sympathetic identification largely ignored in the general discourse about sympathy as a necessary virtue to develop in a modern, civilized nation. The novels I examine in this project are much more apt to question and complicate the effects of

¹⁸ Barker-Benfield describes the process by which sympathy became gendered within the context of an increasingly consumer and secular culture in the eighteenth century. At the end of his book, *The Culture of Sensibility*, he comments on the influence of this “cult of sensibility” on the nineteenth century: “Out of the final 1790’s fusion of evangelism with a sensibility made unequivocally respectable would emerge the flood of reform organizations rooted in a middle-class, female constituency” (394). Barker-Benfield’s study is crucial to understanding how sympathy became the natural province of the female gender, and how this categorization could both empower and destroy women’s ability to act in social and political arenas.

sympathy than the national and domestic discourses articulated through conduct books, treatises, magazines, and even many novels. These writers recognized that although sympathy was often used in unethical assimilative practices, it did not have to be implicated in the homogenizing impulse of Britain. Indeed, Jaffe connects sympathy to a “conceptual fluidity” because sympathy called for identification with society’s outcasts (beggars, fallen women), and yet such identification undermined the representation of a solidly middle class identity (19). It is this sort of complexity, I argue, that these novelists highlight in order to find alternative ways of ethically encountering the other.

Sympathy in the Nineteenth Century

The discourse surrounding sympathy extended well beyond debates about reading, blending into the domain of nationalism, moral theory, religion, and science. Although these divergent areas of society interrogated and used sympathy in numerous ways, one can distill nineteenth century discussions to their most common understanding of sympathy: the ability to show compassion for the other by understanding the experiences of the other. Victorian understandings of sympathy cannot be understood outside of the ways in which the eighteenth century firmly connected sympathy to notions of virtue and even national identity. Britain began defining itself as the charity nation; an identity articulated by writers like Henry Fielding who claimed “Charity is in fact the very Characteristic of this Nation at this Time” (qtd. in Ellis 14). The actual charitable work done by organizations shaped ideas of sympathy, and the language of

sensibility began to spread beyond the boundaries of moral philosophy into economic and scientific discourse (Ellis 18-19).

The Enlightenment played a role in eighteenth-century conceptions of sympathy, particularly in the separation of religion from human nature. What resulted was that “Above all, philosophers during the eighteenth century emphasize pity, compassion, fellow feeling, and sympathy, broadly construed, as the steering mechanism of individual interaction” (Steintrager xiii). Religious rules no longer governed behavior; rather, individual sentiment became the guiding principle for social relationships. Adam Smith outlined one of the most popular ways of thinking about sympathy in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, complicating David Hume’s theory that sympathy was a naturally occurring impulse.¹⁹ According to Smith, we cannot easily determine what another person thinks or feels; this does not, however, negate sympathy for Smith so much as shift it further into the realm of the imagination: “As we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation...it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations” (11). In the exchange described here by Smith, sympathy for the other becomes sympathy for the self (Jaffe 4). This version of sympathy, based on the ability to understand the other, contributed to the practice of extending sympathy only after differences are erased.

I should clarify at this point that sympathy can be ethical or unethical. My theory outlines the requirement for ethical sympathy, which is namely preserving difference.

¹⁹ For a comparison of Hume and Smith’s approach to sympathy see Mercer.

Critics like Amit Rai identify unethical uses of sympathy in nineteenth-century Britain where sympathy was a way of rendering, as he claims, “the other an object of identification” to make the other seem “knowable, accessible, and so appropriable” (164). Rai situates sympathy squarely within the historical rise of humanitarianism in the eighteenth century, such as the establishment of numerous hospitals, charity organizations for chimney sweeps and prisoners, abolition societies, and the Royal Humane Society (33). The emphasis, as seen in Smith’s theory, remained on the role imagination plays in helping one feel another’s pain (46). Such an emphasis, Rai points out, encourages the kind of sympathy that relies on one’s ability to know exactly what the other is thinking and feeling. The problem with this conception of sympathy, Rai argues, is that “in comprehending the other what is lost is, precisely, otherness” (47).²⁰ He cites the British East India Charter and the abolition of the slave trade as two important moments in the development of an aestheticized sympathy (117-118). Very often, then, sympathy, in its unethical form, was a movement more interested in defining a nation than establishing ethical social relationships. I am suggesting, however, that we need to look at other constructions of sympathy that attempted to establish a different way of viewing the other. Rai makes a call in his book for “sympathy beyond sympathy through

²⁰ The lack of concern shown for this kind of assimilation causes Rai to define sympathy within the eighteenth century as “a mechanism of differentiation and normalization” and “a principle of sociality and cohesion.” In short, sympathy was about governing the self, other, family, society. Because he grounds his analysis of sympathy in Foucault’s notion of governmentality, sympathy will always be an oppressive gesture for Rai. He argues that sympathy produces the differences it tries to overcome because sympathy needs those inequalities in order to perform the work of overcoming inequalities that happens through identification (xix). I argue that sympathy can be structured differently, and I think theorists today, as well as in the nineteenth century, found other ways for conceiving sympathy as an ethical way to engage the other.

a different kind of responsibility toward the other. A sociality with and through difference” (114). This is precisely the notion of sympathy that I elucidate in certain nineteenth-century novels that attempt, I argue, to criticize unethical uses of sympathy, such as Rai describes, and offer surprising ways of restructuring the relationship to others by means of typically disregarded forms of telling.

Several developments in the nineteenth century shifted the structure of social relations and increased anxiety about how to interrelate. The Chartist movement and Corn Law Crisis are two examples of movements that led to the need for imagining new social relations between classes (Morris 9). Additionally, the growing sources of wealth other than land, the crisis of sovereignty created by the American and French Revolutions, and the growing middle classes began shifting power away from the landed gentry, changing even the way nations were imagined; rather than a nation visualized as “expansiveness, spaciousness, grandeur, and freedom” now nation became “density, closeness, and proximity” (Morris 10-11). The crowded life of cities produced by industrialization led to more opportunities to interact with unknown others. An English man or woman in London experienced what Pam Morris describes as “the boundaries of self [giving] way before the unfixed, orderless chaos of sheer agglomeration” (25).

As journal and magazine articles show, Victorians were highly aware of these changes to the structure of social relations. In the *Westminster Review* the repeal of the Corn Laws was interpreted as “the commencement of a new era.” (204) Likewise, the *Westminster Review* also commented on the changing structure in leadership, noting that the “number of vacant leaderships” results from “the general uprooting of old authorities”

(479). Titles of essays like Carlyle's "Signs of the Times" (1829) and Mill's "The Spirit of the Age" (1831) also represent the prevailing notion of change. Some viewed the changing face of British society with disapproval and fear, as expressed in *Blackwood's Magazine*: "You may come to touch very disagreeable people; at present you are only a few yards apart. There are two things according to this Census, threatening you – 'density' and 'proximity'" (Eagles 445). The other is to be feared as "disagreeable," posing the threat of unavoidable interaction. Events like the Great Exhibition in 1851, however, revealed a certain fascination for the growing complexity of society, at the same time expressing a desire to assimilate those differences into a unified concept of British identity. In the course of these changes, the middle class strove to subsume everyone's behavior under a common moral code based on visible works rather than the upper class notion of inherited goodness. Sympathy was given credit for prompting people to perform charitable deeds. Thus, where notions of sympathy in the eighteenth century were often used to display one's upper class sensibilities, in the nineteenth century sympathy became a middle-class phenomenon to provide stability for defining moral actions.

The circulation of a coherent national identity through reading became one way to stabilize identity. A central part of this national identity was the refined quality of sympathy. In later editions of Smith's *Theory*, he adds a new section that more clearly than before connects sympathy with nationalism: "The most extensive public benevolence which can commonly be exerted with an considerable effect, is that of the statesmen, who project and form alliances among neighbouring or not very distant

nations” (qtd. in Gottlieb 36).²¹ Sir Walter Scott’s comments about reading novels draw a direct connection between sympathy, reading, and nationalism. He describes how Maria Edgeworth inspired his own writing of the Waverly novels when he saw how her novels stirred sympathy for the Irish:

[her] Irish characters have gone so far to make the English familiar with the character of their gay and kind-hearted neighbours of Ireland, that she may be truly said to have done more towards completing the Union, than perhaps all the legislative enactments by which it has been followed up...I felt that something might be attempted for my own country, of the same kind with that which Miss Edgeworth so fortunately achieved for Ireland – something which might introduce her natives to those of the sister kingdom, in a more favourable light than they had been placed hitherto, and tend to procure sympathy for their virtues and indulgence for their foibles” (“General Preface,” in *Waverly* 352-353).

As is particularly evident in Scott’s work, both novelistic discourse and nationalist discourse rely on the experience of sympathy, on the “substitutive empathy of identification” (Lynch 49). Reading can enhance the ability to imagine others as having similar experiences to one’s own; therefore reading becomes an important link in creating a stable national identity. The danger in this process became one of the problems in the dominant narrative about sympathy in this period: it often served as the moral ground for assimilating the other’s difference (and other here usually designates non-English) into a cohesive definition of Britishness.

²¹ See Gottlieb for a detailed analysis of the connections between sympathy and nationalism in Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. He concludes: “Smithian sympathy simultaneously naturalizes and encourages the moral basis of both social union in general, and the Anglo-Scottish Union in particular” (37).

Identifying Alternative Narratives of Sympathy: Gossip, Gazing, Silence, and Laughter as Discourse Systems

The concern over how to define the British subject greatly increased the conceptual link among reading, morality, and identity. Debates over the dangers of reading had the residual effect of conferring a great deal of power for novels to influence reader's perceptions simply by invoking (fear or praise of) that power. While some novels were certainly written just to entertain, writers and readers alike could not read without an awareness of the supposed power of narrative to alter social relations. Historically, then, the novel and sympathy are intricately linked to discussions about the role sympathy plays in negotiating encounters with the other during the nineteenth century. In addition to these historical connections between sympathy and the novel, I also chose novels as the site of my exploration because I believe this genre combines a certain level of play and reality that provides a unique insight into what people were able to imagine out of what actually existed. The novel, as Mikhail Bakhtin has established, is a dialogic form that carries with it layers of meaning, both in the way it reticulates specific characters and situations within larger social matrixes, and in the way, as an interpretative enterprise, readings of novels remain varied and fluid. In the nineteenth century, novels offered a space for suggesting alternative narratives in ways that more monolithic genres, like treatises and conduct books, did not. I am also interested in the ways that writers imagined sympathy *could* work, the constitutive rather than prescriptive or descriptive function of novels. My aim in using discourse systems is to extend the scope of novels' role in shaping sympathetic discourse by turning my focus to only one agent of transformation at a time. This sustained focus, provided by a discourse system's

attention to one discursive element as it reoccurs throughout the novel, helps reveal alternative narratives about sympathy that often go unnoticed. These discourse systems also unveil the potentially ethical role for communicative acts like gossip, gazing, silence, and laughter that usually have negative connotations.

Discourse systems are interpretive models for reading texts. A discourse system traces how communicative acts operate at multiple levels and on multiple rhetorical fronts to engage with both the story world and the extra-textual world. For example, gossip does not merely exist within a novel as a discourse that creates and propels the plot. It can also influence other discourses, social institutions, and ways of structuring identity. Silence indicates more than just a reticent or oppressed character. It can also be used to actively construct identity. Such large claims can be made for gossip and silence when viewed through discourse systems that trace these forms of relating to the other through acts that run vertically (at multiple levels of story world and lived world) and horizontally (across textual events and spaces). Ultimately, I argue that we can better interpret the social critiques of sympathy in these novels by looking at these usually neglected elements in a sustained, systematic way.

The term *discourse* has accrued densely layered and ambiguous meanings as it has been incorporated into vastly different fields and contexts. It is important, then, to distinguish how I use this term within the phrase *discourse system*. R. S. Perinbanayagam defines discourse as: “an interactional act capable of containing multiple significations, all of them delineating a self and an other in varying forms of dialogues and relationships” (xi). Discourse, then, is distinct from speech and language as discourse

alludes to the way speech manifests itself during interactions with the other defined by specific social contexts.²² More than just spoken words, discourse is a way of interacting in a particular place and with certain people that is inevitably governed by social norms but also can alter and inform those norms. I am drawing on aspects of Foucault's concept of "discursive formation," which recognizes the way groups of statements are structured around ideologies and can either reinforce established conventions or subversively undermine those conventions. Foucault's discussion of discursive formations illuminates the relations of social and cultural power that work to structure the very discursive practices that reinforce the power of dominant traditions. We can easily overlook a woman's use of silence as a form of resistance because gender ideologies inform the way silence will be interpreted. Although discourse systems can work in support of a nexus of social and cultural formations, the novels I examine in this project subvert conventional social norms through discourse systems that employ seemingly negative or frivolous discourses in ethical and powerful ways.

My analysis follows Patricia Bizzell's notion of discourse by looking at the constitutive function of language use in the way it contributes to constructions of social relations. Bizzell focuses on the communal role in shaping discourse through "shared conventions of language use among all members" of a community. In contemporary rhetorics, the idea of the communication as one person acting as the "author" trying to

²²Prior to the 1970's, Discourse Analysis referred to the study of syntactic features. With the influence of anthropologists, sociologists, and sociolinguists, a consideration of social influences on language emerged and Discourse Analysis broadened to incorporate pragmatics and ethnography of speaking. Both of these movements consider language in use in a specific context. By the 1980's and 1990's, under the influence of gender studies, Discourse Analysis now also considers intersections of socially constructed roles and language use. My analysis of discourse utilizes this more recent notion of discourse studies.

convey an idea to another person who receives the message as the “audience,” has given way to the idea of “discourse communities,” which entails the dialectical exchange whereby participants in a communicative act are both sending and receiving messages concurrently. The term “discourse community” prevents discourse from becoming abstract, appearing as though it controls the formation of individuals, by locating the social and contextual element of discourse as the site of production.²³ As much as anything else, what the notion of discourse community highlights is the dialectic between social relations and discourse in the formation of institutional practices, social norms, and shared values. What such a model suggests, then, is that discourse has heuristic power to define, and thus alter, social relations. By exploring gossip, gazing, silence, and laughter within the context of their production and dispersion as systems, I mean to show how these elements critique dominant discourses.

The role of “system” in my phrase *discourse system* indicates the three levels at which these elements work within the novel. The three levels include characters’ use of the elements as communicative acts, the narrator’s role in highlighting the elements’ rhetorical effects, and the writer’s use of the elements as narrative technique. The purpose of a systematic theory of gossip, gazing, silence, and laughter is to locate the complex connections between these elements in narrative and larger systems of social relations articulated through discourses like sympathy. Kathi Weeks cautions against the danger of notions of “system” that take on intentionality and are “credited with a kind of monolithic

²³ Killingsworth cites Foucault as one critic who presents discourse as “an all-pervasive medium of power and manipulation that somehow remains subjectless; users of discourse are represented as victims of the communication media” (116). So long as we always consider discourse in tandem with community, we can avoid conceiving of discourse as an abstract and immutable object.

force that seems to guarantee its ability to recover from potential challenges to its power,” a warning also sounded by Foucault that a reductive analysis of systems constructs a one-way flow of top-down power (88). By their very nature, gossip, gazing, silence, and laughter resist becoming closed systems of power because they have not been accepted within “legitimate” forms of discourse. Unlike dominant discourses that maintain power by rejecting other narratives, these elements require a dialectical relationship that fosters, rather than resists, different forms of knowledge. Additionally, in their most ethical form these elements tend to work from the bottom-up, allowing those outside dominant structures to become part of larger cultural conversations. These discourse systems are not inherently ethical or unethical, rather they illuminate the workings of social relationships within a historical context and, importantly, present counter-possibilities to dominant narratives. What ultimately emerges from each discourse system, I argue, is a construction of ethical sympathy as a relationship that preserves the uniqueness of self and other by maintaining a sympathetic distance.

A discourse system communicates above the level of language, incorporating social messages, the different horizon of experience for the speaker and the audience, intended messages, unintended ones, understood messages, and misconstrued ones. Communicative act is the most basic level at which I explore gossip, gazing, silence, and laughter, focusing on how characters employ these elements as forms of telling within their interactions. My use of “act” follows Butler’s notion: “an ‘act’ is not a momentary happening, but a certain nexus of temporal horizons, the condensation of an iterability that exceeds the moment it occasions” (14). Speech acts are important to Butler for their

possibility to create social change.²⁴ The elements I explore in this dissertation are positioned to perform the social change that Butler attributes to speech acts by challenging the prevailing understanding of how social relationships were built on unethical categories during the mid-nineteenth century. Thus, there is a certain amount of agency assumed in a discourse system because the intention behind the communicative act gives the speaker the agency to shape meaning, but also the reception and consequent interpretation of that communication gives the audience agency to create meaning.

Perhaps the most important element of a discourse system is the relational nature that inheres in the communicative act. This relationship can be ethical or unethical, but an encounter between self and other exists nonetheless. Looking at marginal communicative acts like gossip or silence, for example, within discourse systems, helps to illuminate the way these elements operate as more than just communication or responses. They can be intentional acts that disrupt dominant narratives by providing different ways of structuring social relationships. When part of a discourse system, these communicative acts become more than just language; they perform important social critiques and they construct alternative worldviews.

The second level of the discourse system consists of the narrator's use of these elements as rhetorical techniques. The relationship between narrator and reader is

²⁴Butler wants to separate herself from theorists like Bourdieu by claiming that speech acts are insurrectionary rather than a rite of institutions. She argues language is not a closed system that relies on social positions to fix meanings. Rather, an utterance is forceful when it breaks from prior patterns and context: "Language takes on a non-ordinary meaning in order precisely to contest what has become sedimented in as the ordinary" (145). While Bourdieu only gives utterances the ability to create effects when used by someone who holds power, Butler finds a way for the speech acts themselves to bestow agency when the act uses conventional formulas in non-conventional ways (147).

founded on acts of interpretation. That is, both the narrator, in presenting the characters and action, and the reader, in trying to determine what to think about the characters and action, are primarily concerned with how the story world will be interpreted. Rhetoric is intimately connected to this act of interpretation. Indeed, according to John D. Ramage, the ability to construct and present identity resides in the domain of rhetoric: “It is this interdependence between identity and language – our capacity to use language as a means of representing our identity to others and in turn to interpret others’ representations of themselves – that makes rhetoric such a powerful tool for understanding, forming, and preserving identity” (34). The narrator relies on rhetorical techniques to construct the character’s identity and to elicit desired responses from the reader.²⁵

The third level of the discourse system includes the author’s use of these elements as narrative techniques. Wayne Booth, Gerard Genette, Seymour Chapman, Suzanne Keen, Ruth Page, H. Porter Abbott and others have created a veritable vocabulary for talking about how texts work, making terms like implied reader and homodiegetic narrator, as well as techniques like withholding and indirect discourse, common parlance for understanding and interpreting texts. Gossip, gazing, laughter, and silence—as techniques—are important additions to that list of narrative devices. More than just a plot device or good writing practice, narrative technique is an ideology that “embodies the social, economic, and literary conditions under which it has been produced” (Lanser 5). Instead of assuming that narrative structures are formed by “essential properties” or

²⁵ To influence the minds of readers is the rhetorical aim of literature according to Burke. The three components of rhetoric: identification, address, and persuasion, appear in literature as techniques intending to influence attitudes, not actions (50). In this project, I look for how rhetorical techniques influence the attitude of sympathy, or the attitude of engaging the other.

“isolated aesthetic imperatives,” Susan Lanser suggests that narrative structures are determined by “complex and changing conventions that are themselves produced in and by the relations of power that implicate writer, reader, and text” (5).²⁶ When these narrative techniques serve to disrupt ideology, then, is when they work outside of the category that convention placed them in.

For example, for a woman writer to use gossip as a narrative technique fits too comfortably with conventional constructions of femininity to perform a critique of social constructions of gender. The way in which Martineau and Gaskell place gossip’s power outside of the domestic realm (where it presumably belongs), however, disrupts the conventional use of gossip. In some ways *Deerbrook* is thus even more radical than the texts where Martineau adopts a more masculine writing voice. In *Deerbrook* she accomplishes social critique by using a feminine narrative technique, thus exploding not only the standard understanding of gossip as a frivolous discourse but also conventional ways of interpreting women writers and their work. As Robin Warhol explains, the social context of readers and the social context of narrative techniques each influence the way the text’s engagement with ideology will be interpreted:

each strategy or convention of fiction that a novelist can use will have certain connotations, inherited from its forebears, models, and antitypes among the fictions that preceded it. Depending on how actual readers situate themselves in

²⁶ Lanser includes some misgiving about the “rise of women’s voice” during the historical context of the rise of the novel. Lanser thinks the narrative voice of women actually limits their real, public voice: “The question becomes, then, not simply whether there is ‘female voice’ in narrative, but whether the *forms* of such voice carry an authority that is more than private and fictional, establishing a place for women as subjects in the newly emerging public ‘sphere’” (41). While I agree with Lanser that the agency women gained within texts did not always translate into the lived world, I do think women writers contributed in powerful ways to reimagining the possibility for more ethical social relations.

regard to these conventions, their reactions to the text will be influenced by the text's rhetorical moves. (27-28)

I am not implying, then, that I can prove these writers employed gossip, gazing, silence, or laughter intentionally as strategies to elicit the specific response of a reformed understanding of sympathy within their readers.²⁷ What I do claim is that the way these writers situate these elements within other conventions of fiction (like realism) and within certain social connotations (the debate about sympathy) creates a pointed critique of dominant narratives about each of those elements, about sympathy, and about social relations.

I turn now to examine how each of these elements as discourse systems. Although in each chapter I isolate a particular discourse system, this does not indicate that I see them working as self-contained systems. In my explanation of each system, I consider briefly the way other critics have also engaged in a systematic analysis of gossip, silence, gazing, and laughter, as well contemporary and recent understandings of each element. I am not making a chronological claim for the development of a new understanding of sympathy as the century progresses. Thus, the chapters are not ordered chronologically according to each novel's publication date. Rather, I trace a conceptual trajectory from the simplest revisions of sympathy, beginning with gossip in *Deerbrook* and *Cranford*, to more complex transformations of sympathy with gazing in *Silas Marner* and silence in

²⁷ As powerful as they can be, narrative techniques do not guarantee the "correct" response from readers. As Warhol explains: "strategies are rhetorical features of texts, choices of technique indicating novelists' apparent hopes about the emotional power their stories might wield. Strategies can misfire; they guarantee nothing" (25-26). However, because narrative techniques are nested within social conventions, the way writers use techniques, either upholding or subverting conventions, reveals much about the intended effect.

Villette. *Daniel Deronda* and *Vanity Fair* appear last because they retreat from the radical definition of sympathy in Brontë's text to express the limits of sympathy through laughter.

In chapter two, I examine how the discourse system of gossip highlights the moments where gossip transforms social practices and relationships in Harriet Martineau's *Deerbrook* and Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford*. This transformative quality of gossip is part of Susan Philips's claim that we must look beyond just the subversive qualities of gossip, in doing so we can see how gossip transforms orthodox structures and institutions. If we only look at gossip as a unit of talk, the tendency is to sweep it aside as a trivial or illegitimate conversational tool. Through a systematic analysis, however, we see gossip connected to social contexts, either upholding or transforming relationships within those contexts. Other critics who look at gossip as a system focus on the range of its effects and motivations. Ralph Rosnow and Gary Fine offer one example of a systematic exploration of gossip in that they attempt to establish typologies for gossip, but most importantly they examine how gossip works in various social contexts. They demonstrate the wide range of gossip's influence as it infiltrates a variety of institutions like politics, medicine, and the academy, focusing on the transactional nature of gossip that shows it to be purposive behavior with distinct social and psychological functions (131). Within a literary context, Elaine Bander explores Jane Austen's portrayal of gossip in her novels, arguing it is not a simple "good or bad" approval or disapproval. By engaging in a systematic analysis of gossip in all Austen's novels, Bander can demonstrate how Austen employs gossip in all its many facets as comic, useful, benign, malicious,

damaging, etc. Critics have also looked at gossip compared to other forms of telling. Jan B. Gordon compares gossip, letters, diaries, and novels, Patricia Myer Spacks draws an analogy between gossip and letters, and Blake Vermeule compares literary narrative to gossip. These critics, in various ways, recognize the systematic critique gossip can make at higher levels like institutions of the family or ways of knowing.²⁸

My analysis of the discourse system of gossip examines how gossip reveals the unnecessary boundaries that are constructed between self and other. As a discourse that travels across boundaries of public/private and male/female, gossip itself undermines the ideology supporting those boundaries. Sympathy can flow more freely once the identities of others are not so strictly consigned to categories of difference. In *Deerbrook*, Martineau uses the stereotypical figure of the gossiping woman to show the unethical potential of gossip to destroy social relationships. At the same time, Mrs. Rowland's malicious gossip reveals the power of this communicative act to restructure an entire community in very public ways. Gossip wields such power primarily through its narrative and speculative qualities, two components of gossip that I discuss in this chapter. I focus specifically on the way gossip uses gaps, a function of its narrative and speculative nature, as a way to engage the other. Martineau will use the marginal figure of a disabled governess to illustrate the more ethical use of gossip; Maria brings healing to individuals and the community through her sympathetic gossip. In *Cranford*, gossip exposes the

²⁸ Gordon examines the ways in which the discourse of gossip intersects with other discourses, like that of family inheritance so central to British class structure. This is just one example of how the social norms about gossip are partly informed by the social norms of other discourses: because legitimacy was such a concern for family structure, the fact that gossip usually has an unidentifiable source turns it immediately into a suspect form of knowledge.

destructive nature of the boundaries the Cranford women have erected between themselves and anyone who represents difference. I also focus on the relationship between the narrator and the reader in this novel, founded in gossip. Mary encourages the reader to extend sympathy to these “silly” gossiping ladies as she shows the reader how to reside in a liminal space, not able to fully understand the women and yet willing to share in their experiences enough to cross boundaries. Both novels classify ethical gossip as the opportunity to inscribe narrative gaps with new ways of defining the other, thereby transforming social relations.

In chapter three, I use the discourse system of gazing in George Eliot’s novel *Silas Marner* to explore the possibility of sympathy created, not through recognition of sameness, but through identification in the moment of witnessing the other’s story. The discourse system of gazing departs from classical accounts of “the gaze” that construct it solely as an objectifying practice.²⁹ Systematic analyses of the gaze tend to position it as an ideological function that influences other systems, such as systems of power and knowledge. In his book, *Downcast Eyes*, Martin Jay traces a complicated history of the gaze through the Middle Ages, emphasizing the complex interplay of religion and politics in the development of theories about sight and their manifestations in social practices. What Jay’s historical survey shows is the systematic application of visual theories that

²⁹Laura Hinton looks at the gaze constructed through sentimentality from *Clarissa* all the way to *Recue* 911. Her evaluation of the gaze, and for that matter sympathy, is decidedly negative. She argues that “sentiment is reproduced by sympathy’s endorsement of sadomasochistic, scopophilic practices: in short, by the perverse gaze” (3).

give the gaze hegemony over social relations.³⁰ Jonathan Crary engages in a systematic analysis of the gaze's "massive reorganization of knowledge and social practices" in the nineteenth century "that modified in myriad ways the productive, cognitive, and desiring capacities of the human subject" (3). Levinas reconceptualizes the gaze in more positive ways by focusing on visual "face" as an openness toward the other.³¹ Face is a category of understanding that emphasizes *relationship* with the other rather than *knowing* the other.

My term "gazing" is meant to employ this use of visual perception of the other. It is beyond the recognition that often reduces difference to sameness. Witnessing, a term I use to define the process of approaching the other with sympathy, emphasizes gazing as a relational discourse that negotiates the particular balance between maintaining the other's difference and yet still sympathizing with the other. To understand how this act of gazing could be positive, I focus on two important aspects of gazing: the visual component, comprised of space and stance, and the storytelling component. Within gazing, it is the storytelling component that enables sympathy through the act of listening, thereby acknowledging the other has a story just like me. So while the story may not be one I can comprehend, the important ethical component to gazing is that I confer subjectivity on the other by acknowledging the other's story. Gazing, in contrast to objectifying practices

³⁰Jay's historical survey includes a detailed look at two ideas influencing our notion of the gaze today: Foucault's "unimpeded empire of the gaze" (from *The Birth of the Clinic*) and Debord's commonly cited phrase, "society of the spectacle," as another controlling idea for how we understand the gaze today. Debord centers his critique on the separation of people (alienation) that results in social relations mediated by images. Foucault stressed the dangers of being the object of the gaze, Debord the dangers of being the subject.

³¹ Handelman and Robbins both discuss Levinas's concept of "face" as not emphasizing the visual in the way that gaze studies have commonly constructed encounters with the other.

of “the gaze,” constructs a performance of telling and listening that creates a relationship between self and other, enhancing sympathy without erasing difference. Identification is based on the self’s recognition that the other has a story just like I have a story, even if the stories may be incomprehensible to each other.

Although I have not overtly discussed gender yet, it should be clear by now that I cannot ignore this category when dealing with the elements of gossip, gazing, silence, and laughter that have historically been gendered themselves, nor can I ignore gender when exploring strategies of sympathy. Important to the inflection of gender throughout this project, then, is an understanding of gender as a social construct, as a way of ordering reality. Ruth Page defines gender as “socially constructed norms, practices, and codes which facilitate the identification of an individual or his or her behavior as ‘masculine,’ ‘feminine’” (191). I use gender, not as strictly an identifying mark to delineate male or female, but as a way of structuring knowledge, discourse, and reality. This definition follows Elizabeth Langland’s approach to gender as a category of analysis rather than a focus on women or “woman” (xv). In using gender, I am aware of the tendency to affirm the dichotomy so rampantly reproduced in the nineteenth century whereby masculine and feminine domains became the binary by which all society could be structured. Indeed, my hesitancy for making claims about gender in this project emerges from the fear that others will read my argument as an essentialist one. My use of gender, then, is an historical necessity. It would be impossible to talk about nineteenth-century novels without acknowledging that these writers are both working within and challenging categories of gender. Nor could I write about gossip, gazing, silence, and laughter without

acknowledging how vital gender is to the ways these elements are interpreted. It means something different, for example, when a woman laughs than when a man laughs. It is harder to detect a woman using silence as a strategy because of the social assumption that women are silent out of obedience. In other words, I would be missing an important part of how each of these elements work within the text if I did not heed the ways in which gender informs readers' interpretation. Within my analysis, gender works both as a social category and as "a fundamental textual trope that reorients familiar or traditional plots toward innovative formal ends" (Langland xviii). Gender designates more than male/female, it is way of knowing and a trope for interpretation.

In chapter four I take up silence as a discourse system in Charlotte Brontë's novel *Villette*. Silence clearly connects to gender through issues of voice. Feminist readings of literature often attempt recuperate the lost voices of oppressed populations and thus reveal alternative versions of history through their stories. While this work has been invaluable, the focus on recuperating *voice* has meant the neglect of *silence* as a viable means of communication, identity formation, and strategy of resistance; in short, all of those things we attribute to voice and speech. Cheryl Glenn sets out in her book *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence* to explore the various ways silence is used as a discourse. She describes the silence of "imbalance, of weakness, impotence, fear, and subordination in the face of dominance," normally inscribed upon women and the silence that "enacts strength and power" inscribed upon men (31). While she admits this has long been the understood perception of silence, Glenn challenges such perceptions by

exploring the possibility for silence as empowering (even for women) when it is a chosen rhetorical strategy.

My analysis of silence builds from the important connection Glenn makes between silence, voice, and social relations. The context I use to explore silence, within a written form, can be a particularly tricky endeavor when one begins to ask how silences appear in a text. Silence within a discourse system can facilitate this sort of examination; I can look at the ways silence operates as a communicative act between characters, as a rhetorical technique used by the narrator (often manifested as withholding), and as a narrative technique used by the author (often manifested as gaps in the text). When seen at the level of system and strategy, silence becomes more than just a lack of response, or even more than a response; silence offers an alternative way to perform identity as unknowable and thus transforms notions of sympathy that require a knowable other.

Villette, of all the novels I explore in this dissertation, asks for the most radical form of sympathy, because silence positions Lucy's identity as unknowable. Ethical sympathy in this novel becomes that which can be extended without any possibility of identification. While Eliot's novel still posits a certain amount of identification through the inclusion of the other's story in communal narratives, Brontë's novel resists any point of connection between Lucy and the characters and readers. Lucy's silence does not, however, signify her desire for seclusion; as both character and narrator she projects her aspiration for intimate relationships founded on sympathy. This chapter also offers the most extensive critique of reading by thwarting readers' desire to know and their impulse to complete Lucy's narrative for her rather than leave the ending open.

In chapter five I turn to the limits of sympathy, revealed through my discussion of the discourse system of laughter in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* and William Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*. While there have been many systematic studies of humor, comedy, and jokes, few critics explore the phenomenon of laughter itself. In her book *Breaking Up at Totality: a Rhetoric of Laughter*, Diane Davis focuses on laughter as a systematic way of breaking apart categories that we cling to so insistently in order to make meaning out of our experiences. This systematic analysis establishes laughter as, for Davis, a way to move outside binaries of language. Laughter becomes a critique of language itself, or at least of our belief in the stability of language. Davis argues that focusing on laughter as a system that works outside the binary categories of language will allow us to "think the unthinkable, to engage in a radical redescription of the world in terms of heterogeneity and multiplicity; and to do this without regret or falling again into nostalgia for a solid ground" (166). Jacqueline Bussie also looks at laughter as a way to disrupt systems. Oppressed populations can use laughter as a system to subvert other, often more powerful, systems of oppression: "my reconsideration of laughter argues that laughter interrupts the system and state of oppression, and creatively attests to hope, resistance, and protest in the face of the shattering of language and traditional frameworks of thought and belief" (4). The above examples illustrate a systematic approach to laughter in that they recognize the ways in which laughter intersects with other social ideologies, both being formed by social convention and re-forming social conventions.

My own systematic analysis of laughter is located within literature where one often finds examples that uphold the assumption that feminine laughter should be confined to polite smiles. Representations of laughing women tend to fall in one of several categories: their laughter is disciplined and controlled by the end of the novel, they are given masculine traits so that they cannot be seen as positive pictures of femininity, or they are given traces of madness or hysteria. Charlotte Brontë's character, Bertha Mason, is one of the most famous examples of the mad woman who laughs. In *Villette*, Mdm. Beck can laugh because Lucy masculinizes her through descriptions of her physical and intellectual traits. Evelina's growth in Burney's eighteenth-century novel is associated with the taming of her laughter. Contrary to these examples that employ laughter in the service of upholding stereotypes (mainly of women), laughter in *Daniel Deronda* and *Vanity Fair* exposes the way institutions and social norms unethically constrain social relations. I examine the laughter of Gwendolen and Becky for the ways in which each attempts to use laughter as a rhetorical strategy to construct an identity and a place within society. I argue that the laughter of incongruity, more than other forms of laughter, best facilitates ethical encounters by insisting, first, on a distance between self and other that maintains difference, and then recognizing the validity of the other's world view instead of trying to insist on the preeminence of one's own world view.

This chapter comes last in my dissertation because it also exposes the limits of sympathy. Although both Eliot and Thackeray attempt to use the unconventional laughter of their heroines to revise unethical notions of sympathy, neither can find the right balance of laughter and sympathy. Either the distance established by laughter creates

insurmountable differences, or, once laughter is abandoned, sympathy absorbs the distinction between self and other. I will also consider the influence of form in this chapter, comparing Eliot's realist mode with Thackeray's satirical mode for the ways in which this complicates their presentation of sympathy. I continue to take up this issue of form in my conclusion. I will return to a discussion of how reading can transform social ideologies through the theory of horizons as articulated by Hans-Georg Gadamer and Hans Robert Jauss. Suffice it to say for now that my claim rests on the ethical possibilities inherent in gossip, gazing, silence, and laughter, made apparent when read as discourse systems, to transform horizons of understanding as a vital step in learning to engage difference in the other.

The following chapters are grounded on the belief that narrative is transformative, and thus that narrative is both rhetorical and ethical.³² I build my own analysis from the work of Wayne Booth and Kenneth Burke who connect narrative to rhetoric, James Phelan who describes narrative as a rhetorical endeavor, and Martha Nussbaum and J. Hillis Miller who argue for narrative's ethical implications.³³ My view that novels are transformative means that not only are texts influenced by social contexts, but also that

³² In claiming rhetorical power for texts (in that they produce effects on readers) I am not positing the text as autonomous. The social and political factors surrounding both the text's production and reception hugely influence what kind of effect the text will have.

³³ Phelan's notion of narrative as rhetorically purposeful leads him to discuss the ethics of narration, for he argues that wherever there is rhetorical purpose there is an ethics of telling (11). For other critics who also take the position that narrative is ethical see Davis and Womack's collection of essays. For a study locating narrative ethics in the nineteenth century see Larson.

they have constitutive power to change those contexts.³⁴ Reading novels can transform more than just *reading* practices; it also can transform *social* practices. My analysis of the novels rests on this assumption; I would also argue that the writers themselves believed in the transformative power of their work, evidenced by narrative voice, the treatment of characters, and the construction of sympathy as a factor that readily influences social practices. The following chapters look for how these novels evoke new ways of engaging with the other out of the historical connection between sympathy and reading.

³⁴Childers considers the novel one kind of institutionalized discourse that has an interpretive community that reinforces and reexamines the rules governing the ideologies produced in those novels. This view, he argues, gives novels constitutive status.

CHAPTER II

NARRATING A SPACE FOR SYMPATHY: THE TRANSFORMATIVE ETHIC OF
GOSSIP

You're nobody until you're talked about. ~ Tagline for hit T.V. show "Gossip Girl"

you must expect some set-off against...being among a small number of people, who are always busy looking into one another's small concerns. ~ *Deerbrook* 39

she knew, and we knew, and she knew that we knew, and we knew that she knew that we knew. ~ *Cranford* 7

Gossip – a discourse consumed with talking about others – is perhaps itself one of the most talked about discourses in American culture. Most of us take a moral stance against gossip, yet we cannot resist engaging in this desire to “kiss and tell.” The popularity of first the *Gossip Girl* books and then the T.V. series spin off demonstrates our obsession with gossip despite its consignment to the sphere of frivolous, illegitimate talk. Even though we may trivialize gossip, still we must account for its powerful allure. Contrary to popular ways of talking about gossip, I argue that gossip, both its use as everyday talk and its place within the novel, promotes ethical encounters by transforming the boundary between self and other through an expansion of horizons of understanding. The transformative ethic of gossip deploys sympathy through a particular form of telling, one that relies on narrative and speculation, encouraging the conflation of boundaries such as private/public or male/female. However, in keeping with the definition of ethical

sympathy set forth in the introduction, gossip resists assimilating the other into a category of the same because it works to dismantle those categories altogether.

