THE NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE OF THE LIFE OF CHARLOTTE BRONTË

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RAEWYN DELIA MORRIS

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ABSTRACT

The following discussion of The Life of Charlotte Brontë is an examination of the narrative techniques Elizabeth Gaskell employs in the biography. The structure of The Life of Charlotte Brontë is such that the narrative 'voice' of Elizabeth Gaskell is heard in alternation with the 'voice' of Charlotte Brontë, the latter through the numerous letters which Gaskell has selected and placed throughout the biography.

Chapter One of the discussion indicates the ways in which Gaskell has divided the text into volumes and chapters. Gaskell's methods in organising the overall structure of the biography are important because they highlight issues that recur when studying Gaskell's other narrative techniques.

Chapter Two examines the chronological sequence to show in particular the effect on the text of the large number of chronological disruptions. These disruptions play a major role in providing background material concerning Charlotte.

Chapter Three considers several important features of the narrative including digression, anecdote, summarisation of incidents, dramatisation of scenes, method in introducing and describing characters, and, finally, use of dialogue.

Chapter Four looks at the issue of judgement in the biography. The narrator states in the text that it is not her role to judge, yet she does so often. As well as considering this point, I have examined the ways in which she passes judgement.

Finally, Chapter Five considers Gaskell's characterisation of Charlotte as a tragic heroine. The focus in this chapter is on Gaskell's use of affective language; the selective manner in which she includes Charlotte's letters in the text is also taken up for discussion.

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INTRODUCTION

Prior to publishing The Life of Charlotte Brontë in 1857, Elizabeth Gaskell had published three novels, and she later went on to write several more works of fiction. Although this is a biography and as such stands alone among the collected writing of Gaskell, I have approached the subject of narrative techniques and stylistic concerns in the same way I would approach a novel and in some examples I have made comparisons, with explanations, between the biography and two of Gaskell's novels.

Previous discussion of The Life of Charlotte Brontë has centred on the issue of content. This concern has led to debate on the truthfulness or otherwise of the material within the biography and this debate has continued from the time of publication. I have avoided this issue entirely and examined instead the methods and techniques of narration and style. Gaskell has often been stereotyped by critics as a female, mid-Victorian writer who, although capable of telling a story, is incapable of controlling and structuring it to any great extent. When considered closely, however, this contention lacks credibility. Although, as I will demonstrate, Gaskell does disrupt the chronology and add anecdotal evidence on many occasions, which indicates a lack of control on the part of the narrator, the primary reason for doing this is an important part of Gaskell's strategy. At various points in the text, particularly in the structuring of volumes and chapters, characterisation of Charlotte and her family, in the making of judgements, and dramatisation of scenes and episodes, Gaskell's shaping hand is evident. In the following chapters, I intend to demonstrate the extent to which narrative structure and style control our reading experience of The Life of Charlotte Brontë.

CHAPTER ONE

The Life of Charlotte Brontë is written in two volumes, both consisting of fourteen chapters. The division into Volume I and Volume II occurs at the stage in Charlotte's[1] life when her poetry and that of her sisters, Emily and Anne, had been published, but before any of the three had been acclaimed as major authors:

> Once more, in September, she writes, 'As the work has received no further notice from any periodical, I presume the demand for it has not greatly increased.'
>
> In the biographical notice of her sisters, she thus speaks of the failure of the modest hopes vested in this publication. 'The book was printed; it is scarcely known, and all of it that merits to be known are the poems of Ellis Bell. The fixed conviction I held, and hold, of the worth of these poems, has not, indeed, received the confirmation of much favourable criticism; but I must retain it notwithstanding' (p. 297, End of Volume I)[2].

The decision to divide the book at that point is interesting because Gaskell's stated intention in writing the biography was to emphasise Charlotte's private and family life: "if I live long enough, and no one is living whom such a publication would hurt, I will publish what I know of her and make the world ... honour the woman as much as they have admired the writer"[3]. Nevertheless, it is Charlotte as writer that is focused upon at the important volume break, an acknowledgement of the readers' interest in her work and an understanding on Gaskell's part that she is writing the life-story of a major author.

Although the division into volumes is extremely regular, occurring as it does at the end of the 14th chapter in the 28 chapter book, the breaks between chapters are more unpredictable. The number of pages in each chapter ranges from two to forty-seven and on inspection the only pattern that emerges is that the shorter chapters are found at the beginnings and ends of volumes: Volume I, Chapter I consists of seven pages, Volume I, Chapter XIV consists of thirteen pages, Volume II, Chapter I consists of eleven pages and Volume II, Chapter XIV consists of two pages. The two shortest chapters in the book occur at the beginning and end of the biography and both contain as their subject matter information about Charlotte's death:

ADJOINING LIE THE REMAINS OF
CHARLOTTE, WIFE
OF THE
REV. ARTHUR BELL NICHOLLS, A.B.,
AND DAUGHTER OF THE REV. P. BRONTË, A.B., INCUMBENT.
SHE DIED MARCH 31st, 1855, IN THE 39th
YEAR OF HER AGE. (p. 59, Chapter I)

> Few beyond that circle of hills knew that she, whom the nations praised far off, lay dead that Easter morning. Of kith and kin she had more in the grave to which she was soon to be borne, than among the living (p. 525, Chapter XIV).

