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Mrs. Gaskell as a Biographer

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Abstract

Mrs Gaskell was one of the most interesting writers during the Victorian Era. She was essentially a realist and a social reformer. Her novels and short stories reflect the social problems. Her vision was not only confined to the evils of industrial life but her sphere was wide and had an instinct of humanitarian outlook. When we talk about Charlotte Bronte we cannot forget to mention Mrs. Gaskell, as she was one of the first and foremost biographer of Charlotte Bronte. My research paper analyses the study of Mrs. Gaskell as a Biographer.

Keywords: Social, Humanitarian

Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell, more known as Mrs. Gaskell in the world of English Literature was one of the finest novelists during the Victorian Age, recognized as a distinct story teller. Despite producing masterpieces like '*Mary Barton*', '*Cranford*' and short stories like- '*The Moorland Cottage*' (1850), '*The Old Nurse's Story*' (1852), '*Lizzie Leigh*' (1855), '*Lois The Witch*' (1861) and others, her stature was somewhat overshadowed by colossal writers like Dickens and Thackeray.

Mrs. Gaskell very skilfully maintained a balance in her writings by exposing the evils and ruthlessness of the impact of the disastrous effects of the Industrial Revolution upon the working class. On the other hand, she glorified the provincial life of England for which '*Cranford*' is the best example. As a writer, she devoted her writings for the cause of contemporary society. Saintsbury mentions her name amongst the artists of "Mid-Victorian Novel."^[1] Contemporary of Dickens, Bronte's, Thackeray, Trollope and Disraeli, Mrs. Gaskell was an extensive writer of short stories, novels, poems, sketches and was a contributor to Dickens' journal *The Household Words*, other journals like *Howitt's Journal*, *The Ladies Companion*, wrote for *Sunday School Penny Magazine*, *Cornhill Magazine* and *All the Year Round*, moreover she produced a biography of her contemporary-Charlotte Bronte.

Mrs. Gaskell was the first and foremost biographer of the *Life of Charlotte Bronte* published posthumously in 1857 by Smith, Elder & Co. Since then several biographies of Charlotte Bronte have been written by various authors such as *Augustine Birrell's Biography - Life of Charlotte Bronte* (1887), *C.K. Shorter's - Charlotte Bronte and Her Circle* (1896) and *studies by Dimnet (Les Soeurs Bronte)* (1910) and *E.F. Benson's -- Charlotte Bronte* (1932), *Margaret Lane's- The Bronte Story* (1953) and *Juliet Barker's -- The Bronte's* (1994) and *Charlotte Bronte, A writer's life by Rebecca Fraser* (2003). These biographers have shown their study, analysis, and research in writing their respective biographies but the fact is that Mrs. Gaskell paved a path to other biographers. What makes Mrs. Gaskell stand different from other biographers is her rare excellence of observation and expression which attributed to the shaping of her artistic intellect.

Moreover, Gaskell was personally asked by Charlotte's father, Patrick Bronte to pen a biography of his daughter. It was a biography written by a novelist of a novelist. Her biography played a very significant role in Mrs. Gaskell's life by bringing success and criticism to her at the same time. Gaskell was labelled that she suppressed the facts of Bronte's love episode with a married man Constantine Heger (a Belgian teacher) and her romance with her publisher George Smith. But the fact is that the author must have been conscious of the Victorian conventions and took a safer side to prevent the dignity of an author and that too a woman.

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Moreover, as a friend to Charlotte Bronte, Gaskell must have gone through severe constraints and limitations. Those who came with the criticism of the *Life of Charlotte Bronte* did not know that Gaskell had a humanitarian outlook and as Mrs. Gaskell was living at that time she had to take into consideration about Bronte's friends and relatives. Further, the description of Patrick Branwell's (Charlotte Bronte's brother) love affair with Mrs. Robinson became controversial. Gaskell describes, "Branwell, I have mentioned, had obtained a situation as a private tutor. Full of available talent, a brilliant talker, a good writer, apt at drawing, ready of appreciation and with a not unhandsome person he took the fancy of a married woman, nearly twenty years older than himself."^[2] This anecdote created a furore in both the families. A.B Hopkins comments, "Mrs. Gaskell's handling of the Mrs. Robinson affair is practically the only portion of her book that cannot be defended. Here she wants strangely to counter to all the premises to be discrete in threatening her source material."^[3] But the question is that had their not been any love affair between Branwell and Mrs. Robinson, how it was conveyed to Mrs. Gaskell? Had there be no truth, Mrs. Gaskell would have not raised this issue. As May Sinclair rightly calls Gaskell "a good, wise woman"^[4]. Dullemen criticized Mrs. Gaskell for including irrelevant subject matter in **The Life of Charlotte Bronte**. He observes, "The peculiarities of the Yorkshire people and all their religious concerns are told at great length."^[5] Dullemen while commenting in this manner must have lost the idea that Gaskell was a novelist and the novelist always works on a large canvass. No doubt, as Sinclair rightly observes, "The first chapter of the life is like the opening of the great novel, the somber and elaborate setting of a tragedy"^[6] Elizabeth Gaskell's Biography, e.g., "carefully chronicles the fact that the entire road from Keighley to Haworth was built up, and then speaks of the dreamy, supernatural cast of mind the children acquired from dwelling in such seclusion."^[7]