For many Victorians, gossip flourished in the context of new understandings about transport systems, such as trains, and speculative endeavors, such as land purchases in America, that people both embraced and feared. Among the rampant historical changes associated with the nineteenth century, circulation and speculation serve as the contextual focus of this chapter. These two ideas embody the changing concepts of self and other that most directly relate to gossip. As I will show below, any discussion of gossip in this period easily becomes conflated with changing ideas about how knowledge circulated and how people speculated. I do not spend a great deal of time discussing how Victorians viewed gossip. I am working from the understanding that gossip can be both negative and positive; some people use gossip to re-stabilize old forms of social relations through disciplinary gossip and, conversely, some people embrace gossip as a way of transforming their own identity by altering the terms of social definitions of self and other. The focus of this chapter will be on the use of gossip within another form of telling: the novel.

I explore Victorian manifestations of gossip's power to transform relational ethics in two novels, *Deerbrook* and *Cranford*. Critics have struggled to find a place for these texts in the body of work produced by Harriet Martineau and Elizabeth Gaskell, a task made more difficult by efforts to categorize their novels as either political or domestic works rather than acknowledging the presence of both. The prevalence of gossip in these texts often give critics pause over the feminist politics of these authors and to ultimately

construe the novels as a didactic warning against small-minded women (*Deerbrook*) or as merely a utopian vision of a female community (*Cranford*). Martineau's novel (1839) and Gaskell's novel (serially from 1851-53) are important interventions during the radical social changes emerging in the 1830s and 1840s, and need to be recognized as such. Both women are well known for their political and social prowess, Martineau through her journalism and Gaskell through her obvious concern with the industrial working classes in her fiction. *Deerbrook* and *Cranford* thus make interesting studies as both texts prove to be anomalies in these writers' careers. For that reason, they make a good case for what fiction categorized as "domestic," "realist," and "personal" has to do with important social and political concerns of the day. Although both novels were well received by contemporary critics, today they are generally not part of the canon of Victorian realist literature. My reading of gossip in these novels thus provides another way of understanding how these texts do indeed perform important political critiques of social relationships during a period of concentrated change to class and institutional structures from the 1830s to the 1850s.

Using the discourse system of gossip, I trace these novels' critique of social relationships formulated along strict binary lines of self and other. I look first at how characters use gossip within the story to negotiate relationships with other characters in both positive and negative ways. Second, I focus on how the third-person and first-person narrators in these novels engage with gossip as a rhetorical technique, using it to position the reader as both insider and outsider, thereby establishing the proper distance to enable the reader to ethically sympathize with the characters. Third, I demonstrate how Gaskell

and Martineau's use of gossip as narrative technique accomplishes more than just moving the plot along; it calls attention to the problematic ethics of encountering the other only through the unethical boundaries constructed to divide self and other. At the same time that gossip depends on insiders and outsiders for its narrative content and means of circulation, it also reveals these boundaries to be socially constructed, not natural and certainly not always desirable. This paradox is precisely what Martineau and Gaskell point to through their use of gossip as it permeates the rather porous boundaries artificially constructed between private/public and male/female. More than just reveal that such boundaries are artificial, however, these women writers expose the deeper boundaries created within a community between any person who becomes othered when she does not fit neatly into binary categories. Gossip provides a space for questioning how we are to engage with the other, a question about how to live an ethical life. And this, as Susan Johnston suggests, is a political question worked out in the domestic space of the household "since the question of the good life is bound up with what it means to be a citizen, in political space, and what it means to be an individual, in private life" (5).¹ Before turning to the novels themselves, I lay out a definition and theory of gossip that explains gossip's power to transform social relations in terms of its narrative and speculative qualities.

¹ Building from foundational works like Poovey's *Uneven Developments* and Armstrong's *Desire and Domestic Fiction* that argue for the presence of the political in the domestic, more recent works like Johnston's go further and argue that the household itself is seen as the place of production for the liberal polity. Johnston's work merges these two spheres more finely than Poovey and Armstrong by implicating both spheres together in a process of producing the individual.

Gossip (gäs əp) n. 1. Narrative speculation

Gossip: 1. One who has contracted spiritual affinity with another by acting as a sponsor at a baptism. a. In relation to the person baptized: A godfather or godmother; a sponsor. 2. A familiar acquaintance, friend, chum. 3. A person, mostly a woman, of light and trifling character, esp. one who delights in idle talk; a newsmonger, a tattler. (OED)

Earlier definitions of gossip easily reveal that this word is rooted in relationships, both positive and negative. Focusing on the relational aspect of gossip helps balance the negative connotations associated with it. In her study of gossip, Patricia Meyer Spacks makes the argument for positive, or what she calls “serious,” gossip.² Gossip’s complexity lies in its power to influence relationships in both positive and negative ways. Since we are accustomed to viewing gossip as a negative force, Spacks spends most of her time exploring how gossip might be construed in more positive ways, arguing “the value of gossip at its highest level involves its capacity to create and intensify human connection and to enlarge self-knowledge predicated more on emotion than on thought” (19). Spacks refutes negative evaluations of gossip by broadly defining it as talk about an absent party. Her definition of positive gossip, then, is intimate conversation that exists within an open and trusting relationship. She supports this view by tracing a historical tendency, from Immanuel Kant to Hannah Arendt to Carol Gilligan, to define the propensity to talk about others and the world around us as a humanizing and essentially moral force (43).

² From a sociological perspective, De Sousa also suggests gossip has positive elements, mainly because he views the oppressed as the primary users of gossip. This assumption, I argue, only furthers gossip as a marginal discourse, ignoring the way those with power can also employ this form of talk. Additionally, his view of gossip as a democratic discourse, one interested in relational matters, not instrumental or goal oriented, can ignore gossip used in instrumental ways. De Sousa’s article is important, then, for thinking about gossip in more positive ways. However, I would add that we must always keep in mind gossip’s complex and various uses in order to position it as a powerful and central form of discourse.

Spacks tends to focus on gossip as a mode of power that undermines the boundary between private and public and provides a type of agency for women. These are gossip's subversive qualities, which Spacks traces convincingly through various genres like letters, biography, drama, and the novel. When Spacks turns from other genres to look at gossip in novels, she primarily focuses on how it elucidates a subversive reading that exists within the more overtly conservative story line. Spacks argues that ultimately gossip "exemplifies the subversive resources of the novel as genre" (170). She uses gossip as an interpretive metaphor for the narrator-reader relationship and to explain the functions of detail in fiction, or, put more broadly, she uses gossip to elucidate the formal strategies of the novel.

Spacks's study is important for demonstrating the complexity often ignored in gossip, a complexity that exists because of its positive potential for enhancing human connections as well as its subversive agency for oppressed populations. Spacks's continuum of gossip with "gossip as malice" at one end and "gossip as intimacy" at the other is an important intervention in the conversation of cultural studies and sociological explorations of gossip that attempt to develop a system for categorizing the types of gossip and to explain what needs gossip satisfies (such as the need for intimacy or the need for belonging). Though studies devoted to gossip help confer a level of importance on this discourse, they still managed to trivialize it by using descriptors such as "relaxing" (like games), "easygoing," and "talk for the sake of talking" (Goodman 13). Furthermore, the studies that try to categorize gossip as trivial or subversive, good or bad tend to miss gossip's transformative potential. My work begins, then, from this

understanding of gossip's positive power to influence human relations. I extend Spacks's use of gossip as a reading lens to understand the formal strategies of novels, to my focus on how gossip is the medium through which these novels revise social relations in the nineteenth century. I am interested in highlighting the moments where gossip actually reveals how the boundaries created to fortify the distance between self and other falsely represent the other's differences. Gossip can transform those boundaries because of the narrative and speculative components that give it the power to make meaning. In this light, gossip can increase sympathy, in particular the kind of sympathy willing to cross socially constructed limits.

The transformative power of gossip rests in the relationship between gossip and narrative. Because narrative often functions as a meaning-making activity, narrative itself contains the function of redefining how one views the world. The narratives exchanged in gossip can open up new ways of being in the world by transforming individuals' capacity for sympathy. This sympathy lies at the core of ethical gossip. In contrast to self-serving gossip that only works to affirm one's prejudices, gossip told or heard out of sympathy contains the possibility of extending one's horizon of understanding. As a form of narrative, gossip discursively situates identities within larger communal stories, or grand narratives. Ethical gossip, then, is talk that presents the possibility for a fusion of horizons through sympathetic exchange among the teller, listener, and subject. Gossip is not contained by categories constructed to delineate boundaries of difference; the stories exchanged through gossip, then, connect self and other by crossing those boundaries.

Gossip's power emanates from the ability to construct, and thus potentially transform, social conventions and identities. It thus presents the ethical situation in which we must make choices about how to engage with others in the ways we handle their stories. The narrative element of gossip explains how this form of telling creates meaning and contributes to the formation of both social codes and identities. The nature of narrative to define larger institutional values, what we refer to as grand narratives, endows gossip with the power of structuring how we view the world and others in it. As a verbal form of narrative, gossip also carries with it discursively signifying acts of telling. To underscore its constitutive aspect, I define gossip as a type of discourse and not simply language or conversation. Patricia Bizzell defines discourse as most simply the general use of language in everyday encounters. She goes on, however, to describe the communal role in shaping discourse through "shared conventions of language use among all members" of a community (192). Bizzell's definition is useful for underscoring discourse as language *plus* its context; gossip is always intimately connected to the social conventions of a community. The signifying effect of gossip as a discourse means, then, that it has great power to influence the social conventions conveyed through language.

In addition to influencing social conventions, gossip's narrative qualities mean that it also participates in constructions of identity, and this gives those who gossip an ethical responsibility. In the tradition of Jacques Derrida, R.S. Perinbanayagam explains how the self is a text constructed from the signifying acts we use to present the self for others to interpret. This rhetorical performance, Perinbanayagam claims, requires careful consideration for what signs to present so that audiences will most accurately read the

self and not misinterpret this “text” (15). Gossip falls under Perinbanayagam’s description of discursive acts, for although it is not usually thought of as a discourse about the self, the act of gossip presents a certain aspect of self. Those who gossip use the dramatic moment in the story when some social convention or norm is broken to “create a dialogic moment by displaying a sharing of the emotions and the values explicated by the anecdote” (185). Gossip is a discursive act that constructs identity as those involved in the act engage in presentations and interpretations of selves.

The gendering of gossip as a female form of talk contributes to the assumption that gossip only influences the domestic realm and is therefore a less meaningful and powerful discursive mode. Both of the novels I examine challenge the restriction of gossip to one area of life. Although Martineau constructs gossip in the community of Deerbrook as a feminine mode of talk, she makes a point throughout the novel not to limit the discursive power of gossip to the private or domestic sphere. In *Cranford*, Gaskell does not challenge the representation of female talk consumed with knowledge of trivial facts and particulars of ordinary life. Instead, she shows how women characters use this kind of knowledge to endow themselves with the power of authorship, the particularly titillating power of authoring another’s life. As Alison Case articulates in her book, *Plotting Women*, women were not permitted to construct stories because “plotting is an act of authority and agency: the narrator poses as the one to assign the shape, and hence the meaning, we are to derive from the story” (13). Even more radically than plotting their own story, those who gossip plot other people’s stories, shaping their identity and making meaning out of someone else’s life.

The power that comes from plotting stories about other people can best be understood in the context of identity theories that stress the importance of the other in constructing one's own identity. Numerous critics, including Mikhail Bakhtin, Judith Butler, and Adriana Cavarero, have argued this position. Bakhtin claims that all of our utterances include the discourse of others, a phenomenon he calls "double-voiced discourse" (185). Constructing the self becomes a question of voice, then, because we situate the voice of our discursive self among other voices before we ever utter a word. Butler states this principle of the situated self as an "I" that can never be separated from the social context of its existence: "the 'I' has no story of its own that is not also the story of a relation – or set of relations – to a set of norms" (8). If social norms are what determine the constitution of a subject, gossip's power to influence social norms means that gossip can also influence identity. Social norms are articulated through the relationship between self and other, thus creating a certain dependence on the other for determining how one names and constructs the self. Cavarero emphasizes this dependence on the other in the way we need someone to listen to our stories and then reflect an image of our self so we come to recognize that self. This kind of dependence creates an ethical obligation to listen to another's story, an obligation that requires sympathy, as I will show in my discussion of *Cranford*. The power and ethics of gossip are connected through the condition of identity formation that relies on social norms and the other.

As much as gossip relies on principles of narrative for the power to transform social relations, gossip does operate differently than narrative. We tend to recognize

narrative by its wholeness, by the closure it achieves through a sense of an ending. Gossip, by contrast, thrives on the gaps that interrupt narrative. When these gaps are understood as necessary moments of disrupting normative, containing narratives, one can then conceive of gossip as an ethical endeavor. Gaps cause one to question the social norms limiting the ability to recognize difference, what Butler defines as “normative horizon,” allowing the other to exceed definitions that might assimilate the other into sameness (24). We would never come to recognize the other if not for these disruptions in narrative, which, after all, create the impulse to gossip. Butler’s notion of transforming normative horizons through encountering the unrecognizable other helps explain how the gaps in narrative – which gossip works to fill – confer the powerful potential for changing the social norms gossip relies on. Rather than confirming the other as outsider, ethical gossip will alter social norms to make the other, in Butler’s terms, “recognizable.”³

The potential to turn gaps into a site for creating ethical relationships comes from the speculative nature of gossip, a quality central to its transformative power. In stories circulated through gossip, these gaps exist because the story is the other’s and not one’s own. These gaps, then, are literally moments of narrative uncertainty; they also represent our uncertainty about the other and the importance of that knowledge remaining incomplete. Thus, gaps present gossip with an ethical role in transforming how people with differences relate to one another. Gossip can illuminate the violence committed

³ It is important to note that in Butler’s definition of making the other recognizable, it is not just the other that changes. That would simply be assimilation. Rather, Butler points out that it is the “I” who changes: “I am invariably changed by the encounters I undergo; recognition becomes the process by which I become other than what I was and so cease to be able to return to what I was...the ‘I’ is transformed through the act of recognition” (27-28).

against the other when an individual identity is assimilated into a communal script, an essentializing tendency that results from efforts to create wholeness in narrative. Gossip, more overtly than other forms of talk, reveals that often in the effort to make sense of fragmented stories we assimilate the other into a position of sameness or consign the other forever to a status of the unapproachable capital “O” other. The speculative nature of gossip uses gaps to raise awareness, by making more overt what happens to the other’s identity when we narratively and speculatively fill in those gaps. Thus, amidst all the moral injunctions against this idle form of talk, it turns out gossip can illuminate the unethical ways we use “legitimate” modes of talk to forge connections with the other.

This speculative quality unfortunately contributes to gossip’s reputation as an unreliable and, therefore, an illegitimate form of knowledge. However, gossip is grounded precisely because of the relationship between narrative gaps and social networks. In George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*, for example, a marriage between two characters materializes through gossip. When Lydgate and Miss Vincy are seen together around town, the way they act in each other’s company makes people assume they are engaged. Mrs. Plymdale confirms her knowledge of their engagement to Mrs. Bulstrode on the grounds of the couple’s behavior: “Well, people have different ways, but I understand that nobody can see Miss Vincy and Mr. Lydgate together without taking them to be engaged” (286). In this example, gossip carries out its more traditional role as a disciplinary force by scripting the couple into society’s norms: after spending time alone in each other’s company they must marry or be constructed as immoral individuals.

Gossip has another kind of power evident in this example as well: it can become a legitimate source of fact retroactively, an ability connected to social norms that can apply enough pressure to conform situations to the truth gossip posits, however prematurely. Untrue when initially circulated, Lydgate and Miss Vincy must become engaged to avoid scandal. The gossip was easy for people to believe because it fit squarely in their horizon of social behavior and therefore adopts the valence of truth: “truth is only accepted when it is consistent with one’s frame of reference. Information is processed in light of the assumptions one holds about the nature of the world, for knowledge is culturally determined” (Rosnow 18). This is gossip’s power to legitimate itself by conforming situations to the narrative circulated. While I do not intend to focus this chapter on a defense of gossip as a reliable form of fact, we must first recognize gossip as a legitimate type of knowledge before we can become more aware of its role in social relationships. If we discard gossip as unreliable, we may miss the transformative aspects of gossip that make it such a powerful form of telling.

Even more important than recognizing gossip as a legitimate form of knowledge, I underscore the ethical component of gossip in the way it can transform social relations. Susan Philips makes this important distinction between focusing on gossip’s transformative power and its subversive power. The latter, she argues, consigns gossip to the sphere of marginal discourse and ignores how it structures dominant practices (6).⁴

⁴ I take Philips approach as instructive, but I understand the transforming power of gossip’s form and content differently as it applies to the nineteenth century. My concern about the form of gossip relates to how it infiltrates the realist novel and what it means for our evaluation of this genre. I am also concerned to show gossip as a form of telling that provides a social critique embedded within these novels. This critique is aimed at the role sympathy plays in one’s approach to the other and the negotiation of identity that takes place in relational encounters.

While Philips concentrates on how gossip transforms institutional practices, such as confession in the medieval period, I look at how gossip transforms the social practice of encountering difference in the other. This transforming power comes from gossip's reliance on constantly evolving social norms that keep identity in a fluid, impressionable state, thus allowing gossip to construct and re-constructing unstable identities. The identities circulated by gossip are always in flux precisely because they are dependent on constructed social norms that change. Gossip that deviates from socially prescribed scripts creates a new way of engaging the other by formulating new individual and communal identities.

Such transformation begins with the ethical choices made when deciding how to fill the gaps in someone else's story. In the act of telling, the speaker rhetorically constructs both her own identity and the other's identity. She can choose to reformulate those identities by altering the narrative sustaining social conventions that define the edges of identity. In *Deerbrook*, Mrs. Rowland damages Dr. Hope's identity and builds her own popularity, thus shifting her place and Dr. Hope's in the community's middle-class hierarchy. In *Cranford*, Miss Pole alters her identity and that of the entire community by reconstituting the terms of insiders/outsideers. These two novels model the ethical and unethical ways gossip can be used to construct identity, venerating the ethical gossip that works to dismantle boundaries of difference.

Gossip as a way of critiquing and then transforming social relations seems rooted in this period where new ideas about circulation and speculation formed a changing

conception of identity and social norms. From the 1830s to the 1850s, Victorian's experienced an explosion in information technology. Railways and the telegraph made news more immediate with the speed at which news could be circulated. Legislation, like the Penny Post Act, the 1844 Railway Act, and the repeal of Taxes on Knowledge, conceptualized information as a commodity and made it available to mass audiences in ways it had not before.⁵ Novels themselves became more easily disseminated with cheaper printing technologies, railway bookstalls, and circulating libraries. The importance of gossip within mid-nineteenth-century novels develops alongside the institutional changes contributing to conceptions of knowledge and identity as commodities to be circulated and exchanged.

The increasingly social and physical mobility of the Victorian period continued to build on the Enlightenment heritage of identity as an individualistic notion. One's family name still held great sway in the nineteenth century of course, but the shifting frame of legitimacy from heredity to individual merit created an important space for gossip to circulate with more authority. In his book *Gossip and Subversion in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction*, Jan B. Gordon discusses the suspicion of gossip emerging from its lack of parentage, source, and authorship in a British society dependent on these legitimizing forces. Gossip represents, however, the shifting ground of establishing one's position in society; social connections are replacing heredity as the mark of identity. As Pam Morris notes, The Reform Bill of 1832 marks a symbolic acknowledgment that power could not

⁵ Running from about 1712 to 1853, also known as the Stamp Duty, but generally involved taxing print forms including advertisements in magazines, etc. The 1840's saw a drastic reduction in this tax after much lobbying, but the actual repeal did not occur until the 1850's. See Plunkett's and King's collection of primary sources from this period.

always reside exclusively with birthright (4). The Chartist movement and Corn Law Crisis continued the work of the French Revolution in challenging traditional sources of authority and the role of individuals within social hierarchies. As notions of selfhood changed, so too did notions of the other. This is not only a metaphysical change, but a material one as well. Urbanization increased the encounters between strangers as crowds on the streets, concert halls, railway stations, and stores became a way of life in modernized cities (Morris 25). The rapid pace of social change in this period created an atmosphere for gossip to transform social relationships as it reconstituted the terms of identity formation.

Certainly gossip often stabilized fluid identity by using conventional social norms, something many Victorians longed for as they tried to keep up with their changing world. The gossip I am interested in, however, kept boundaries between self and other fluid by altering the terms of sympathetic identification, radically shifting the divide between self and other. In her analysis of Gaskell's novels *Cranford* and *Ruth*, Jaffe argues that these texts show "the alternative to masculine rule is not feminine rule but rather a more profound destabilization of categories" (57). Such destabilization, I argue, is most evident when seen through the work of gossip. More than just draw attention to the subversion of categories, gossip prevents categories from stagnating by always presenting other ways of organizing the world. Although Victorian writers used many techniques to encourage sympathetic engagement from their readers, gossip makes an especially interesting case as a technique because it is a form of communication that itself crosses divides between legitimate/illegitimate, male/female, private/public, among

others. Ethically engaging the other in Gaskell and Martineau's novels becomes a matter of using sympathy stirred through gossip to negotiate the boundary between self and other.

I turn now to the novels themselves where I explore what cultural work the discourse system of gossip accomplishes as it gets translated into a communicative act, rhetorical technique, and narrative technique. I show how characters use gossip to negotiate the identity of individuals and communities and the tensions that inevitably arise between them. I also look at how the narrator's use of gossip challenges how the reader applies sympathy to the task of judging characters within the novel. Gossip as a rhetorical technique moves the reader between insider and outsider positions so that readers become more aware of constructed borders. As a narrative technique, gossip critiques those boundaries as impediments to ethical relationships. These boundaries, whether between insider/outsider (*Cranford*) or private/public and political/domestic (*Deerbrook*), are problematic ways of knowing the other, and both novels deploy gossip to create an alternative way of perceiving the world.

Beyond Boundaries: Dismantling Divisive Categories Through Gossip in Harriet Martineau's *Deerbrook*

Deerbrook was a necessary experiment, after which Martineau returned to the genres and topics that were clearly better suited to her literary and reformist inclinations. ~ Deborah Logan *The Hour and the Woman*

Martineau was "at her weakest when she wrote fiction."
~ Valerie Pichanick *The Woman and her Work*

The critical interest in Martineau revolves mainly around either her *Illustrations of Political Economy* or her *Autobiography*, and most critical opinion casts her novel as ultimately a failure in comparison to her other modes of writing – albeit an interesting failure. Deidre David is full of praise for Martineau as a person, intellectual, and woman but highly critical of her attempt at a novel. Deborah Logan entirely omits *Deerbrook* from her biography of Martineau, explaining in one small footnote that she excludes the novel because it contains “uniformly conventional” women characters without “demonstrating feminist qualities or issues” (295).⁶ It is opinions such as these that I wish to challenge by offering gossip as the important narrative technique used by Martineau to subvert conventional categories of epistemology perceived more readily by critics in her non-fiction or journalism.

Without close attention to gossip as a discourse system in this novel, we will most likely see her novel in terms described by critics like David. Martineau values male traits (rational, intellectual) over female ones in her novel, so David’s argument goes, and thus rather than doing away with gender binaries Martineau merely wanted women to develop masculine traits.⁷ On the surface, gossip actually seems to support this kind of reading.

⁶ Logan disagrees with critics like Valerie Pichanick who find fault with Martineau’s conventional characters, arguing instead that through those characters Martineau provides critiques of the gender ideologies, institutions, and laws that hinder women (122). However, it would seem that Logan does not identify characters in *Deerbrook* as capable of providing such critiques.

⁷ Sanders is one critic who seems frustrated that Martineau does not maintain a “consistent level of protest” and usually has her characters fatalistically accept their lots: “The book is unsatisfying because of its refusal to follow through the implications of its many statements about love, self-repression, marriage, and women’s career prospects” (70). Peterson argues that Martineau held a genderless ideal for writing, evident in all her books: she tends to eschew the ‘feminine’ (intuition, emotion, passion, fiction) and to assert the ability of women writers – or at least herself – to produce ‘masculine’ prose (orderly thought, logic, reason, nonfiction)” (174). Once she proved she could write like a man, Martineau’s goal, Peterson argues, was to then dislodge the belief that there were distinctions between what men and women could accomplish.

The figure of Mrs. Rowland could be interpreted as a strong didactic message demonstrating to (women) readers what may happen if they engage in this feminized form of talk. The very fact that the novel seems so stereotypically feminine suggests, however, a subversive reading. Surely the woman who wrote *Illustrations* and *Autobiography* was aware of how the mode in which one wrote would influence how one's intellect would be judged. I am not suggesting that Martineau is without naiveté or conservative views. I do argue, however, that Martineau's use of gossip in this novel restructures social categories in progressive ways, moving beyond just issues of gender to engage with the broader issue of ethically engaging the other.

Without suggesting that these critics are entirely wrong in their estimations of Martineau's novel, I would like to offer the discourse system of gossip as a way to revise how we evaluate the novel's style as well as its contribution to social and political debates. I suspect, however, this technique contributes more often to the disparagement of Martineau's work. Valerie Sanders, one of the few critics to note gossip as "*Deerbrook's* most urgent concern," demonizes and belittles this form of talk in one breath when she attempts to resolve the view of gossip in the novel with Martineau's own prevalent use of gossip in her letters, suggesting "her virulent opposition to it throughout the novel was at a subconscious level a recognition of her own weakness" (xvii). Interpreting Martineau's personal use of gossip as a weakness suggests she has no control over this "vice," a construction aligned with the nineteenth century correlation between gossip and weak-minded women. This negative interpretation of gossip precludes notice of how gossip encourages ethical social relations. By reconfiguring gossip as an ethical

discourse, I offer another way of reading Martineau that brings to light her use of gossip as an important tool for social critique.

An early passage in the novel illustrates how Martineau's literary accomplishment could be judged differently if her primary narrative technique, gossip, were reconstituted in different terms. I quote a small portion of the longer passage:

When young people first meet, the possibility of their falling in love should occur to all the minds present . . . Probably the sisters wondered whether Mr. Hope was married, whether he was engaged, whether he was meant for Sophia, in the prospect of her growing old soon enough. Probably each speculated for half a moment, unconsciously, for her sister, and Sophia both. Probably Mr. Grey might reflect that when young people are in the way of meeting frequently in country excursions, a love affair is no very unnatural result. (18)

David criticizes this very passage for its verbosity and pointless overuse of words like "probably." A different reading emerges, however, if one recognizes in repeating this word Martineau emphasizes one of the main themes of her novel: the speculative nature of the knowledge we have about others' lives. David argues that the repetition of the adverb "probably" has "no incremental, significant effect" (79), but I suggest that the pointed effect in fact draws a connection between gossip and speculative knowledge based on social expectations, an important distinction for Martineau to make when connecting this discourse to relational ways of reading the world (and, perhaps, of reading her novel).

Martineau's use of gossip as the foundational discourse in her novel should not seem at all strange in light of her interests in economy and issues of speculation. The economy of gossip requires the circulation of a community's social values, as it uses

those values to speculatively fill in the gap of fragmented stories. Gossip's dependence on social norms contributes to its gendered label as a female form of talk. Women are especially savvy consumers of social norms because, as a subordinate class, their very survival depends on understanding and embodying these norms. I would posit that at times gossip allows women to be more than just consumers of these norms; it can also grant female characters the power to define social norms. Gossip provides this power by initiating a way of knowing that clashes with empirical knowledge. One of the patriarchs in the novel voices the standard judgment against gossip as "dangerous" early in the novel, warning his wife away from letting the "young people get a glimpse of your speculation" (19). Mr. Grey labels the rumors about a marriage engagement as speculation because he operates with a different notion of evidence. He did not hear anything directly from the people involved in the gossip, so for him there is no basis of fact. Mrs. Grey's speculations about a love intrigue are based on what she knows of social norms – doctors need wives and young, handsome girls need husbands. Her attention to minute details, social expectations, and the inner, private lives of people proves to be a very different way of reading the world than through the lens of knowledge categorized as rational, male, and properly institutionalized. In other words, had there been a formal engagement announcement or a marriage ceremony, Mr. Grey would more readily accept his wife's pronouncement of an attachment between the lovers.

The emphasis in this early scene on making meaning through an intimate knowledge of communal values introduces the reader to another way of constructing events that runs counter to legitimized forms of empirical knowledge and meaning-

making activity, namely that which is purported to be masculine, public, and political. Gossip questions standard cultural narratives through the use of alternative forms of knowing and telling. Linda Peterson identifies just such an alternative form of discourse in Martineau's *Autobiography*, labeling it "a form of feminine gossip that seeks the truth of experience rather than of abstract analysis" (183). Although she discusses gossip in a different text, Peterson identifies the same strategy I am looking at here; that is, the way in which gossip "turns the masculine/feminine dichotomy on its head: it shows the irrational that underlies the masculine, the reasonable truth that emerges from the feminine" (186). Martineau also overturns dichotomies in *Deerbrook* through the discourse system of gossip. As characters exchange ethical gossip, this communicative act disrupts categories of difference. Although the narrator's distanced presence makes the use of gossip as a rhetorical technique harder to detect, when the narrator does intrude she pushes the reader to critique the ethics of social encounters, not gossip itself. Lastly, Martineau's use of gossip as a narrative technique creates ethical relationships that rely on neither feminine nor masculine ways of knowing. Gossip suggests a better way of relating to the other by dismantling the false boundaries between ways of knowing and interacting.

A Tale of Two Gossips

Martineau's negative portrayal of gossip, what usually earns the novel its description as "didactic," is in fact performing a larger critique of the hierarchical structure of the village and the emphasis on empirical forms of knowledge. The conflict

of the novel revolves around the issue of status as the arrival of two strangers disturbs the social stratum of Deerbrook's middle class families. At least it is a disturbance to one woman in particular, Mrs. Rowland, who feels herself in a constant status competition with the Grey family and becomes the figure for malicious gossip. The strangers are in fact two nieces, Hester and Margaret, of the Grey family who have come for a lengthy visit. Status in this small town gets marked by attention and visitors, and the Grey family enjoys extra attention and afternoon visits by the locals as they come to satisfy their curiosity about the newest additions to their community. Mrs. Rowland circulates her most malicious gossip when a marriage between Hester and the very popular town doctor, Hope, threatens to give the Grey family additional status markers above the Rowland family.

Although Mrs. Rowland uses gossip in unethical ways, she demonstrates how this form of telling blurs the boundary between legitimate and illegitimate discourses. Because Hope is well liked and respected within the community, it would seem a difficult task for Mrs. Rowland to dislodge him from his position in the village. His profession as a doctor, however, provides her the opportunity to exploit the fears and suspicions of doctors that emerged from the climate of the Anatomy Act of 1832.⁸ Mrs. Rowland spreads rumors that Hope digs up bodies from the graveyard to study them and pulls perfectly good teeth to sell them. These rumors effectively destroy Hope's reputation by

⁸ This act caused panic specifically among the poor, and helps to explain why these rumors could create such heightened frenzy as illustrated in the mob scene later in the novel. The Act itself was inspired by the notorious murders by Burke and Hare who sold their victim's bodies to doctors interested in studying the human body through dissection. In an effort to remove the incentive for bodysnatching, the Anatomy Act allowed doctors legal access to unclaimed bodies from hospitals and poorhouses. For more information, see Rothfield.

transforming his identity into an untrustworthy doctor. The Deerbrook community had not experienced this medical malfeasance directly; everyone who had personal contact with Hope in fact respected him very much. These personal constructions of Hope are altered, however, by Mrs. Rowland's public gossip and the support it receives from the political judgment of doctors under the Anatomy Act. This gossip, though untruthful, remains powerful because of its basis in the relationship between doctors and patients as they were socially constructed in the 1830's. Because law is recognized as a legitimate construction of society and individuals within it, laws discursively structure social relationships. Furthermore, they can often make these relationships seem self-evident. Gossip usually does not have this same power because it has not been bestowed with the same legitimacy as legal discourse. In this example, however, we see how gossip acts in tandem with law and the line between political and domestic discourses begins to fade. Mrs. Rowland's gossip, fortified by the truth of social beliefs and norms, gives her discursive control over Hope's identity, transforming him from a trustworthy doctor into a malpracticing apothecary. Gossip, in this case, acts as the primary discourse to construct Hope's identity.

As this "frivolous" rumor becomes dangerously political, Sir William must step in to regain control of a rioting community. The presence of a public figure like Sir William only further blurs the boundary between private and public spheres. The rumors spread to such a heightened frenzy a mob scene breaks out at the Hope's home. Sir William does nothing to quell the riot, signaling his tacit approval when the mob sets fire to Hope's home and office. Though the villagers are angry for personal reasons, Sir William's

motivations are clearly political as he seeks revenge on Hope for voting for the wrong man in the county elections directly against Sir William's wishes. Gossip does not distinguish between personal or political motivations (perhaps because these are in fact always inseparable); the presence of both Sir William and the villagers furthers the creation of Hope's new identity begun by Mrs. Rowland's rumors. Sir William did as much as Mrs. Rowland in creating this danger for the Hopes, and yet the villagers place responsibility on Mrs. Rowland for causing such a disturbance in Deerbrook. Thus, while Sir William has political authority and may have been part of circulating the rumors, the characters in the novel attribute the greatest share of responsibility to Mrs. Rowland, in effect giving gossip the power in creating the situation.

Because this violent scene emphasizes the consequences of malicious gossip, it can obscure the power of gossip to reconstitute the identity of a community and the individuals within it. Identity, in this novel, becomes transformed as gossip's narrative interweaves the private and the public, the personal and the political, establishing an agency that gains power by circulating in and between formerly separated spheres. Gossip moves so fluidly between separate domains, using information without bias from each, that the distinctions between the dichotomies used to construct subjects become ineffectual. In the scene just described, the new "knowledge" of Hope restructured communal ties in Deerbrook. This knowledge came from private (gossip) and political (legislation) as well as domestic (Mrs. Rowland) and public (Sir William) sources. At the height of its power, gossip used knowledge forms usually consigned to separate spheres

and traversed across those dichotomies. The representation of gossip here extends beyond a group of women gabbing around a kitchen table.

Mrs. Rowland uses gossip as a rhetorical mode to establish her status and authority in the community as the one who knows. She will maintain this position until her gossip plots begin to unravel, dislodging her regime of falsehoods. Indeed, Mrs. Rowland's punishment will emerge from the plague that sweeps the village. This epidemic restores Hope's reputation while at the same time destroying Mrs. Rowland by taking the life of her child. Because of the rather blatant analogy between the spreading of gossip and the spreading of the plague, many could see this as a fitting punishment.⁹ Instead of just interpreting Mrs. Rowland as a character who illustrates the negative consequences of gossip, however, I argue she also needs to be read as a character who illustrates how labels like man/woman, reason/emotion, rational/irrational, break down as gossip circulates.

If Martineau had only provided Mrs. Rowland to represent the discourse of gossip within the novel, perhaps the single apparent meaning behind her use of this narrative technique would have been as both plot device and didactic warning. Martineau also gives us Maria, however, the governess in the novel who adds complexity to gossip's work. Building from Spacks's suggestion to look also at gossip's positive potential, I argue that Maria's role in *Deerbrook* is to highlight the most important work of gossip: transforming relationships by fostering sympathetic encounters between self and other.

⁹ Sanders is one critic who makes this analogy, describing the plague as a metaphor for gossip in the novel, functioning as a "poisonous miasma in the village" (xxix). With the prevalence of miasmatic theory of disease contagion still prevalent in the 1830's, this reading would also be plausible to a nineteenth-century audience.

Maria watches others closely, but her powers of observation are motivated differently than Mrs. Rowland's spying eyes. Maria feels it may be her "business to keep an intent eye upon the possible events of other people's lives" so she can "stand clear-sighted ready to help," something she distinguishes from "meddling" (47). Maria's watchful eye enables her to reflect the images of each person's identity, enacting Cavarero's description of the "necessary other" who helps a person construct her identity by telling her story from a new perspective. Maria avoids assimilating her construction of others' identity into her own likeness by getting to know intimately those she observes through her conversations with them. In other words, as she gossips intimately with her friends she alters her speculations according to her friends' interpretations. These conversations highlight the important role of gossip, and talk in general, to negotiate meaning through the dialectic of horizons that emerge from people's variant viewpoints.

The more positive spin on Maria's act of watching also carries over into her act of sharing these observations in the form of gossip. Maria and Margaret's conversations suggest the gossip of intimacy described by Spacks at the opposite end of the continuum from the gossip of malice. The distinction Spacks draws between these two negative and positive forms of gossip rests on the metaphor of exchange. Destructive gossip seeks information for its own prized status as information, for the power of having secret knowledge, and for the malicious intent of furthering one's interests. Gossip of intimacy seeks to cultivate deep relationships because it values particulars and recognizes the importance of the inner lives of people (4-5). The distinction lies in the difference between the exchange of a commodity (knowledge) and the exchange itself (the

relationship). The former involves only transformations of power while the latter embraces transformations of people. These are the defining qualities, according to Spacks, of a gossip of intimacy where the participants are less concerned with influencing the world than with changing themselves.