The economical style used here is indicative of the manner in which Gaskell approached Charlotte's death. It is a tragedy that is foreshadowed throughout the book not only by references to Charlotte's early death but by the placing of her death within the context of the whole family's tragic circumstances. Although Gaskell dwells in detail on the deaths of Branwell, Emily and Anne, she is succinct in her description of Charlotte's death. The reason for the final chapter's brevity is that the chapter describes only the burial and pays a final tribute to Charlotte. All of the other deaths in the Brontë family are described in chapters that contain information on many other aspects of their lives. One example of this is Volume II, Chapter II, which is forty-seven pages in length and not only deals with the deaths of Branwell and Emily but also describes visits to London by Charlotte and Anne, the publication of the sisters' first novels with their subsequent reviews and the beginnings of the correspondence between Charlotte and people involved in the literary scene in London. It is Charlotte's death then that is of most importance and some chapter divisions reinforce this.

Other chapters in the biography are divided for similar reasons; that is, to emphasise an emotional or troubled stage in the Brontës' lives. The end of Chapter II in both Volumes I and II is a case in point:

> One wonders how the bleak aspect of her new home - the low, oblong, stone parsonage, high up, yet with a still higher back-ground of sweeping moors - struck on the gentle, delicate wife, whose health even then was failing (p. 76).

> As the old, bereaved father and his two surviving children followed the coffin to the grave, they were

> joined by Keeper, Emily's fierce, faithful bull-dog. He walked alongside of the mourners, and into the church, and stayed quietly there all the time that the burial service was being read. When he came home, he lay down at Emily's chamber door, and howled pitifully for many days. Anne Brontë drooped and sickened more rapidly from that time; and so ended the year 1848 (p. 358).

The first example from Volume I, referring to the physical condition of Maria Brontë at the time of her arrival in Haworth, occurs at the end of the second chapter and is not mentioned again until several pages into Chapter III. This heightens the emotion concerning her ill-health and effectively gives the end of the chapter an atmosphere of pathos. Similarly, the end of Volume II, Chapter II, showing the Brontë family in mourning for Emily, also gives prominence to the emotion surrounding that event because it is separated by the structural break immediately after it. Several other chapters end in this manner and they all serve to heighten the sense of peculiar isolation surrounding the family.

Many of the chapter divisions in the biography can be explained in terms of a movement in time. Sometimes this movement is from the more distant past to the more recent past but at other times Gaskell uses the break more definitely to move from the end of one year to the beginning of another, or from the end of a certain stage in Charlotte's life forward to the next. The division between Chapters VI and VII is an example of the latter. Chapter VI concerns Charlotte's life at Roe Head with the final sentence of the chapter summing up her experiences there: "And among them, beloved and respected by all, laughed at occasionally by a few, but always to her face - lived, for two years, the plain, short-sighted, oddly-dressed, studious little girl they called Charlotte Brontë" (p. 142). Chapter VII begins, "Miss Brontë left Roe Head in 1832, having won the affectionate regard both of her teacher and her school fellows" (p. 143), and the structural break allows Gaskell to complete her account of that part of Charlotte's life, remind the readers at the beginning of the next chapter that that period has been covered and consequently move onto another topic.

There are several examples of Gaskell's technique of using chapter breaks to move from one year to another. Volume I, Chapter VIII, ends with a letter written by Charlotte dated, "'December 21st, 1839'"

(p. 194), while the following chapter begins, "The year 1840 found all the Brontës living at home, except Anne" (p. 196). The effect of this is to make the narrative seem orderly; although the subject matter is carried over into the following chapter, the time has changed and the chapter break reinforces this. Gaskell uses the chapter/year break on other occasions, "Meanwhile, they enjoyed their Christmas all together inexpressibly" (p. 249, Volume I, Chapter XI), and, "Towards the end of January, the time came for Charlotte to return to Brussels" (p. 250, Volume I, Chapter XII); "'Anne is now much better, but papa has been for near a fortnight far from well with the influenza; he has at times a most distressing cough, and his spirits are much depressed'. So ended the year 1846" (p. 311, Volume II, Chapter I), and, "The next year opened with a spell of cold dreary weather, which told severely on a constitution already tried by anxiety and care" (p. 312, Volume II, Chapter II). The Brontës' lives, lived as they were in a remote village with few close friends, were far from exciting with at times the only measure of living in this way being the chronicling of the extreme sicknesses and consequent deaths of each member of the family, so Gaskell by using chapter divisions in these ways is able to make distinctions between ill-health and monotony from one year to the next.