Writing a biography needs an extensive research of a person's life. As defined by Miller, biographical research is, "a research method that collects and analyses a person's whole life, or a portion of a life, through the in-depth and unstructured interview, or sometimes reinforced by semi-structured interview or personal documents."^[8] Gaskell herself claims, "for a right understanding of the life of my friend Charlotte Bronte, it appears to me more necessary in her case than in most others, that the reader should be made acquainted with the peculiar forms of population and society amidst which her earliest years were passed and which both her own and her sister's first impression of human life must have been received. I shall endeavor, therefore, before proceeding further with my work to present some idea of the character of the people of Howarth of the surrounding districts."^[9]

Charlotte's letters very well show her personality, desires, and feelings and give an opportunity to the readers to understand her as a person; and how her sisters, Emily, Anne and her brother Patrick Branwell were talented and creative writers and always had a craving to become established writers. As the Victorian Age did not treat women writers equally; the sisters had to find out a way to produce their work under a pseudonym. This letter shows their passion:

"We had very early cherished the dream of one day being authors....We agreed to arrange a small selection of our

poems, and, if possible, get them printed. Averse to personal publicity we veiled our own names under those of Currer, Ellis, and Acton, Bell: The ambiguous choice being dictated by a sort of conscientious scruple at assuming Christian names, positively masculine while we did not like to declare ourselves women, because—without at the time suspecting that our mode of writing and thinking was not what is called 'feminine'—We had a vague impression that authoresses are liable to be looked on with prejudice."^[10]

Charlotte Bronte's struggle to establish herself as a writer was not easy. Her novel 'The Professor' was rejected by the publishers though it was the first novel written before 'Jane Eyre' could only be published posthumously in 1857. 'Jane Eyre' too was not accepted by the publishers. Bronte herself said, "Currer Bells book found acceptance nowhere, nor any acknowledgment of merit, so that something like the chill of despair began to invade..."^[11] But after sometime 'Jane Eyre' and 'The Professor' were accepted after the publication by the readers. Similarly the other novel, "Villette- which if less interesting as a mere story than 'Jane Eyre,' displays yet more of the extraordinary genius of the author—was received with one burst of acclamation."^[12] Being a woman Mrs. Gaskell very well understood the notion of struggles of being a woman "despite the fact Gaskell raised issues related to religion, race, nationality, and class and to a minor degree, sexuality in the Life."^[13]

After Mrs. Gaskell's work, many biographies were produced, but there is no biographer who has not accessed Gaskell's **The Life of Charlotte Bronte**. C.K. Shorter had a journalistic attitude and was critical about Gaskell's description of Cowan's Bridge School and Rev. William Carus Wilson's, character (the operator of the Cowan Bridge School). No doubt, by presenting such a picture of Cowan's Bridge School, no doubt, Mrs. Gaskell came with the facts and truths of the deplorable conditions of schools of that time. Margaret Lane in retelling 'The Bronte story' – "unfortunately gives us facts and opinions but entirely leaves out the soul."^[14] Juliet Barker wrote 'The Brontes' in 1994 but by using the historical records; rather wrote Bronte's biography with the perspective of a historian. Her "book is the first definitive history of 'The Brontes'"^[15]

But Gaskell as a biographer put her heart and soul into writing this biography, she rather was, "determined both to tell the truth and to honor her friend. She contacted those who had known Charlotte and travelled extensively in England and Belgium to gather material. She wrote from a vivid accumulation of letters, interviews, and observation establishing the details of Charlotte's life and recreating her background. Through often difficult and demanding process, Gaskell created a vital sense of a life hidden from the world."^[16]

Mrs. Gaskell's –The Life of Charlotte Bronte will always remain a landmark for the coming authors. "The Life of Charlotte Bronte has established itself as one of the great biographies; later biographies have modified but not replaced it."^[17] Other biographers handed over the material to the readers, but Mrs. Gaskell's details in her biography were done meticulously with her keen observation. "The great thing for us is that she was right about Charlotte Bronte. She was right with the rightness which no biographer and no critic of The Bronte's has ever so securely attained ..." ^[18] And moreover, her biography was written by a friend of a friend and of a contemporary by a contemporary. Mrs Gaskell, a writer of social consciousness

is considered to be a social historian and an artist of great skill and calibre par excellence.

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