Maria illustrates the gossip of intimacy when she shares a rumor with Margaret about the possible engagement between Philip Enderby (whom Margaret loves) and “a young lady at Rome.” When Margaret asks Maria to tell her what she knows of the gossip, Maria answers bluntly that she has heard enough confirmation to “leave no doubt in my mind the report can be true” and she is sorrowed over the wrong done to Margaret. Margaret is at first irritated with Maria’s condemnation of Enderby, but when she remembers her relationship to Maria her anger fades: “She felt that Maria understood her better than she did herself, and was justified in the words she had used” (261). Although gossip is almost always defined as idle or malicious talk, here it is neither. Maria’s knowledge stems from rumors that are loosely supported by speculation, like Mrs. Rowland’s rumors. The difference between Maria’s and Mrs. Rowland’s gossip rests in what motivates each to tell. Maria only tells what she knows when asked directly by Margaret, and she expresses her view out of sympathy for her friend. Maria’s knowledge of the rumors is important, not so much for the information, but for what she shows Margaret about herself. Maria’s gossip will turn out to be incorrect, but her ability to aptly reflect Margaret’s feelings on the matter marks an intimacy that stems from these moments of sharing gossip in their friendship. Through their gossip, these two friends reach a better understanding of themselves and create solidarity in their relationship.

Maria's final contribution to a positive construction of gossip appears in the closing scene of the novel. Martineau's novel ends mostly in conventional Victorian fashion – with everyone happily married. Except for, that is, the one woman who has been an anomaly through the whole novel and remains an awkward appendage to the tidy ending. Or perhaps, rather than an appendage, Maria's place in the final scene is quite central to the discourse of the novel as a whole. When everyone begins leaving Deerbrook to start new lives as married couples, Maria imagines out loud to Margaret a time when they will return and sit as “a knot of gray-headed friends, and hear over again about those good old days of ours” listening to how the new generation will retell the stories of their parents' time during the plague that swept Deerbrook (600). Maria's image of talk elides gossip and storytelling. She looks forward to people “telling their little ones all about the pestilence that swept the place” and her own inclusion in this gossip. For gossip it will be, as fragments of information told about others. In this scene, gossip sounds more like stories only because Maria ascribes a positive meaning to it. Often, then, the difference between gossip and stories is not the content or structure but the positive and negative valence we interpret from its outcomes.

Talk about others thus shifts at the end of the novel from “injurious gossip to constructive storytelling” as Jennifer Yates points out (375). Such an ending, I argue, must cause us to reconsider the presentation of gossip throughout the novel in light of this reclamation at the end. Yates contrasts the formerly “eager children” in their “noisy play” with “silenced and subdued” children of “privation and dreariness,” arguing that *Deerbrook* is a didactic tale to “expose the volatile nature of the nineteenth-century

woman's public voice" and to present gossip as "precariously balanced between a valuable means of conveying information and an uncontrollable, and therefore potentially destructive, political force" (371). Such an argument leaves dichotomies of knowledge and gender firmly in tact with gossip as a marginalized discourse whose purpose is to occasionally challenge and subvert social norms. I suggest a different reading that emphasizes gossip's role in identity transformation, as both individual and communal identities must be reshaped in relation to each other through the act of gossip. This interpretation positions gossip as an integral part of relating to the other. In particular, it challenges the boundaries artificially constructed between self and other and it challenges the dichotomies of knowledge that ignore the value of what has been called "private" knowledge. Gossip has a central place in this novel, confirmed by the ending where boundaries are blurred and the community reorganized according to the effects of gossip. Gossip even structures the future, the as-not-yet-told story that Maria looks forward to.

"Deerbrook in Sunshine:" Narrating the Reader into Community

Thus far I have examined how gossip in *Deerbrook* functions as a form of telling endowed with the power to construct individual and communal identities. When motivated by sympathy, ethical gossip can transform social relationships into more ethical encounters between self and other by utilizing its narrative and speculative qualities to fill gaps in such a way as to dismantle the boundaries that formerly prevented ethical engagement with an other. Within the structure of the novel, gossip also negotiates the reader's relationship to the narrator and to the characters. Although the

narrator of *Deerbrook* does not maintain a dominant presence throughout the story, gossip still functions as a rhetorical technique the narrator uses to position the reader into adopting an appropriate distance to the characters. This distance allows readers to observe the larger network of social relationships in the novel. In one of the longer, more philosophical intrusions of the heterodiegetic narrator, we are told, “there is something so striking in this perpetual contrast between the external uniformity and internal variety of the procedure of existence” (415). Gossip reveals this internal variety, either in a disciplinary mode to bring it into concordance with external uniformity, or as a way to escape that uniformity and claim individual space within a community. Within the context of the whole passage, the narrator’s comment seems to glorify the domestic scene at the Hopes’ establishment. In their sorrow and poverty, caused by Mrs. Rowland, they find bliss (the “internal variety” of existence), and marvel at the way the community continues in despair from the plague (the “external uniformity” of existence). In this instance, then, the individual feelings of the Hopes represent the internal variety that operates contrary to the external community. It is important to read this passage as an illustration of the tension between individuals and their community, not a commentary on nineteenth-century separate spheres ideology as some critics emphasize.¹⁰ Mrs.

¹⁰ For example, Hobart argues that Martineau presents the domestic sphere as a liability to women’s involvement in the (more important) political realm, because women are too absorbed by the “minutiae of daily life” (227). Hobart’s contention, then, that Martineau’s fiction participates in a “devaluation of a daily experience conventionally, indeed normatively, associated with women” (228) seems to miss the power of gossip to blur the boundaries between domestic and public spheres, not by subsuming the domestic into the public, but by emphasizing the power of each. Even more importantly, by diminishing the kind of knowledge gossip trades in (“minutiae of daily life”), Hobart must necessarily figure gossip as solely a negative force in the novel. Hobart’s overall focus on Martineau’s presentation of the public/private split, then, misses the novel’s commentary about relational ethics revealed through the discourse system of gossip.

Rowland's gossip represents more than just a disruption of domestic harmony; it disrupts the core of ethical relations, the interaction between self and other. In order to see this critique, one must understand the narrator's reference to internal and external states as a picture of the relationship between an individual and a community, the very relationship transformed by gossip.

The narrator attempts to balance the reader's distanced perspective by circumscribing the reader within this community as well. As a rhetorical tool of the narrator, gossip constructs the characters as sentient beings that require a response from the reader. Most of the narrator's longer intrusions are spent in explaining the inner feelings of a specific character and making sure the reader can sympathize with those feelings. For example, when the narrator explains what Margaret was feeling on the day she expects her sister to return from her wedding journey, the narrator switches from a third person pronoun to "our" and "we":

We look forward with a kind of timidity to meeting, and fear there may be some restraint in it...Is there a girl, whose heart is with her brother at college, who does not feel this regularly as the vacation comes round? Is there a parent, whose child is reaping honours in the field of life...who is not conscious of the misgiving and the reassurance, as often as the absence and the reunion occur? (197)

This is just one example of the narrator's many attempts to ensure we feel sympathy with various characters, from the selfish, naïve Hester, to the generous but single governess Maria, to Mr. Rowland caught between the divisions of his private and public life. The narrator's form of telling attempts to close the distance between self and other by providing a truly accurate picture of what someone else thinks and feels. And yet, the

difficulty of really doing that becomes evident in just how hard the narrator must work to condition readers to identify with characters' emotions. In effect, this narration models the movement of gossip as a form of telling: gaps in the other's story are filled by attempts to identify with another's feelings through potentially common social scenarios. The narrator uses gossip to erase the distance between reader and character that may prevent the needed deployment of sympathy.

At the same time this gossipy narration tends to erase distance, it also creates a gap between character and reader that aligns the reader with the narrator in making judgments of characters. The narrator helps the reader look beyond gossip itself as the problem and see instead the deeper rift created from what the narrator labels an "unamiable nature." Any judgments placed specifically against that act of gossiping are expressed through the characters' voices and not by the narrator. Margaret might call gossip Mrs. Rowland's vice, but the narrator points to a deeper issue, her unamiable approach to others. The narrator most clearly articulates this judgment in a passage describing the chaos created in a community by those who are ill natured. The amiable are "friendly and pleasant to be with" or "characterized by friendly feelings," descriptions emphasizing how a person relates to another. In contrast, the narrator describes people who do not know how to be in community with others, characterized as "evil ones" that "heaped wrong upon wrong" and are "awfully self-deluded" (244-45). In passages like this one, the narrator encourages readers to identify negative gossip as systematic of a larger problem, namely an unethical way of engaging with others.

The ending of the novel focuses readers' attention on how the relationships have transformed through ethical gossip by figuring such transformations prominently in the concluding pages. Although some mention is made of all the marriages that take place, the last scene is devoted to a conversation between Margaret and Maria. This ending is no more an appendage to the whole novel as Maria, still unmarried, herself could be; they both offer central insights for reading gossip as a critique of social relationships in the novel. Gossip, transformed into storytelling, offers the community of Deerbrook a chance to rescue an identity from the broken and divided community the plague created. The communal identity is resuscitated out of the "aged man's" story of the deer that came down through the forest to drink at the brook, a story that gives value and history to the community rather than Mrs. Rowland's divisive gossip. This bit of gossip, this story, also gives the village its name, pointing to the important connection between identity and gossip. Martineau chooses to offer her readers a hopeful picture of gossip at the end of her novel, legitimizing its constructive power to provide an identity for individuals that brings them into greater community with one another by dissolving the boundaries of private/public and legitimate/illegitimate meaning-making processes.

Gossip as Sympathetic Engagement in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford*

In the first place, Cranford is in possession of the Amazons; all the holders of the houses, above a certain rent, are women. ~ *Cranford* 5

The picture we are left with at the end of *Deerbrook* focuses on sympathy among friends, revising the notion of the nuclear family as the primary production site of

sympathy.¹¹ *Deerbrook* thus opens with two traditional families acting spitefully toward each other, but concludes with sympathy exchanged between Maria and Margaret. Such an image, I suggest, expands the potential of sympathy to extend outside the family unit. Indeed, throughout the novel sympathy emanates from this pairing and remains absent from the more traditional representations of family relationships. If *Deerbrook* slowly works its way into affirming the production of sympathy outside the family, *Cranford* begins by adamantly declaring the absence of the traditional family altogether. In the opening line of the novel, quoted above, Gaskell immediately emphasizes the femaleness of the community. This emphasis also suggests the exclusiveness of the community and points to what will become the barrier to sympathetic engagement.

The exclusion of men, established from the beginning of the story, has led critics to interpret the novel as a utopian female community, a feminist manifesto, and a simplistic tale of a life no longer imaginable. Despite early feminist criticism's applause of Gaskell's focus on female community, later criticism instead saw *Cranford* as a testimony to the narrow and delusional lives women were forced to live, extending rather than revising nineteenth century separate spheres ideology (Matus 49). Some critics interpret this work as nothing more than a nostalgic tale that allowed Gaskell to escape the social conditions she wrestled with in *Mary Barton*. Other critics view this work as a political intervention in important social issues of the time. These two contrasting perspectives demonstrate how critics tend to evaluate *Cranford* based on whether they

¹¹ Rai looks at how the family became the "preeminent workspace for the functioning of sympathy." The family acted as a model for social relations of sympathy that began operating on a larger scale in class-society and empire. He also claims that the family became a place of counter-discourses to challenge and critique capitalist norms and colonial hegemony (35).

situate Gaskell as a writer of social problem novels or as a writer of provincial life (Matus 178).¹² By focusing on gossip as a discourse system in *Cranford*, I am revising the place critical evaluation has given this novel (or series of vignettes as some condescended to call it). Rather than choosing to focus on Gaskell as a domestic realist writer or social problem novelist, I suggest instead that we view her body of work as continuous rather than divided, as focused on the same issue of ethically engaging the other through sympathy, whether that engagement occurs between workers and factory owners or spinsters in a small village.¹³

Gaskell's use of gossip as a narrative technique forms a critique of the social rules that create the boundaries of this community. It is because of these boundaries that the homodiegetic narrator, Mary, dons her ironic stance toward the ladies and encourages us to laugh at them, gently, along with her. We also laugh because the women seem to display an inordinate amount of concern over small issues, like cows being too cold or what hat to wear at the next tea party, and often neglect issues that would normally garner more attention. Indeed, national issues all but disappear in this book, except for the intrusion of the bank failure, which is treated as a matter of personal concern to Miss Matty. As readers witness the way gossip circulates these "trivial" issues and becomes the powerful means by which this community transforms social relationships, issues

¹² Not all critics follow this dichotomy, of course. Lansbury includes all of Gaskell's works under her manuscript's subtitle "The Novel of Social Crisis." However, the social crisis she focuses on in *Cranford* is that of old age, while I find the novel more interested in social crisis on a larger scale, that of the relationship between self and other. I find it fascinating that Lansbury criticizes the repetitiveness of *Cranford* which "grates on the reader" as Martineau's repetitiveness was also criticized (93). It would seem that unless gossip, which depends on a certain amount of repetition in order to circulate and legitimate its narratives, is seen as a deliberate technique then narrative styles which employ gossip will not measure up to aesthetic standards.

¹³ For another critic who follows a similar line of inquiry into Gaskell's work see Stoneman.

formerly deemed frivolous (i.e. domestic and feminine) become more central to redefining social relationships in Cranford and by de facto social relationships in the British Nation.¹⁴ Any critique implied by Mary's irony is aimed, I would argue, not at the women or the activity of gossiping, but at the practice of clearly delineating insiders and outsiders via social rank and behavior. As Mary narrates the gossip-driven action in the novel (in effect, passing on the village's gossip to the reader and implicating us in the gossip circle) she carefully guides the reader to judge the social rules that restrict possibilities for ethically relating to the other. Gossip becomes the space for transforming both unethical social norms and the unethical encounters they elicit.¹⁵

Mary resides in a liminal position, like the reader, as both insider and outsider. She can therefore narrate as someone who offers greater insights about events in Cranford than the women who have never left the village. She also narrates, however, from a position of intimacy living during her frequent visits with one of the village's beloved women, Miss Matty. Mary's tone alternates between comic irony and sincere affection for the ladies and events in Cranford. Because of Mary's distanced yet intimate relationship with these women, we are able to respond to what Mary tells us with critical

¹⁴ In her introduction to *Cranford*, Ingham suggests that Gaskell is most concerned with the relationships possible in a community of women devoid of any masculine influence. This concern engages with a contemporary debate in the mid-nineteenth century about what women could do in the face of separate spheres ideology. I agree with Ingham about Gaskell's focus on the relationships between the women, but I also see these relationships acting as models for other social relationships; thus, importantly, Gaskell does not preclude all male characters, including the negotiation of relationships between the women and men (who also represent that aberrant Other).

¹⁵ Henry is another critic who situates sympathy at the heart of the possibility for social transformation for Gaskell. However, Henry does not provide any sustained analysis of *Cranford*, nor does she suggest how such sympathy was aroused beyond Gaskell's own comments about imagining the other's plight. Thus, while she looks at fiction in general as a mode Gaskell believes will effect change, I am suggesting that it is the specific narrative technique of gossip that accomplishes transformation by arousing sympathy in characters and readers alike.

distance ourselves, and yet our judgments are made out of the sympathy through which Mary insists on presenting even the most outrageously speculative gossip. Here we notice less the power of gossip to dismantle the larger boundaries prescribing ways of perceiving and knowing, which we saw so clearly in Martineau's novel, and instead our awareness is drawn to the negotiation of boundaries defining individual identity within a community.

As single women living on finite incomes, the Amazons' class and gender restricts agency over their own lives. Gossip becomes all the more important, then, as a discourse that bestows the agency of meaning making, allowing the Cranford ladies to control the narrative about their community. These women take the partial narratives that circulate into town from the outside world and use gossip's speculative quality to fashion the gaps into a desirable identity for their community. The gaps will determine what meaning emerges from the narrative. This discursive power is the promise of transformative potential. More often than not, the women choose to fill these gaps according to already prescribed social norms, maintaining the status quo. In a few important scenes, however, gossip offers the women an alternative way to construct the narrative identity of their community and consequently of themselves. In this novel, gossip transforms social relationships by distinguishing those boundaries that are needful and those that prevent ethical encounters between self and other. In an analysis of several key moments in the text, I will show how characters use the discourse of gossip to construct identity, both at the level of personal identity and at the level of communal identity. I also examine the critique Mary provides by using gossip as a rhetorical

technique to challenge the relational ethics in this community of Amazons and the reader's reactions to it.

The robbery episode most clearly illustrates how these women rely on gossip's speculative nature to generate identity by defining categories of the self in relation to the other. This episode begins, not with any actual robberies in Cranford, but with "all sorts of uncomfortable rumours" about some "real bonâ fide" robberies that happened in another town (107). Mary at first implicates herself within "The Panic" (as the chapter is called) when she describes following Miss Matty "armed with the poker" to make their "regular expedition all round the kitchens and cellars every night" (107). Her actions make her complicit with the village narrative that confirms these rumors must indeed be true. Miss Pole, the foremost gossip in the village, is "the principle person to collect and arrange these reports, so as to make them assume their most fearful aspect" (107). Mary recognizes the power Miss Pole has to shape the meaning of these events into "their most fearful aspect." So while we see Mary submitting with the other women to this construction, her distanced perspective separates her interpretation of Miss Pole's gossip from those of the other Cranford women: "and we (at least I) had my doubts as to whether [Miss Pole] really would enjoy the little adventure of having her house broken into" (107). Through the parenthetical clarification of pronouns, as well as her description of a potential robbery as a "little adventure," Mary shows she sees through Miss Pole's outward display of bravado. Miss Pole "who affected great bravery herself" wants to shape the rumors of robbery so that she can situate her own identity within the community as the courageous one. Mary's narrative asides help point the reader to what

is more important than the gossip itself – the negotiation of Miss Pole’s identity within the community and the women’s understanding of themselves as a community that will pull together and defend itself. The actual existence of the robberies no longer matters; they only exist as an impetus for the gossip that will open a space for constructing identity.

Although the robberies are exposed as nothing more than a few stolen apples and missing eggs on market day, Mary does not critique Miss Pole’s exaggerated gossip. Instead, she critiques how the women constructed the imagined robbers as outsiders in order to feel better about the Cranford community. The possibility that robberies could be committed in Cranford unsettled the women’s narrative of their town as “being an honest and moral town...too genteel and well-bred to be otherwise” (108). Once the community’s identity is called into question, the women feel their own genteel and well-bred identities are suspect. They restore this identity by assuming the robbers could not be any Cranford person, but must be an outsider. Their gossip, in this example, maintains the boundary between self and other. Mrs. Forrester illustrates this prejudice by theorizing it must be a French spy, for as Mary narrates to us “if strangers, why not foreigners? – if foreigners, who so likely as the French” (108). Mary’s assuming air here is ironic as she points to Mrs. Forrester’s theory based in stereotypes and small-minded associations. The women create this boundary of us/them in an attempt to continue an elevated opinion of themselves:

But we comforted ourselves with the assurance which we gave to each other, that the robberies could never have been committed by any Cranford person; it must have been a stranger or strangers, who brought this disgrace upon the town, and

occasioned as many precautions as if we were living among the Red Indians or the French. (108)

By projecting the robberies onto a stranger, the women are able to assure themselves of the sophisticated identity they have worked so hard to construct. Although Mary took pains earlier to separate her own opinion from the wild rumors circulating, here she includes herself in the “we” comforted by demonizing the other. I suggest this move also instructs the reader not to create our own high-minded judgment of these women who unethically use the other as a scapegoat, but instead to recognize our own tendencies to define self against the other.

One additional moment in this robbery incident further shows Mary’s critique is not aimed at the gossip itself but rather at the women’s attitude toward the other. Miss Pole hears rumors that the surgeon, Mr. Hoggins, has been robbed at his office. She goes directly to his house to get the report first hand, but returns to the ladies outraged at his denial of any robbery. Miss Pole absolutely cannot believe, according to the fragments she has already heard, that there was no such robbery and she is appalled that Mr. Hoggins declines to tell.¹⁶ We have already seen how the women put together whole

¹⁶ As this makes the second appearance of a doctor-figure in this chapter, I would like to mention here more generally the position of doctors in the Victorian period. While lawyers and clergyman were often categorized as gentlemen, doctors were often situated in a more liminal class position. In fact, because medicine was still associated with manual labor, it would not really be considered a career until later in the century, with the help of the 1858 Medical Act that created a unified and regulated educational curriculum for doctors. Medicine soon infiltrated the fields of ethics, reform, and policing. For example, the Contagious Disease Acts of 1864 policed women’s sexuality and tried to reform prostitutes and the cholera epidemic of 1831 shifted reform efforts to the poor as the site of moral degradation and filth that created unsanitary conditions. In a strange way, then, doctors were both unpopular in the collective imagination while they also served as moral guide, especially in small towns. Just as Hope’s position as the town doctor bestowed on him the wisdom of morality, Mr. Hoggins’s refusal to participate in the robbery rumors was a moral blow that delegitimized the women’s story.

stories of robberies out of fragments (footsteps in the flower beds and strangers walking past the house more than once) and the women obviously expect Mr. Hoggins to do the same. Miss Pole focuses her criticism of Mr. Hoggins on his concern over status; she claims he won't admit to the robberies because "he feels that such a thing won't raise him in the eyes of Cranford society" (115). Mr. Hoggins's refusal to tell is set in contrast to the women who immediately begin to share their own stories of robberies and join together in chastising Mr. Hoggins. They retell old stories of danger they overcame together, reinforcing the communal identity of strong women united, the very same identity affirmed by the robbery gossip. Mary uses her insider status here to interpret for the reader the women's motive for sharing these stories. It is not, she claims, to establish intimacy, but to establish their superiority to men by proving their greater candor. The ethic implied in connotations of candor (openness) suggests that Mr. Hoggins missed this ethical moment.

These women are not looking for adherence to the facts of a case but a willingness to listen with interest to the other and contribute to the communal identity under negotiation. Ned Schantz, in his attempt to recuperate positive aspects of gossip, describes "critically effective gossip" as talk that develops "a generous and *linking* attention where it is most needed. It is quite simply a cultural politics of interest" (19). Schantz's call to become more ethical readers by being better gossips requires that we read with a "linking attention," part of a politics of interest that values loose ends as the means for considering multiple interpretive possibilities (32-33). Mr. Hoggins thus fails

ethically because he is not willing to entertain the women's perspective or their need for a communally negotiated identity.

Scantz's connection between reading and gossiping reveals an implicit critique of *Cranford's* readers who, like Mr. Hoggins, may not be interested in the value of interpretive possibilities in the Cranford ladies' gossip. Miss Pole "was very much inclined to install herself as a heroine" and Mr. Hoggins prevents this by withholding a key piece of "evidence" that the robberies are a real threat. While the narrative tone takes on the gentle comic irony often used when the Amazons get ruffled, Mary still includes herself as a "we" in this moment and targets her critique at the women's efforts to demonize the other, not at their gossip. She models the extension of sympathy toward these women that the reader should emulate. Mary's narrative commentary about the disagreement between Mr. Hoggins and Miss Pole attempts to align readers' sympathies with her point of view and not Mr. Hoggins's. There are thus two critiques that emerge from the robbery episode: one aimed at the women's gossip that demonizes the other and the second critique aimed at Mr. Hoggins's lack of interest in the communal activity of identity formation.

Miss Pole's ability to criticize Mr. Hoggins for placing too much emphasis on status marks her growth as someone who also used to place great importance on position (and, to some degree, still does). This growth occurs, I argue, because of gossip. A newcomer to town, Mrs. Fitz-Adam, becomes the contested topic in a disagreement over whether Miss Barker should invite Mrs. Fitz-Adam to tea, a rather exclusive event in this community. This episode at first seems to confirm the women's status addiction and their

exclusivity. Miss Pole's final word on the matter, though, is for inclusion. She says, "as most of the ladies of good family in Cranford were elderly spinsters, or widows without children, if we did not relax a little, and become less exclusive, by-and-by we should have no society at all" (78). Mary attributes this attempt to loosen an exclusive policy to "dear Miss Jenkyns's" death, which took with her also some "of the clear knowledge of the strict code of gentility" (78). The resulting gap in the "strict code" softens through the gossip about whom Miss Barker should invite. The gossip creates new boundaries between insiders and outsiders by extending the all-important tea invitations to someone who is not considered a member of the community. The hierarchy of class and member rank will remain important to these women, but Mary narrates a moment here where gossip begins the negotiation of making the Cranford community more inclusive. This moment of gossip confirms a new priority for extending the boundaries of the community through sympathy for the other.

Like the example of positive gossip Maritneau provides through the figure of Maria, Gaskell also shows gossip's ethical potential when infused with sympathy. Most subjects that consume the Cranford ladies' gossip, tea parties, invitations, dress fashions, engagements, etc., may perhaps seem trivial to an outsider. When rumors of a bank failure reach Cranford, one would think this is surely worth much gossip. However, the ladies are more selective than usual with who they share this information. Perhaps the two most surprising people excluded from their gossip are Miss Matty and the reader. We first hear the news of the bank failure when Miss Matty sees someone try to purchase some cloth with a note from that bank only to have it rejected by the storeowner because

of rumors the bank is failing. This is the only event relayed to the reader through action and not through gossip. The reader is never told how the rest of Miss Matty's friends come to find out about the bank failure because we never actually see them talking about it. This narrative gap reinforces the reader's position as outsider, a status usually ameliorated by Mary's gossip with us. If we feel like outsiders excluded from the gossip, Miss Matty's exclusion marks her also as an outsider. As one of the most popular members of the Cranford society, however, it does not make sense that the other women would place her outside the circle of intimacy. We must look to another motivation for the ladies' exclusion of Miss Matty.

Sympathy motivates the bank failure gossip; the Cranford ladies talk about it in order to help Miss Matty, whose life savings are in this bank. They exclude Miss Matty to preserve her identity, and thus their own identities within their community of "delicate independence." Perhaps because the women feel like they are doing important work through this gossip, their talk resembles a more official and serious type of discourse. When they want to bring Mary into the gossip, for example, they call her to a private council meeting at Miss Pole's house where they are all seated around a table. Miss Pole uses notes on a card to give a little speech once Mary confirmed that the "sad report" about the bank was true (160). The formal setting reveals just how seriously the Amazons feel about gossip's role in saving Miss Matty. They desire to help, but "in consideration of the feelings of delicate independence existing in the mind of every refined female," they want to keep their donations a secret (161). Although it may seem they are othering Matty by not including her in their gossip, they are actually solidifying her insider status

by keeping up the appearance of her financially stable household. If Miss Matty knew that the other women had found out about her financial trouble, she would have felt like an outsider and probably excluded herself from the group out of shame. The women's sympathetic kindness, circulated amongst themselves through gossip and extended toward Miss Matty through secret bank deposits, creates a greater intimacy among the group. Gaskell here ascribes a positive motive and outcome to gossip, demonstrating the complexity of this seemingly frivolous form of discourse.

The women do not always gossip with such positive motives, of course. Woven into the bank failure episode, Mary narrates another incident that rouses the women to malicious talk. Such is the fluidity of gossip that these women have several narratives to talk about at once, and they do so with different purposes and ends in mind. When rumors of an engagement between Lady Glenmire and Mr. Hoggins circulate through the village, the Amazons are completely shocked and outraged. If the French represent one kind of other for the Cranford ladies, then men encompass another representation of otherness in this novel. In fact, the male gender is firmly established throughout the text as the abject other. The incidents that do involve men usually exoticize them (for example Signor Brunoni), so that even when the women act kindly, the men are clearly set apart as a different species altogether. The village women consign marriage to this other world and make singleness an important indicator of insider status in their community. Although labeled a private matter, marriage in reality is a political and domestic, private and public issue. In this case particularly, the woman in question holds a title, merging private feelings with political alliances. The decision about including or excluding Lady

Glenmire from the community is not a trivial matter, then, nor is the discourse that will circulate about this decision. Gossip holds public and political weight. Even when gossip begins with malicious intent, it still contains the power to create an alternative narrative for constructing the boundaries of “us versus them” appearing here in the form of “unmarried versus married.”

Those who gossip, as the example of Lady Glenmire’s engagement demonstrates, have a greater purpose than just the accumulation of information; more importantly they use gossip to negotiate what is and is not proper behavior. Because manners indicate one’s status and thus one’s identity, the women are essentially negotiating the terms of identity by discussing Lady Glenmire’s behavior. Both Mary and Miss Matty respond to Miss Pole’s news with the appropriate shock, everyone repeating the word “marry” followed by exclamation points. The women cannot decide how they should feel about this breach of conduct until Mrs. Jamieson returns to the neighborhood. As a widow and woman of higher class, Mrs. Jamieson has become the person everyone depends on to interpret behaviors according to the collective understanding about their society’s rules and norms. The following speculative gossip is almost as consumed with how they think Mrs. Jamieson will take the news as with how the engagement came about. The exchange is worth quoting in full:

What would Mrs. Jamieson say? We looked into the darkness of futurity as a child gazes after a rocket up in the cloudy sky, full of wondering expectation of the rattle, the discharge, and the brilliant shower of sparks and light. Then we brought ourselves down to earth and the present time, by questioning each other (being all equally ignorant, and all equally without the slightest data to build any conclusions upon) as to when IT would take place? (137).

As she narrates here, Mary moves from sweeping, lofty diction to pragmatic questions. Wedged in between this movement is one of her typical parenthetical phrases that draw our attention to her awareness of the ungrounded information, the “darkness of futurity,” with which they formulated their conclusions. While Mrs. Jamieson’s reactions seem to be admittedly imagined, Mary also recognizes that though the women feel more grounded in discussing when the marriage would take place, in many ways these predictions are just as speculative. Despite its speculative nature, the connection between manners, status, and identity means the women’s gossip carries the weight of identity construction and negotiation.

Presumably, the women could make predictions about the wedding details based on their knowledge of marriage customs, but their predictions about Mrs. Jamieson’s reactions would rely on speculations about her views on proper social decorum. Customs governing an institutionalized event like marriage are much easier to predict than someone’s personal response; though the situational response may be governed by social rules, Mrs. Jamieson could decide not to adhere to social codes. This is similar to Mary’s decision to scoop peas off her plate at a dinner party hosted by Mr. Holbrook. Here again, the intrusion of the masculine other provides a gap in the social narrative of properly eating peas with a fork. Mary watches Mr. Holbrook shovel the peas into his mouth from knife to plate: “I saw, I imitated, I survived!” (43). Mary’s “precedent” offers a new narrative of convenience over decorum. It is not one the ladies choose to follow at this point, but neither do they cast Mary as an outsider for following this alternative narrative. These two incidents demonstrate the most fluid of gossip’s gaps come not from

institutional norms but from personal norms. The gaps within gossip's narrative, then, often come from the unpredictability of how an individual might respond in relation to communal dictates. Gossip is a form of "grassroots" change, if you will, beginning first with personal ethics that begin to alter social relationships on a larger scale.

These gaps represent possibilities for challenging an individual's circumscription within social rules. When individuals choose to diverge from socially scripted behavior, they transform their relationship to a community. With this individual transformation arises the possibility that the community itself could transform to accommodate the individual. Lady Glenmire's engagement appears contrary to how the women value their status as single. Her action, then, compels the Cranford ladies to reevaluate their narrative about marriage. Despite how their leader, Mrs. Jamieson, continues to reject Lady Glenmire, the other women decide to visit her. Especially when she opts to drop her title and simply become Mrs. Hoggins, the women do not exclude her from their circle, though the "Jamieson and Hoggins feud still raged" (174).

Mrs. Jamieson still held power over the other Cranford ladies, however, and if Mrs. Jamieson was at a party they did not invite the Hogginses. It is finally a man, the quintessential other in Cranford, that will heal the rift between the two women. When Peter, Miss Matty's long lost brother, returns to Cranford he brings excitement to the whole village with his stories and exuberant personality. Miss Pole even allows him to sit cross-legged at the dinner table, though Mary reminisces to the reader "how we had all followed [Mrs. Jamieson's] lead in condemning Mr. Hoggins for vulgarity because he simply crossed his legs as he sate still on his chair" (181). Here again we have evidence

of Miss Pole's changing relational ethics; she is more interested in hearing Peter's story than she is in requiring him to hold strictly to social etiquette.

Gossip, largely responsible in many cases for transforming the community's ethical approach to otherness, becomes linked with Peter himself as the incitement to transformation. It was gossip about Miss Matty's lost brother that caused Mary to engage in a diligent search until she found him. Gossip, as an illegitimate form of talk, and Peter, as a male, are also connected in their otherness. Peter represents additional layers of otherness as well when he brings traces of the colonial other with him from his travels to India. Gaskell broadens the scope of her novel from provincial life to national issues with this undercurrent of imperialism. Her critique of the unethical boundaries the Cranford ladies construct extends, then, to the unethical imperialist practices of Britain. Peter's presence in the novel signifies the potential benefit of including the other's perspective as he brings healing to the community.

Peter's primary role at the end of the novel, I argue, is to show the transformation of Cranford's tendency toward othering and exclusion. Peter accomplishes this feat by throwing a great party, asking Mrs. Jamieson's permission to use her name as the patroness. With this flattery, Mrs. Jamieson hardly notices the presence of the Hogginses at this same party. Before the night ends Peter claims he will "enter the Assembly Room tonight with Mrs. Jamieson on one side and my lady Mrs. Hoggins on the other," and Mary tells us "somehow or another he did" (187). This scene illustrates just how

completely Cranfordian social norms have been transformed.¹⁷ The differences between class, gender, and nation are deemphasized as everyone engages with the other in a generous, joyful party atmosphere. With each intrusion of the other and the consequent gaps in the communal identity, the Amazons must revise their narrative. Mary chooses to leave the reader with the image of Peter attempting to shock the ladies as often as he can with his stories of foreign places. He intends these disruptions to get “everybody to be friends” by encouraging them into conversation despite their ongoing rifts. Closure is achieved in this novel, like in *Deerbrook*, when the community is no longer interested in excluding the other but desires to hear her story instead.

Martineau and Gaskell end their novels with a similar picture of a peaceful community. These novels make an interesting pairing because of the critical debate surrounding the place each should have in the authors’ oeuvres. Reading both novels with attention to gossip’s transformative potential, rather than limiting it to a superfluous or illegitimate discourse, illuminates the significant contributions these novels make to social issues in the period. Gossip’s power to transform emerges, I have argued, through its very form as it relies on narrative and speculation. When the speculation moves beyond social scripts and explores alternative ways to relate to the other, then gossip transforms social relations. In these two novels, that transformation transpired by first

¹⁷ Certainly this scene could be read as the need for a masculine figure to solve petty problems the women could not handle themselves. However, I believe that the text focuses on masculine as “other” so that the importance of Peter is not his status as male but his status as other. Indeed, in the context of the fifties, Peter’s imperial background may be even more relevant to his status as other than his gender. Also, whenever there is ample opportunity for a male figure to rescue the women, it is always the women who help themselves. For example, in the instance of the bank failure Mary’s father advises Miss Matty what to do. However, Mary does not attribute this advice to saving Miss Matty. She credits instead the Cranford ladies’ secret deposits of money. Thus, the text does not support a reading that the women need saving by a male figure.

dissolving unethical categories and then proposing more fluid boundaries and a more inclusive community. In *Deerbrook*, Maria demonstrates the importance of listening with the intent to help construct the other's story based on their own lives rather than assimilate the other's story into her own script (as Mrs. Rowland aimed to do). In *Cranford*, Mary guides the reader to critique competitive hierarchy and to recognize the likeness that does exist between self and other, a likeness often founded in seemingly insignificant events and concerns. By the end of the novel, the Cranfordians' acceptance of others like Mrs. Fitz-Adams and Peter represents the kind of flexible sympathy gossip fosters. Each novel traces how a community no longer insists on strict practices of othering and imagines instead how sympathy circulated through gossip crosses boundaries to form a more ethical relationship between self and other. Arguments can always be made about whether gossip is good or bad, and of course we should readily admit that it is both. This is not all that gossip can be, however. I am suggesting, instead, that we read these novels through the discourse system of gossip in order to witness the complex ways gossip exposes and revises the exclusionary politics of othering.

In these novels, the unethical act of othering occurs not so much because of irreconcilable differences but because of the effort to create hierarchy and establish one's identity against the other. To transform social relations in these communities, then, each novel calls for the kind of sympathy that transfers focus from maintaining status to a genuine interest in another person. Especially in *Deerbrook*, the other is not the colonized, exotic figure that will emerge later in the century. Nor is there even a dichotomy between city and country. Aside from the class difference between the

villagers and the poor, the main conflict takes place between solidly middle class families who closely resemble one another. Even in *Cranford* the most radical form of alterity exists in the figure of an English male. Thus, while in Eliot's and Brontë's novels sympathy will be called to negotiate much more explicit cases of otherness, in these two novels sympathy must simply cross boundaries between an other who is not really so different. Boundaries built for the purpose of maintaining hierarchies of inclusiveness, then, really create a false sense of difference. Through the transformative potential of gossip, Martineau and Gaskell suggest, we can fuse the horizons of difference in telling a story that circumscribes self and other in a more inclusive community.

As the epigraph from *Deerbrook* shows, Martineau's activity in writing a novel belonging to the realist tradition models the same activity of the inhabitants in the town: both were "busy looking into one another's small concerns." What both Martineau and Gaskell demonstrate, however, is that no relational encounter is a "small concern," for the foundation of nations are built upon the individual engagements of its citizens. David feels that the failures of Martineau's novel can be explained by the lack of any pressing theory or public injustice that drives her other writings. Martineau herself said, however, that authorship for her was not "a matter of choice;" she wrote because "things were pressing to be said" (*Autobiography* 1:189-90). *Deerbrook* engages with the most pressing need of all – the ethics of how one encounters difference, and even more specifically how those differences materialize in the first place. Martineau and Gaskell choose to engage with this issue, remarkably, through a form of telling that earns immediate disparagement. These novels suggest a needed revision of readers'

interpretative lens in three areas: 1) understanding the ethical possibilities in gossip, 2) resisting the construction of irrelevant boundaries between self and other, and 3) seeing the primary concern of realist texts as focused on the relationship between self and other rather than the relationship between representation and reality. In the next chapter, George Eliot also suggests needed revisions in each of these areas, though she uses different strategies to challenge traditional ways of relating to the other and traditional ways of reading realism.