Another technique Gaskell uses when making divisions between chapters is the device of repeating subject matter so that the content of the opening sentence of a chapter is also carried over to the end of the chapter. This method is employed by Gaskell seven times during the course of the biography and in the majority of examples emphasises the state of health of Charlotte or a member of her family. Volume II, Chapter I therefore opens with, "During this summer of 1846, while her literary hopes were waning, an anxiety of another kind was increasing. Her father's eyesight had become seriously impaired by the progress of the cataract which was forming. He was nearly blind" (p. 301), and concludes with, "'papa has been for near a fortnight far from well with the influenza; he has at times a most distressing cough, and his spirits are much depressed'" (p. 311). This circularity in narrative, so that the end repeats the beginning, is common to all narrative, from journalism through to the ballad and even ordinary conversation, and contributes both to the understanding and to the aesthetic appeal of the story being told.

A distinctive feature also noticeable in the manner Gaskell has organised her volumes and chapters is the frequency with which she hands over the narrator's role to Charlotte, allowing her to finish off chapters. In Volume I, six out of the fourteen chapters are completed by Charlotte's words; in one case this consists of a poem, with the remaining five consisting of letters. In Volume II, where it is the adult writer as opposed to the younger Charlotte of Volume I, ten of the fourteen chapters conclude with Charlotte's letters.

Of the sixteen chapters ending with Charlotte's words only two display her sense of wit. The first involves her own rather harsh self-awareness:

> 'You tantalize me to death with talking of conversations by the fireside. Depend upon it, we are not to have any such for many a long month to come. I get an interesting impression of old age upon my face; and when you see me next I shall certainly wear caps and spectacles' (p. 223).

The second is a response to the local curate's reading of Shirley:

> 'It is a curious fact that, since he read "Shirley", he has come to the house oftener than ever, and been remarkably meek and assiduous to please. Some people's natures are veritable enigmas: I quite expected to have had one good scene at least with him; but as yet nothing of the sort has occurred' (p. 406).

Throughout the biography there is evidence of Charlotte's rather dry, often self-mocking humour, but in the majority of chapter endings in which Charlotte speaks, it is either to the family's poor health or to her efforts in being published, that she addresses herself. This is significant because the structural breaks give emphasis to the last words in any chapter and once again the impression gained is of Charlotte as the tragic heroine. While writing the biography in Charlotte's words as far as possible, Gaskell has organised the breaks at chapter and volume ends so as to give prominence to Charlotte the suffering woman, not Charlotte the extraordinary writer.

Footnotes

1 In speaking of Charlotte Brontë I have used her first name throughout this thesis to distinguish her from other members of the Brontë family.

2 Elizabeth Gaskell, The Life Of Charlotte Brontë, ed. Alan Shelston (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1975). All further page references given are for this edition.

3 J.A. Chapple and A. Pollard, ed., The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1966), p. 345.

CHAPTER TWO

In looking at the chronological structure of The Life of Charlotte Brontë I have paid particular attention to the manner in which Gaskell has arranged her material within certain chapters. It becomes apparent that Gaskell often disrupts the straightforward movement of the text, sometimes to the extent of several times on each page. Volume I, Chapter III contains as many as six forward and backward movements in time on any one page. The most obvious effect of these interruptions at this early stage of the biography is to disclose every possible influence upon the life of Charlotte; but there are however other changes in narration that have more subtle reasons for being used.

Chapter II concludes with the arrival of the Brontë family, parents and six children to the Haworth parsonage in 1820. Chapter III, though, begins in the present tense, "The Rev. Patrick Brontë is a native of the County Down in Ireland" (p. 77). The choice of tense is explained naturally enough by the fact that Charlotte's father was still alive at the time of Gaskell's writing. We then travel back in time to Patrick's father, "His father, Hugh Brontë" (p. 77). The effect of these inclusions soon becomes obvious because Gaskell uses the information included in these backward-looking descriptions to illustrate the exceptional qualities of Charlotte's forbears and so suggests the source of Charlotte's own extraordinary character. The few facts which are related concerning Charlotte's paternal grandfather are positive:

> he was the descendant of an ancient family ... He made an early marriage, and reared and educated ten children on the proceeds of the few acres of land which he farmed. This large family were remarkable for great physical strength, and much personal beauty (p. 77).

This pattern continues, with the next chronological disruption being forward again to the time of writing, "Even in his old age, Mr. Brontë is a striking-looking man, above the common height, with a nobly-shaped head, and erect carriage", and back again, "In his youth he must have been unusually handsome" (P. 77). The narrator, in another forward-looking chronological disruption on the same page, concludes: "The course of life of which this is the outline, shows a powerful and

remarkable character, originating and pursuing a purpose in a resolute and independent manner" (p. 77).

Changes in chronology at many points in this chapter allow the narrator to develop Charlotte's character by providing insights into other members of her family. Maria Branwell, Charlotte's mother, is dealt with in a similar fashion. After a description of Charlotte's maternal grandparents and a reference to the years in which they died, "he in 1808, she in 1809, when their daughter Maria was twenty-five or twenty-six years of age" (p. 80), the narrator leaps forward in time using letters of Maria's to show, "They are full of tender grace of expression, and feminine modesty; pervaded by the deep piety to which I have alluded as a family characteristic" (p. 80). In this way the reader can learn about the qualities of Charlotte's mother and therefore, by association, of Charlotte herself: "I shall make one or two extracts from them, to show what sort of a person was the mother of Charlotte Brontë" (p. 80). Other chronological interruptions concerning Maria Brontë provide material which completes the positive aspects of her character. The narrator writes of Maria just before her wedding, then goes forward in time to shortly before her death: "And so Maria Brontë fades out of sight; we have no more direct intercourse with her; we hear of her as Mrs Brontë, but it is as an invalid, not far from death; still patient, cheerful and pious" (p. 83). It is in interrupting the narrative flow and describing Maria on the point of death that the comparison between mother and daughter is made more obvious. In the penultimate chapter of The Life Charlotte is described on her death-bed as: "She, who was ever patient in illness, tried hard to bear up and bear on ... Long days and longer nights went by; still the same relentless nausea and faintness, and still borne on in patient trust" (pp. 523-4). The similarity of description implies that Charlotte's courage and resolution are traits inherited from her mother.

Of importance too, in relation to Maria Brontë's story, is the effect of her early death on the remaining Brontë family and so Gaskell has disrupted the movement in this chapter not only to point out the 'womanly' qualities she possessed but also to foreshadow her death. The recurrence of death and the emphasis on the tragedy resulting from it is of great significance in the biography and is a

subject I will deal with more fully in Chapter Five. In Chapter III of The Life, Gaskell, by stressing at several points the impending death of Maria manages to impart an atmosphere of pathos and adversity upon the state of the rest of the family.

The end of Chapter III describes the arrival of the Brontës at Haworth with an indication of Maria's approaching death and reader sympathy gained with the juxtaposition of that fact with the words "six little children":

> Into the midst of this lawless, yet not unkindly population, Mr Brontë brought his wife and six little children, in February, 1820 ... One wonders how the bleak aspect of her new home ... struck on the gentle, delicate wife, whose health even then was failing (p. 76).

The narrative in Chapter III then goes back in time to detail Mr. Brontë's youth until the time he married Maria Branwell and also details the background and upbringing of Maria in Penzance, then moves forward again to mention her death and at the same time stress how young Charlotte was at the time of her death: "Miss Branwell ... came to the parsonage, when Charlotte was only six or seven years old, to take charge of her dead sister's family" (p. 80).

The next chronological disruption concerning death in the Brontë family shows a forward movement again to the period when Gaskell was writing and this time includes other deaths as well as Maria's, but although the reference is wider the sense of tragedy is maintained with the final words in the sentence: "There are plans for happy picnic parties to Kirkstall Abbey, in the glowing September days, when 'Uncle, Aunt, and Cousin Jane,' - the last engaged to a Mr Morgan, another clergyman - were of the party; all since dead, except Mr Brontë" (p. 81).

Another example used by Gaskell to anticipate Maria's death also shows the connection between her fatal illness and the effect of that on the children. The chronological disruption is complex and the passage begins by describing the children at the time of their early years at Haworth: "They were grave and silent beyond their years; subdued, probably, by the presence of serious illness in the house" (p. 87). The narrator moves from that time period to her present time of writing, "which my informant speaks of", then back again to the

period of illness, "Mrs Brontë was confined to the bed-room", and finally forward again, "the bedroom from which she never came forth alive" (p. 87). But rather than the complexity of the passage leading to dislocation, the effect of the disruptions is to unify the narrator's main idea. By giving as much detail as possible about their lives and by substantiating the material in the present tense using words such as "my informant", Gaskell demonstrates that the mother's death occurring at a time when her children were very young, had a significant effect upon the way they behaved then and in later years.

Chronological disruption in Chapter III not only discloses reasons for the way Charlotte's character was developing up until the age of seven when her mother died, but is also used in a wider sense to indicate factors that influenced Charlotte's development as a writer. Gaskell's narrative reaches the point where the Brontë parents meet (p. 78) but she then takes her story back to Maria Brontë's childhood in Penzance and includes a passage written by John Davy about his brother's life in that same town during the time of the Branwell family upbringing. The passage is a long one in terms of the length of the chapter and in her present tense Gaskell explains why it is there: "I have given this extract because I conceive it bears some reference to the life of Miss Brontë, whose strong mind and vivid imagination must have received their first impressions ... from" (p. 80). Gaskell then proceeds to list three possible places these traits could have come from and the Penzance story links up with Charlotte's maternal aunt who: "came to the parsonage, when Charlotte was only six or seven years old ... This aunt was older than Mrs Brontë, and had lived longer among the Penzance society, which Dr Davy describes" (p. 80). The link between Penzance society as depicted by Dr Davy and any resulting influence on the mind of Charlotte through her aunt seems tenuous but shows the lengths Gaskell is prepared to go to give a full account of her life. This is achieved in the above example by interrupting the narrative flow.