CHAPTER III
GAZING THROUGH DIFFERENCE: BECOMING SYMPATHETIC WITNESSES TO
THE OTHER'S STORY

The visual embrace of a stare is a validation of our being, the relational registering that we matter to another, even if it perhaps exposes our deepest vulnerabilities. ~ Garland-Thomson, *Staring* 59

In the previous chapter, I examined the way gossip transforms social relationships by destabilizing us/them categories and thus rearranging the way one organizes the self and other within a community. Listening and telling are necessary components of gossips, signaling the willingness of participants to extend sympathy to the other. The activities of listening and telling are also a vital aspect of gazing. This chapter defines gazing as a specific stance one takes when responding to the other. I employ the term *witnessing* to describe the process of gazing with sympathy; a potentially optimistic role for gazing that argues gazing can confer subjectivity instead of the objectification associated with “the gaze.” I explore this more positive configuration in George Eliot’s novel, *Silas Marner*. This novel models ethical gazing as a relational discourse that negotiates the particular balance between maintaining the other’s difference while still sympathizing with the other. Gazing between characters is not just a harmful power struggle; it becomes a moment for witnessing the other’s story. Ethical gazing also operates as a distancing technique that directs the reader to recognize the other as a

subject vastly different from the self and to willingly identify across this difference.

Gazing is a rhetorical strategy that can be used ethically or unethically to construct and negotiate the relationship between self and other. Current conceptions of the gaze are largely articulated through the ideas of Michel Foucault and Laura Mulvey. Foucault's notion of the "unimpeded empire of the gaze" (from *The Birth of the Clinic*) critiques the scopic regime focused on "the disciplining and normalizing effect of being the object of the gaze" (416). Mulvey's work in film studies exposes the binary opposition of women as the object of men's gaze. Most gaze theory thus focuses on the harmful effects of the gaze as an unethical practice. I am highlighting a different concept of this visual relationship, illustrated in Eliot's novel and theorized through Kelly Oliver's conception of "witnessing." One important point I emphasize throughout this chapter, then, is that my notion of gazing departs altogether from theories of the gaze; the visual relationship with the other does not have to be mired in domination or assimilation.

To begin conceptualizing the act of gazing as an ethical endeavor, we must first recognize two important aspects of gazing: the visual component, comprised of space and stance, and the storytelling component, comprised of the embodied presence of a teller and a listener. The visual component underscores the physicality involved in this mode of relating to others. By stance I mean both a mental attitude (the mental process one goes through when approaching the other) and a physical presence (how the presence of literal bodies influences the encounter). Unethical gazing occurs when stance and space are used to create hostile distance that reinforces power structures or refuses to acknowledge the other. Ethical gazing, by contrast, includes the crucial aspect of witnessing, an action

that encourages multiple perspectives to cohabitate, turning the potentially hostile distance between self and other into a fluid playground of engagement. For example, Marner's doorway acts as an unethical space when he uses it to frame his glaring eyes that keep neighbors away, but it becomes an ethical space when he welcomes Eppie through an open door.

The storytelling component of gazing emphasizes the need to tell stories and the need to listen to stories as an integral part of the way we interact with the other. Unethical gazing involves stories told that are not authored by the subject. Rather than the "I" telling the story, the other has control over the identity constructed through story, such as the villagers' attempt to construct a story about how he acquires the skill to heal people with herbs, without asking Marner himself. The aspect of witnessing in ethical gazing ensures that the subject of the story is the one authoring the story. When Marner tells his story at the Rainbow Inn, he is gazing at the villagers and they are gazing at him. This mutual exchange, as I will show, creates sympathy while allowing Marner to establish the distinctiveness of his story. I explore both kinds of gazing in this novel, analyzing first the unethical gazing that occurs in several scenes in the first half of the novel where Marner gazes fiercely at his neighbors and they in turn perpetuate his alienation by circulating stories of his strangeness. I then turn to scenes of ethical gazing, such as the pivotal scene in the Rainbow Inn, where both Marner and the villagers are transformed. The examples of characters gazing demonstrate the capacity for ethical gazing to create a space where sympathy and difference can co-exist. The reader is also gazing at Marner

via the narrator; by controlling the distance between characters and the reader, the narrator is largely responsible for directing the reader toward ethical gazing.

This chapter adds to George Eliot scholarship by exploring the themes of storytelling and visuality that have been part of the critical discussion about her work for some time now, but exploring these themes in one of her more neglected texts, *Silas Marner*. I find it all the more pressing to examine the social relations in this novel that not only displays the drama of otherness within its pages, but also gains the label of “other” in its status as a text examined by critics.¹ George Eliot predicted no one would be interested in this tale, and to some degree critical evaluation has proven her right. Even in Eliot’s own time, critics pointed to the strangeness of *Marner*. One contemporary critic from the *Times* said he thought Silas “a singularly unaccountable being” and a “most unsuitable hero” (qtd in Carroll 16-17). Although a few critics today have discussed otherness in *Silas Marner*, they have not connected the emphasis on gazing with this theme. I find the numerous and explicit references to eyes, looks, stares, and faces make gazing a central motif in this novel and an important strategy to add to Eliot’s repertoire of sympathetic devices.

Placing gazing in a discourse system helps account for the frequent occurrences of gazing. The accumulated effect of gazing enhances the role of sympathy; indeed, I

¹ In a book focusing on the rhetoric of sympathy in Eliot, Doyle surprisingly leaves out *Silas Marner*. Doyle’s attention to sympathy as not only a part of the content of Eliot’s writing but also a rhetorical tool deployed through distancing techniques is an important addition to studies on sympathy in Eliot’s texts. However, Doyle’s concern that Eliot does not uphold artistic standards of the Victorian novel seems to take away from the ways in which these texts grapple with sympathy in important ways. Thus, Doyle’s analysis is at times more about Eliot and realism than Eliot and sympathy. This is why Doyle does not include *Silas Marner* in her analysis, something I consider a curious absence considering how much sympathy grounds the rhetorical influence of this novel.

suggest that without using the discourse system of gazing as an interpretative lens we can miss what Eliot proposes as a revised version of sympathetic identification. Within this discourse system, characters use gazing to communicate; very often the message sent via gazing consists of either an invitation to continue the relational encounter or a rejection of further engagement. Thus, Marner's ferocious stare early in the novel, or his head-in-hands posture when visited by neighbors after his tragedy, communicates his desire to be left alone. In contrast, Dolly's rapt attention gazing at Marner as he tells her about his history indicates that Dolly wishes for Marner to continue sharing his story with her. Consequently, because gazing operates as discourse that communicates, it is also a rhetorical mode when used intentionally to construct one's stance toward the other. Thus, the villagers no longer exchange only work-related conversation when Marner comes to their door, but they invite him in, a rhetorical gesture of hospitality suggesting their desire to be in his presence and thus gaze upon him as they witness his new life with Eppie. It is ultimately the narrator, however, who most often uses gazing as a rhetorical strategy. The narrator fosters a sympathetic stance toward Marner, specifically giving the reader different information than the villagers, in order to condition the reader to engage in ethical gazing. As a narrative technique, then, Eliot can use gazing as an important component of her efforts to create people "better able to *imagine* and to *feel* the pains and the joys of those who differ from themselves" (*Letters* 3:111).

I will explore the connection between sympathy and ethical and unethical gazing in this chapter by first historically situating the emphasis on sight in this novel within the rampant changes to technologies of sight in the mid-nineteenth century, as well as

nineteenth-century views of gazing. I then introduce a more recent notion of “witnessing” as a way of understanding and giving definition to the kind of sympathy Eliot proposes through ethical gazing. This theoretical section is followed by examples from the text, beginning first with the relationship between the narrator and the reader, and then moving to examples of unethical gazing and ethical gazing between characters, and finally ending with the narrator/reader relationship once again. I bookend the close reading aspect of this chapter with a focus on how the reader should engage in ethical gazing because this was Eliot’s clearly stated goal – that her writing should produce real effects in the world beyond her novel. I examine closely the expectations placed on the reader by the narrator’s control of distance and thus our sympathetic response.

Historical and Theoretical Contexts for Gazing

The attention to sight in *Silas Marner* must be understood alongside the many changes in the nineteenth century – urbanization, industrialization, railroad travel, advances in studies of the body and technologies of light and communication – that influenced the discourse surrounding visual culture by the time of the novel’s publication in 1861. The Great Exhibition of 1851, traveling circus troupes, “moving panoramas,” and the rise of museums and galleries are just a few examples of how looking became coterminous with objectification as Victorians were encouraged to look and specifically to enjoy spectacles.² The prominence of the visual also grew through an explosion of technological inventions like the kaleidoscope (1815), improvements to telescopes and

² For more on this spectacle society see Marsh.

microscopes (1820s), the photograph (1835), and the stereoscope (1849). Advancements continued on into the century with X-rays (1875), streetlights (1879), and cinema (1895).³ Such numerous advances in visual technologies could only result in what Jonathan Crary has called a “radical abstraction and reconstruction of optical experience” that had the far-reaching effects of a “massive reorganization of knowledge and social practices” (3, 9).⁴ Crary couches the rise of visual culture in the nineteenth century in terms of power: the proliferation of signs led to the instability of those signs, and this instability led to less aristocratic control over the meaning of those signs (12). He connects this new understanding of signs with a new understanding of the subject (17). Thus, visual culture in the nineteenth century did not solely produce an unquestioning faith in the reliability of visual representation; there emerged also an awareness of the constructed nature of perception, creating ambivalence about the role of the visual in pursuits of knowledge, including how one comes to know the other.

While some writers, such as Eliot, grapple with this ambivalence in their novels, many literary representations of the act of gazing upheld simple binaries. At the opening of Thomas Hardy’s *Far From the Madding Crowd*, Bathsheba stares unabashedly at

³ Like the nineteenth century’s explosion of technology directly related to sight, the twentieth and twenty-first centuries witnessed the advent of television, the Internet, webcams, the Kindle, and medical advances such as lasik surgery. Jay traces twentieth-century thought that takes us to the present-day notions of visibility. He encapsulates the major players in this history including “Sartre’s depiction of the sadomasochism of the ‘look,’ Merleau-Ponty’s diminished faith in a new ontology of vision, Lacan’s disparagement of the ego produced by the mirror stage, Althusser’s appropriation of Lacan for a Marxist theory of ideology, Debord’s critique of the society of the spectacle, Irigaray’s outrage at the privileging of the visual in patriarchy, and Lyotard’s identification of postmodernism with the sublime foreclosure of the visual ” (588).

⁴ See Postlethwaite for a brief overview of Eliot’s experience with science, such as her acquaintance with George Combe, her familiarity with Comte’s, William Heinrich Reihl’s, and Goethe’s work, and of course her relationship with George Henry Lewes, an avid philosopher of science in his own right.

herself in a hand mirror, which produces a smile at her own reflection. The heterodiegetic narrator immediately castigates this self-confident approval of her image:

There was no necessity whatever for her looking in the glass. She did not adjust her hat, or pat her hair, or press a dimple into shape, or do one thing to signify that any such intention had been her motive in taking up the glass. She simply observed herself as a fair product of Nature in the feminine kind. (11)

Gabriel Oak, the guiding moral character of the novel, also passes judgment on this act that reveals her greatest fault to be “Vanity” (12). What bothers both the narrator and Gabriel most about the scene of Bathsheba’s gazing seems to be the lack of practical purpose for her looking. The notion of a woman gazing at herself, or anyone else, purely for the pleasure of looking immediately calls her moral character into question. This is a more typical use of gazing in Victorian novels, to illustrate the immoral, in this case misogynist, nature of a female character.

Nineteenth-century literature usually associates gazing with sexuality or power, thus excluding the “proper” woman from this activity. Like Bathsheba, Lucy Snowe is reprimanded for gazing in *Villette*. She is accosted by M. Paul in a museum where she sits observing a painting of Cleopatra that emphasizes the sensuality of the female body. M. Paul accuses her of “astounding insular audacity” for staring with “the self-possession of a garçon” (225). Like Bathsheba’s self-possessed act of looking at herself with pleasure, Lucy’s claims the position of a subject who gazes rather than the object of the gaze. M. Paul’s comments, “insular” and “self-possessed,” also represent gazing as an activity that opposes a sense of community, placing the individual in a potentially antagonistic relationship with the other. These negative representations of gazing make

Eliot's suggestion that gazing can be an ethical way of encountering the other seem all the more radical. Eliot also engages with the gendered side of this debate by overturning the usual model of the masculine subject objectifying the female through his gaze. Just as Lucy subverts this hierarchy by resisting the common trope of women-as-object, so too does Eliot by positioning a male character as the object of the reader's gaze. She also revises the fetishizing and objectifying masculine gaze most prominent in nineteenth-century literature (and, I would argue, today) by transforming Marner's own gaze into a more ethical practice.

These models from literature and theorists create a powerful account of the harmful practice of assimilation and domination that often result from the gaze. The lasting influence of these views diminishes, however, the possibility for gazing to be anything other than perverse. Whether this was their intended purpose or not, the gaze has become inherently negative through these models. In our conversations about the gaze, I argue we need to consider both its harmful and healing properties. Gazing is concerned with how we relate to one another and is therefore fundamentally ethical. I use the term *gazing* to distinguish it from the negative connotations of the gaze and thus begin to re-conceptualize this act as an ethical way to engage the other. Although Rosemarie Garland-Thomson uses the term "staring," her definition encapsulates the way I am using gazing as "an intense visual exchange that makes meaning." She defines gazing as an oppressive activity; we gaze at what we desire, we stare at what we astonishes us (Garland-Thomson 13). Garland-Thomson's effort to separate the stare from the gaze is well articulated. However, rather than dismiss the term *gaze* altogether, I

want to redefine its potential to mean more than a struggle for domination. Therefore, I use the term *gazing* to focus on the ethical stance of acknowledging the other as a subject by witnessing their story, an act that requires distance to preserve difference but still requires the extension of sympathy. My focus, then, remains with the positive potential for gazing as an active exchange of information that establishes a two-way process rather than creating a subject and an object. Through its dialectical nature, gazing involves purposeful rhetorical choices that can be aimed in various ways, from positioning oneself in a hierarchy to positioning oneself within a community.

Witnessing: An Ethical Approach to Gazing

The rhetorical effect of ethical gazing extends horizons of sympathy by repositioning the mental and physical stance one takes toward the other. Gazing creates this transformation by first disrupting our horizon of understanding; as Garland argues, the discomfort created by staring can be productive: “Triggered by the sight of someone who seems unlike us, staring can begin an exploratory expedition into ourselves and outward into new worlds” (6). The attitude of openness Garland describes here clears the way for more ethical relationships because it pushes on the boundaries of self, boundaries created to separate what is known and accepted from the other. Within this dynamic relationship we learn to respond ethically to the other: “We become ethical starers by being conscious in the presence of something that compels our intense attention. What gives such attractions power in these formulations is their capacity to vivify human empathy through bearing visual witness...that can be transformative” (188). In order to

“vivify human empathy” we must have something that “compels our intense attention,” and this is the embodied presence of faces that I emphasize with ethical gazing. This kind of ethical encounter requires a visual component, a stance and an embodied space, in conjunction with a moment of telling, a moment that signals the stance of openness through both the teller’s revelation of self in story and the audience’s willingness to bear witness.

In the first scene where Marner and the Raveloe villagers respond ethically to one another, the narrator emphasizes faces and the act of looking. “This strangely novel situation of opening his trouble to his Raveloe neighbours, of sitting in the warmth of a hearth not his own, and feeling the *presence of faces* and voices which were his nearest promise of help, had doubtless its influence on Marner” (italics mine 54). The encounters that follow from this moment of witnessing and shared sympathy shows a radical transformation from the frightful way Marner glares at little boys who come spying at his door: “he would descend from his loom, and, opening the door, would fix on them a gaze that was always enough to make them take to their legs in terror” (2). The unethical relationship between Marner and the community in this early scene in the novel is signaled by the space of Marner’s door, filled only with the stern glare of his gaze. His stance toward the boys is unwelcoming, thus the space of his doorway, though literally open, signals an uninviting, closed door. The process of transforming Marner’s relationship with his community occurs through the transformation of this space and stance. In the Rainbow Inn example above, Marner sits on a stool in the center of the room with the villagers’ faces turned toward him. This ethical moment of gazing

incorporates both space and stance through the crucial element of witnessing. Now that Marner occupies a welcoming space, the place of the storyteller in this village, his stance necessarily changes toward the villagers as he opens himself to them. Additionally, the villagers also change their stance by turning listening faces to bear witness to his story. The first condition for transformation, then, is a turning toward the other, an internal attitude signified outwardly by gazing.

The notion of gazing that I am constructing here is based on the ethical space opened through storytelling. Thus, gazing and story become a moment of *witnessing*, a term Kelly Oliver develops to mean “beyond recognition” and therefore beyond any dominating sense of the gaze. Oliver employs this notion of witnessing as an alternative to current notions of identity predicated on a contestatory relationship of defining self against the other. She agrees that one cannot conceive of the self without difference, but she disagrees with the way most identity theories presuppose that the distance of difference is a disaffecting space that must be surmounted by understanding or recognizing the other. Identity that requires recognition will always lead to the assimilation of difference into sameness (9). Oliver writes: “one of the main reasons that recognition always either returns us to the recognition of sameness or becomes misrecognition that leads to hostility is that recognition seems to depend on a particular notion of vision” (10-11). The problem begins with, Oliver argues, vision’s role in overcoming the gap between self and other through an objectifying gaze. Because she grounds her idea of witnessing in vision, she wants to suggest a new concept for how we gaze at the other. Oliver rejects theories that ultimately define vision as alienating

because they are predicated on a separation of subjects from objects, replacing “the interrelational dependent subject with an autonomous isolated subject...control and mastery are bought at the price of relationships” (172). Oliver wants a concept of gazing that remains ingrained in the relational, so that ultimately to gaze means to be in relationship with the other.

Rather than abandon the notion of vision as part of forming subjectivity, Oliver reformulates what it means to see. This begins with understanding the space between self and other not as an adverse void but as a space of connection where systems of sensation bond us to others (12). The separation created by this space, filled with affective energies or social energies, connects us; this conception of space allows Oliver to reconstruct vision as a positive tool for connecting rather than an oppressive or alienating process. She focuses her critique on theorists who conceive of recognition as a requirement for an ethical response:

If recognition is necessary to subjectivity, it isn't the kind of recognition identified by Taylor through which we recognize others only when we have understood them and passed judgment on them. It is more than Honneth's conferring respect on others. And it can't begin from Butler or Kristeva's logic of exclusion or repudiation. To recognize others requires acknowledging that their experiences are real even though they may be incomprehensible to us...we are obligated to respond to what is beyond our comprehension, beyond recognition, because ethics is possible only beyond recognition. (106)

Oliver revises identity theories by claiming we must move past the dependence on recognition by reformulating the distance between self and other. This distance does not signal hostile differences that must be overcome. Rather, the space connects us, a way of

envisioning the difference of otherness, Oliver argues, once we learn to respond beyond recognition.

Oliver's notion of witnessing is important for the connection I am drawing between gazing and storytelling. The term *witnessing* as a new way of understanding subjectivity integrates the notion of story and the notion of gazing as crucial components for creating a sense of self. Oliver argues that bearing witness means the subject is not created from the *content* of the testimony but from the *act* of telling oneself to an other: "I construct and reconstruct my experiences for another, even if I don't ever actually tell them the narrative that I have prepared for them. It is the bearing witness to the other itself, spoken or not, that gives birth to the I" (206-07). What becomes important, then, is not *what* is being told or what happens at either end of the gaze; rather, the focus shifts to the interaction itself, on the space between. This revelation of self through the other witnessing my story is the kind of encounter Eliot constructs in her novel. This happens most clearly in the Rainbow Inn scene, the first occurrence of ethical gazing where Marner suspends his prejudices long enough to go to the community gathering place, sit in the center of the Rainbow, and tell his story to a listening crowd.

Gazing as Readers

If witnessing presupposes a productive space between self and other as Oliver contends, then I propose it is sympathy that prevents this necessary distance from becoming alienating and antagonistic. Sympathy can expand a person's capacity to see and bear witness to what is strange and unfamiliar instead of turning away from the other.

This is the kind of sympathy the narrator calls for from the reader; it does not depend on the ability to understand Marner or his experiences.⁵ Like the characters in the story world, readers can respond ethically only through bearing witness to Marner's story.

The narrator begins the novel by creating distance between the reader and the characters, making it clear that the reader will have difficulty recognizing or understanding the "hero" of the story. The description found on the opening page of the novel clearly establishes the image of otherness. First, Eliot sets her tale in a period that seems foreign to modern England because it is a "far-off time" when "superstition clung easily round every person or thing that was at all unwonted" (5). The British affinity for reason and science creates distance between the nineteenth-century reader and the superstitious villagers. Eliot also includes within this world certain people who are othered by the community. The effect of this introduction makes it difficult for the reader to sympathize with either the narrow-minded villagers or the wandering weavers who are not described as a type of person one might easily identify with. Silas Marner is singled out from this group of weavers as especially unlikeable when the narrator reveals his terrifying gaze directed toward the village boys. Thus, from the superstitious and close-minded villagers to the foreign and hostile weaver, in the opening pages there is no one with whom the reader is clearly supposed to align herself with.

⁵ Nestor, after tracing the development of Eliot's theory about sympathy through her earlier works, says that in *Silas Marner* Eliot moves away from sympathy based in recognition or likeness and instead suggests an ethical challenge "to embrace what is not like or known, and that embrace requires more than empathy or imagination contemplated in earlier novels" (13). What ethics requires then is an openness and a "movement beyond cognition – an extra-rational leap of affective faith through which the embrace of the other becomes an acceptance of the unknown and unknowable" (13). While Nestor points to how Eliot tests the limits of sympathy by creating a main character that seem unknowable, there is an additional step between cognition and a "leap of affective faith" presented in this novel as the moment of staring and storytelling.

We might, at this point, ask how the narrator expects the reader to respond to Marner. Although the heterodiegetic narrator does not attempt to make Marner's story seem better or more appealing to us, the story of his past is clearly told that we might have a fuller picture of the motives shaping Marner's actions in Raveloe.⁶ Does the narrator's retelling of Marner's past obligate the reader to feel beyond what the villagers feel toward this strange "other"? Eliot herself seems to excuse the reader when she writes to Blackwood acknowledging that the strange tale might be hard for her readers to relate to: "I should not have believed that any one would have been interested in it but myself" (*Letters* 3:382). Yet the narrator seems determined to appeal to our sympathy as readers, as witnesses to Marner's story. Unlike the villagers at this point in the novel, we know about Marner's past and we know him outside his role as weaver; we have seen him in love and we have seen him betrayed. After we have heard the whole story of how much the Lantern Yard community meant to Marner, and how much he loved both Sarah, his fiancé, and William Dane, his best friend, we are outraged at the betrayal we witness when Dane falsely accuses Marner of stealing. As we inhabit the imaginative space of revisiting Marner's former life, the narrator decreases the distance between the reader and Marner by allowing us to feel the indignation for him that we would feel if *our* best friend or lover treated us this way.

⁶ The component of ethical gazing that requires the story be authored by the subject of the story is here satisfied through the narrator, who relays Marner's history like one who has heard the story from Marner himself and merely passes it along to others. Thus, the narrator tells Marner's story in much the same way as the villagers will talk about Marner's story at the end of the novel, once they have encountered the story first through Marner himself. This kind of storytelling is unlike the first time the villagers circulate stories about him when he heals Sally Oates, before they have engaged with him personally.

The narrator immediately withdraws this space of common ground, however, when he shares the way Marner responds to these wrongdoings. When he is rejected by all of the town and his best friend, Marner numbly states “*She* will cast me off too,” feeling certain he will lose Sarah as well. Instead of defending himself, he “for a whole day sat alone, stunned by despair, without any impulse to go to Sarah and attempt to win her belief in his innocence” (11). This response risks creating more distance between Marner and the reader because we cannot understand why he does not tell Sarah his side of the story and stand up for himself. The narrator anticipates this, however, and asks us to ethically gaze at Marner by adopting a stance that is open to witnessing his story without understanding it:

To people accustomed to reason about the forms in which their religious feeling has incorporated itself, it is difficult to enter into that simple, untaught state of mind in which the form and feeling have never been severed by an act of reflection. We are apt to think it inevitable that a man in Marner’s position should have begun to question the validity of an appeal to the divine judgment by drawing lots; but to him this would have been an effort of independent thought such as he had never known. (11)

The readers are the “people accustomed to reason” who are being asked to consider the difference between Marner’s position and their own. What we are “apt to think,” the narrator points out, reflects our own worldview more than Marner’s. The reader knows more about Marner’s history than the villagers (thus the obligation to feel for him seems greater), and yet what the narrator reveals about his past underscores his strangeness. Knowing more, then, may actually increase one’s antipathy toward the other. This call to respond ethically does not depend on sympathy felt because the reader understands

Marner's story. The narrator asks for sympathy shared with Marner because the reader witnesses his story.

The more the narrator reveals from Marner's past, the harder it becomes for readers to assimilate his experience into their own. The narrator asserts readers cannot really understand the depth of Marner's loss:

Minds that have been unhinged from their old faith and love have perhaps sought this Lethean influence of exile in which the past becomes dreamy because its symbols have all vanished, and the present too is dreamy because it is linked with no memories. But even *their* experience may hardly enable them thoroughly to imagine what was the effect on a simple weaver like Silas Marner, when he left his own country and people and came to settle in Raveloe. (12)

The narrator creates more sympathy by actually increasing the distance between Marner and the reader, a distance that can only be labeled positively if defined within the act of witnessing I have been describing. Readers simply cannot understand his situation because it is so terrible and heartbreaking. But this is precisely why we should have even greater sympathy for Marner. Witnessing the other's story is different than understanding the other's story. Knowing Marner's history, his story, allows us to re-read his fierce gaze directed toward his neighbors. The narrator has shown us that even though Marner may still seem strange and unknown to us, an "other," we can sympathize with the fact of his loss, reading his history of pain into the unwelcome gaze he fixes upon the village that could not be "more unlike his native town" (12). Responding ethically to the other sometimes means we stop trying to understand; we should not interpret Marner's actions differently from what they are just so we can understand them. The distance maintained between Marner and the reader at this point in the novel can be an ethical space of

distance if embodied by a stance that suggests an openness to listening and sympathizing with Marner, whether we can relate to him or not. We, as readers, have witnessed Marner's story, and the narrator expects us to extend Marner more sympathy than the villagers of Raveloe.⁷

Unethical Gazing in *Silas Marner*

The act of gazing implied in the relationship between the reader and Marner becomes much more explicit between characters. The initial encounters between Marner and the villagers consist only of unethical gazing. The first example illustrates the necessary combination of the visual and telling components of ethical gazing. As the villagers discuss Marner's strange ability to heal Sally Oates, they take liberties with his story and misrepresent him. The villagers have not fulfilled the first component of ethical gazing, inhabiting a stance of openness by being fully present as the other tells his/her story. When the villagers try to tell Marner's story without first engaging in the witnessing aspect of sympathetic space, the story only objectifies Marner. Likewise, when Marner and the villagers share the space of their doorways for business purposes, the looks and stares establish an impervious distance that is not alleviated by any attempt to share one's story. This negative example thus emphasizes the need for telling and visual components to occur together, in an act of witnessing, in order for ethical relations between self and other to emerge.

⁷ Allen argues that we don't accept Marner until all of Raveloe does (88). However, as I have suggested here, the narrator makes pointed comments to the reader that attempt to increase the reader's sympathy beyond what Raveloe feels for Marner at this point. Also, some time is spent in the narrative telling us the story of Marner's history, a differentiation between the reader and the village that places the reader under greater obligation to respond sympathetically.

Unethical encounters abound in the novel so long as Marner remains alienated from the community by refusing to inhabit the spaces of his neighbors, such as the Rainbow Inn and their own homes. His solitary life begins to erode his ability to relate to others, something Eliot represents by focusing on visible changes to Marner's face resembling "a handle or a crooked tube" (18). Marner's mechanical features are indicative of his isolation and his attempt to live without community. The narrator indicates that his life is "narrowing and hardening itself more and more into a mere pulsation of desire and satisfaction that had *no relation to any other being*" (italics mine 18). Marner's life narrows and hardens because he is missing the sense of what it is to live well, which involves "developing an identity, enmeshed in larger, collective narratives but not exhausted by them...it involves, equally, a sense of belonging, of being situated within a larger narrative or narratives" (Appiah 231). Marner's purely work-related encounters do not include an exchange of stories that would help him gain a sense of self through a blending of his unique story within the larger narrative of Raveloe.

Prior to these descriptions of how alienated Marner has become from human relations, he does make an attempt to help a neighbor. This incident that could have opened a "possibility of some friendship with his neighbours," does not, however, because Marner never truly opens himself to his neighbors and in turn the villagers only misrepresent and misunderstand him (15). Marner employs his skills with herbs to help heal Sally Oates, and this healing became a "matter of general discourse" (15). Although Marner's story circulates throughout the town, it does not emanate from ethical gazing. First, Marner did not author this story; there was no face-to-face encounter for the

villagers to witness Marner's own rendition of how he acquired the knowledge to heal Sally. Secondly, because the villagers do not have Marner's personal context, the story they circulate can only focus on *what* he has done; it says nothing about *who* Marner really is. In fact, the villagers assume they know who Marner is by comparing him to The Wise Woman, another figure already othered by the community because of her strange charms and muttering words. Marner is placed into this same category because he is "comical looking," came from "nobody knew where," and worked wonders with his strange "stuff" (16).

The villagers seems ready to incorporate Marner into their discourse, into their community, but only in a very misunderstood category that focuses on Marner's *what* and not his *who*. The *what*, Adriana Cavarero explains, are the qualities and roles of the self; the *who* is comprised of that which makes us unique, the part of our self that can only be discovered through narration (73). Levinas says that to ask *what* prevents a true encounter with the other: "When we understand man on the basis of his works he is more surprised than understood. His life and his labor mask him" (178). Marner's face has literally become masked into mechanical features because he is only understood in relation to his work.

The blame for unethical gazing in the Sally Oates incident cannot reside solely with the villagers. Marner has also prevented his neighbors from understanding who he is by refusing to relate to anyone other than through his work. Early in the novel we read that Marner "invited no comer to step across his doorsill, and he never strolled into the village to drink a pint at the Rainbow, or to gossip at the wheelwright's" (4). Not only

does Marner establish his doorway as an unwelcoming, hostile space, but also he never makes appearances at the Rainbow Inn, a central place of community building for this town. Further, he “sought no man or woman, save for the purposes of his calling, or in order to supply himself with necessaries” (4). Marner’s interactions are strictly business dealings, spawned from necessity and not from any desire of listening to his neighbors’ stories. If he makes no effort to become further acquainted with his neighbors, how can they be expected to relate to him beyond the masked face of the weaver he offers?

When Marner finds his house flooded with visitors after the Sally Oats incident, he turns them away with unwelcoming gestures, casting “irritated glances” at them. The villager’s behavior remains unethical as well because they are only visiting Marner out of the selfish desire to see if he can heal them. In the same way that Marner seeks out his neighbors only when he needs something, so too do people interested in how he can serve their needs suddenly visit his home. This encounter does not turn into an ethical relation resulting in community, but rather “heightened the repulsion between him and his neighbours, and made his isolation more complete” (16). The encounters between Marner and Raveloe do not foster ethical relationships because the very foundation of ethical gazing through the stance of a welcoming face-to-face encounter does not exist, as shown by Marner’s faceless story, told and circulated by others who have not witnessed his story. As this example shows, unethical gazing does indeed result in furthering the distance between self and other by objectifying the other, the kind of gazing referred to by twentieth-century concepts of “the gaze.” This unethical encounter thus demonstrates what is crucial about ethical gazing: adopting an attentive stance toward the other,

inhabiting a space embodied by the presence of the other, and witnessing the context of the other's story. For it is that personalized aspect of the other's story, which can only be translated by the subject of the story, that enables one to sympathize with the other precisely because they are a subject with a context, a life that has created the uniqueness of otherness. In ethical gazing, the other remains unique because I recognize their story is not my story. However, and this is crucial, by focusing on the exchange of stories, I can extend sympathy across distance created by differences between those stories. In other words, ethical gazing imparts sympathy based on the sharing of stories, not the similarity of stories.

Ethical Gazing in *Silas Marner*

Critics have been puzzled by, and thus often simply ignored, chapter six of *Silas Marner*. This chapter interrupts the action of the plot; Silas has just discovered the theft of his gold and runs to the Rainbow Inn to report it. Right as he is about to burst through the door, however, this chapter ends and thus begins chapter six, a rather long-winded episode of storytelling and general community bonding over drinks. The sudden shift in focus from the fast-moving action of the robbery to the meandering exchange of stories in the Rainbow Inn seems like a strange and unnecessary interruption to the main plot. This scene, I argue, has a crucial role in preparing the reader for the moment in the following chapter when Marner's story begins to blend with the villager's stories. Eliot continually struggles with the tension between community and selfhood, but in this chapter she suggests that communal stories can actual uphold one's individuality. The obligation to

be in relation to the other, the necessary condition of being in community, cannot mean the loss of the important uniqueness of different selves. The Rainbow Inn chapter thus forms a necessary interruption to prepare the reader for Marner's inclusion in the community. The reader must see it, not as an erasure of Marner's otherness, but as an acceptance of his strange story within the larger narrative of the Raveloe community.

The exchange of stories in chapter six are also important for demonstrating the most crucial concept of ethical gazing – witnessing – as an ethical way of sympathizing with the other by maintaining the distance of difference. As both Suzy Anger and David Carroll point out, the content of the stories themselves focus on hermeneutics and the issue of interpretation or point of view. The story of the confused wedding vows, Anger suggests, shows Eliot's emphasis on how context should influence interpretation. This is why storytelling is so important – it provides the context needed to move us from universal assumptions to witnessing particularities. Storytelling emphasizes how one's identity depends on the other, while gazing maintains distance by differentiating self from the other. Oliver conceives of distance as necessary gaps that actually create connection because “we find wonder at the gap between us, the distance that enables us to relate to each other” (200). In other words, there has to be some distance in order to distinguish between self and other, thus recognizing that relationships are formed out of two distinct subjectivities.

For the most part, all of the villagers have been presented as one entity to the reader in the name of Raveloe. By listening to this storytelling exchange at the Rainbow Inn, we become aware of distinct characters within this village. We meet the prideful and

confident Mr. Macey, the cautious and suspicious Mr. Tookey, the jovial and pleasant landlord, and the pessimistic Mr. Dowlas. Through their participation in this storytelling event, they emerge as individuals. At the same time, we clearly see their positions within the community. Cavarero explains that individuality is not lost in the community; it depends on community:

The expositive and the relational character of identity are thus indistinguishable. One always appears to someone. One cannot appear if there is no one else there...existing consists in disclosing oneself within a scene of plurality where everyone, by appearing to one another, is shown to be unique. (20)

Thus, our desire for a unique identity, which we come to know by displaying this identity to others, is intimately tied to the relational character of our nature: we must exist within a community to display our identity at all. Cavarero further asserts the affirmation, not the loss of, the individual in the community; a life-story is unique “precisely because it is constitutively interwoven with many others” in a way that no other story can be (71). Macey’s wedding vow story is both a public performance of his own identity and a confirmation of his relationship to the Raveloe community. Thus, storytelling has the peculiar characteristic of establishing one’s individuality while also establishing one’s place within the community. When witnessing the other’s story, then, we witness their uniqueness and sympathize with them for their uniqueness. Once we acknowledge someone’s subjectivity we acknowledge his or her unique position within a community, a uniqueness that, though I may not comprehend it, forms the basis for my acknowledgment of the other’s subjectivity. Ethical gazing, I am arguing, is a way of engaging with the other that preserves uniqueness and difference by bearing witness to

the story told without trying to comprehend it or make meaning out of; the meaning emerges from the event itself, from the act of telling.

The detailed description of Macey telling this story forces the reader to focus on how the story is told rather than its content. The other villagers have heard this story so many times that they too attend to the ritual of telling and listening more than the story itself:

Everyone of Mr. Macey's audience had heard this story many times, but it was listened to as if it had been a favourite tune, and at certain points the puffing of the pipes was momentarily suspended, that the listeners might give their whole minds to the expected words. (50)

If this story has been heard so many times, why does it still hold such importance for the listeners that they “give their whole minds” to it? Barbara Hardy argues for the ritual status of storytelling, mentioning both the “response and chorus” style of narration and the repetition of having told the same story in the same way many times before (134-135). Because Macey has repeatedly told this story, the audience bears witness to how the telling of the story affirms Macey's unique identity as parish-clerk, tailor, and historian in the community. Hardy alludes to how, in choosing to tell the stories he does, Mr. Macey actually tells his own story. The wedding tale is important to him as the parish-clerk of Raveloe, and the ghost story of Cliff's Holiday holds special interest for his occupation as a tailor. Macey is demonstrating, I argue, how individuals use stories to affirm their own place in a community. In his deliberation over the confused wedding vows, Macey describes himself as “allays uncommon for turning things over and seeing all round 'em” (49). The response from different members of the Rainbow further affirms these

characteristics in Macey. The butcher interjects at one point, “But *you* knew what was going on well enough, didn’t you, Mr. Macey? You were live enough, eh?” and the landlord also comments, “But you held in for all that, didn’t you, Mr. Macey?” (49). Both men confirm the observant and persistent nature Macey reveals about himself by engaging in this storytelling ritual. These examples all demonstrate how Macey reveals his own identity through the act of narrating a story that is, essentially, his own story as a member of the Raveloe community. This encounter is ethical because the audience recognizes Macey’s subjectivity by bearing witness to his story, gazing at him with their “whole minds.”

If Eliot uses chapter six to promote membership in community as necessary for a sense of self-identity, then we must look at her earlier negative presentation of the Lantern Yard community.⁸ The description of Lantern Yard depicts a close-knit community of which Silas is an integral member:

His life, before he came to Raveloe had been filled with the movement, the mental activity, and the close fellowship which, in that day as in this, marked the life of an artisan early incorporated in a narrow religious sect, where the poorest layman has the chance of distinguishing himself by gifts of speech and has at the very least the weight of a silent voter in the government of his community. Marner was highly thought of in that little hidden world, known to itself as the church assembling in Lantern Yard. (6)

⁸ Susan Graver’s argument about Eliot’s attitude toward community looks more at the importance of history and custom in a community that is moving toward a more progressive, complex society, of which Eliot is an advocate. Graver does not include Silas Marner in the novels that critique custom, but I think we have to address this critique in the novel because of the Lantern Yard episode. Additionally, I argue the importance of telling stories actually addresses the tensions between individual and community that Graver sees throughout Eliot’s novels. Storytelling in this novel is both an important unifying ritual and an opportunity for individuals to assert “self.”