A further reference to Charlotte's writing in later years is found on p. 81 in another disruption to the forward movement of the text when Gaskell describing Mrs. Brontë states:

> Miss Branwell was extremely small in person; not pretty, but very elegant, and always dressed with a quiet simpli-

> city of taste, which accorded well with her general character, and of which some of the details call to mind the style of dress preferred by her daughter for her favourite heroines.

Another comparison between the two, mother and daughter, which also moves from one time period, the more recent past to another the more distant past, occurs on p. 83: "Without having anything of her daughter's rare talents, Mrs Brontë must have been, I imagine, that unusual character, a well balanced and consistent woman." A further very marked narrative disruption occurs with a story about a family living near Haworth. Gaskell leaves the lives of the Brontës briefly because: "as the story connected with this family ... made a deep impression on Charlotte's mind in her early girlhood, I may as well relate it here" (p. 91). These three examples show Gaskell providing links between minor features of Charlotte's life, such as her mother's wardrobe, and what was to be a major part of her adulthood, her writing, and demonstrates the comprehensive nature of her methods in detailing Charlotte's background and the reasons for so many disruptions in chronology.

The final narrative disruption relating to Charlotte's imaginative and creative life, occurs when Gaskell, using a letter of Mr. Brontë's, moves from the time after Charlotte's death back to her childhood and in this instance the reasons for the inclusion of the episode are explicitly stated:

> When mere children, as soon as they could read and write, Charlotte and her brothers and sisters used to invent and act little plays of their own ... I frequently thought that I discovered signs of rising talent, which I had seldom or never before seen in any of their age (p. 93-4).

This extract from Mr. Brontë's letter supports Gaskell's claims of early signs of talent in Charlotte and by disrupting the chronology at several points during Chapter III she is able to draw upon more examples to illustrate this.

An additional way that Gaskell interrupts the time sequence in The Life, and specifically in Chapter III is when she reverts to the present tense to describe villages and other significant places. Her intention indicates that unless she has an authentic, historic reference to a place, such as Dr. Davy's description of Penzance in

Memoirs of the Life of Sir Humphrey Davy then the towns become as she sees them in her time. Hence there is a change in chronology from the present tense description of Hartshead, "Hartshead is a very small village, lying to the east of Huddersfield and Halifax", back to the past, "Mr Brontë ... while the incumbent of Hartshead ... wooed and married Maria Branwell" (p. 78).

There are similar changes in tense from past to present used by the narrator when describing Thornton church:

> At the expiration of that period, he had the living of Thornton, in Bradford parish ... Thornton church is a little episcopal chapel of ease ... The neighbourhood is desolate and wild ... The church itself looks ancient and solitary (pp. 83-4).

The narrator here has again used first-hand evidence and she repeats this when describing Haworth, both in Chapter I and Chapter III. However even when disrupting the chronological sequence to describe a place such as Haworth, "Brontë was, of course, much engaged in his study ... Haworth Parsonage is - as I mentioned in the first chapter - an oblong stone house" (pp. 84-5), the narrator moves from the present to the past in her description of the parsonage. In explaining the layout of the house, Gaskell uses the information to point out how the Brontës occupied the main areas:

> The house consists of four rooms on each floor, and is two stories high. When the Brontës took possession, they made the larger parlour, to the left of the entrance, the family sitting-room, while that on the right was appropriated to Mr Brontë as a study (p. 85).

She then moves forward to use the present tense, "There is the pleasant old fashion of window seats all through the house" (p. 85). This intrusion has the effect of establishing the narrator's authority concerning what is stated there. The narrator is giving her own evidence on the function and appearance of the Brontë house and she can only do this by positioning the past and the knowledge of the people who lived there with her own evidence of the state of the house.

The establishment of an over-riding authority is another effect brought about by the narrator's constant disruption of the narrative. By moving from the past into the present tense and commenting on the narrative, the narrator is justifying the evidence she is using and

she does this by quoting informants as well as giving her own testimony. Such are the narrative disruptions concerning the family:

> From their first going to Haworth, their walks were directed rather out towards the heathery moors, sloping upwards behind the parsonage, than towards the long descending village street. A good old woman, who came to nurse Mrs Brontë in the illness ... tells me that at the time the six little creatures used to walk out, hand in hand, towards the glorious wild moors (p. 86).