At first appearance, Lantern Yard seems to be an exemplary community. The only indication in this passage that it might be otherwise is the adjective “narrow.”

Throughout the following narration describing Marner’s betrayal by his good friend William Dane and the wrongful accusations of murder, the narrator defines just what “narrow” means. Marner cannot defend himself against the accusations because to do so would require “independent thought such as he had never known” (11). The congregation offers a picture of what a community would look like if it did not acknowledge individual difference.

Lantern Yard provides a contrast to Raveloe, the former clings to negative customs that ignore individual thought and the latter allows individuality to thrive within communal customs. When Marner begins to doubt his fiancée’s love for him, she will not agree to break off the marriage because she can “render no reason that would be sanctioned by the feeling of the community” (8). She offers no opinion independent of the community, but bases her decision only on the congregation’s views of marriage. Lantern Yard offers an important clarification to indiscriminate praise of community and tradition. Unlike Raveloe, in Lantern Yard the individual is completely subsumed by the community. Raveloe also has some very set rituals and customs, but as we have seen in the ritual of storytelling, individuality can be affirmed through these traditions. Each member at the Rainbow has a certain place in the town based on his own unique identity in relation to everyone else. Even Mr. Dowlas, who is “the negative spirit in the company,” is quite “proud of his position” because it is uniquely his own (51).

The Rainbow Inn chapter, when read as a thematic treatise on some of the important theories of sympathy Eliot is working through, prepares us for Marner's first ethical encounter with the villagers. Indeed, the chapter dramatically interrupts and forestalls his entrance until we have participated in the enactment of how gazing and storytelling constitute selves and ethical relationships. Only now is the reader prepared to understand why this important exchange between Marner and the villagers in the Rainbow Inn will be the first ethical encounter in the novel. When Marner bursts into the Inn to tell his neighbors the story of his lost gold, for the moment he is just like anyone else from the previous chapter who has related a story to his neighbors. And yet, he is not like them because he does not know the proper way to tell a story. He begins by making demands for the Justice and accusing Jem Rodney of stealing his gold. The landlord finally gets Marner to calm down and tells him "if you've got any information to lay, speak it out sensible, and show as you're in your right mind, if you expect anybody to listen to you" (54). Marner must perform the role of storyteller for the villagers to feel any obligation to listen to him. Marner takes his seat in the center of the company, a typical position for the teller that the villagers recognize. Finally, "all faces were turned to Silas" as he begins his story (55).

This encounter is so different from his usual experience with anyone in Raveloe that it has quite an effect on Marner: "This strangely novel situation of *opening his trouble* to his Raveloe neighbours, of sitting in the warmth of a hearth not his own, and *feeling the presence of faces* and voices which were his nearest promise of help, had doubtless its influence on Marner" (italics mine 54). He is heavily affected by the

“presence of faces,” gazes quite different from those exchanged earlier in the novel between Marner and the spying boys. Those who hear his story in the Rainbow Inn begin to feel for him as a fellow sufferer: “The repulsion Marner had always created in his neighbours was partly dissipated by the new light in which this misfortune had shown him” (76). The sympathy they extended through bearing witness to Marner’s story presents him in this new light; importantly it does not indicate that they fully understand Marner, but rather that they now recognize him as a subject who suffers. Sharing stories, according to Nel Noddings, “can penetrate cultural barriers, discover the power of the self and the integrity of the other, and deepen [our] understanding of [our] respective histories and possibilities” (qtd. in Arnett 252). There are certainly cultural barriers between Marner and Raveloe that have kept each thinking the other is strange and incomprehensible. Marner’s indifference to attending church makes the villagers doubt his integrity, and Marner does not understand why things like baptism are important. When Marner tells his story of being robbed, each begins to see beyond the mere cultural differences to how they can have a conversation based on shared experiences of being human and living in such close proximity to each other: “cultural and personal stories reveal the nature of self-in-relation and uncover possibilities for ethical action” (Arnett 246). It will be the continued sharing of stories that enables Marner and the villagers to interact despite their differences.

Although the transformation in how Marner and the villagers relate more ethically to one another can be marked at the Rainbow Inn scene, the resulting change nevertheless proceeds slowly. The slow progress results from both the depth of Marner’s alienation

and also to the limits of sympathy. As the narrator describes how the villagers attempt to show their sympathy by delivering food to Marner and engaging him in conversation on the street and in his home, the narrator also points out the flawed nature of sympathetic words: "I suppose one reason why we are seldom able to comfort our neighbors with our words is that our goodwill gets adulterated . . . We can send black puddings and pettitoes without giving them a flavour of our own egoism; but language is a stream that is almost sure to smack of a mingled soil" (78). Thus, the sympathy in Raveloe is of a "beery and bungling sort," flawed because the villagers cannot help showing themselves superior while giving help in the form of advice. The villagers, then, have not yet learned how to show sympathy without attempting to make the other more familiar by imposing their own doctrines. Even Dolly, who will later become the most ethical listener, attempts to convince Marner that he must start attending church. The villagers and Marner finally embody a space filled with conversation, and yet the villagers try to fill that space with their own telling instead of offering to listen. The attempt at conversation marks the beginning of the villagers' transformation, but attempts to change Marner into a good Raveloe citizen shows their flawed sympathy.

Marner's transformation is marked by not turning away his neighbors when they drop in to check on him at his home: "when he did come to the door he showed no impatience, as he would once have done, at a visit that had been unasked for and unexpected" (81). We have seen what Marner "would once have done" when he turned people away with a scowl after the Sally Oates incident. The change in Marner that allows him to turn a welcoming gaze on his neighbors emerges from his new sense of

dependence on others. The narrator describes his heart before the theft as a “locked casket with its treasure inside” (81). The theft of Marner’s gold results in an empty heart on which “the lock was broken,” a metaphor that now suggests Marner has a more open heart waiting to be filled. This open-hearted stance leads Marner to an awareness that “if any help came to him it must come from without” (81). Marner now has a “faint consciousness of dependence on their good will,” a feeling that necessarily makes Marner approach his neighbors with a more ethical stance and a willingness to inhabit a space of face-to-face relationships with the villagers.

Marner’s changing attitude, however, is slow and bungling like the villagers’ first offers of sympathy. Though Marner welcomes his neighbors into his home, at this point he still responds sullenly, often sitting “leaning his elbows on his knees, and pressing his hands against his head” in silence (78). His responds this way, in part, because of the flawed sympathy described above; his neighbors still come to talk with the ulterior motive of making him more like themselves. But Marner is also not ready yet to receive sympathy; the narrator makes this especially clear through the encounter between Dolly and Marner. Although Marner does not understand much of what Dolly tries to describe about church, the narrator focuses on her implied motive: “there was no possibility of misunderstanding the desire to give comfort that made itself heard in her quiet tones” (82). This conversation remains a one-way discussion, as the “fountains of human love and of faith in a divine love had not yet been unlocked” in Marner, and he remains unable to respond to Dolly. In order for Marner to grow in his ability to respond more ethically to his neighbors, he must be drawn further outside of his narrow horizon of self. It is at

this point that Eppie's entrance into the narrative becomes necessary.

Eppie's Influence

Eppie will finally enable Marner to engage in ethical gazing by shifting Marner's inward focus in a more outward direction: "The gold had kept his thoughts in an ever-repeated circle, leading to nothing beyond itself; but Eppie was an object compacted of changes and hopes that forced his thoughts onward" (128). Eppie helps Marner establish the outward stance required to approach the other ethically. An inward focus sees the other only as an extension of the self, such as we see when Marner's obsession with his gold causes his gaze to turn Eppie into an extension of that gold. In one of the most dramatic scenes in the novel, Eliot creates a stark contrast between the holiday party at the Cass household and Eppie's mother, Godfrey's unacknowledged wife, drudging through the snow towards the house to have her vengeance on Godfrey. She never makes it, however, and falls to the ground in a dying stupor. Eppie crawls off, her attention caught by a light that emanates from Marner's open door. The narrator tells us Marner "had contracted the habit of opening his door and looking out from time to time, as if he thought that his money might be somehow coming back to him...listening and gazing, not with hope, but with mere yearning and unrest" (109). Marner's doorway offers a welcoming haven for Eppie as she crawls through it, though at this point his open door is a mere accident, a result of his obsession with looking for his gold and not a welcoming gesture toward other humans.

The way this scene is constructed foreshadows, however, the transformation of Marner's doorway and his own ethical growth. The narrator attributes one of Marner's cataleptic fits to his inability to see Eppie as she crawls through his door while he holds it open with "wide but sightless eyes" (110). Marner's eyes trace his transformation and here we see that instead of glaring eyes they are wide open but remain sightless. The cataleptic fit and his "sightless" eyes thus represent Marner's inward focus, his inability to sympathize beyond his own feelings and his own life. When Marner finally closes the door and turns toward the hearth where Eppie has fallen asleep, his "blurred vision" makes him see Eppie's golden hair as his "own gold – brought back to him as mysteriously as it had been taken away!" (110). When he touches the softness of her curls, his "agitated gaze" then thought she must be his little sister come back to him, "his little sister who he had carried about in his arms for a year before she died" (110-111). Within just a few moments, Marner's efforts to understand who or what Eppie is becomes quickly assimilate according to his own horizons of experience, focusing first on his most recent tragedy of losing his gold and then turning to the tragedy of losing his beloved sister when he just a boy. In other words, Marner does not really "see" yet; he is not ethically gazing at Eppie because he immediately tries to fit her into a life story that he calls his own.

The moment Eppie awakens, however, begins the fast-forming attachment that draws the inward, selfish gazing of Marner's unseeing eyes in an outward direction and teaches him to recognize Eppie as an entirely different entity distinct from his own objectifying visions. Eppie's displays of affection toward Marner in those first few days

cause him to often tremble “with an emotion mysterious to himself, at something unknown dawning on his life” (122). Marner’s interest in something other than his gold widens his self-centered horizon of sympathy to include Eppie. Furthermore, his decision to keep the child who appears in his doorway on Christmas night creates “more active sympathy, especially amongst the women” (122). The villagers’ horizon also widens to include Marner in genuine conversation with him when he makes the rounds to deliver linen: “now Silas met with open smiling faces and cheerful questioning, as a person whose satisfactions and difficulties could be understood. Everywhere he must sit a little and talk about the child, and words of interest were always ready for him” (133). The “open smiling faces” indicates the more ethical stance of the villagers, their willingness to witness what Marner experiences with Eppie.

This moment also suggests the limits of sympathy, a tension Eliot continually returns to. It would seem the villagers’ ability to understand Marner’s “satisfactions and difficulties” produces their willingness to engage with him; understanding precedes sympathy. Yet, Marner’s difference is highlighted in this scene in the way he occupies the mother-role as a male, undercutting the model English family. Nancy Lammeter, in her refusal to adopt a child and create even a slightly unconventional family structure, only highlights Marner’s singleness and maleness as a subversion of the typical family configuration. I do not want to ignore the problematic connection between the villagers’ sympathy and their ability to relate to Marner through the similar experience of raising a child. However, even here Eliot preserves Marner’s strangeness by feminizing him.

Additionally, British readers were accustomed to extending sympathy toward females. Here, Eliot creates a male figure who needs the reader's sympathy.

The villagers' sympathy may be limited to what they can relate to, but they still engage in ethical gazing because they witness Marner's stories about Eppie without attempting to change his identity, as they did earlier when they wanted to make him a church-goer. What a difference from the strictly work-related talk between Marner and his customers! Now he is invited into the homes of his neighbor and engages in a kind of "story time," telling them all the latest happenings with Eppie. Just as his loss had placed him in a more sympathetic light, his attachment to Eppie provides Marner with the substance of a story and an experience that his neighbors can bear witness to.

It is through Eppie, more a symbol and tool of Marner's recovery than a character herself, that his sensibilities are reawakened and we get a sense of actual *shared* sympathy between Marner and Raveloe. With a deeper understanding of his need for the other, Marner begins to take on the customs of the village he has lived in for 15 years but never truly been included. He goes to church on Sundays with Eppie, he participates in conversation beyond business transactions, and he continues to depend on people like Dolly for help and advice. Importantly, his participation does not signal his assimilation, as we will see in the final scenes of the novel, partly because it is his choice to engage in these events and partly because his background is too different to ever be completely subsumed by the villagers. Raveloe comes to accept both Marner's unknowable origins and his unusual role as bachelor-mother. In turn, Marner signals his willingness to bear witness to the village customs by attending more community rituals, without ever really

understanding or believing in those rituals. Thus, the space of difference between Marner and Raveloe is filled with a sympathy based on witnessing rather than understanding and knowability.

Witnessing as Readers

Once Marner begins to engage more with his neighbors, the narrator focuses primarily on the relationship between Marner and Dolly. This relationship forms a model, I suggest, for how the reader should bear witness to the other's story. Earlier in the novel, the narrator guided reader reactions to Marner more overtly. Here, however, the narrator uses gazing as a rhetorical technique by showing the effects of Dolly and Marner's engaging attention to one another and their willingness to witness the other's story. As Marner grows to trust Dolly more, he is able to "open his mind" to her, until he "gradually communicated to her all he could describe of his early life" (143). The description of how Marner tells his story to Dolly is worth quoting in full:

The communication was necessarily a slow and difficult process, for Silas's meager power of explanation was not aided by any readiness of interpretation in Dolly, whose narrow outward experience gave her no key to strange customs, and made every novelty a source of wonder that arrested them at every step of the narrative. It was only by fragments, and at intervals which left Dolly time to revolve what she had heard till it acquired some familiarity for her, that Silas at last arrived at the climax of the sad story – the drawing of lots, and its false testimony concerning him; and this had to be repeated in several interviews, under new questions on her part as to the nature of this plan for detecting the guilty and clearing the innocent. (143)

The first sentence describes this encounter clearly as an example of people with "narrow outward experience" who are "others" to one another because of their "strange customs."

Despite these differences, both Marner and Dolly engage in ethical gazing, Marner by sharing his story with the other and Dolly by embodying an open and generous stance toward the other. The narrator details carefully what this ethical space and stance look like, focusing on how Marner tells his story and on how Dolly responds. Because Marner has only a “meager power of explanation,” he tells his story in fragments that allow Dolly to familiarize herself with the strange customs he describes. Marner only “at last arrived at the climax of the sad story” after he gives Dolly time to ask questions. Dolly is a model listener for the rapt attention she gives to Marner’s story; even during the pauses she spends time pondering “what she had heard till it acquired some familiarity for her.” This is the most ethical encounter in the novel so far because both are willing to engage with an open stance toward the other.

Dolly’s “listening face” illustrates the act of witnessing for the reader (180). The fragmented and interrupted nature of the story Marner narrates to Dolly closely resembles the way *Silas Marner* has been narrated to the reader. The Cass family story forms another part of the novel that constantly interrupts the telling of Marner’s story, similar to how the Rainbow Inn chapter interrupts the plot climax of Marner’s stolen gold. Perhaps these gaps are to give the reader “time to revolve” all that has been said, as Dolly does here. To be ethical listeners (or readers) of this story, rather than passive listeners, we should follow Dolly’s example and ask questions of the narrative. Though Marner seems like a strange character that we would not normally relate to, Dolly models how Marner’s “otherness” should not keep us from bearing witness to his story. Even if we cannot fully understand his story, as the narrator predicts we will not, we can still respond ethically by

simply letting Marner tell it. As twenty-first century readers, this means giving our attention for a length of time to the novel. It also means that when we walk away from the novel, we should continue pondering the story as Dolly did. If Eliot writes to create moral change within her readers, then responding ethically to this novel means allowing for the transformative possibility of the reading experience. In one of her essays Eliot lays out what the reader owes the author: “The greatest benefit we owe to the artist, whether painter, poet, or novelist is the extension of our sympathies” (Pinney 270). No truly ethical encounter with the “other” will leave our horizon of sympathy unchanged.

Conclusion

Eliot clearly saw her writing as a moral project intended to improve the ethics of relating to the other; thus she declares the whole aim in her art is to enable sympathy in people: “The only effect I ardently long to produce by my writings, is that those who read them should be better able to *imagine* and to *feel* the pains and the joys of those who differ from themselves” (*Letters* 3:111). Perhaps one of the most important contexts for understanding Eliot’s conception of sympathy is her revision of nineteenth century hermeneutics.⁹ There is a strain in Eliot’s conception of sympathy, influenced by Schleiermacher, favoring a more subjective approach, in contrast to the more common

⁹ Eliot’s theory of sympathy has been explored on a more technical level by several critics who focus on specific narrative and rhetorical techniques that model sympathy or control how and when it is produced in readers. Doyle looks at distancing techniques, particularly as they are used to control how much we see of a character and the relations characters have to one another (14). Marshall focuses on narrative voice as a technique to control readers’ sympathetic responses. The technique I am focusing on, gazing, draws attention to the reader’s act of looking and the interpretative, and therefore ethical, considerations that go into this act.

methodological approach carried over from eighteenth-century philosophers like Hume.¹⁰ Eliot's more subjective method to hermeneutical understanding leads her to a sympathy that emphasizes individual experience: "my writing is simply a set of experiments in life...[but I refuse] to adopt any formula which does not get itself clothed for me in some human figure and individual experience" (*Letters* 6:216-17). Suzy Anger aptly labels Eliot's novelistic manifestation of hermeneutics as a "hermeneutics of sympathy" (96). Eliot's hermeneutics of sympathy attempts to understand the other while maintaining an important degree of distance and difference by insisting on the uniqueness of each person. Thus, Eliot must struggle to situate her characters within a community without erasing their differences. She wants to "help my readers in getting a clearer conception and a more active admiration of those vital elements which bind men together" (*Letters* 4:472). This is why in *Silas Marner*, Marner's return of self-awareness is predicated on his growing recognition of the "vital elements" binding him to Raveloe. Sympathy requires a balance between eradicating the self and eradicating the other, and it is this tension that Eliot continually returns to her in her novels.¹¹

Eliot recognizes that it is not enough to sympathize with people who bear resemblance to our own values and beliefs; such an act of sympathy will not push on the

¹⁰ For a description of Hume's theory of sympathy see Mercer.

¹¹ Ablow is one critic who points out how sympathetic relations break down continually in Eliot's novels (70). She suggests that Eliot's sympathy concentrates on "how to eradicate selfishness while maintaining the self-consciousness necessary for ethical relationships" (71). For example, Ablow looks at *The Mill on the Floss* as highlighting the problem of how exclusive marital love can become. Total absorption is both pleasurable and very dangerous. Lane's exploration of hate in Eliot's novels further reveals her complexity, though ultimately Lane argues her novels still strive to represent the ethical as intertwined with the exercise of sympathy. However, Eliot's view of sympathy is never as a simple answer and Lane emphasizes how her novels present "social conflict as insoluble and participation in communities as sometimes irreparably damaging to individuals" (116).

horizon of our understanding and will not encourage growth. Eliot is clear, then, that she wants her readers to feel for unsympathetic characters rather than idyllic ones: “We want to be taught to feel not for the heroic artisan or the sentimental peasant, but for the peasant in all his coarse apathy, and the artisan in all his suspicious selfishness” (Pinney 269-71). There should be no doubt why Eliot created the strange hero in *Silas Marner*. This novel pushes the limits of readers’ sympathy; we are called upon to respond to Marner, a space inhabited by our imagination where we act out possible responses, hopefully learning to choose the more ethical form of gazing that leaves the differences between self and other intact while still engendering sympathy in the distance that separates each person’s uniqueness. As I will show in the next chapter, however, reading is not enough to turn someone into a moral person, a challenge Brontë extends in her novel *Villette*. In creating an unknowable heroine, Brontë shows readers they cannot call themselves sympathetic people just because they are able to feel for characters in novels; we cannot be witnesses only by sharing in the lives of fictional characters. Eliot extends a stronger faith than Brontë in the power of fiction to transform the sympathetic horizons of her reader. Certainly Eliot does not see the sympathetic response to a fictional character as the end result. As she stated in the letter quoted above, she expects her novels to expand her readers’ horizon of sympathy so that they can become “better able to *imagine* and to *feel* the pains and the joys” of those who act as “others” in their lives beyond the fiction. Eliot is clear about her effort as a writer to influence, not just reading practices, but actual relationships in people’s lives. The sympathy produced through the intersection of gazing and storytelling is a solution she proposes, but it is not without its failings.

The danger implicit in sympathy is the total absorption and conflation of the self and the other. It is important, then, that the ending of this novel illustrates the extension of sympathy without assimilation. Though the story ends with the marriage of Eppie, I argue this is not the resolution of the novel. The conclusion does not focus on the details of Eppie's wedding, instead the focus turns to various relationships between members of the community, from the Lammeter's own family dynamics to their connection with Marner, to Mr. Macey sitting on his porch and Dolly's recognition that "he'll be hurt if we pass him and say nothing" (182). These little glances into the various relationships of the community remind us of the individuals we have met throughout the narrative and, as always, situates them within the Raveloe community. Perhaps the most important detail in this ending is the description of how the villagers had "leisure to talk of Silas Marner's strange history" (182). Importantly, this shows that although Marner is considered part of the community, his story is still "strange." As Garland's epigraph to this chapter indicates, the moment of witnessing – gazing and storytelling – validates a sense of self. His inclusion within the community in this final scene does not erase the differences between Marner and the villagers. Rather, it demonstrates the presence of ethical relationships as the villagers and Marner willingly identify across their differences, allowing sympathy to dwell in the gap between self and other.

I have argued for a more optimistic role for the gaze by using the term gazing to focus attention on the negotiation of social relationships in *Silas Marner*. An ethical encounter is predicated on maintaining distance between self and other, but ensuring that sympathy dwells in that gap. To have sympathy that does not require understanding, and

thus does not assimilate the other, means there must be a moment of witnessing.

Witnessing allows the other to tell her story and gain an ethical response from listeners indicated by gazing, an open stance toward receiving the other's story and bearing witness to the other's position as a subject with a story to tell.

CHAPTER IV
SILENCE AND THE ETHICS OF UNKNOWABILITY
IN CHARLOTE BRONTË'S *VILLETTE*

Silence is of different kinds, and breathes different meanings. ~ *Villette* 385

There is a perverse mood of the mind which is rather soothed than irritated by misconstruction; and in quarters where we can never be rightly known, we take pleasure, I think, in being consummately ignored. What honest man on being casually taken for a housebreaker, does not feel rather tickled than vexed at the mistake? ~ *Villette* 109

In the prior chapter, Eliot presented a form of sympathetic engagement I called ethical gazing. As illustrated by the exchange of sympathy between Marner and the Raveloe villagers, sharing one's story can help bridge the distance of difference. Unlike Eliot, Charlotte Brontë does not offer a strategy for overcoming difference, insisting instead on the merits of unknowability. In this chapter, I explore silence, another marginalized form of telling like gossip, looking specifically at how its rhetorical effect in Brontë's novel *Villette* produces a critique of the way British readers and citizens assumed all too easily they could know the other. In a period when other narrators and characters seem bent on telling, Lucy Snowe as both narrator and character insists, instead, on silence and withholding. Understanding Lucy's silence as an ethical and rhetorical choice redefines how critics have formerly characterized Lucy as a detached, paranoid, reticent, and unreliable narrator. Such descriptions misread Lucy's silence as an

unethical construction of her own identity, and an unethical stance toward the other. In essence, the rhetorical positioning of Lucy's identity as unknowable, an effect produced by her strategic use of silence, illustrates an alternative conception of approaching the other. The kind of sympathy necessitated by Lucy does not rely on assimilative moves to turn the other into a likeness with which one can sympathize. Instead, silence in this novel calls for a sympathy in, and through, difference that leaves identity fluid, rather than consigning the other to artificial and restricting categories. Lucy's non-response, where a response is expected, strategically constructs fluidity between identity categories. Silence enacts an unknowable self that resists fixed categories and assimilation by resisting the cultural norms covering over difference.

If readers cannot attach to Lucy as they would expect, then they must learn to sympathize with a heroine that remains essentially unknowable, perhaps even unlikable. Lucy's silences transform both reading practices and social relationships by disrupting two sets of expectations: Lucy's moments of silence position her identity as one that disrupts Victorian categories of womanhood, and Brontë's use of silence counter to typical nineteenth-century narrative techniques disrupts the reading process. Of course, this transformation only happens if Lucy's silence is understood as a choice that can create agency. Her silence must be recognized as rhetorical in the sense that it is a chosen action intended to influence her audience to interpret her identity in certain ways.¹

¹ Ramage connects identity and rhetoric through acts of interpretation: "It is this interdependence between identity and language – our capacity to use language as a means of representing our identity to others and in turn to interpret others' representations of themselves – that makes rhetoric such a powerful tool for understanding, forming, and preserving identity" (34). Ramage defines interpretation as the means by which we allay uncertainty; in wrestling with the meaning of the symbolic act that gave rise to the

Lucy's unknowability suggests a needed revision of how sympathy was employed in the nineteenth century. In effect, her silence critiques overly simplified versions of sympathy whereby the sympathizer assumes he/she can comprehend the other. Whereas the use of language often clarifies identity by providing more details and knowledge about a person (even if it is merely an "act"), Lucy's silence refuses to fill in such details and thus makes the work of interpreting her identity seem nearly impossible. The characters that are able to show Lucy sympathy, without falsely constructing her identity, model a new ethic of relating to the other. This defines what I mean by "ethical" in this chapter: the ability to approach the other with sympathy without constructing and defining the other's identity within prescriptive social categories. In addition, the reader must also transform her reading practice as she encounters a narrator who thwarts the "dear reader" relationship at every turn. The narrator-reader relationship thus offers an additional critique, one aimed at reading practices that masks anxieties of imperialism by allowing readers to feel moral just because of their capacity to sympathize with fictional characters.

The need to circumscribe Lucy within a recognizable category reflects in many ways the English imperialist anxieties about knowing the other. Imperialist notions insisted on the ability to define and to describe the other, and claimed moral superiority to reconstruct the identity of the other. *Villette* challenges reading practices that mirror the imperialist need to know and to transform the other into a recognizable English subject before extending sympathy. The discourse system of silence in *Villette* revises the

uncertainty, we alter our interpretative model (149). Language as a symbolic act includes the use of silence as one way of presenting signs that must be interpreted by an audience.

practice of extending sympathy only to one's likeness by employing gaps to insist on the inability of fully knowing the other. These gaps underscore differences between the reader and the characters, narrator, and text. When employed at these different levels silence performs different rhetorical functions. As a character, Lucy uses the communicative act of silence to keep her identity categorically unstable and thereby unknowable. As a narrator, Lucy uses silence as a rhetorical mode to challenge the ethics of how we respond to story and thus to the tellers of story. Brontë uses silence as a narrative technique to create distance between the reader and the text by thwarting the desire for resolution and disclosure.² These three modes of silence together form a discourse system that redefines sympathy predicated on knowing, showing readers how to sympathize in the face of the unknowable other. Tracking acts of silence across the text offers a new way of interpreting Lucy's withholding: her silences create sympathy in, and through, difference rather than relying on assimilation. A more ethical way to negotiate relationships, silence frees the other from one's horizon of norms and expectations.

Theorizing Silence

The lack of studies exploring the role of silence in literary texts parallels the general disregard for silence as a secondary form of communication defined only in opposition to speech – as the absence of speech and therefore less than speech. In addition, the connection usually made between voice and self equates silence with a lack

² Laurence offers an insightful and rigorous look at specific narrative techniques for narrating silence, a unique discourse to convey through written words. Focusing mainly on Virginia Woolf, Laurence develops a theory of reading silence. While I briefly attend to silence as a narrative technique, I am less concerned to establish a method for categorizing narrative silences, as I am interested in the rhetoric of silence as it connects to identity and ethics.

of subjectivity. Extending attempts by feminist theory and rhetorical theory to reconceptualize the importance of silence, I offer an analysis of Lucy's silence as a means of both ethically engaging the other and actively constructing one's identity. I hope to extend Cheryl Glenn's definition of silence as an active and productive rhetorical strategy by tracing the representation of silence in a literary text. Glenn acknowledges that enforced silence can be a form of oppression, but chosen silence can be a source of empowerment. One of the empowering effects of silence as a rhetorical choice, she claims, is how it resists dominant narratives. I am arguing this is the effect of Lucy's silence: it allows her to resist fixed categories of identity and to reformulate the dominant narrative about sympathy in the nineteenth century.

Ratcliffe's study, *Rhetorical Listening*, also opens up definitions of silence by focusing on another aspect of communication that does not include spoken words. Though a different part of interacting with the other, listening often accompanies the space of silence. As Glenn argues with silence, so Ratcliffe claims an active, rather than passive, role for listening. Most relevant to my purposes, Ratcliffe argues that nonidentification is the best position for listening. Rhetorical listening uses a cultural logic that recognizes commonalities *and* differences, allowing both to exist rather than resorting to an either/or reasoning. This kind of listening, then, requires a dialectical process that recognizes the margins between self and other, allowing them to remain rather than assimilating them. One can thus understand an other, Ratcliffe claims, without having to elide the distance created through cultural difference. Perhaps most radical about Ratcliffe's claim for rhetorical listening is how integral such an activity is for defining one's identity. Her

theory corresponds, then, to those like Judith Butler and Adriana Cavarero who claim constructing an identity requires another to whom we tell our story. What Ratcliffe adds to those theories is the role of listening in the development of identity. Both Glenn and Ratcliffe's studies are foundational for expanding our notions of silence in relationships and the rhetorical work it accomplishes in constructing identity.

Butler's emphasis on the performative aspect of telling one's story can be a useful way to understand silence as a form of telling. Butler's description of the exchange between self and other deemphasizes the actual words spoken and places greater importance on the rhetorical moves used to position the self: "I am, in other words, doing something with that I – elaborating and positioning it in relation to a real or imagined audience – which is something other than telling a story about it" (66). This focus on positioning the self requires us to think about narrating in terms other than just verbal messages; silence can be an integral part of the rhetorical positioning involved in any exchange between self and other. Through her silence, then, Lucy's identity remains outside conventional categories, requiring the other to identify with her although he or she may not recognize her. One of the primary ways Lucy encourages this kind of sympathetic identification is through the act of non-response. Lucy intentionally resists responding, for example, when M. Paul calls out to her, though her ear "strained its nerve to hear" because she loves him. She suspects should M. Paul find her he will propose to her; to respond thus means she will take on categories like "wife" and possibly "mother." Lucy is not yet sure of M. Paul's willingness to accept her differences and she refuses to be hailed into a subject position defined by somebody else's idea of what she should be.

Silence in this novel demonstrates how non-response can create subjectivity that resists fixed categories. As a component of identity formation, silence insists on the impossibility of knowing the other, suggesting that sympathy must be possible even across distances of the unknown.

In the following analysis of Brontë's novel, I analyze separately Lucy's use of silence as a character and as a narrator. This separation, highlighted by the model of a discourse system that includes silence as narrative technique (when used by Brontë), rhetorical technique (when used by Lucy-the-narrator), and communicative act (when used by Lucy-the-character), helps underscore the different critiques of social relationships, showing both positive and negative uses of silence as well as the ethical and unethical uses of sympathy engendered by those silences. Because the narrator has a retrospective point of view, at times Lucy-the-character responds unethically and Lucy-the-narrator will correct herself. Thus, to interpret the model of ethical social relations posited in the text we must keep Lucy's own developing ethic distinct from the final model required of the reader. When examining the relational ethics between characters in the novel, I trace examples of both ethical and unethical encounters. The unethical encounters range from Lucy's own responses to the unethical efforts of other characters to "know" Lucy. The ethical encounters occur in varying layers of intimacy, with the bookseller encounter remaining fairly shallow and the encounters with M. Paul developing into a deep relationship. What emerges from these examples is the counterintuitive truth that silence often results in the most ethical approach to the other

because it keeps the other's differences intact and thus fosters a sympathy that avoids assimilation.

“Are You Anybody?”: Lucy's Impulse to Reveal Nothing

Within *Villette* there are three possible ways characters encounter difference. Unethical encounters occur primarily in two ways: a character either assimilates or conflates the other with his or her own self, or a character exoticizes the other to keep that person as a capital “O” other. Both of these responses are presented as unethical in the novel. A third way of encountering the other resists the binary of recognition and misrecognition, and instead extends sympathy through the other's unknowableness that may never be resolved. Lucy's own silences as a character, as well as the various ways other characters respond to this rhetorical positioning of her identity, models for the reader these three different possibilities. Lucy-as-narrator holds this last position as the ethical one, praising characters who encounter the other (most often herself) in this third mode. Brontë inscribes silences into the text, for example by leaving Lucy's childhood and the novel's ending open, thus compelling the reader to enact this third way by sympathizing with the novel's heroine without knowing very much about her life.

It is not a mere accident that others misread Lucy; it is by her own will that she remains unknown through “silent” construction of herself. In this way, she resists an identity fixed within normalizing categories. In contrast to Lucy, Polly willingly takes up cultural categories. As James Buzard suggests, the importance of Polly's character and her marriage to Dr. John is the allegory it articulates of a “self-universalizing imperial

identity” from which, importantly, Lucy’s narrative diverges (257). Lucy’s story disrupts the notion of a rooted British identity with which we begin the novel at the Bretton’s generational home. What Lucy finds fascinating in Polly, Buzard suggests, is her ability to belong to the culture by accepting the roles Polly recognizes others are hailing her into. Lucy’s desire, in contrast, is “to be wholly uninscribed by culture, invisible to its circle of gazes” so that by the end of the novel Lucy takes up the “position of no position” becoming the “light by which we see but not an object to be seen” (266). This non-identification is, I propose, the most ethical way one could “read” Lucy because she is empowered to choose roles and to present her self to others without fighting against socially prescribed and limiting definitions of who she should be.

Although Polly herself easily takes on categories, she does not impose them on Lucy. Through a brief example, I show that young Polly operates as the exemplary for this third way of sympathizing, setting the tone for how other characters should, but most often do not, respond to Lucy. When Lucy catalogues how others construct her, she singles out Polly as the one who “knew” her best:

What contradictory attributes of character we sometimes find ascribed to us, according to the eye with which we are viewed! Madame Beck esteemed me learned and blue; Miss Fanshawe, caustic, ironic, and cynical; Mr. Home, a model teacher, the essence of the sedate and discreet: somewhat conventional perhaps, too strict, limited and scrupulous, but still the pink and pattern of governess-correctness; whilst another person Professor Paul Emmanuel, to wit, never lost an opportunity of intimating his opinion that mine was rather a fiery and rash nature – adventurous, indocile, and audacious. I smiled at them all. If any one knew me it was little Paulina Mary. (334)

Lucy-the-narrator points out the ways in which the other characters only understand her in relation to socially constructed categories of identity that they themselves are most comfortable with. Lucy praises Polly as the character who most understands her; yet, it is Polly who says, “Lucy, I wonder if anyone will ever comprehend you altogether?” (471). When Lucy upholds Polly as “knowing” her the best, then, she is really commending Polly’s ability to develop a friendship with Lucy despite her apparent unknowability. Rather than attempt to assimilate Lucy into a feminine mold Polly can recognize, she acknowledges that Lucy will remain unidentifiable.

Lucy-as-character uses silence as a communicative act most clearly in her encounters with Dr. John, who makes the most unethical attempts to know Lucy by confining her within stereotypical categories. Her silence toward him is a strategic, rhetorical choice she employs to force all the categories he could ascribe to her (woman, teacher, wife, English, Protestant) to remain flexible and unstable. When Dr. John appears at Mdm Beck’s school where Lucy is now teaching, she recognizes him from her residence with the Brettons many years ago. When she first sees him, a strange look passes over her face, which annoys Dr. John: “Mademoiselle does not spare me: I am not vain enough to fancy that it is my merits which attract her attention; it must then be some defect. Dare I ask—what?” (108). He misinterprets the motive behind Lucy’s intent gaze, but she refuses to answer him. She explains to the reader: “I might have cleared myself on the spot,” but she prefers to let him “think what he chose, and accuse me of what he would” (109). Lucy makes sure the reader is clear about her motives for allowing his misconception:

To *say* anything on the subject, to *hint* at my discovery, had not suited my habits of thought, or assimilated with my system of feeling. On the contrary, I had preferred to keep the matter to myself. I liked entering his presence covered with a cloud he had not seen through, while he stood before me under a ray of special illumination, which shone partial over his head, trembled about his feet, and cast light no farther. (109)

Why does Lucy resist being “seen through” by Dr. John? Because from her prior knowledge of him when she lived with the Brettons, she already knows that Dr. John will only see her through his limited vision of social categories like gender and class. The unethical response in this scene is not Dr. John’s inability to recognize Lucy; rather, it is the fact that he fills in the gap of his nonrecognition with his own assumptions.³ He does not leave Lucy’s identity open, he imposes his own interpretative categories on her. He proves this very fact through his lack of notice or interest in Lucy when he encounters her at Mdm Beck’s school. Rather than Lucy’s silence causing him surprise and making him readjust his estimation of her, her silence instead fits into his assumption of her servant status. Her silence here is misinterpreted and actually furthers her circumscription within a social category. However, because Lucy herself does not accept this categorization, it does not confine her actions, something we witness as she attends operas and will eventually run her own school, neither of which a servant would do.

That Dr. John does not recognize Lucy is a mark of his disrespectful manners toward others who are not like him (i.e., of the same class). In recounting this episode to

³ Bock interprets John’s actions as not reading her at all, rather than misreading on his part (131). Even worse than being misread, Bock suggests, is not being read at all. I disagree, however, arguing instead that Brontë created a character who does not mind being misread sometimes, and goes to great lengths at other times not to be read at all.

the reader, Lucy clearly describes the neglect with which Dr. John behaved towards her: He gives her the “degree of notice...given to unobtrusive articles of furniture” and he “never remembered that I had eyes in my head; much less a brain behind them” (107-108). My epigraph qualifies Lucy’s delight in misconstruction; such delight only occurs “in quarters where we can never be rightly known” or, in other words, when we know the encounter involves a person who is too blinded by his or her own conceits to ethically engage with someone who is that person’s other. Had Dr. John given Lucy the same notice she gave him, acknowledgment might have existed on both sides. Dr. John’s behavior is telling – Lucy knows he will always try to construct her within the appropriate cultural norms, and so her silence is Lucy’s strategy to resist being known by someone who does not approach with genuine sympathy, the kind of sympathy willing to expand one’s horizons of understanding and move beyond known categories.