In this instance, the narrator is telling her story and then repeating it using supporting evidence from "a good old woman". An example of the narrator establishing herself as an authority is seen on p. 84 where Gaskell supports her story and interrupts the chronology of the chapter with a personal declaration. She begins by relating the married life of Maria Brontë: "Fast on her heels followed Patrick Branwell, Emily Jane, and Anne. After the birth of this last daughter, Mrs Brontë's health began to decline" (p. 84). Gaskell then moves into the present tense to support her comments about Maria Brontë by acknowledging that she also has been in a similar position:

> It is hard work to provide for the little tender wants of many young children where the means are but limited. The necessaries of food and clothing are much more easily supplied than the almost equal necessaries of attendance, care, soothing, amusement, and sympathy (p. 84).

It is a persuasive and compelling statement and it results in conveying feelings of sisterhood and an understanding of the role of women at that time. Maria Brontë's weaknesses, were then, something to be understood by all married women. If Gaskell had omitted her own comments and kept strictly to a time sequence the information concerning Maria Brontë's illness would not have had the same impact.

Finally with regard to Chapter III, the chronology is disrupted at various points in the chapter to give continuity in terms of characterisation and in doing this conveys an impression of complete knowledge of a character. The reader learns about Mr. Brontë:

> He became unpopular there among the mill-workers, and he esteemed his life unsafe if he took his long and lonely walks unarmed; so he began the habit, which has continued to this day, of invariably carrying a loaded pistol about with him (p. 90).

The disruption in this extract gives the reader a more complete picture of Mr. Brontë than either the past or the present could convey alone. Similarly: "he had begun, before his wife's death, to take

his dinner alone, - a habit which he always retained" (p. 91). The narrator has knowledge of the present as well as the past and in drawing both together by changing the chronological structure a full picture of Mr. Brontë emerges. Another example of complete characterisation has already been given; that of the patience and other virtues of Maria Brontë which are emphasized often during the chapter and are not always depicted in strict chronological order.

In obvious contrast in terms of chronological disruption to Chapter III, is Volume II, Chapter XII, the third to last chapter in the biography which contains much less backward and forward movement. This is also true of the chapters surrounding Chapter XII. There is little need at this stage of the biography to recur to incidents from the past largely because they have been covered and although there is some anticipation of Charlotte's marriage and death, this is kept to a minimum.

The narrator begins Chapter XII by moving from the more distant past at the end of Chapter XI, and one of Charlotte's letters, to the more recent past and the difficulties Gaskell faced in writing the biography. In this first paragraph she gives some of her reasons for writing the biography in the way she has and she shows why she has disrupted the chronology so often:

> The difficulty that presented itself most strongly to me when I first had the honour of being requested to write this biography, was how I could show what a noble, true, and tender woman Charlotte Brontë really was, without mingling up with her life too much of the personal history of her nearest and most intimate friends. After much consideration of this point, I came to the resolution of writing truly, if I wrote at all; of withholding nothing, though some things, from their very nature, could not be spoken of so fully as others (p. 490).

Gaskell's method of depicting Charlotte as, "noble, true, and tender" is to disrupt the narrative at available opportunities so that she can speak in the present tense to pass judgement on matters relating to Charlotte. 'Judgement' has been dealt with as a separate topic in The Life but is also important when discussing chronology because the narrator moves into the text at so many points to comment on the lives of the people involved. Another significant factor to consider is that by this late stage in the biography Charlotte Brontë has been built up into a tragic heroine by Gaskell and it is interesting to

note that the places where Gaskell most frequently interrupts the chronology in Chapter XII are the incidents where Charlotte is at her most vulnerable in terms of her image. One of these concerns her marriage late in life and the other is the publication and reception of her last novel Villette.

An example of an interruption on the part of the narrator to give judgement has been given above, p. 490. This passage continues: "One of the deepest interests of her life centres naturally round her marriage, and the preceding circumstances; but more than all other events ... it requires delicate handling on my part, lest I intrude too roughly on what is most sacred to memory" (p. 490). The extract on Charlotte's marriage continues for some time with the narration changing sequence at several points. There is the anticipation of Charlotte's death, "Yet I have two reasons, which seem to me good and valid ones, for giving some particulars of the course of events which led to her few months of wedded life - that short spell of exceeding happiness" (p. 490) followed by the reversion back to the time of the proposal, "In silence he had watched her, and loved her long" (p. 490). Gaskell did in fact have doubts about the wisdom of Charlotte marrying at that stage in her life to a man of Mr. Nicholls' interests and temperament but any explicit criticism of the marriage would have damaged Charlotte's credibility as much as it would have Mr. Nicholls'. The passage is distinctive not only for its affective language but also for the way in which Gaskell interrupts the chronology to praise and enhance the characters involved. The passage continues then on p. 490 with abrupt changes even within sentences such as the following, where the change is from Mr. Nicholls' perspective and time, "How deep his affection was", to Gaskell's present, "I scarcely dare to tell, even if I could in words", and then onto the following where the narrator is again regarding Charlotte's situation: "She did not know - she had hardly begun to suspect - that she was the object of any peculiar regard on his part, when, in this very December, he came one evening to tea" (p. 490). The effect of the changes here in particular in Gaskell's disruption, is to add to the naivety of Charlotte Brontë; naivety in terms of her lacking in the more worldly experiences such as love. If Gaskell had merely related the beginning of this relationship in a strictly chronological

sequence the impression gained would have been quite different and the characterisation of Charlotte as an innocent would lose its impact.

After approximately eighteen lines of the history of the relationship, Gaskell again breaks the time sequence to promote her ideas on the characters involved by placing emphasis on the positive, heroic features of Charlotte: "So deep, so fervent, and so enduring was the affection Miss Brontë had inspired in the heart of this good man! It is an honour to her; and, as such, I have thought it my duty to speak thus much" (p. 491). The narrative then returns to the time of Mr. Nicholls' proposal and the way the backward-looking excerpt is written supports both in meaning and detail, the narrator's disruptions and what she states directly about the character of Charlotte:

> Thus quietly and modestly did she, on whom such hard judgments had been passed by ignorant reviewers, receive this vehement, passionate declaration of love, - thus thoughtfully for her father, and unselfishly for herself, put aside all consideration of how she should reply, excepting as he wished (p. 491).

The second subject which causes the narrator to disrupt the time sequence in Chapter XII is that of Charlotte's writing. The material covered in the remaining section of the chapter largely concerns Charlotte's visits to London and Manchester and the overseeing of the publication of Villette. Gaskell uses letters Charlotte wrote to give information about Villette, but again interjects in the present tense to expound further on the way in which Charlotte was treated, by reviewers in particular. A small extract from a letter of Charlotte at the time allows Gaskell to behave as a fellow author giving her the impetus to reply on Charlotte's behalf and disregard the chronological arrangement:

> 'The import of all the notices is such as to make my heart swell with thankfulness to Him, who takes note both of suffering, and work, and motives ... As to friends in general, I believe I can love them still, without expecting them to take any large share in this sort of gratification. The longer I live, the more plainly I see that gentle must be the strain on fragile human nature; it will not bear much' (p. 494, Charlotte).
> To the public, one reviewer may be the same impersonal being as another; but an author has frequently a far deeper significance to attach to opinions. They are the verdicts of those whom he respects and admires, or the mere words of those for whose judgment he cares not a

> jot. It is this knowledge of the individual worth of the reviewer's opinion, which makes the censures of some sink so deep, and prey so heavily upon an author's heart (p. 494, Gaskell).

The story then reverts to the time of writing, and the narrator sums up the preceding lines by describing how Charlotte had felt when harshly criticised about the contents of Villette by her friend, Miss Martineau: "And thus, in proportion to her true, firm regard for Miss Martineau, did Miss Brontë suffer under what she considered her misjudgment not merely of writing, but of character" (p. 494). The course the narrator has taken in the above example, is that of a link-person or arbiter and in both that extract and on the following page the resultant effect of Gaskell's disruptions is to show that while there could possibly be some truth in Miss Martineau's accusations it is important for the reader to appreciate the extenuating circumstances, both tragic and peculiar, surrounding Charlotte's solitary life.

Thus the narrative continues to change, in terms of time on p. 495, as Gaskell intercedes on Charlotte's behalf. The changes range from a comment by Gaskell, "This seems a fitting place to state how utterly unconscious she was of what was, by some, esteemed coarse in her writings", leading to the more distant past, "One day, during that visit at the Briery when I first met her, the conversation turned upon the subject of women's writing fiction", and finally returning in a cyclical movement back to Gaskell's comments in the present, "I do not deny for myself the existence of coarseness here and there in her works, otherwise so entirely noble. I only ask those who read them to consider her life, - which has been openly laid bare before them, - and to say how it could be otherwise" (p. 495). Had Gaskell left the arrangement in a chronological sequence, without interrupting to add evidence from both the more distant past and the present, the reader would have been left with the unease admitted to by Charlotte in her letter about the reviews, and correspondingly we would have had none of the justification which Gaskell felt to be quite necessary to obtain an understanding of Charlotte's life.

A large proportion of the remainder of the chapter is in letter form, consisting mainly of letters from Charlotte and most of these are in the chronological structure that is prevalent in the second

half of the book. The other important piece of chronological disruption present in Chapter XII is by a method already mentioned, that of foreshadowing. The one remaining event left to anticipate in Charlotte's life apart from her marriage, which is briefly foreshadowed at the beginning of Chapter XII, is her death. Gaskell anticipates her death in various ways throughout the biography, always with a sense of tragedy, but the comparison between what she had achieved by this stage in her life and the knowledge of what was to be her future is turned by Gaskell into pathos.

In addition to the example of foreshadowing already given from Chapter XII, there are three others, all contriving to give the same effect:

> If she had lived, her deep heart would sooner or later have spoken out on these things.