Although Lucy will open up to a few characters by the end of the novel, she continues to remain hidden from Dr. John both figuratively and literally. In the famous festival scene near the novel’s end, Lucy hides in the shadow to avoid Dr. John’s recognition because, she tells the reader, “I *would* not be known” (438). Lucy realizes that mis-recognition would be better than Dr. John’s attempts to assimilate her into a character that suits his tastes and views of the world – into someone like Polly. “I liked to find myself the silent, unknown, consequently unaccosted neighbor of the short petticoat and the sabot,” she tells the reader, “and only the distant gazer at the silk robe, the velvet mantle, and the plumed chapeau. Amidst so much life and joy too, it suited me to be alone – quite alone” (502). At times, certainly, Lucy’s claim, “it suited me to be alone,”

sounds like the assertion of one struggling to accept her lot in life and pretend she actually prefers it. It is interesting to note, however, the connections she makes between being silent and unknown and being unaccosted. She also contrasts her plain clothing with the luxurious clothing of which she wishes only to be a “distant gazer.” The silk robe, petticoat, and other articles of clothing act as markers of identity Lucy does not desire. She resists this socially prescribed identity by remaining only a “neighbor” of the petticoats and a “gazer” at the silk robes while dressing plainly herself.

Although one would expect Lucy to find more comfort with someone she has known for a long time, someone like Dr. John, she surprisingly connects more with a stranger at the festival. This shows that sometimes the distance between self and other can foster a more ethical sympathy. While she successfully hides herself from Dr John (a metaphor for the way she cloaks her identity from him), the bookseller who she has only seen occasionally recognizes her: “Strange to say, this man knew me under my straw-hat and closely-folded shawl.” She calls his offer of help to find her a better seat “disinterested civility” (503). This unselfishly motivated disinterest in Lucy fills the distance between the bookseller and Lucy with a more ethical kind of sympathy, one that does not act out of an egoistic replication of the other as self, nor does the act depend on any self-seeking gain. Ethical distance, labeled here as “disinterest,” prevents false knowledge of Lucy, such as Dr. John might construct by erasing her differences in order to understand and thus sympathize with her. The stranger makes no claims on Lucy, but merely offers to help her find a more comfortable seat. He is able to sympathize with her discomfort without attempting to know her as a person. It is important to remember

Lucy's alien status as a foreigner, in particular an English woman, in Brussels. Lucy is doubly other through national and gender differences, making the stranger's behavior all the more remarkable. Although the briefest of the ethical encounters in the novel, its placement next to Dr. John's unethical treatment of Lucy highlights the qualities that make the bookseller a model for how to engage the other.

The social relationships I have discussed so far show that Lucy desires to form relationships that allow her to remain outside typical feminine constructions. She would rather encounter the bookseller, a stranger who approaches her without trying to define her, than to encounter an old friend like Dr. John who continually confines her within his narrow horizon of womanhood. Genevra is another character who misinterprets Lucy, but to whom Lucy grants more tolerance. One of the rhetorical effects of Genevra's character, which seems exaggerated at times, is the foil she forms to Polly. Polly is willing to acknowledge that she can never know Lucy while Genevra is determined to fix her within some social script. Genevra asks Lucy "but are you anybody?" pleading, "Do – do tell me who you are?" to which Lucy refuses an answer. Unsatisfied at letting Lucy escape with silence, Genevra proceeds to concoct the "most fanciful changes on this theme" proving, according to Lucy-as-narrator, Genevra's narrow horizon of understanding the other, "her incapacity to conceive how any person not bolstered up by birth or wealth, not supported by some consciousness of name or connection, could maintain an attitude of reasonable integrity" (343). Lucy does not appear bothered by Genevra's fanciful descriptions, perhaps because the many stories Genevra concocts mirrors the open possibility of multiple identities with which Lucy feels more

comfortable. Ginevra's perspective on identity represents what the world is concerned with (pedigree, social position, ect), set in opposition to what concerns Lucy (which characteristically she does not divulge). Lucy-as-narrator enacts the practice of allowing differences to co-exist by declaring, "the world is very right in its view, yet believe also that I am not quite wrong in mine" (343). Rather than claim one right perspective, Lucy-as-narrator reinforces the ethics of multiple possibilities. Lucy's silence encourages Ginevra's speculations about her background. Although Ginevra herself is not comfortable to leave Lucy's identity open in this way, Lucy's silence insists on this fluidity. When others approach Lucy unethically, silence can thwart assimilation and refuse the sympathy offered on the basis of likeness alone.

Silence encourages disparate views to co-exist by resisting the impulse to resolve unknowability. This ability to make available multiple interpretations enables ethical encounters between self and other.⁴ In an uncharacteristically didactic moment, Lucy-as-narrator explains how she arrived at this ability: "the longer we live, the more our experience widens; the less prone are we to judge our neighbour's conduct, to question the world's wisdom: wherever an accumulation of small defences [sic] is found, whether surrounding the prude's virtue or the man of the world's respectability, there, be sure, it is needed" (343). Being "less prone to question" does not mean losing one's own beliefs. Rather, Lucy describes a stance of openness to the other, a recognition that we should be less apt to judge just because someone else does not fit into our conceptual categories.

⁴ In Lucy's search for meaning (the narrative trajectory argued by Bock), Bock describes the structure of truth that Lucy posits based in paradox. Lucy reveals a different definition of truth to us: "not as a supposedly genuine interiority hidden by a false and opposing exterior, but as a paradox of alternative realities that can be brought 'within the compass' of understanding" (138).

What makes the above scenarios from *Villette* serve as examples of unethical encounters is how the characters assume they can, and must, know Lucy. The numerous attempts characters make to categorize Lucy demonstrate the unethical assumption that social relations require such knowledge to activate sympathy at all.

As a last example of the unethical attempt to construct an other's identity based on one's own experiences, I look at the way Lucy herself responds to other characters. In one of the early scenes between Lucy and Polly, Lucy-the-narrator describes three different responses to Polly's sadness when her father leaves her at the Bretton household. Mrs. Bretton shed a tear, Dr. John gazed at her, and "I, Lucy Snowe, was calm" (25). Mrs. Bretton arranges her whole world around her son Dr. John, and all of her reactions in the novel are a product of her worldview as his mother. It is thus doubtful that Mrs. Bretton is really sympathizing with Polly. Rather, she probably equates Polly's feeling of missing her father with her own feelings of missing Graham when he is away; she sympathizes by assimilating Polly's feelings to her own. Graham's reaction is of another unethical kind, the objectifying gaze. His gaze directly contrasts Mrs. Bretton's tears, which would be understood by a nineteenth-century audience as a mark of sympathy (though this is precisely the kind of sympathy Brontë's novel questions).

Lucy's response shows that she does not always approach the other ethically. Lucy misreads Polly at first because she assimilates Polly's emotion into two categories: how Lucy expects young girls to act and how Lucy understands her own experience as a young child. Lucy overlays her history of emotion onto Polly, "I perceived she endured agony" (25). The "I perceive" is very important here, for the description following

certainly sounds similar to how Lucy describes her own tormented inner life earlier in the novel. From her retrospective point of view, Lucy-as-narrator recognizes that her representation of Polly in this scene merges Polly's emotional life with Lucy's own.

Lucy-as-narrator traces how her younger self, Lucy-as-character, learns to more ethically approach Polly in another scene where she forces Lucy to revise her assumption that all girls are chatty and shallow (like Genevra). Lucy's surprise at Polly's ability to sit quietly reveals that Lucy had categorized Polly as she did all young girls (321). Lucy now begins to recognize Polly's emotional responses as different from her own: "the peculiarity of this little scene was, that she said nothing: she could feel, without pouring out her feelings in a flux of words" (322). Polly's silence, because it does not fit with Lucy's understanding of young girls, creates a gap that makes Lucy pause and reconsider her interpretation of Polly. Lucy's self-corrective statements create a clear link between ethics and interpretative acts, thus pointing to the reader's own responsibility in the act of reading as interpretation. Lucy's initial misreadings are a rhetorical move that "allows two opposing realities to stand" (144), a model that asks readers, Bock argues, to recognize "that the reading experience may result, not in a definitive interpretation, but in an understanding that encompasses divergent meanings" (147). This way of reading others, modeled in this scene by Lucy-as-character, will become the model the reader needs in order to approach the unresolved ending to the novel.

I turn now to two examples that develop a different pattern for the way Lucy interacts with others. In both her relationships with Père Silas and M. Paul she shows a greater desire to tell than to be silent. Lucy's willingness to be known by these two men

emerges as she learns that they are willing to engage her without trying to erase her difference. The scene of Lucy's confession to Père Silas, a Catholic priest, much discussed by critics in terms of nationalism, sets up an encounter between two people who would be perceived in nineteenth-century Britain as having the irreconcilable difference of religion. Despite such radical difference, both Lucy and the Priest interact in fulfilling and ethical ways. This scene seems anomalous to the rest of the novel because Lucy insists on telling her story to the Priest rather than claiming her usual silent space. It proves, however, that Lucy desires community; her prior silences do not signify her aversion to intimate relationships. Rather, Lucy's silences single out the kind of relationships she desires: those that build from difference rather than erasing it.

Like her silences, in this instance Lucy uses her voice to disrupt the socially scripted confession between priest and parishioner by beginning with the statement "I am a Protestant," which breaks from the proper "formula of confession" and disrupts the priest's ability to go through the confession as a duty of form "with the phlegm of custom." Added to this blunt declaration of difference, Lucy also redefines the conventional purpose for confessing. Confession usually signifies that one desires to be reinstated within a community by turning from some aberrant behavior. Lucy's confession does not come under this definition; she does not actually need or desire the priest's advice to reform her behavior. What she really wants is the "relief of communication in an ear which was human and sentient" (179). Lucy's purpose and opening statement, the Priest tells her, "take me unawares...I have not had such a case as yours before: ordinarily we know our routine and are prepared, but this makes a great

break in the common course of confession. I am hardly furnished with counsel fitting the circumstances” (178-79). The priest has no ready response within his normal horizon of understanding those who come to confession.

Lucy’s approach to Silas not only highlights their difference but also overturns the hierarchy of confessor and confessee. This unequal relationship is undermined because Silas’s normal horizon of response is disrupted; without the script Silas normally follows, he must step down from his role as priest and create another way of interacting with Lucy. The encounter moves from the confessor/confessee hierarchy to a more open interaction between two people who, once forced to let go of their assumptions, now expand their horizon of understanding to create a new narrative about one another, and by extension about other religious faiths (not all Catholics are bad, not all Protestants are bad). Lucy can now separate her dislike for the Catholic Church and her appreciation for the priest of whom she will always “retain a grateful recollection” because he “was kind when I needed kindness; he did me good” (180). This confession scene, with all the complex meanings that it alludes to, offers the hope that people separated by extreme difference can still ethically interact in the way they each approach the other with surprise or openness and strive to relate to the individual and not a category.

I have been talking so far as though Lucy’s silence provides a complete break with social scripts and allows her to easily resist others’ categorization of her. It is not so simple of course, and even Lucy realizes the ways in which she is already confined within social definitions even in the way she understands herself. When she meets Père Silas again some time after the confession scene, he says how jealous he is that she

belongs to the Protestants because he recognizes in her the potential for a high “spiritual rank” if she were to pass under the “discipline of Rome, moulded by her high training, inoculated by her salutary doctrines” (437). Lucy reflects to herself: “I half-realized myself in that condition also; passed under discipline, moulded, trained, inoculated, and so on” as if she recognizes that despite trying to keep others from fitting her into a mold, she is already formed by culture’s requirements. Throughout the novel her inward battles take this form: she fights between reason and passion, between society’s requirements of her as a woman and her own desires. Indeed, the battle between individual and society takes place within Lucy, and she knows it. Her silence may hold social scripts at bay, but it does not prevent the struggle against the definitions she desires to throw off.

The third and final ethical encounter modeled in the novel takes place between M. Paul and Lucy, who gradually fall in love. Although early in their relationship Lucy employs the same strategy of silence with M. Paul, once she learns that he respects her uniqueness she begins to speak more openly with him. M. Paul becomes the one with whom reticent Lucy indulges her desire to tell because she recognizes that he will allow their differences to remain. In an important, yet often-neglected scene, M. Paul proves he will not try to conform Lucy to his own worldviews by assuring her he does not think their opposing religious beliefs are an obstacle to their relationship. Once Lucy candidly tells M. Paul she has finally and formally decided that after all her exposure to Catholicism she clings more tightly to Protestantism, she thinks this pronouncement will end any possibility of a relationship between them: “I had spoken, so declared my faith, and so widely severed myself from him I addressed” (467). Throughout the novel she

returns again and again to the differences of Protestantism and Catholicism, thinking this difference will ultimately keep her and M. Paul apart. M. Paul's response surprises Lucy, then, coming as "an echo responsive, one sweet chord of harmony in two conflicting spirits" (467). M. Paul proceeds to affirm each of their separate beliefs, but grasps to the one they have in common – the cry "God be merciful to me, a sinner." M. Paul thus emphasizes their common beliefs but without assimilating their differences.⁵

The longest part of his speech here, in fact, focuses on how they are different: "How seem in the eyes of God who made all firmaments, from whose nostrils issued whatever of life is here, or in the stars shining yonder – how seem the difference of man? But as Time is not for God, nor Space, so neither is Measure, nor Comparison" (467). Because Lucy trusts that M. Paul can love her without confining her within his own worldview, he becomes the person to whom she will "tell all." Yet, the novel does not end with the scene of telling in the schoolroom between the two lovers. Rather, we are left with no ending at all. It is to the relationship between narrator and reader I now turn in an attempt to explain the function of ending with "sunny imaginations" instead of the lovers' scene.

Lucy as Narrator: Ethically Reading the "I" of an Other

The following analysis of Lucy's silences as a narrator importantly reinterprets critical perception of her moments of withholding. Ultimately, I argue that Brontë created

⁵ Buzard interprets this novel within his study about auto-ethnography in the nineteenth century as a critique of self-universalizing mentalities. The fact that M. Paul leaves Lucy's Protestantism intact and even says he loves it in her is a "remarkable passage" for that time and one Buzard uses to show the text's critique of universalizing by applauding Paul's gesture here (250).

a narrator-reader relationship that redefines what it means to extend ethical sympathy. Lucy's silences as a narrator critique reading practices in Britain, by showing readers that they can never really know her and by extension that they can never really know an other. If we accept the positive ramifications of non-recognition, however, then the distance maintained between self and other actually creates a more ethical encounter. Lucy is not just a reticent narrator; she is an ethical one who forces readers to acknowledge difference. We are not the intimate listeners of *Jane Eyre's* "dear reader." Lucy instead insists that we keep her defined as other, that we do not base our sympathy on recognition of "you are like me." Rather, we must learn to sympathize with someone who will always remain other to our self, and not only other, but also unknowable. The point, in other words, of Lucy's silences as both character and narrator is to represent what an ethical relationship with the other looks like.

I focus on how Lucy's silences transform social relationships, a focus necessary for understanding her silence as an ethical endeavor. Without this focus on relationships in the novel, her silences are more often represented as a skeptical or even cynical practice. For example, Carol Bock's discussion of the novel, though insightful, focuses on the interpretative act itself. Bock describes *Villette* as a novel concerned explicitly with the scope and limits of interpretation. My discussion of the novel refocuses the issue of interpretation more within relationships, rather than just the act of reading itself. When Bock focuses on Lucy-as-character, she also sees Lucy's "invisibility" as an intentional strategy. Bock argues, however, that this strategy results in characters' inability to decode Lucy and thus implies "that interpretation is endlessly creative (and hence never

definitive) and entirely futile” (132). Because Bock focuses on the act of interpretation, the end result indeed seems futile when interpretation fails to produce truth of some kind. I suggest, however, that if we see this failed interpretation as the point, we discover that Lucy-as-character uses her invisibility to transform the structure of social relationships.

An ethical encounter with the other should not begin with attempts to read or to interpret, attempts that result most often in misreading or misconstruction. When Bock moves to discuss Lucy-as-narrator, she does suggest that in recounting her life story, Lucy models the act of interpretation as a reading experience that results “not in a definitive interpretation, but in an understanding that encompasses divergent meanings” (147). I suggest it is important to place this model of producing “divergent meanings” not just within the act of reading, where Bock situates it, but to extend it to social relationships. The ethical encounter with the other, Lucy-as-narrator models, should include these divergent meanings rather than attempt an interpretation of the other to fit our understandings.

The distance Lucy-as-narrator constructs between herself and the reader, I argue, is an important strategy she uses in redefining how one ethically engages with the other. Critics who focus on Lucy’s distancing strategy as narrator generally see this as an attempt to avoid relationships rather than enhance them. Ivan Kreilkamp argues that the association between novel-writing and speech was not always the best strategy for women writers. Lucy’s refusal to narrate, then, demonstrates a tactic women could use to gain social power, by creating an anonymous or impersonal voice. Kreilkamp acknowledges her silence as chosen strategy, but he ascribes a purpose to those silences

that focuses on the problem of women's voice in the Victorian period. Kreilkamp thus interprets Lucy's refusal to narrate the ending as a recognition of the limits of narrative and voice. I find this reading symptomatic of most interpretations of the ending of *Villette*, and I would like to propose, instead, that the unresolved ending needs to be read as expressing the possibility of narrative rather than its limits. Lucy's strategy of withholding does not emphasize Lucy's isolation, a "successful but partnerless professional" (153). Rather, her withholding is meant to encourage relationship, but to encourage a more ethical type of relationship that does not insist on full knowledge of the other. This distance created by the unresolved ending, then, emphasizes the need to allow multiple interpretations to exist at once, a distance that is therefore positive in its ethical implications.

While many critics interpret Lucy's silence as desiring distance, they fail to recognize that this distance is intended to create a more ethical relationship between self and other. Amanda Anderson insightfully reads the detachment in this novel as a critique of gender ideologies; the distance Lucy cultivates helps her resist restrictive categories. However, Anderson ultimately construes this distance in negative terms, mirroring the "forms of surveillance, impersonality, and neutrality that marked Victorian discourses of femininity and professionalism" (48). Lucy distances herself from others' attempts to read her, Anderson argues, because she is "wary of the perpetual threat of failed intimacy and the acute potential of misrecognition" (48). Recasting her established distance in more positive terms, I suggest, helps uncover the way Lucy works to transform relationships rather than just resist them. I argue that Lucy's rhetorical stance of silence

(what Anderson refers to as detachment) illustrates how silence presents an unknowable identity that requires sympathetic engagement without the identification that so often elides differences into sameness. Therefore, I interpret Lucy's distancing technique as a way to encourage connection between self and other through the positive distance of difference.

Lucy describes the ethical distance between self and other by narrating how her own attitude transforms toward audiences. A typical witty and combative exchange between M. Paul and Lucy illustrates young Lucy's approach to an audience of strangers. M. Paul tries to irritate her by describing her infatuation with her leading role in the upcoming examination day: "So...you will be enthroned like a queen; tomorrow – enthroned by my side. Doubtless you savour in advance the delights of your authority. I believe I see something radiant in you, you little ambitious woman!" (170). Though she does not immediately respond to M. Paul, Lucy corrects his perception for the reader:

Now the fact was, he happened to be entirely mistaken. I did not—could not—estimate the admiration or the good opinion of to-morrow's audience at the same rate he did. Had that audience numbered as many personal friends and acquaintance for me, as for him, I know not how it might have been: I speak of the case as it stood . . . *He* cared for them too much; *I*, probably, too little. (171)

Lucy cares little for the audience of school children because they are all strangers to her. In contrast, she feels M. Paul is too assured of his audience's good opinion and cares for them too much. Lucy's indifference to her audience results from their relation to her as strangers. Considering her position now as narrating her life story to an audience of strangers, older Lucy seems to take much more care with how she cultivates the

relationship between herself and her readers. M. Paul continues to bait her by referring to her “passionate ardour for triumph” when she performed the leading role in the school play. Provoked into finally responding, Lucy declares: “I had not the slightest sympathy with the audience below the stage. They are good people, doubtless, but do I know them? Are they anything to me?” (171). The narrator, an older Lucy, presents a very different way of relating to the audience than we see young Lucy enact in this scene. The discussion between M. Paul and Lucy about audiences shows her earlier self’s unwillingness to cultivate a relationship with people she does not know. Yet, the very way that older Lucy narrates her story, demanding that readers sympathize with her while accepting they do not really know her, shows that Lucy herself has learned a more ethical way to approach an audience of strangers.

Brontë uses Lucy as a vehicle to revise the type of narrator she developed in *Jane Eyre*. Jane performs an assumed intimacy with the reader through endearing references to “dear” or “my” reader. Lucy from the outset creates distance between herself and the reader by refusing to act as the reader’s guide. Instead, Lucy offers multiple interpretations of plot situations without suggesting which is the “correct” one. For example, when she tries to explain how she felt the first month of her isolation during the “long vacation,” she includes a paragraph addressing several kinds of readers (religious, moralist, stern sage, stoic, cynic, epicure) who would each have different reactions to her feelings. But she says “I accept the sermon, frown, sneer and laugh; perhaps you are all right: and perhaps, circumstanced like me, you would have been, like me, wrong” (173). Thus, while presenting several interpretations, including her own, Lucy allows for any of

them to be true and does not privilege any one over the other. The rhetorical effect of continually refusing to choose just one perspective helps readers become more comfortable with variant meanings. If Lucy is willing to consider others' judgments of her own situation, then we as readers should not be so quick to fill in her intentional silences with our own interpretations.

Lucy-the-narrator's request for readers' sympathy is at times quite direct. The sort of sparring illustrated above in M. Paul and Lucy's conversation about audiences entertains the reader throughout the novel. Lucy-as-narrator indicates she knows that readers enjoy these scenes, despite how they might make Lucy-as-character feel. After a time of "first-rate humour and spirits" between M. Paul and Lucy, she admits they were fighting again soon after: "after all this amiability, the reader will be sorry for my sake to hear that I was quarrelling with M. Paul again before night" (364). Lucy here explicitly asks the reader to extend sympathy toward her, despite the fact that she knows the reader probably enjoys the comedy of their squabbles more than the sedate conversations without antagonism. She thus qualifies that the sympathy is "for my sake." In the interest of story, readers might want to see them quarreling again because it is entertaining, but she asks us to separate *our* feelings on the matter for how *she* must feel about it. This is the foundation for ethical sympathy; the sympathy does not have to emerge out of similar feelings or self-interest. In this instance, readers can sympathize with Lucy-the-character's feelings at fighting again with M. Paul, while still acknowledging the enjoyment their sparring adds to the process of reading (though we should be suspicious that Lucy actually enjoys sparring with M. Paul also).

Just as characters in the novel struggle to define Lucy and must eventually accept her unknowable status, the readers of *Villette* must learn how to show sympathy for the narrator without understanding her. My reading of Lucy's silence as rhetorical strategy helps make sense of the beginning and ending in which Lucy-the-narrator intentionally withholds any specific information about herself. In the first chapters of the novel, Lucy gestures toward the way a reader might construct her according to whatever "amiable conjecture" he or she chooses:

It will be conjectured that I was of course glad to return to the bosom of my kindred. Well! The amiable conjecture does no harm, and may therefore be safely left uncontradicted. Far from saying nay, indeed, I will permit the reader to picture me, for the next eight years, as a bark slumbering through halcyon weather, in a harbour still as glass...A great many women and girls are supposed to pass their lives something in that fashion; why not I with the rest? Picture me then idle, basking, plump, and happy, stretched on a cushioned deck, warmed with constant sunshine, rocked by breezes indolently soft. (39)

The irony in her statement, created through the hyperbolic picture of an "idle, plump, and happy" girl on a "cushioned deck" with "constant sunshine" alerts the reader to the insincerity of her suggestion to fill in the gap of her childhood. The reader's freedom in filling in her early years is tempered by this irony as well as the conflicting picture Lucy presents just a few lines later "I too well remember a time – a long time, of cold, of danger, of contention" (39). This incongruity forces the reader to acknowledge that if the "amiable conjecture" is made, it will be of the reader's own construction and not a true representation of Lucy's circumstances. What we desire to hear is how Lucy constructs her early years because this tells us something about Lucy. Even if Lucy's story were inaccurate, her telling would illuminate important aspects of her character. She denies us

this, however, establishing her unknowability at an early stage in the novel. If the reader were to fill in the narrative gap, instead of leaving the story's possibilities open, the narrative would then reflect the reader's own story and life experience, not Lucy's. Assimilating her identity within the horizon of the reader's experience closes down the possible meanings for Lucy's story and assigns only one meaning – and that meaning comes from the other and not the subject herself.

Lucy performs the same rhetorical tactic again at the end of the novel, thwarting the fulfillment of our desire to know by denying the reader any real closure:

Here pause: pause at once. There is enough said. Trouble no quiet, kind heart; leave sunny imaginations hope. Let it be theirs to conceive the delight of joy born again fresh out of great terror, the rapture of rescue from peril, the wondrous reprieve from dread, the fruition of return. Let them picture union and a happy succeeding life. (546)

Lucy passes no judgment here should the reader decide to provide closure through her own "sunny imagination"; however, Lucy's intentional withholding positions the reader to commit a certain violence against the story by ascribing a meaning limited to the reader's own horizon of experience. In a letter to her publisher, George Smith, Brontë describes how the ending will be created according to the individual reader:

Drowning and Matrimony are the fearful alternatives. The Merciful – like Miss Mulock, Mr. Williams, Lady Harriet St. Clair and Mr. Alexander Frazer – will of course choose the former and milder doom – drown him to put him out of pain. The cruel-hearted will on the contrary pitilessly impale him on the second horn of dilemma – marrying him without ruth or compunction to that – person – that – that – individual – 'Lucy Snowe.' (55-56)

We should not miss Brontë's ironic humor in this passage by suggesting the cruelest ending is marriage, not death. She also leaves out any adjectives in describing Lucy, managing to put only vague nouns, "person" and "individual," before finally casting her name in quotation marks. Though she appears unconcerned that others will form an ending for her (as her father certainly tried to do), I would suggest that her caustic humor here indicates a critical attitude toward the demands of readers that the novel should end as they see fit and not as fits the heroine. Creating our own ending limits the text's meaning to one interpretation and situates Lucy's identity within a category constructed by the reader to fit this ending. Lucy resists this unethical construction by leaving the ending unresolved. She therefore models the more ethical way readers should encounter difference in their own lives: they should resist imposing one way of constructing an other's identity (their way) and instead use the possibility of multiple interpretive viewpoints to expand their own horizons of understanding.

Lucy's withholding is thus not simply the result of Brontë's lack of trust in readers as some critics suggest. For example, Bock interprets the novel's ending as another failed moment; like Lucy-the-character fails as "a decoder of signs," Lucy-the-narrator fails "in her attempt to elicit from her readers the proper response for understanding her encoded tale" (137). She goes on to argue, "*Villette* thus appears to confirm *Shirley's* skepticism about the power of readers and storytellers to find truth in the fiction-making process" (137). It seems strange, however, to argue that a novel writer would ultimately think there is no truth in narrative. Rather than ascribe Lucy's withholding to some mistrust between author and audience, such gaps and silences

instead point to a new way of sympathizing across difference that Lucy enacts as both a character and a narrator. Rather than just sympathizing with someone we understand, whose story we fully comprehend, Lucy wants us to be able to sympathize in spite of (or even because of) difference.

So how are we to respond ethically to Lucy and her story, avoiding the binary of either assimilating her or constructing her as an exotic other? We must follow the third way suggested by Lucy's silences as a character and as a narrator, a strategy for engaging the other that begins with recognition of the other as a subject without necessarily seeking something of ourselves in the other (7). Leaving the ending of the novel open to multiple interpretations in our minds symbolizes our willingness to approach Lucy without assimilating her story into our own. To respond ethically to the text, we should not be Miss Mullocks or Mr. Frazers; rather, we should listen to how Lucy describes those three years building up her school and waiting for M. Paul's return, acknowledging her as a feeling subject without having to understand or agree with her experience.

Charlotte Brontë invests much of her novel with the desire to tell, but she does so primarily through textual silences. Lucy Snowe, both as character and narrator, employs silence to resist the identity that others want to assign her. We are not the intimate listeners of *Jane Eyre's* "dear reader." Lucy instead insists that readers learn to sympathize with someone who remains unknown and thus other to one's self. The gesture towards fulfilling our desire for a happy ending is only just that, an empty gesture that turns Lucy's story into our own construction. If readers impose their own final

interpretation, they perform the violence of fashioning her life story to fulfill their own desires rather than truly listening to the silence that preserves difference.

The kind of sympathy Lucy requires sets her apart from other narrators, like those described by Carla Kaplan who refuse to narrate an identity to an “unreliable, unworthy, or otherwise inadequate” audience (113). I am suggesting that Brontë’s novel, while also wanting the audience to recognize difference, more importantly uses Lucy’s role as narrator to ask readers to sympathize and receive her story despite these differences. In the scene of Lucy telling her story to the Catholic priest, a listener who is most unlike herself, Brontë models this third way of sympathizing. The rhetorical effect of Lucy’s silence does not indicate a mistrust of the reader; rather, that distance is intended to enact a new way of approaching difference. Lucy’s silence calls us to acknowledge her subjectivity despite the differences that may not allow characters (or readers) to recognize her. If an ethical encounter is one where I can express my identity without being confined to the other’s categories, then silence, more often than language, offers the best opportunity for such an encounter. Silence transforms social relationships by creating the ability to sympathize across the space of difference between self and other.

CHAPTER V

LAUGHTER, FORM, AND THE LIMITS OF SYMPATHY

The world is a looking-glass, and gives back to every man the reflection of his own face. Frown at it, and it will in turn look sourly upon you; laugh at it and with it, and it is a jolly, kind companion. ~ *Vanity Fair* 17

Gwendolen rather valued herself on her superior freedom in laughing where others might only see matter for seriousness. ~ *Daniel Deronda* 109

In claiming that sympathy could be extended to an unknowable other, Charlotte Brontë suggested a radical alteration of nineteenth-century notions of sympathy predicated on knowing and understanding the other. In this chapter, I use the discourse system of laughter to illustrate the limits of sympathy because laughter itself most often resides at the extremes of signaling either sympathy with the other or rejection of the other. I explore two laughing heroines, Gwendolen Harleth in *Daniel Deronda* and Becky Sharp in *Vanity Fair*, who both use laughter to challenge social conventions. Unlike Brontë, who suggests the distance that Lucy constructs through her silence is necessary for ethical sympathy, George Eliot and William Thackeray cannot link the distance of laughter with sympathy in their heroines. Although both Eliot in *Daniel Deronda* and Thackeray in *Vanity Fair* at times represent ethical laughter in the service of sympathy, they ultimately retreat from it as neither can find the right balance between distance and sympathy; it would seem that laughter is opposed to sympathy. Part of what obstructs

ethical sympathy in these novels, however, is the context of genre; realism and satire, born out of certain ideologies and worldviews, present limits to what the ideology of sympathy can achieve. Laughter, automatically connected in many ways to satire and often overlooked in realism, pushes on the limits of how both forms are able to engage with an ethical kind of sympathy.

In the epigraph above from *Vanity Fair*, the narrator employs a mirror as metaphor, a common device when describing realism as a mirror that reflects truth about the world. In this example, however, the reflection is not the world but a narcissistic image of himself. The narrator suggests, then, that if one can laugh at oneself the world will turn out to be a jolly place. Only this does not exactly hold true when one considers where Becky, who laughs all the way through the novel, finally ends up. If laughter is aligned with this narcissistic image of seeing only oneself, then can laughter ever produce the outward impulse of sympathy? What kind of world does satire construct and how does it compare to realism's vision of the world? These are questions I consider at the end of the chapter as I move from the characters' use of laughter to the ways Eliot and Thackeray explore sympathy and ultimately find its limits. Indeed, the kind of sympathy Eliot seems to be searching for in *Daniel Deronda* actually suggests the need for a different model of realism than the one predicated on reading-as-knowing. The assumptions on which realism and satire are based represent two poles for the unethical ways in which self and other can relate. Realism attempts to present the other as knowable and thereby requires sympathy to participate in assimilation and homogenization of the other's differences. Satire presupposes a distance that is based on

a sense of superiority. This distance, then, prevents the exchange of sympathy by maintaining hierarchy and alterity. When sympathy is no longer enough to facilitate an ethical encounter between self and other, it is better, I argue, to acknowledge the limits of sympathy and to walk away. At the very least, we have preserved the others subjectivity and difference.

Today, popular sayings like “laughter is the best medicine” support customary understandings that laughter is a mostly congenial response to a humorous situation, though many people also distinguish between laughing *with* versus laughing *at* someone. Laughter’s effects also depend on *who* is laughing, as laughter is a clearly gendered discourse in the nineteenth century and continues to be so today.¹ Genial, soft laughter (acceptable for women) we associate with building intimacy; this is the laughter we use with our friends in support of a joke, statement, or situation. In contrast, loud, raucous laughter (not acceptable for women) we associate with alienating someone; this is the laughter we use with our enemies to expose them and build ourselves up. The problem with the former kind of laughter is the way it usually elides all distance between self and other; sympathy extended through this laughter, then, is not really ethical. I do not think, however, that we can only laugh sympathetically with those who we presuppose to fully know and understand. I identify a third kind of laughter that combines elements of both extremes detailed above by employing sympathy at the same time that it maintains the distance that enables important distinctions between self and other to remain. In this

¹ Crawford’s essay points out how experimental research in humor studies begins from a biased point of view, beginning with categories of the comical based on traditionally male forms of humor.

chapter, I focus on the laughter of incongruity as offering the best model for ethically engaging the other.

My claim for the place of sympathy within the laughter of incongruity rests on the effect of laughter; more than just incite characters or readers to laugh for the sake of release, laughter is meant to expose the unethical practice that rejects disparate views and insists on normative practices. This exposure, and the opening up to alternative ways of viewing the world, is the ethical value in the laughter of incongruity. In *The Victorian Comic Spirit: New Perspectives*, Jennifer Wagner-Lawlor asserts “humorous and comic representations function politically by revealing contradictions in ideological discourses, by exposing repressed illogicalities and prejudices, by way of irony or ridicule, attendant to nineteenth-century ideologies of gender, class, race, nationalism” (xvi). Laughter is not just a response to humorous situations, as Wagner-Lawlor asserts; it can expose contradictions in ideologies that oppress certain populations. One of the ideological discourses it can disrupt, I suggest, is the dominant narrative that sympathy must be predicated on understanding. Laughter can work in the service of sympathy by transforming hostile differences formed on the basis of prejudices and “repressed illogicalities” into a distance that respectfully recognizes difference by allowing contradictions, when they arise, to remain in place.

In order to uncover the way laughter can produce ethical sympathy, I explore laughter as a discourse system in two novels. Characters within *Vanity Fair* and *Daniel Deronda* use laughter as a communicative act. When Becky and Miss Crawley laugh together, they express their superiority over other people at the parties they attend while

simultaneously communicating a common bond with one another because they share this sense of superiority. Laughter as a communicative act can be misconstrued, as often happens between Gwendolen and Grandcourt. In one of the few instances when Gwendolen laughs in Grandcourt's presence, she means to be playful and flirty, but he misinterprets her laughter as an expression of disdain. The narrator's role becomes important in ensuring the reader properly interprets instances of laughter, even when the characters do not. I primarily focus on the narrator in *Vanity Fair*, examining how the narrator uses laughter as a rhetorical technique to manipulate the distance between the reader and the character, drawing attention to gaps in the text that create the laughter of incongruity. Laughter is also a narrative technique used by Thackeray and Eliot to draw attention to the incongruities in life; Eliot attempts to propose sympathy as the solution, but she finds sympathy cannot resolve the extreme differences inherent in the complex interiorities of her characters in *Daniel Deronda*. Thackeray encourages the reader to adopt an array of perspectives presented by the narrator, but this acceptance of open-endedness does not increase the reader's sympathy for characters.

In claiming laughter as a communicative act, rhetorical technique, and narrative technique, I am working from the assumption that laughter is not just a physiological response; that one can control what one laughs at and when. As a type of discourse, laughter communicates individual and group identity and works to negotiate those identities. In *Laughter in Interaction*, Phillip Glenn claims, "laughing contributes to the ongoing creation of meaning, self, relationship, society, and culture" (3). While laughter can also contribute to the creation of unethical relationships, such as the hierarchical

relationships established through the laughter of superiority, the effect of the laughter of incongruity encourages a more positive view of difference that allows various viewpoints to coexist. This laughter forms an important contrast to the usual tendency to create unsympathetic barriers between the self's perspective and the other's perspective. I first contextualize the laughter in these two novels by discussing how laughter was constructed in the nineteenth century, and then further develop a definition of the laughter of incongruity by examining some recent theories about laughter that I find essential for re-conceptualizing laughter to enable ethical sympathy. I then turn to *Daniel Deronda* and *Vanity Fair* to trace the way each of these novels expose the limits of sympathy as it pushes against extreme difference and the form of the novel itself.

Theorizing Laughter

Although common perceptions of Victorians construe the period as repressed and somber, the tensions of modernity often produced a comic view of the world. Peter Berger theorizes that the modern spirit encourages a comic perception because:

Modernity pluralizes the world. It throws together people with different values and different worldviews; it undermines taken-for-granted traditions; it accelerates all processes of change. This brings about a multiplicity of incongruities – and it is the perception of incongruence that is at the core of the comic experience. (202)

According to Berger, the comedy emerging from modernity is produced out of contradictions; Berger's observations thus identify incongruity as the primary source for laughter. There were other kinds of laughter recognized in the Victorian period, of

course. In fact, there are three main theories that converge in nineteenth-century accounts of laughter. The oldest and possibly most popular theory of laughter, the theory of superiority, descends from Aristotle to Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes's theory is best summarized by the often-cited quotation: "Laughter is a sudden glory arising from the sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly" (46). Superiority theories of laughter tend to emphasize its disciplinary effect to corral people into socially normative behavior. As a critique of Hobbes, the theory of incongruity emerges in the eighteenth century largely through the philosophies of Immanuel Kant and Arthur Schopenhauer. Andrew Stott argues this shift makes sense alongside the privileging of wit in the eighteenth century as a form of humor that delights in exposing incongruities (136-137). Finally, the relief theory also enters discussions of laughter in the nineteenth century through Herbert Spencer and Sigmund Freud. They saw laughter as "a symptom of division and struggle within the self, recognition, as it were, of incongruous selfhood" (Stott 138). In light of Freud's other theories, in particular the way he popularized notions of Victorian sexual repression, one can see how Freud would view laughter as the release of repressed tensions.

What my brief historical survey demonstrates is that no single theory can explain laughter. Laughter itself is paradoxical and dependent on social contexts; these two facts should encourage studies of laughter to acknowledge the multiplicity of motives for laughing and the variety of work laughter accomplishes. While acknowledging laughter's diversity, I limit the focus of this chapter to the laughter produced out of the context of incongruity, both because, as Berger states above, it seems most fitting to the modern

world view emerging in the nineteenth century, and because I find the laughter of incongruity theory resonates most deeply with my exploration of laughter producing an ethical distance between self and other. Like the other discourse systems in this study, laughter is inflected by gender, particularly because of my focus on the incongruities exposed by laughter, incongruities experienced most strongly by disempowered groups like women. A woman who laughed in the nineteenth century took greater risks than a laughing man, namely for the social injunctions against women laughing. In fact, for a woman to laugh uproariously was sure to gain her the label of madness and turn her into a hysteric.² If she were not labeled mad, then a witty woman's chastity could be questioned, just as we see the uncertainty revolving around Gwendolen's and Becky's virtue.

What one chooses to laugh at usually conveys a lot about one's beliefs and values. A person who tends to laugh at incongruity exhibits what John Marmysz calls the "humorist attitude": "What is central in the humorist attitude is not the discovery of some solution to an apparent incongruity but rather the openness involved in surveying incongruities from a variety of perspectives and taking pleasure in the process along the way" (154). What makes the laughter of incongruity ethical is that the central aim, as Marmysz claims, is not to resolve the incongruities but to take pleasure in "surveying" multiple viewpoints. Laughter produces sympathy when it recognizes different perspectives but does not necessarily feel compelled to pick one. Not resolving

² Suggestive of Gregg Camfield's title, *Necessary Madness*, women who demonstrated wit, and the aggressive behavior linked to it, were popularly considered to be psychologically disturbed. Barreca also points to the perceived danger of women engaging in humor, the resulting construction resting on the "figure of the hysteric" (31-32). Gillooly traces the historical trend of the hysterical woman in her book (see pages 32-38).

incongruities does not mean laughter ignores them; on the contrary, laughter draws attention to those incongruities, but for the purpose of allowing additional perspectives to arise. When a social norm or category clashes with the way we actually experience the other, we are forced to re-evaluate our interpretive lens, in essence creating a new way of viewing the other and the world. This is the value of humor, as Gregg Camfield claims: “(humor) juxtaposes ostensibly incompatible systems of thought to inspire a different order of viewing” (xi). While Camfield argues that all forms of humor work by contrasting two different views, I focus on the laughter of incongruity as having the particular effect of creating distance between self and other.

I am concerned to show not just how laughter produces sympathy, but how it must also produce distance. There are some forms of laughter, like the sentimental, that seem easily aligned with sympathy. In her study of humor in nineteenth-century British fiction, Eileen Gillooly argues that “feminine humor” has the potential to build sympathetic identification, rather than create distance between humorist and object like most other forms of humor.³ While Gillooly draws important connections between laughter and sympathy, I extend her discussion to include loud, raucous, or otherwise “unfeminine” laughter. I argue that the distance emerging from eruptions of laughter is

³ I am uncomfortable with suggesting that the laughter of incongruity is the special province of women or the “feminine,” though many critics make this connection because women experience firsthand the incongruity of life. For example, in her essay “The Divided Lives of Women in Literature,” Pope says much of women’s humor is based on “the incongruity between the inner and outer self, between reality as women perceive it and the myths of male superiority” (qtd. in Unger 23). As I will show in my discussion of *Vanity Fair*, a male writer can also recognize the incongruity of women’s inner lives and what society requires of them. Rather than gendering the laughter itself, I recognize the historical practice of applying gender to categories of laughter, but in my own analysis I posit the laughter of incongruity as ungendered.

necessary to the kind of sympathy that can be used to formulate ethical relationships.⁴ Ronald De Sousa helps explain how the distance created by laughter can produce sympathy. He suggests that the usual pairing of detachment-with-alienation and identification-with-engagement does not always coincide. One can be engaged with someone radically different, he says, and one can act in a detached manner within an intimate relationship (Morreall 238). This is important for my purposes in delineating laughter that creates distance and sympathy at the same time. I am proposing the most ethical kind of sympathy is that which occurs through detached identification, precisely what laughter creates.

Laughter does not have to be congenial, familiar, or sentimental in order to produce sympathy. The laughter of incongruity relies on a certain attitude toward difference rather than a certain quality of the laugh itself. To reveal unethical practices of relating to the other may, in fact, require raucous laughter, such as the kind Diane Davis discusses in her book *Breaking Up at Totality: A Rhetoric of Laughter*. Davis makes an important contribution to recent theories of laughter because, unlike Gillooly, she argues for the importance of laughter that is loud and disruptive. This kind of laughter, Davis contends, has the ability to break apart categories that we cling to so insistently in order to make meaning out of our experiences. The most ethical moments of relating to the other, Davis suggests, may occur where laughter resides in the gaps and fissures beyond

⁴ I do not think that feminine strategies of laughter include only the gentle, sympathetic sort explored by Gillooly. To her study we must also add the kind of feminine humor Barreca focuses on. She argues that characteristics of women's comedy include the use of humor to destroy social order. She wants to thwart the view that women's humor is "gentle, subtle, and reconciling;" instead, she argues women's laughter is not a safety valve but inflammatory; it is not used to purge desire and frustration but to transform those frustrations into action (7).

linguistic expression, helping to create identities that are not subject to strict discursive categories. Social, economic, and institutional forces work to solidify the fluidity created in the excesses of meaning, but it is precisely these excesses, in the form of incongruities, that laughter exposes. Davis's emphasis on disruptive laughter highlights the productive work of the laughter that Gwendolen and Becky employ, a laughter that defies the social norm of polite, feminine laughter and exposes restrictive norms.

Laughter thus offers the possibility of creating a sympathetic distance rather than an alienating distance. Stuart Tave makes this kind of distinction between sentimental and satirical humor, identifying "amiable humor" as inhabiting a middle ground:

To make a general distinction, amiable humor measured reality not, as the satirist tends, by an ideal against which reality is terribly wanting, nor did it, in the manner of the sentimentalist, deny or falsify the gap between the real and the ideal. It accepted the difference with a liberal tolerance, or unlike both satirist and sentimentalist, it found the ideal in the varied fullness of the real with all its imperfections. (166-67)

Tave's term "amiable humor" reflects the attitude that produces the laughter of incongruity. His description mirrors my earlier discussion of the two extremes we most often associate with laughter: either the laughter is sympathetic but limited to those who we intimately identify with through sameness, or the laughter constructs barriers because of the gap found between self and other (or in Tave's terms between ideal and real). The third alternative, what Tave describes as a "liberal tolerance" toward difference, does not choose one particular norm or category in order to relieve the tension of incongruity. When laughter identifies disparate categories of reality and allows those categories to coexist, then the distance between the self and other that clings to each category becomes

less threatening. It is not a matter of whose reality will win out (the aim of the laughter of superiority), but becomes instead a search for ways of reordering the world to include new realities.

To clarify what I mean by incongruity in the phrase “the laughter of incongruity,” I mean laughter in the presence of conflicting realities. The laughter of incongruity is one way to respond to the gaps created by conflicting norms that guide our understanding of reality. Kant, one of the founding theorists of the incongruity theory of laughter, highlights the role of understanding in laughter: “in everything that is to excite a lively convulsive laugh there must be something absurd (in which the understanding, therefore, can find no satisfaction)” (qtd. in Bussie 13). In short, laughter exposes the limits of understanding and requires a certain amount of flexibility in adapting our horizon of understanding as we reach its limits. I suggest this is why the narrator aligns our sympathies with Becky in *Vanity Fair*. The narrator describes his Becky Puppet as “uncommonly flexible in the joints” (6). This kind of flexibility is precisely the attitude needed to recognize and respond appropriately to incongruity. Marmysz writes that the humorist stance relies on creative flexibility:

The humorist attitude, in fact, is that distinctly human capacity that enables us to actively interpret incongruity in terms of amused pleasure rather than painful anxiety. A humorous attitude encourages us to linger in contemplation of various incongruities and to consider them from a variety of differing angles, or perspectives. (124)

We can see this flexible response in the way that Becky responds when she and Rawdon are denied any inheritance from his aunt. They are expecting the envelope left them to

contain a large sum of money, and Becky laughs when Rawdon opens it to find a mere twenty pounds. Who knows what various perspectives Becky considered here (and we probably should suspect she was at the center of each perspective), what we do know is that her laugh is evidence of her ability to take “amused pleasure” instead of “painful anxiety” at the incongruity of her expectations and the actual contents of the envelope.

When laughter exposes the limitations of a social norm or worldview, it creates the need for alternative worldviews. Indeed, it is the presence of marginal realities that causes Berger to label laughter (with delight) as dangerous in the way it produces “ecstasies” that provide a way of “standing outside ordinary reality,” a position of danger for how it undermines social order (207). He describes the comic as an intrusion into the reality of life, a reality constituted by the social order that “envelops the individual in a web of habits and meanings that are experienced as self-evidently real” (65). Mikhail Bakhtin, also writing about laughter’s effect of producing alternative worldviews, explores the medieval and renaissance carnival traditions as a moment where laughter creates a counterworld: “[medieval laughter] builds its own world versus the official world, its own church versus the official church, its own state versus the official state” (88). This carnival atmosphere, for Bakhtin, is “a peculiar point of view relative to the world; the world is seen anew” (66). Bakhtin points to the power of laughter not just to interrupt reality but also to suggest a new way of viewing reality. The laughter of incongruity produces carnival within the daily realities of life.

The main effect of ethical laughter, then, exposes incongruities to open the possibility for alternative worldviews. This points to another important component of

ethical laughter: the object of the laughter should be institutions, not people. The laughter most often used by nineteenth-century women, as Regenia Gagnier suggests, was aimed at institutions and systems, not at individuals. This is a crucial distinction, for my purposes, between laughter that employs sympathy and laughter with a more malicious intent. It is also a crucial distinction for laughter that accomplishes the transformation of social relationships. Women's laughter "had socio-behavioral implications for exploring difference rather than merely disparaging it," Gagnier claims, "and for prolonged critical action rather than momentary release" (138). Through their novels, Eliot and Thackeray show they recognize the unethical potential of both sympathy and laughter. They each attempt in different ways, however, to use laughter to facilitate an ethical distance between self and other, and therefore produce sympathy that could transform social relationships.

The Loss of Laughter and the Limits of Sympathy: The Absorption of Selves in *Daniel Deronda*

In her last novel, George Eliot introduces more barriers to sympathy than she tackled in her previous novels. Whether she set out to test the limits of sympathy or not, by choosing to construct a relationship between an English woman and a Jewish man, she establishes an acute sense of difference between two complex subjectivities. In what I see as an admission of the failure of sympathy, Eliot actually splits laughter and sympathy between two characters: Gwendolen embodies the spirit of laughter and Daniel Deronda embodies the spirit of sympathy. However, the novel does not present him as the positive antithesis to Gwendolen's wit. Deronda's sympathy misses the essential distance that

Gwendolen's laughter produces. Her laughter, I argue, marks the distinction from her earlier ability to keep the distance of difference and her later attempts to assimilate herself into Deronda's experience. In other words, laughter in this novel gives one the ability to maintain an ethical distance.⁵

Gwendolen stands out among Eliot's other heroines as a woman "daring in ridicule" (88) with "a keen sense of absurdity in others" (74). She does not have Dorothea's martyr spirit, Maggie's loyalty, or Dinah's faithfulness. However, unlike the narrator of *Vanity Fair*, Eliot's narrator in *Daniel Deronda* rarely laughs at characters and rarely encourages the reader to laugh. Within the context of this rather serious and tragic novel, it may seem odd that Eliot creates her only witty heroine.⁶ This serious context offers a good moment to see laughter occur in response to non-comedic situations. Gwendolen does not laugh spontaneously or with delight; she uses laughter for rhetorical purposes, particularly aimed to expose false norms and to attempt her own subversion of them by living as she pleases. Ultimately, Gwendolen falls into the category of the witty woman demonized because she laughs freely. The erasure of Gwendolen's laughter is

⁵Doyle identifies distance as the primary rhetorical technique of Eliot's fiction. Distance, she says, is the "precise degree of the reader's involvement with or detachment from a character." The function of rhetoric in the novels is to control the kind and amount of sympathy given to each character (8). Doyle's connection between distance and sympathy is important for my project, though I identify laughter as the primary rhetorical device to create distance in *Daniel Deronda*.

⁶ Indeed, for some it may seem odd to associate laughter at all with Eliot's work. One of Eliot's biographers, G.W. Cooke, says "she is too much in sympathy with human nature to laugh at its follies and its weaknesses. . . the foibles of the world she cannot treat in the vein of the satirist." Russell says this could only be true if the only type of satire was Juvenalian or Popeian, and proposes a new view of satire that mixes intellectualism and tragedy, within which the form of Eliot's work fits comfortably (281). See also Jenkins.

one way that Eliot represents the limits of sympathy within the realist mode that desires to resolve the tensions of incongruity rather than imagine a world where they coexist.

Eliot seemed to believe in the ability to sympathize with people who were different from oneself or even to sympathize with people one had never met:

Through my union and fellowship with the men and women I *have* seen, I feel a like, though fainter, sympathy with those I have *not seen*; and I am able to live in imagination with the generations to come, that their good is not alien to me, and is a stimulus to me to labour for ends which may not benefit myself, but will benefit them. (*Essays* 201)

She seems less sure of this assumption when she actually tests it out in her fiction and creates a Jewish character, in many ways epitomized as other in the Victorian period.⁷

The definition of sympathy that emerges through Eliot's work reaches its limits, Ellen Argyros suggests, in *Daniel Deronda*. Argyros describes Eliot's sympathy as beginning with "a kind of imaginative transportation beyond the boundaries of self" and then moving to "a recognition of the differences between self and other" and finally arriving at "an identification between self and other that leads one to take action on behalf of that other" (1-2). Eliot shows Deronda's desire to "take action" for Gwendolen, but this desire falls short when he cannot find some way to identify with her. Argyros claims Eliot's sympathy thus reveals a paradox: she desires "to respectfully recognize difference while at the same time resolving or transcending it" (145). By the time she writes *Daniel*

⁷ Eliot's use of Jewish characters forms the basis for the problem of radical difference she engages with in this novel. For more on the critical conversation surrounding Eliot's exploration of "The Jewish Question" see Himmelfarb, Mahawatte, Smith, Levenson, and Alexander.

Deronda, Eliot realizes that we cannot always understand the other and that it may be presumptuous to think we can (146).⁸

While Argyros focuses on the revelation of limits through the rivalry that exists between females in Eliot's novel, I suggest one can also see these limits expressed in the way Eliot split the qualities of ethical sympathy between two characters: Gwendolen's laughter enables her to maintain the needed distance between self and other, and Deronda's willingness to explore the viewpoint of another enables him to respond with sympathy. Each character, however, pushes these various positions to a logical extreme, so that Gwendolen never learns to recognize the other's subject position, only her own, and Deronda never learns to recognize his own subject position, only the other's. In both cases, the distance between self and other collapses.

In order to understand how Gwendolen uses laughter, we must first outline her general outlook on the world. We are invited to read her as a flawed, egotistical character; the reader's introduction to her occurs in Book One entitled "The Spoiled Child." Gwendolen's desire to be the center of attention certainly complicates the strong sense of self she uses to maintain distance from others. Yet, I would like to suggest that Eliot's exploration of this confidence in self is meant to demonstrate the necessary

⁸ Many other critics echo Argyros's theory that Eliot's conception of sympathy changes over time. See, for example, Jackson. Although Argyros does not use *Silas Marner*, one can place it on a similar trajectory according to her assertion that *Middlemarch*, written around the same time, is her most optimistic work on what sympathy can achieve. I would add a caveat to that trajectory by pointing out that in my analysis of *Silas Marner* I showed how Eliot kept Marner's difference in tact to the degree that the villagers still thought he was strange. Their ability to sympathize with him came along with his involvement within the community, beginning with the sharing of his story. *Silas Marner* bears some difference then, to Argyros's assertion that the only way Eliot achieved sympathetic identification in *Middlemarch* was by suppressing the subjectivity of the characters. It seems to me that while Marner certainly refashions his identity because he cannot recuperate his history, this does not mean he loses the sense of his self, or that the reader no longer recognizes what is distinct about Marner.

quality of sympathy that Deronda, Gwendolen's foil, lacks. She laughs often early in the novel, but her laughter almost completely disappears after her marriage. This has much to do, I suggest, with how her worldview changes as she loses her sense of independence. Before her marriage she sees much promise in the world because the possibilities for her own place in society seem open to a great many choices. As those choices begin to close down, first with Klesmer's view that she cannot be a singer or actress and then with her marriage to Grandcourt, Gwendolen loses the hope of choice and begins to feel trapped in a life where she is insignificant. The problem is that Gwendolen loses her sense of absurdity when she loses control of her life through an oppressive marriage. She no longer laughs at disappointed expectations, she only feels subjugated by them.

Many critics interpret Gwendolen's laughter as that of ridicule or superiority.⁹ Her sense of the absurd in life, however, helps underscore how she laughs at social norms more than individuals, recognizing the world is not fair in its representation of people. For example, when Gwendolen laughs at Rex's broken bones, she does not laugh at Rex himself, but the absurd picture conjured by her Uncle's explanation of the accident. When her uncle describes just how Rex fell off his horse the "descriptive suggestions in the latter part of her uncle's speech" made Gwendolen's "features less manageable than usual; the smiles broke forth, and finally a descending scale of laughter" (109). Both her uncle and her mother chastise her for laughing at another's misfortune, but the narrator provides the reader with additional insight into Gwendolen's motives: "Gwendolen rather valued herself on her superior freedom in laughing where others might only see matter

⁹ For example, in showing Gwendolen's lack of any ability to sympathize with those different from herself During says that "her habitual response to the accidents of others was laughter" (78).

for seriousness. Indeed, the laughter became her person so well that her opinion of its gracefulness was often shared by others” (109). The narrator describes Gwendolen’s laughter as a rhetorical stance toward situations, not something aimed specifically at people. Indeed, although her Uncle outwardly chastises her, he inwardly admires her humorous attitude: “no wonder a boy should be fascinated by this young witch.” His admiration is tempered by using a typical label for a witty woman, calling her a witch and affirming the inappropriateness of this kind of forwardness in a woman “who, however, was more mischievous than could be desired” (109). This example illustrates how Gwendolen’s laughter is often aimed at society’s sense of propriety, and how such expectations often make humans look ridiculous when they fail to uphold the standards of a gentleman or lady. She may feel superior in her ability to laugh at Rex’s situation, but it is not the laughter of superiority where she intends to lower Rex in the eyes of herself or his family.

Gwendolen’s laughter does lack one important quality: she has trouble laughing at herself. Just as laughter establishes important distance between self and other, it can also produce necessary distance from oneself. Distance from the self helps create the awareness that identity, including one’s own, is situated within a complex nexus of social categories. Gwendolen struggles to laugh at herself when Klesmer criticizes her singing skills, which she prizes highly. The narrator shows us her inward battle to conquer her feelings and somehow find humor in them:

Gwendolen, in spite of her wounded egoism, had fullness of nature enough to feel the power of this playing, and it gradually turned her inward sob of mortification into an excitement which lifted her for the moment into a desperate indifference

about her own doings, or at least a determination to get a superiority over them by laughing at them as if they belonged to somebody else. (80)

For Gwendolen to laugh, she must go through the exercise of projecting her feelings away from herself so that it feels like she is laughing at someone else rather than herself. She has a much easier time laughing at herself when she finds some ground for feeling superior to others: “Klesmer’s verdict on her singing had been an easier joke to her since he had been struck by her *plastik*” (137). Obviously Gwendolen, like Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*, has not fully learned to laugh at herself. Distance from the self can produce a better understanding of identity and the way one’s actions become implicated in social norms. Because Gwendolen does not have this distanced perspective, the tenuous hold on her identity demands that she constantly maintain a sense of superiority, marked by her laughter. It also means that her identity is vulnerable to consumption, an attribute Grandcourt finds irresistible.

Ultimately, laughter fails to maintain Gwendolen’s independence as her marriage subsumes her identity. Grandcourt’s strange power over Gwendolen stops her laughter even early in their relationship. He walks with her in complete silence at a ball for some time, a situation Gwendolen finds funny, and yet she does not laugh:

If the situation had been described to Gwendolen half an hour before, she would have laughed merrily at it, and could only have imagined herself returning a playful, satirical answer. But for some mysterious reason – it was a mystery of which she had a faint wondering consciousness – she dared not be satirical: she had begun to feel a wand over her that made her afraid of offending Grandcourt. (158)

Although Gwendolen does not seem fully aware of her hesitancy to laugh, her mother immediately notices Gwendolen's "marked abstinence from satirical observations" about Grandcourt (167). When they go walking again together, this time outside, Grandcourt makes an observation so funny in its obtuseness that the narrator wonders "how was it that Gwendolen did not laugh? She was perfectly silent, holding up the folds of her robe like a statue, and giving a harder grasp to the handle of her whip" (171). As Gwendolen weighs whether or not to marry him, the narrator points specifically to her lack of laughter: "how was it that he caused her unusual constraint now? – that she was less daring and playful in her talk with him than with any other admirer she had known?" (173).

Judith Wilt traces the typical comic figure she labels the Matriarch, a woman who laughs at men but does not subvert her own position within a patriarchal society. She is "committed to small revelations and large reconciliations" (176). In contrast, the laughter of the maiden figure "expresses, rather than represses...exposes and deflates... finding no role in the world which totally satisfies her. She hesitates, laughing, at the edge, withholding fertility, humility, community" (179-180). In her discussion of *Daniel Deronda*, Wilt argues Gwendolen's laughter "is her way of keeping her space free from the intrusions of those who think it their right to intrude upon the maiden – the matriarchs and the males" (184). This is the distance I argue laughter creates, the ethical distance that allows the uniqueness of subjectivity to thrive. This uniqueness of identity is slowly "battered" and "blunted" by Grandcourt (Wilt 186).

Once situated in an oppressive marriage, Gwendolen's worldview can no longer bear the heightened tension of her broken expectations because she no longer recognizes the distance between herself and others; she loses her sense of self within her marriage, mirrored by her loss of laughter. She still recognizes general maxims as ridiculous, such as her Uncle's reliance on stereotypical views of marriage, but rather than laugh she sees it as tragic: "To Gwendolen the whole speech had the flavour of bitter comedy. If she had been merry, she must have laughed at her uncle's explanation to her that he had not heard Grandcourt express himself very fully on politics. And the wife's great influence! General maxims about husbands and wives seemed now of a precarious usefulness" (611).

The reader further witnesses this change in her attitude during a conversation with Deronda when she admits to him the world seems like "a dance set beforehand. I seem to see all that it can be – and I am tired and sick of it. And the world is all confusion to me" – she made a gesture of disgust. "You say I am ignorant. But what is the good of trying to know more, unless life were worth more?" (507). Once Gwendolen has lost her humorous worldview and the ability to laugh at incongruities, Deronda enters her life and becomes, for Gwendolen, the image of a savior. Deronda is described throughout the novel as having an uncommon capacity to sympathize: "Deronda's conscience included sensibilities beyond the common, enlarged by his early habit of thinking himself imaginatively into the experience of others" (570). Deronda's innate ability to sympathize is implicitly connected to his ability to leave interpretation open. The novel begins by constrating Gwendolen's assumption that her viewpoint is always correct and Deronda's

ability to leave interpretation open. As Deronda stares at her, Gwendolen interprets his gaze as “looking down on her as an inferior,” and never considers another possible meaning (38). In contrast, Deronda mentally asks a series of questions about Gwendolen that he leaves unanswered “Was she beautiful or not beautiful? And what was the secret of form or expression which gave the dynamic quality to her glance?” (35). The novel praises characters who recognize the fallibility of interpretation. By the novel’s end, however, even Deronda will fail in this area.

The sympathetic impulse in Deronda gives him the ability “to read events and characters in terms of their own being, rather than as reflections of his own desires” (Jackson 233). This reading-as-knowing motif, Tony Jackson argues, determines how characters interpret the world. Daniel Deronda is presented as a “right reader,” one who adapts “his horizon to allow for others as others” (63). Deronda’s sympathetic nature, manifested through such reading practices (of people and texts) is contrasted with misreaders, like Mordecai, who attempt “to fit people and events into his interpretive horizon” (63). Deronda proves to be a good reader because he has the skill that Gwendolen lacks, described by Jackson as “the ability to alter his interpretive horizon when confronted with a new human text” (49). Through the metaphor of reading, this novel emphasizes one of realism’s tenets, the ability to know the other’s perspective. The emphasis on knowing becomes, however, the challenge and failure of sympathy.

Deronda's desire to know, his sympathy, always seems tainted by the danger of too much understanding.¹⁰ Because it was Deronda's "habitual disposition that he should meet rather than resist any claim on him in the shape of another's need," his sympathy, particularly when enacted toward Mordecai, tends to result in losing his own sense of self in the other (551). Unlike Gwendolen, who has no trouble distinguishing herself from others, Deronda has never established a sense of self apart from others:

A too reflective and diffusive sympathy was in danger of paralyzing in him that indignation against wrong and that selectness of fellowship which are the conditions of moral force. . . what he most longed for was either some external event, or some inward light, that would urge him into a definite line of action, and compress his wandering energy. (413)

Deronda's enlarged capacity for sympathy has the negative side effect of hindering him from specific action. Daniel's failing could be seen, then, as lacking the individuality that contributes to one's place in a community; if one can be anybody, then one is effectually nobody: "the radically sympathetic man, who lacks grounding either in an organically unified community or in some absolute belief, such a man has failed to find the evidence to prove his individuality" (Jackson 53). Jackson proposes Eliot cannot accept this model of an other-centered, self-relativized character because she believes people must be connected to a community or an absolute belief to have an identity (237).

¹⁰ This novel points out the dangers of sympathy: the erasure of difference, of borders between self and other. During says "The action of sympathy fills up all the empty spaces where private subjectivity might come to exist. The object enjoying the sympathy is encouraged to think that the sympathizer truly 'lives' in them. And this has the effect of making it very difficult for the dynamic of sympathy to be reciprocal" (77). Deronda might represent sympathy, but During argues that Gwendolen's "moral significance" in the novel is ambiguity: "In the story this novel tells, ambiguity – or being difficult to read – is also the heroine's final performance...she is at least framed, rather than annihilated, by solitude" (73).

Rather than Deronda lacking connection to others, I suggest instead that he is too connected. By splitting laughter and sympathy between two characters, Eliot demonstrates what happens when there is no balance between totally distancing self and other or totaling subsuming self and other. Deronda's sympathy fails because it is always based on understanding, which requires blending the identity of self and other. As the narrator explains, sympathy becomes neutralized when it depends solely on understanding:

[Deronda's] imagination had so wrought itself to the habit of seeing things as they probably appeared to others, that a strong partisanship, unless it were against an immediate oppression, had become an insincerity for him. His plenteous, flexible sympathy had ended by falling into one current with that reflective analysis which tends to neutralize sympathy. (412)

Here the connection between imagination and sympathy becomes problematic. Indeed, Daniel's "habit of seeing things as they probably appeared to others" sounds much like the novelist's ability to project multiple perspectives and create characters as they *probably* would act in life. We discover that Deronda assumes he can always understand the other's perspective, but through Gwendolen's difference he realizes the limits of his ability to understand and therefore the limits of his sympathy.

Although Deronda appears to have an idealized capacity to sympathize, the text subtly articulates Deronda's growing ability to sympathize with the Jewish other in this text *only* when he begins to fall in love with Mirah: "but now, with Mirah before him as a living reality whose experience he had to care for, he saw every common Jew and Jewess in the light of comparison with her" (431). Furthermore, once the reader discovers

Deronda's own Jewish heritage, his ability to sympathize no longer seems astounding. Indeed, it turns out he has been extending sympathy to those who are just like him after all. If Deronda's sympathy is based on assimilation, then as Gwendolen's moral guide it becomes clear that his program of healing asks her to lose her self in others.¹¹ Without her laughter to preserve distance between self and other, she too falls prey to the absorption of self as the only catalyst for sympathy.

Vanity Fair and the Importance of Self-laughter

I pair *Daniel Deronda* and *Vanity Fair* together in this chapter in order to look at two heroines who begin with similar attitudes and both end still trapped within social norms that define their behavior and identity. An important difference, however, is that Becky never loses her ability to laugh, perhaps casting her as the more "successful" heroine. In addition, pairing these two novels also provides a comparison between how realism, a mode of identification, and satire, a mode of distance, each tackle the problem of sympathy. Within the realist mode, Eliot demonstrated how total identification with the other is not always possible and therefore cannot be the basis for ethical sympathy. Thackeray will use a satirical mode to focus on creating distance, but at the sacrifice of sympathy.

The gendered treatment laughter often receives becomes particularly interesting as I move to discuss *Vanity Fair* and the only male writer included in this project.

¹¹ Toker argues that sympathy is linked with consuming another human being (569). By exposing the dangers of this consumption, Toker suggests that the novel's moral vision is uncomfortable with a typical middle-ground moral vision and instead presents a dialectic between "a commitment to future-oriented social goals and emotionally alert sympathy for individual human beings" (572).

Thackeray's views on women have long been a source of debate.¹² Micael Clarke, representing those critics who trace a more generous view toward women in Thackeray's writing, says: "Thackeray's critique of Victorian gender ideology encompasses not only women's legal disabilities but also the social and psychological effects of gendered patterns of thought and behavior" (4).¹³ With less willingness to extol Thackeray's feminist tendencies, James Phelan acknowledges Thackeray's vision of women in society as "sometimes compatible with and sometimes antithetical to the view offered from a consistently feminist perspective" (132). It would be hard to disprove the presence of contradictory views about women in Thackeray's novel, inconsistencies that seem to mirror critical perceptions of his contradictory narrator. I argue, however, that these shifting perspectives contribute to the prevalence of the laughter of incongruity in the novel. Focusing on the effects of this laughter reveals the incoherence in the text to be a purposeful strategy. Thackeray adeptly shows the ability of laughter to expose unethical social norms, but his satirical mode places limits on that laughter's ability to fashion a

¹² In the twentieth century, Gordon Ray, Nina Auerbach, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick all praised his "critique of patriarchy" (13). Phelan takes a middle-of-the road approach: "although Thackeray's focus is on women in a society that we clearly recognize as patriarchal, his primary purpose is not to offer a feminist critique of that society but to expose the multifarious workings of vanity within it" (132). Flint identifies the "novel's masculine biases" both in the construction of reading practices (gendered male because active) and in the presentation of the women characters themselves. Flint tempers this judgment by acknowledging the irony of the narrator's voice makes it difficult to decipher if his comments about women are meant to uphold or subvert stereotypes, and in general the novel itself is about women and their survival skills rather than a more masculine approach to public life (261).

¹³ While recognizing that biographical details cannot correlate precisely with the novels, Clarke proceeds with wary caution but convincing evidence that we can learn much from Thackeray's letters and relationships to help us determine just what views about gender emerge in the novels: "Because he was gifted with an extraordinary ability to reflect on his own experiences and shortcomings, Thackeray was able to recognize the ways in which male socialization was implicated in women's problems. This capacity for self-reflection is what enables him to explore gender relations with unusually sympathetic insight" (6).

space for sympathy, a problem I turn to after first examining the laughter of Becky and the narrator.

Laughter of all types abounds in *Vanity Fair*: guffaws, chuckles, snorts, cackles, giggles, and snickers. Although harder to detect, there are larger structural elements of the novel that help create such laughter. The plot structure of the novel itself seems bent on exposure that will make readers laugh; the narrator points out that novels often end with marriage, but states this one will go on long after to reveal marriage is not always a happy ending (297). Thackeray also brings together contexts normally kept distinct, such as the blending of war and domestic matters. Thus, chapter titles like “In which Amelia invades the Low Countries” throw disparate ideas together in close proximity on the page and in the reader’s mind. Finally, the novel also overturns common hierarchies, creating funny scenarios that readers laugh at precisely because they contradict expectation. For example, people began ignoring Rawdon after his marriage to Becky and recognizing him only as Becky’s husband, “indeed, that was now his avocation in life. He was Colonel Crawley no more. He was Mrs. Crawley’s husband” (439). The reversal of gender roles makes this statement funny. Rather than have the woman’s identity disappear and become only part of her husband’s title, Rawdon, the man, becomes nothing more than a husband hailed by his wife’s name. I take the time to trace the humorous context of the novel itself in order to show the particular kind of laughter Thackeray’s novel evokes from his readers. Laughter emerges from the incongruity between registers, a concept Alan Partington defines as “a way of speaking or writing regularly associated by a set of participants with a certain set of contextual

circumstances” (74). By putting contrary registers into play, the structure of the novel itself makes clear that the focus of the novel is incongruity; therefore, the most appropriate response is the laughter of incongruity.

My attention to even just one character, Becky, quickly reveals that laughter of all kinds exists within the pages of the novel. Becky fascinates readers because of the mixture of virtue and vice in her character. Thus, she engages often in the laughter of superiority, the kind of self-centered laughter that closes the space for sympathy by filling in the distance between self and other with hierarchy. Becky’s success in winning the favor of Rawdon’s rich Aunt, Miss Crawley, rests in her ability to get Miss Crawley to laugh at others: “As for the Misses Wapshot’s toilettes and Lady Fuddleston’s famous yellow hat, Miss Sharp tore them to tatters, to the infinite amusement of her audience” (118). Their relationship is built, therefore, on the laughter of superiority as they laugh together at everyone else’s faults. Becky also uses the laughter of superiority as a form of revenge on those who formerly snubbed her. For example, the countess begs Becky for her horses in order to escape Brussels and the impending army. Becky, now in a position of superiority, “laughed in her face” and “enjoy[ed] the humiliation of her enemy” (365). Indeed, one of the first times we meet Becky she laughs at her schoolmistress with a “horrid sarcastic demoniacal laughter” (21).

From these instances of Becky’s laughter, one would think she would easily be marked as a wicked character, or at least one the reader would not like very much. The narrator positions Becky in a more positive light, however, by suggesting, sometimes directly and sometimes through the force of wit, that her behavior is the necessary

condition of the restricted position society has placed her in. The narrator can criticize Becky's morals while standing up for her at the same time because of the incongruity of her circumstances. How can a woman possibly be good in a situation that requires her to use the only tools she has, her feminine charms, to survive? Becky's own summary of her situation suggests the same conclusion: "I think I could be a good woman if I had five thousand a year" (490). Unexpectedly, the narrator agrees with Becky: "And who knows but Rebecca was right in her speculations – and that it was only a question of money and fortune which made the difference between her and an honest woman?" (490).

The fact that the narrator constantly highlights the social conventions that drive Becky to her immoral actions is a key point in demonstrating the kind of sympathy found in this satirical mode. The reader must maintain sympathy for Becky, as John Frazee argues, because if not the novel loses its ability to critique larger social structures beyond the individual: "As Becky vainly pursues social position, Thackeray never wants the reader to lose sympathy with her, to turn away from her in disgust: a reader disgusted by Becky's immorality would not feel implicated in her fate or acknowledge its general significance."¹⁴ It is laughter, I suggest, that staves off our disgust and instead creates a sense of sympathy through the shared experience of the ways in which individuals often feel constrained by society's rules.

¹⁴ Frazee 239. He argues that Thackeray was aware of women's dependent and restricted position in the world, and he thought this made them more sympathetic than males. Thus, Frazee asserts that when Thackeray wanted to create a character who would engage in all kinds of immoral activities, he knew he could maintain readerly sympathy by making that character a female (231). Russell also finds Becky a sympathetic character: "[Becky] is more human and has the claim of normal humanity on our sympathy; she is the product of circumstances, clearly shown to be largely responsible for her failure both in aspiration and achievement" (103).

The narrator does not solely depend on casting blame on society in order to gain the reader's sympathy for Becky. We also like Becky, I argue, because she laughs at herself, even when her own life becomes absurd. Miss Crawley only leaves her and Rawdon a note for twenty pounds in her will when the couple had expected much more from her, indeed had depended on much more in order to pay off their growing debts. Becky recognizes the way Miss Crawley had led them on and decides, "the joke was too good, and Becky burst out laughing" (293). This ability to laugh at oneself is a leveling device that works against the development of hierarchy. Although Becky often betrays a superior attitude toward others, moments like this one demonstrate that she understands no one is exempt from the harsh realities of life. Her acute sense of the absurd, a quality she shares with Gwendolen, acts as the impetus for her self-laughter.

Throughout the novel the narrator repeatedly draws attention to Becky's sense of the absurd. When Becky has to retrieve Mrs. Dowd to comfort a sorrowing Amelia (comfort that Becky's unsentimental nature cannot provide), Mrs. Dowd seems quite upset that Becky herself will not go. The caricature of Mrs. Dowd flouncing off causes "Mrs. Crawley" to "almost upset" her gravity, a seriousness Becky puts on for the sake of the situation as all the soldiers have just been called off to war (355-356). This scene models so many others where Becky's attitude is compared, often implicitly, to other characters'. Amelia's sentimentalized sorrow and Mrs. Dowd's righteous sense of duty are both contrasted to Becky's laughter, which undermines their serious and even sanctimonious attitudes. The narrator has fun promoting Becky's humorous worldview in this grave scene of the soldiers going off to war by claiming her reaction as heroic: "If

this is a novel without a hero, at least let us lay claim to a heroine. No man in the British army which has marched away, not the great Duke himself, could be more cool or collected in the presence of doubts and difficulties, than the indomitable little aide-de-camp's wife" (340). The passage must be taken ironically to be funny; the reader must recognize that Becky's composure does not fit the script of a loving, bereaved wife – the response most people would qualify as right and desirable. Similarly, making an unsentimental woman the heroine directly contrasts the tradition of sentimental novels that extol the ability to cry and faint at a moments notice. Thus, the narrator knowingly thwarts this expected response by framing Becky's rather coldhearted reaction as "cool" and "collected."

Despite the moments when Becky engages in the laughter of incongruity, she proves to be an imperfect model for laughter that can produce sympathy and result in ethical relationships. Becky is only capable of employing one element of the laughter of incongruity at a time: she cannot laugh at herself at the same time that she laughs at social norms. She cannot laugh both *at* and *with* the world, the kind of laughter promoted by the narrator in this chapter's epigraph. Karen Gindele suggests Becky's laughter receives the narrator's approval when she balances the giving and receiving of pleasure. All of these moments come, Gindele argues, during her marriage to Rawdon when they operate as a team thwarting the upper class and exposing the powerful. Gindele is right to point to these moments of Becky's laughter because they reflect laughter aimed at larger structures of oppression, not at individuals. Her laughter serves, therefore, to connect herself and Rawdon despite their differences. The connection occurs in their common

actions to survive and triumph over a system bent on keeping them out of the upper echelons of society. Becky is ultimately inconsistent in her ability to sympathize, however, and the narrator turns his attention to the reader, beginning with where Becky leaves off, insisting the reader laugh at herself.

The narrator uses laughter as a rhetorical device to shape the distance, and therefore the sympathy, between characters and readers.¹⁵ The narrator persuades the reader to follow in his example of laughing at oneself by first establishing a conspiratorial, bonding relationship by encouraging the reader to laugh with him at the characters:

And, as we bring our characters forward, I will ask leave, as a man and a brother, not only to introduce them, but occasionally to step down from the platform, and talk about them: if they are good and kindly, to love them and shake them by the hand: if they are silly, to laugh at them confidentially in the reader's sleeve: if they are wicked and heartless, to abuse them in the strongest terms which politeness admits of. (90)

According to these directions, laughing at someone is an appropriate response only if done confidentially and toward someone who is merely silly. However, those who have read the text in its entirety will recognize that the narrator does not hold to these distinctions. He laughs at Amelia, who is good and kindly, and he laughs at Becky who is often wicked and heartless. Nor is the laughter always confidential. The disparity between what the narrator says he will do and what he actually does makes the target of

¹⁵ One reason the satire is not corrosive, according to Harriet Blodgett, is that the narrator includes himself in the theme of human imperfection and wrong doing: "The narrator does not exclude himself; his self-portrayal is the measure of his own sense of involvement in *Vanity Fair* where no man is perfect . . . the narrator's mitigating sense of personal involvement tempers the satire" (213). Thus, for Blodgett, Thackeray's text falls neither into cutting satire nor into total morbidity by maintaining a hopeful view that humans can change, including the narrator and the reader.

laughter unclear. Perhaps most important in this quote is the fact that the narrator *steps down* from his platform, coming to stand on the same plane as those he laughs at (or with). When we think we are bonding over the laughter of superiority, therefore, the narrator subtly brings us down with him from this lofty position to recognize how we, too, are implicated in activities and values that are laughable.

The danger in inviting the reader to laugh at hypocrisy is that it will be the laughter of superiority. However, the narrator prevents this by making fun of not only the characters, but also the reader and himself all at once: “Picture to yourself, O fair young reader, a wordly, selfish, graceless, thankless, religionless old woman, writhing in pain and fear, and without her wig. Picture her to yourself and ere you be old, learn to love and pray” (151). This description of a dying Miss Crawley mimics how we imagine Becky herself would describe her, though loving her to her face. It mocks the moralizing tendency of novels by exposing Becky’s hypocrisy, it mocks the reader by using an exaggerated address, and it mocks the world’s sense of morality that in facing death one only then begins to think about love and prays desperately for oneself.

The narrator thus prevents readers from developing a sense of superiority by encouraging the combination of laughter at other characters while also laughing at ourselves. Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen defines sympathetic laughter as the laugh that relates the fall of the other to the fall of the self (757). Borch-Jacobsen thus contends in the laughing instance we “are at once ourselves and the other” (758). This is not the same as assimilation; I do not become the other nor does the other become me. Rather, in the space of difference we recognize the possibility of adopting the other’s perspective. For

example, in describing Dobbin's love for Amelia, the narrator in *Vanity Fair* makes his love seem ridiculous: "Mr. Dobbin's sentimental Amelia was no more like the real one than this absurd little print which he cherished" (506). The image of Dobbin tearing a picture from one of his sister's magazines so that he might stare at it and imagine Amelia is certainly laughable. But in the middle of the reader's laugh, the narrator reminds us: "But what man in love, of us, is better informed? Or is he much happier when he sees and owns his delusion?" (507). For our laughter to continue, therefore, we must laugh at both Dobbin and ourselves.

Although the narrator encourages us to laugh at characters, he also aligns our sympathies in various way with the characters, such as pointing out our own silly ideas about love like Dobbin's and helping us see Becky's actions are not the result of her evil nature but rather the result of her circumstances. Another way the narrator works to produce ethical sympathy in the reader is by criticizing false sympathy. When Becky reflects on what an opportunity she missed by having to turn down Sir Pitt's offer of marriage, the narrator says to the reader "I am sure our friend Becky's disappointment deserves and will command every sympathy" (171). Remembering the way women have treated Becky out of jealousy, one must question how they can now sympathize with her. The narrator asks "what well-bred young person is there in all *Vanity Fair*, who will not feel for a hardworking, ingenious, meritorious girl, who gets such an honourable, advantageous, provoking offer, just at the moment when it is out of her power to accept it?" (171). The exaggerated use of adjectives here should call the reader's attention to the ironic undertones, as well as the contrast between the narrator's other descriptions of

people in *Vanity Fair* who never condescend to feel for anyone but themselves. Thus, it would seem the sympathy felt in this instance occurs only because Becky missed this opportunity. Had she succeeded in propelling herself into high society, there would be many other feelings directed toward her, but certainly not sympathy. In this example, then, the narrator sarcastically calls attention to how persons tend to sympathize only when it is at no cost to themselves.

I come now to the question of whether satire can achieve a positive construction of sympathy. The narrator indicates that Satire and Sentiment visit *Vanity Fair* arm-in-arm. This image tends to complicate the question at hand, because while it separates the two as distinct entities, their arm-in-arm stance also suggests the ability to work together or to at least co-exist. The blend of realism and satire, the vacillation between the narrator's scorn and sympathy, has kept critics divided on the tone of *Vanity Fair*.

Thackeray's decision to use laughter as a narrative technique, to adopt this satirical stance within a realist text, reveals something about the worldview and thus the tone of the novel. As Robert Martin claims:

It demands considerable self-possession to believe that laughter and comedy are valid ways of viewing the world, even to accept them as wholesome human activities, for comedy is in part dependent upon the triumphant revelation of a discrepancy between the ideal and the actual, and it is never safe to make that kind of revelation unless one is so confident of the fundamental unity of the world as to be able to laugh at the apparent chinks in its solidity. (4-5)

Martin's description of the "self-possession" required when using laughter as a guiding principle identifies a reason for the underlying tone of optimism in the novel, the feeling that the narrator is not quite a cynic. To laugh and poke fun, even to mock, suggests a

confidence in the “fundamental unity of the world.”¹⁶ This optimistic tone is subtle enough, and undermined frequently by the narrator’s sarcastic tone, so that critics can still debate just exactly what attitude Thackeray adopts toward the world. His contemporaries tended to criticize the novel’s satirical tone: Thackeray’s “scepticism is pushed too far,” “a cynical, sarcastic tone . . . too much pervades the work,” he insists on moving “too much in the direction of satire” (qtd. in Harden 12). I think it is fair to say that critics in his day and ours remain puzzled by the tone and cannot decide on what side of the humorous/satirical divide it falls.¹⁷

Part of the problem with identifying an ethical stance toward sympathy, or any ethical stance for that matter, in Thackeray’s novel is where the mode of satire prevents the satisfying ending of realism. And by satisfying, I do not mean a happy ending necessarily, but one in which an ethical view of the world is fully developed and the respective characters are situated accordingly within it. Satire often seems to resist resolution, parodying extremes on both sides of the issue rather than proposing one correct interpretation. For example, Becky and Amelia represent two extremes of

¹⁶ Martin documents the change of comic theory in the Victorian period from a belief in “amiable, sentimental humour to an acceptance of intellect as the basis of comedy” (vii). He traces a gradual acceptance of incongruity and wit as the essence of comedy and moves away from the acceptance of sentimental humour (viii). Most broadly he defines this shift from humour to wit, or from the comedy of character to the comedy of intellect and idea, or from personality to idea (3).

¹⁷ Critics today often discuss the satirical elements of *Vanity Fair* in terms of the narrator’s role. Harden says while many have identified the narrator’s voice as “sympathetic mockery,” he feels the narrator exhibits a range where sometimes the sympathy disappears into sharp satire, and sometimes the mockery disappears into solely pathos (113). Blodgett argues that the narrator is encouraging readers to maintain a certain distance but not to place themselves above the laughable characters: “the narrator’s rhetorical stance meets the intentions of Thackeray’s type of satire: not corrosive, but genial and plaintive in its aptness, intended to make mankind smile wryly even while shifting about uncomfortably” (214). Sharp argues against those who say the narrator dissimulates and says instead that his changing attitude is part of his irony. She accounts for the flip-flop of the narrator’s criticism as pointing to criticism, not of characters per se, but of the morality that judges others.

femininity without a middle-ground representation; Thackeray mocks both of them and yet does not suggest what would be an acceptable way to behave (Palmeri 770).

The lack of resolution is actually one of the limits of laughter in articulating a new, more ethical, way to sympathize with the other. Laughter is very good at exposing incongruities, yet it does not do the work of proposing alternatives like gossip, gazing, and silence. These elements actually begin to enact a new reality by positioning the self and other to engage in a different way. Gossip not only reveals the artificiality of boundaries between self and other, it actually deflates them through the act of gossiping. When one listens to the other's story in a moment of ethical gazing, the relationship becomes restructured around bearing witness rather than understanding. As silence constructs an unknowable other, new ways of sympathizing without having to fully understand the other are created. But the self and other can engage in a moment of laughing at the incongruity of life without a clear sense of how laughter restructures sympathy. Whether this is a problem of laughter itself, or more a problem of laughter within realism and satire, is a question of how form shapes representations of sympathy.

Form and the Limits of Sympathy

On the face of it, sympathy resides uncomfortably in Thackeray's mixture of satire and realism primarily because of the mocking tone the narrator adopts toward all the characters and the reader. Sympathy also usually connotes some kind of resolution, as a sense of community develops out of feeling sympathy for another. The ending of Thackeray's novel, if nothing else, resists closure. No character seems particularly happy

or rewarded, and this makes it more difficult for the reader to determine which characters deserve sympathy. What I would like to suggest, though, is that sympathy does have a place in Thackeray's satirical text; he restructures sympathy so that it does not have to be based on resolving the tensions of difference or incongruity.

Victorians themselves would have found it unusual to locate sympathy within satire. It was not uncommon in the Victorian period to align humor with sympathy, but wit was assumed to be antithetical to feeling for another. Humor was usually distinguished from wit by qualities of sympathy, love, and understanding as compared to the scorn, degradation, and condescension of wit (Martin 26). Gerald Massey distinguishes between them in the *North British Review* (1860): "wit is more artificial, and a thing of culture; humour lies nearer to nature" (36 qtd. in Martin). Walter Pater even more overtly connected humor with compassion; humor was "the laughter which blends with tears and . . . in its most exquisite motives, is one with pity," while wit was "that unreal transitory mirth which is as the crackling of thorns under the pot" (qtd. in Martin 36-37). What made wit and satire incapable of producing sympathy? Perhaps part of the problem was the understood aims of each. Satire was meant to expose and punish what was bad in humanity and humor was meant to create identification. On the one hand, Martin explains: "What the theories of both superiority and the incongruous postulated was sufficient distance from the object of comedy to perceive how it was out of joint," but on the other hand, "what sentimental comedy, like that of Dickens, advocated was the eradication of that distance and an identification between perceiver

and perceived” (Martin 29). Because wit was seen to create distance, it could not therefore also produce sympathy.

The aim of satire was also to teach, an aim similar to the claim of realist novels. In his “Essay on Comedy” George Meredith argues: “the satirist is a moral agent, often a social scavenger, working on a storage of bile” (44). Gifford, in the Preface to the *Translation of Juvenal* also points to the moral aim of satire: “To raise a laugh at vice . . . is not the legitimate office of Satire, which is to hold up the vicious as objects of reprobation and scorn, for the example of others, who may be deterred by their sufferings” (qtd. in Russell 14). But if realism taught readers to sympathize, this moral trait did not seem to be what the mode of satire taught readers. Rather, satire was bent on exposing follies and warning readers away from vice. If a text combines realism and satire, however, can the blend result in a dual purpose?

Thackeray’s novel aligns sympathy and satire, I suggest, because he revises sympathetic identification to be an act that recognizes what is incoherent in society, the very recognition that satire aims to produce in readers. We are not meant to judge Becky or Amelia, but to judge the social dictates that insidiously decide their behavior. Satire and sympathy are united in this novel through the common recognition of paradoxical social norms and the tensions that develop between the opposing viewpoints of individuals and society. The sympathetic reader in Thackeray’s novel is not one who identifies with a character that matches some ideal or matches the reader’s own character; the sympathetic reader instead is the one who recognizes that everyone is susceptible to the incongruous situations thrust upon individuals by incoherent social ideologies. The

satirical mode within Thackeray's realist novel allows him to emphasize this point: "In Thackeray . . . satire opens all intellectual positions to questioning and allows the socially marginal points of view to compete with the most powerfully entrenched ideas" (Clarke 82). Rather than invoking sympathy for the triumphs of a character situated rightly within a community, Thackeray instead uses satire to resist the pressure of resolution in the realist mode. He thereby invokes sympathy for the failure of society to produce cohesiveness in individual lives. Readers of realist novels can be too confident that once we have traveled through the struggles of a character's life, we will reach a better understanding of how that individual fits into a local community, imagined consistent with our worldview. Satire and laughter challenge this kind of reading, the one that situates people and events neatly into categories, satisfying our desire to know where we fit and where the other fits.

If Thackeray's satirical mode challenges the conception of sympathy based on finding a resolution in understanding, then Eliot's sympathy challenges the classical notion of realism predicated on knowing.¹⁸ The difficulty in coming to know and understand Gwendolen's character destabilizes realism by "violating one of the precepts of classical realism...the unified, knowable 'essence' of character beneath the external signs" (Sypher 507).¹⁹ Deronda's discomfort with his inability to know Gwendolen, to

¹⁸ Jackson argues the limits of sympathy in *Daniel Deronda* are represented in the formal collapse of realism, where the realist heroine who does not learn to sympathize becomes the heroine of a naturalist novel, and the hero of sympathy becomes part of a romance plot, an epic story rather than a realist one (64).

¹⁹ During also emphasizes Gwendolen's unknowability, arguing her "moral significance" in the novel is ambiguity: "In the story this novel tells, ambiguity – or being difficult to read – is also the heroine's final performance . . . she is at least framed, rather than annihilated, by solitude" (73). Eliot proposes a sympathy

understand her, becomes also the reader's discomfort. As the novel develops, Eliot reveals Deronda's attempts to understand as the greatest flaw in his otherwise idealistic character. Eliot may want to idealize the sympathetic impulse in Deronda, but ultimately she cannot escape his flawed sympathy extended only to those he can fully understand. Bernard Paris suggests that Deronda learns about the limits of sympathy from Gwendolen: "His relationship with Gwendolen is also presented as an education of sorts for Deronda, presumably concerning the limits of altruism, of what we can do for other people" (197). Paris points out how often Deronda's advice to Gwendolen, supposedly given out of sympathy for her, reflects more his own feelings and experiences rather than hers (204). Deronda ultimately fails, by his own estimation and Eliot's, in using sympathy to help Gwendolen.

Had Deronda a better sense of his own nature, he could perhaps have offered better advice through a sympathy that ethically recognized the uniqueness of Gwendolen's situation; instead he always sees her experience in the light of his own. He begins to sense the limitations of his sympathy when he struggles with his inability to understand Gwendolen. In one of their last meetings before Grandcourt's death, when Gwendolen is filled with her most desperate sense of guilt and helplessness, Deronda feels that "Words seemed to have no more rescue in them than if he had been beholding a vessel in peril of wreck . . . How could he grasp the long-growing process of this young creature's wretchedness?" This realization, the narrator tells us, would be "afterwards

that is beyond what Britishness can comprehend, it is a "Hebraic ethic" that is not afraid to identify "with the repellent, the ostracized, the ugly, the unloved" (81).

called horrible” by Deronda. Instead of accepting that he cannot understand Gwendolen, he seems repulsed. The parting scene reveals that Deronda seems afraid of differences instead of embracing them as ethical sympathy might. When he tries to comfort Gwendolen about this impending departure, he tells her “I shall be more with you than I used to be . . . If we had been much together before, we should have felt our differences more, and seemed to get farther apart” (878). Difference, for Deronda, represents the impossibility of fully understanding and therefore the hindrance to sympathy. If we find Deronda’s attempt to comfort Gwendolen ultimately unsatisfying, so does she. Once he leaves the house, Gwendolen falls into fits of hysterics.

Eliot and Thackeray’s novels push against the limits of what sympathy, even a reformulated sympathy, can accomplish. But is finding the limits such a terrible thing? It would seem that Deronda’s example demonstrates what happens when we cling too insistently to sympathy and its transformative possibilities: the ethical sympathy we have been striving to create comes full circle to the assimilative sympathy we meant to avoid. When the other’s differences are too great, perhaps we ought not to assume that sympathy is the answer. Deronda’s leaving at the end of the novel suggests this solution, though his motivations are from a fear of difference rather than recognition of difference. Deronda leaves with the feeling that his sympathy failed Gwendolen because he could not fully comprehend her. Had he not feared their differences, his departure could have signaled the choice to leave their respective differences intact by walking away instead of trying to conform Gwendolen to his own ideals.

Reading ethical sympathy in realism and satire requires, perhaps, a new understanding of what constitutes resolution. The last words in Eliot's novel leave us queasy, as they evoke Milton to offer a sense of rightness that seems contradictory to the condition of the character's fates. Perhaps Thackeray's ending offers the most satisfaction after all; when the narrator of *Vanity Fair* shuts up the box and puppets, he leaves Becky smiling "demurely" as if she knows that the reader, like Amelia, will "scurry off" when faced with what seems like an unresolved ending for "our Becky doll." Rather than attempt to satisfy the reader's desire for closure by artificially matching the characters' circumstances with what we think we know about their inner lives, the narrator simply tells us the story is over, and indeed it is: "for our play is played out" (809).

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Having considered the various iterations of sympathy in several nineteenth-century novels, I now turn to some of the implications of my exploration. What is at stake here is the reformulation of gossip, gazing, silence, and laughter, usually disregarded as inconsequential, as forms of interacting that are capable of substantial critiques of dominant narratives and social ideologies. Furthermore, the vision of ethical sympathy proposed in each chapter can foster conversations as we reconsider our use of sympathy across global communities today. The elements of gossip, gazing, silence, and laughter encourage a distinctive approach to difference as they highlight the important role of narrative gaps and communicative gaps in developing an ethical approach to the other.¹

Narrative Gaps encourage an ethical approach to difference by focusing readers' attention on the way a customary response may not be adequate. Leona Toker describes responses to gaps as:

a conjecture and a set of expectations that are either fulfilled or thwarted by subsequent portions of the text. The thwarting is a usually more interesting phenomenon, not only because, like everything unexpected, it carries more information, but also because it can alert us to subjective reasons for our mistakes. Then our own attitudes, formerly unconscious or taken for granted, become the object of our attention. (7)

¹ Iser popularized the notion of "gaps" as the inconsistencies that may arise when a text's formal qualities resist a reader's interpretative framework. This indeterminate space, Iser argues, incites the reader to act: "the lack of a common situation and a common frame of reference corresponds to the contingency and the "no-thing" which bring about the interaction between persons" (167).

Token importantly points out that reactions to gaps are connected to what readers expect from the text, expectations created through the rhetorical devices of the narrative. By using gossip, gazing, silence, and laughter in unexpected ways, the writers I examined “thwart” expectations about what both reading and sympathizing mean. These disrupted expectations call attention to the “formerly unconscious” ways reader would normally react to the text or to the other, and such disruptions require a new response. This new response encourages a revision of one’s horizon of understanding; the value of narrative or communicative gaps appears, then, in the way they encourage revision of the paradigms and norms through which one perceives the other.

An important reason for looking at gossip, gazing, silence, and laughter as discourse systems rests in the fact that communicative gaps work alongside narrative gaps in these novels to challenge interpretative horizons. In other words, I have not just considered how silence created narrative gaps, but also how it created gaps in communication between characters, or what one might label cognitive gaps. Ellen Spolsky describes how such cognitive gaps cause us to pause before making assumptions in the way we construct the other by filling in indeterminate spaces. Spolsky emphasizes gaps, then, as necessary to changing how we interact with an other: “the gaps in human cognitive structure – the vacancies between fragments of understanding – not only permit but actually encourage transformation and innovation” (2). Because we can no longer leap to a categorical conclusion in the face of a gap we do not recognize or understand, Spolsky argues that we must instead listen to the other. The process of listening is vital for allowing others to define themselves instead of being defined by one’s own

assumptions about the other. Gaps thus allow for the “structural possibility of slowing down categorization sufficiently to take into account others’ accounts of their own self-definition” (Spolsky 206). The difference presented in the other’s self-definition promotes the transformation of our own horizons of understanding. In this dissertation, I have focused specifically on the ways gossip, gazing, silence, and laughter as discourse systems created gaps in order to transform our understanding of sympathy.

Throughout this dissertation I have worked from the assumption that literary texts transform more than just reading practices; the act of reading also carries with it the possibility of transforming social relations, the way real readers engage with real people in their lives. One way we can understand the extension of a text’s influence into the actual lived experience of readers is through the notion of horizons as discussed by first Hans-George Gadamer and then Hans Robert Jauss. Interpretations of the world around us, which become naturalized as reality, are based on our horizons of understanding. These horizons are formed by the contexts in which each person is situated, so they are both personal and public. Reading transforms the way we interact with other people by pushing on the limits of our own horizon of understanding when new viewpoints and scenarios are presented within the text. For Gadamer, the concept of horizons, built into his hermeneutic method, draws attention to the preconceived beliefs we bring to any encounter. Difference is what exists beyond our horizon; when we encounter difference we become more aware of the edges of our horizons and we learn more about our

beliefs.¹ Because difference requires a new way of responding, an encounter with the other opens the possibility for transforming our interpretative lens. Thus, difference is not something to be feared or avoided, but rather a quality that we should embrace as the moment for transforming our selves.

While Gadamer speaks of horizons and difference primarily in lived experience, Jauss discusses horizons mainly in terms of how we approach literature. Jauss uses the term “horizon of expectation” to mean all the judgments, beliefs, and reactions we bring to a text. Novels can expand readers’ horizons, according to Jauss, by disrupting genre expectations. When a novel does not allow readers the comfort of following convention, readers experience the work as difference. A new form of literature, Jauss argues:

can make possible a new perception of things by performing the content of a new experience first brought to light in the form of literature. The relationship between literature and reader can actualize itself in the sensorial realm as an incitement to aesthetic perception as well as in the ethical realm as a summons to moral reflection. (41)

Realist texts, in their attempt to engage directly with social issues, make the connection Jauss draws here between aesthetic and moral perception. When these texts create a problem or tension in social relations that cannot be answered by socially prescribed solutions, the literary form suggests to readers new ways of thinking about those

¹ It is important to understand that Gadamer does not propose that we learn to approach the other without any biases. Rather, his hermeneutics emphasizes the way we enter understanding with our own beliefs and expectations at the same time that we encounter something unfamiliar or alien (Jauss xi).

questions.² As readers attempt to resolve the tensions within the text, they alter their interpretative horizons, the same horizons used in engaging the other in lived experience.

I turn now to look at each of the discourse systems in relation to gaps and the transformation of social relations they accomplished. Gossip and gaps in narrative are fundamentally connected; gossip's purpose is to fill in the gaps in a story and satisfy our desire to know, our desire for narrative wholeness. Because these stories are integral to constructing identity, how gossip fills the gaps has ethical implications. In chapter two, I showed how gossip could be used unethically to construct the other's identity by confining that identity to social categories that have a tendency to create false boundaries between self and other. Martineau and Gaskell's novels also provided an example of how gossip can transcend those boundaries because gossip itself permeates categories of public/private or male/female. Mrs. Rowland's gossip in *Deerbrook*, though unethical and without sympathy, demonstrated that gossip is not a frivolous feminine discourse that resides only in the domestic realm, but is a political tool with the power to restructure both private and public realms. As gossip reveals boundaries to be artificial and harmful, it transforms the gap between self and other, revealing this distance to be predicated on differences that are not severe enough to prevent ethical relationships. Thus, the Cranford ladies learn that marriage and men do not have to be othered by us/them dichotomies and can actually contribute to their community in meaningful ways. Gossip develops an

²He uses the trial of Flaubert for writing *Madame Bovary* to show how a literary work can have great influence over moral questions in lived praxis: "The consternating effect of the formal innovations of Flaubert's narrative style...compelled his readers to perceive things differently ...at the same time thrust them into an alienating uncertainty of judgment" (43).

ethical sympathy that is willing to cross over the usual boundaries that exploit fear and prejudice, transforming rigorous categories of difference into fluid boundaries that make an exchange of sympathy possible and even desirable.

Gazing does not attempt to fill the gap between horizons of experience with understanding; rather it legitimates the other's subjectivity by recognizing the other also has a story. Chapter three takes up a more challenging view of sympathy compared to the way, in chapter two, sympathy did not have to overcome extreme differences. Rather, the self just had to be willing to recognize how categories often create difference where there is the possibility for similarities. In chapter three, a more acute case of difference arises between Silas Marner, clearly cast as a stranger and an outsider, and the Raveloe villagers who have customs and beliefs radically different from Marner's. The gap between Marner and the villagers, at first filled with animosity, becomes inhabited by sympathy through the process of witnessing each other's story. Gazing thus constructs the gap between self and other with an embodied presence that signals openness toward the other. As, for example, in the Rainbow Inn scene where Marner feels himself surrounded by the "presence of faces" turned to him in rapt attention. This stance, which recognizes the other has a story to tell, must also be accompanied with listening, or bearing witness to that story. Ethical gazing encourages multiple perspectives to coexist because one does not listen to the other's story in order to agree or understand, one listens simply because the other needs to tell his or her story. Witnessing the other's story focuses not on the content, but on the act of telling. Engaging in a moment of ethical gazing, then, fills the gap between self and other with an exchange of sympathy through story.

Silence itself can be experienced as a gap in the text, such as when characters do not respond or when the narrator withholds information. In Brontë's novel, silence also acts as a tool to maintain the gap between self and other necessary for the sense of one's self as distinct from the other. The use of silence maintains this gap by resisting oppressive or inaccurate categories imposed by others on one's identity. In chapter four, the discourse system of silence in *Villette* presents a totally unknowable other, yet still requires sympathy from both characters and readers in response to Lucy-as-character and Lucy-as-narrator. Lucy uses silence to remain unknown so that her identity cannot be confined to social categories that do not really fit her. She resists the way characters try to assimilate her into their own horizon of understanding, like the way Dr. John tries to conform her to the proper role for an English woman and Polly's father sees her only as a schoolteacher. Though Lucy's silence often makes it seem as if she does not want intimacy, she does desire to be in relationship with others. She insists, however, that people show her sympathy without having to first understand her. Gaps in *Villette* occur, then, as the void of everything that characters and readers do not know about Lucy. To sympathize with Lucy requires abandoning any notion of sympathy predicated on knowing or understanding. Silence firmly maintains the differences that create the gap between self and other, thus the sympathetic act must acknowledge that there is no sameness, and maybe even no agreement, between self and other.

In Chapter five, I presented a challenge to the suggestion that sympathy can be extended despite radical differences. While laughter as a discourse system revealed the importance of distance (from both the self and the other), I showed that Eliot and

Thackeray ultimately found that the distance created by laughter proved to be too great to allow for sympathy. Gwendolen and Becky, the laughing heroines in each novel, were not able to laugh and show sympathy toward others at the same time. The distance Gwendolen's laughter established was necessary, however, because Eliot shows that once Gwendolen's laughter fades she can no longer maintain the gap between self and other, and she loses her sense of self. Thus, Eliot creates the two components necessary for an ethical encounter, distance represented by Gwendolen and sympathy represented by Deronda, but cannot find a way to bring those two qualities together. While Thackeray also shows Becky's laughter as antithetical to sympathy, he requires more from the reader. The narrator insists that readers laugh at themselves as well as other characters; Thackeray succeeds in getting the reader to laugh at everything and everyone, but perhaps sacrifices sympathy along the way. Eliot and Thackeray are more apt than Brontë to point out the challenge of sympathizing when the distance between self and other is too great. The implications emerging from their experiments with sympathy, however, point to a needed revision of the way we understand realism.

Critical conversations and definitions rely on visibility to define realism, a construction that often neglects what I argue is a central, defining part of a realist text: the discourse in, around, and exchanged between characters, narrator, author, and reader. Peter Brooks argues that "realism more than almost any other mode of literature makes sight paramount – makes it the dominant sense in our understanding of and relation to the world" (3). Certainly the visual and the material are vital components of realism. I am suggesting, however, the visual need not be the primary focus or defining quality of the

realist novel. Instead, I reposition realism as a rhetorical mode focused on relational tensions. Following Penny Boumelha's notion that realism is a set of relationships rather than solely a narrative device (Furst 321), I suggest we need to focus on how the realist novel interrogates social relationships rather than on how it represents the world. When we look at realism in this way – as sets of relationships or systems of meaning – we can move away from evaluating a realist novel solely on formal qualities such as mimesis or closure.

Perhaps realism does not, after all, require closure if we understand realism as investigating a set of relationships. This definition offers a more comfortable relationship between the resolution that realism seems to require and the contradictory, unresolved endings realist novels more often produce. Especially if we understand those relationships in terms of the complicated notions of sympathy presented by the writers I have examined in this dissertation. Many of the indictments against realism concentrate on the transparent notion of language, the one-to-one relationship between signifier and signified. Recent studies of realist novels are beginning to complicate that charge; the most successful of those challenges are the ones that recognize realism is not limited to representing “the world.” Realism does not have to, and indeed cannot, present a transparent representations through language because it is “always interested in engaging the reader, not in some sort of illusion of ‘direct’ contact with the world, but in a dialogue in which the stakes are more rhetorical than epistemological and have more to do with the will than with a certain (inadequate) model of knowing” (Shaw 39). Reading realist novels through discourse systems, as I have done in this project, reconstructs the

relationship between reader and text as “more rhetorical than epistemological.” That is, we read less for *what* we know and more for *how* we come to know or, even better, why it is that we cannot and should not know.

I am focusing here on how we read the endings of realist novels because the way these texts do or do not achieve closure influences heavily how readers ultimately interpret the social relationships in the novel. For example, by constructing characters’ fates as punishment or reward, endings influence which characters readers sympathize with. If we understand realism as the articulation and negotiation of social relationships, rather than a set of representations, then our reading practices can complicate tidy endings as a way to challenge the normative ideologies upheld through resolution. What better way to expose the unethical relationships between classes and between genders than by leaving such relationships unresolved in the endings of novels? In this project, Brontë and Thackeray are the writers who resisted the realist impulse to provide closure, and their endings usually serve to fuel critical debate. Yet we also debate the endings of more “classical” realist texts like Eliot’s novels. Were critics to take the “provincial life novels” of Gaskell and Martineau more seriously, I suspect they would debate those endings as well.

What I am suggesting is that even the seemingly “happy endings” of Victorian novels often entail a sense of uneasiness. Bernard Paris suggests that this tension arises between the mimetic portrait of character and the rhetoric surrounding character, corresponding roughly to representation and interpretation. The narrator’s and author’s interpretations may say one thing about where characters end up, but the representation of

the characters, the portrayal of their inner lives, often suggests a different way to read their fates. If this contradiction is always there, perhaps it is the point of realism. Perhaps the best way to expand readers' horizons is to prevent them from closing down multiple points of view and resolving all the tensions of plot and character into a tidy ending.

I have tried to avoid conflating sympathy and understanding, but I want to suggest now that I do see understanding as in some way fundamental to sympathy. However, conceptions of understanding that assume it is based on agreement or likeness need to be reformulated. Understanding can draw on distance and gaps in productive ways rather than struggle to close distance and gaps and so cover over difference. To understand someone, then, may actually entail the recognition of differences and the ensuing revelation that changes the way one thinks of the self and the other. Rather than identifying the act of understanding as a moment where I recognize sameness in the other, understanding actually consists of "revelatory moments of realization when it becomes apparent that the other *does not* think the *same* as me or that I can no longer think the *same* as I did about a person or a text" (Davey 5). This defamiliarization of our own thinking produces the possibility for an ethical encounter; that is, one in which we do not attempt to familiarize the other and misrepresent or misunderstand the other. Instead, we allow our horizon of understanding to be disrupted and challenged, accepting rather than refusing the difference we come face to face with.

I would like to suggest, then, that understanding does not entail agreement or require adopting the other's worldview. I feel we have misconstrued just what "understanding" really means; we normally equate "I understand" with "I agree." To

sympathize, to understand, can simply mean I recognize the other's perspective. In order to illustrate this concept I turn to Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein*, a Romantic text that grapples fundamentally, I argue, with this issue of sympathy. Although this is not considered a realist text, its didactic tone and allegorical mode offer an especially clear illustration of what I am talking about. My inclusion of *Frankenstein* here also attempts to draw attention to interpretations like Gayatri Spivak's, which recognize Shelley's representation of nineteenth-century anxiety over imperialism and otherness. Spivak insightfully highlights the imperialist undertones in *Frankenstein*, pointing to many examples like Henry Clerval's entrepreneurial desire to travel to India as well as the representations of otherness in characters like Safie. The numerous implicit references to imperialism and the overt strangeness of the monster make this novel fundamentally about how one manages an encounter with the other. I only discuss one encounter here, but there are many more where the narrative focuses with explicit detail on the moment at which various characters first come in contact with the monster, including the De Lacey's, William, the rustic in the woods, and Frankenstein himself.

In each of these encounters, the monster is positioned as other. While the characters all respond in unethical ways, rejecting the monster based solely on his appearance as other, the reader is asked to sympathize with the monster once we have heard his tale. As we "listen" to the monster's story, our sympathy wanes for Victor because his responses to the monster seem increasingly abhorrent. And yet, what Shelley really asks of us is to be able to say "I understand" to both Victor and the monster. She achieves this by first aligning our sympathies with Victor as we journey through his inner

life, his domestic affections, and his ambitions. Then she aligns our sympathies with the monster as we make the same journey through his experiences, his craving after domestic affections, and his ambition to have a mate like himself. By showing us that we can say “I understand” to Victor in volume one and then “I understand” to the monster in volume two, Shelley then asks why we cannot say “I understand” to both the monster and Victor at the same time.

This is exactly Walton’s dilemma at the end of the novel when confronted with the monster who appears over Victor’s dead body. We know from the beginning of the novel that Walton sympathizes with Victor. Although this sympathy reflects the more unethical type of sympathy based in sameness, Walter exhibits an amazing capacity at the end of the novel for sympathy with the monster. He expresses this sympathy in two ways: first by listening to the monster’s tale and then by allowing him to walk away. Walton’s response at the end of the novel offers perhaps the only ethical response to the creature. For the first time in the novel someone hails Frankenstein’s monster: Walton “called on him to stay” (240). By hailing the monster, Walton positions himself as a listener.

Invited to stay, the monster pours out “uncontrollable passion” over the corpse and Walton’s first impulse to “the duty of obeying the dying request of my friend” gives way to the “mixture of curiosity and compassion” at seeing this response to Victor’s corpse (240). The monster defends himself by trying to tell of the horrible existence he has endured, trying to convince Walton that his torture was “such as you cannot even imagine” (241). Walton tries to imagine and is “touched by the expressions of his misery,” an extension of sympathy and understanding that causes Walton not to comply

with Victor's request to kill his creation, and instead he listens to the monster's story with the intent to witness the strange tale of this other. His understanding does not extend to agreement, and he does not ultimately condemn or condone the monster. He simply lets the monster leave, and the novel ends with the image of "darkness and distance." This illusive space of silence implicates the reader as listener. A response to the monster, which is also a response to Victor's story and Walton's letters, is an opportunity to be a more ethical reader, sympathizing in the way that Walton does by recognizing the ethical obligation we have to listen to the other's tale. This sympathy can be the difference between an unrecognizable monster or a recognized self.

The primary characters in Mary Shelley's text exhibit the desire to tell and to know, indeed, their journeys become obsessed with these impulses. The impulses to tell and to know are not desires that we need to overcome; indeed, I think they are imperative to our need for community and the other. Instead, the new conception of sympathy I am proposing here helps to redefine what "knowing" the other might mean. It does not have to mean assimilating differences into sameness so that we can reach understanding. Sympathy in and through difference suggests our impulse to know can be satisfied by discovering new perspectives and new horizons. In other words, the impulse to know just could be the desire to discover difference, rather than the desire to find sameness. This notion of sympathy can also restructure scenes of telling, avoiding the antagonistic relationship between self and other developed in an effort to be the person with the "right" perspective, the "true" telling. Instead, the impulse to tell becomes bound up in a more reciprocal exchange of stories that maintains the subjectivity of each identity by

listening for difference in the stories rather than listening for what is the same. This practice of telling encourages sympathy through the act of bearing witness to one another's stories, and difference or sameness becomes irrelevant.

As our global world comes up against more and more encounters with what are perceived to be radical differences that are irreconcilable, this conception of sympathy becomes vital. Rather than trying to overcome those differences, we need to seek out ways to hear and witness the presence of the other. Sometimes this may necessitate the "darkness and distance" of unknowability, but the openness of endless possibility. If Spivak can describe *Frankenstein's* open ending as "a noble resolution for a nineteenth-century English novel" (259), then I hope we have progressed to the point now that if we reach the limits of sympathy, we learn to simply walk away. This, I believe, will make a world of difference.

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