> What she saw dwelt in her thoughts, and lay heavy on her spirits. She received the utmost kindness from her hosts, and had the old, warm, and grateful regard for them. But looking back, with the knowledge of what was then the future, which Time has given, one cannot but imagine that there was a toning-down in preparation for the final farewell to these kind friends, whom she saw for the last time on a Wednesday morning in February (p. 493).

The second example is part of Gaskell's disruption in the forward movement of the narrative to defend Charlotte's writing against those who thought it "coarse". Her line of argument throughout the paragraph maintains that Charlotte's background predisposed her to write in a certain way but her writing was all the time becoming more refined. Her foreshadowing is introduced at that point:

> do her justice for all that she was, and all that she would have been (had God spared her), rather than censure her because circumstances forced her to touch pitch, as it were, and by it her hand was for a moment defiled. It was but skin-deep. Every change in her life was purifying her; it hardly could raise her. Again I cry, 'If she had but lived!' (p. 496).

The effect of this narrative change is to once again emphasise the tragedy of her early death, as does the final example of foreshadowing in Chapter XII. In this example the pathos is shown because the disruption immediately follows the episode concerning Miss Martineau's criticisms and Charlotte's letter to a friend responding to those criticisms. Gaskell intercedes: "Kindly and faithful words! which

Miss Martineau never knew of; to be repaid in words more grand and tender, when Charlotte lay dead and cold by her dead sisters" (p. 497). Although Gaskell goes on to state that the two women, Charlotte and Martineau were "faithful friends" the implied criticism is still present in the above quotation; if there were good things to be said about Charlotte they should have been said when she was alive.

This method of contrasting two chapters and examining the chronological arrangement within them, reveals that Gaskell often used the technique of disruption but for varying reasons. In general, the narrative changes occur far more in the early chapters of the book. Gaskell believed she was writing about an unusual and remarkable woman. To allow the reader to obtain all information possible about Charlotte at the earliest opportunity, Gaskell has often changed the time sequence in the early chapters, and included historical material and other relevant information that she had gathered after Charlotte's death. Later in the book, the methods of narration change. By this stage there is less background material to be detailed so correspondingly there is less need for a break in chronological sequence. The exceptions are when Gaskell provides justification for some of Charlotte's actions and writings, and when Gaskell foreshadows Charlotte's death.

CHAPTER THREE

The technique of backgrounding people and places that had an influence on Charlotte's life, of dramatising scenes and of using digression, anecdotes and 'tales within tales', is indicative of the ways in which Gaskell works throughout the biography. She has been subjected to much criticism over the years for some of these methods, in particular her use of digression and anecdote:

> the argument that the diversion cements the story by bringing to life the character concerned in a vivid way does not entirely work, for there are other ways of doing that and a tighter design ... would have integrated the two kinds of material instead of incorporating one in the other ... the author has an incomplete grasp of the importance of structural unity[1].

McVeagh's argument is reiterated by Wright: "Mrs. Gaskell was one of those who find it difficult to resist a digression; to this extent her fondness for reminiscence and local tales affects the mechanics of her art as well as the tautness of her style"[2]. Although this criticism is directed particularly at her novels it could equally be made of the biography.

In its overall structure the book follows Charlotte's life carefully, but as has already been shown when looking at the chronological arrangement, Gaskell makes sure that the forward movement is not at the expense of any detail she feels is an integral part of the Brontë story. Gaskell herself explains in Volume I Chapter II: "For a right understanding of the life of my dear friend, Charlotte Brontë, 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" (p. 60). Wright's comments in particular are borne out as the backgrounding leads to affective diction, the use of sentimental words and often either weak links or no links between digression or anecdote and the principal story-line. On the positive side though, Gaskell is able to dramatise and inject reader interest into minor detail that is so often ignored by other writers. The Life of Charlotte Brontë would not be complete without the creation of the small-village atmosphere, the description of the moors, the dramatisation of episodes concerning some of the more eccentric Yorkshire men and women and the revelation of other incidents on the periphery of Charlotte's story.

In studying the way Gaskell introduces and describes characters I have closely examined one chapter in particular, with some examples from the rest of the biography, to illustrate the various methods used by Gaskell to describe people. Volume I, Chapter II, has already been referred to, in the context of Gaskell justifying her extensive use of backgrounding, and the quotation continues: "I shall endeavour, therefore, before proceeding further with my work, to present some idea of the character of the people of Haworth, and the surrounding districts" (p. 60). Gaskell continues by introducing characters, including local eccentrics from the past and present, throughout the rest of the chapter and the Brontës, apart from being mentioned once or twice, are kept in the background until the final page..

Gaskell begins the second paragraph of the chapter by generalising about the people from Yorkshire and she does this, while at the same time trying to create an impression of objectivity, by observing them from an outsider's point of view, allowing the reader to identify also with the outsider: "Even an inhabitant of the neighbouring county of Lancaster is struck by the peculiar force of character which the Yorkshiremen display" (p. 60). In using that opening sentence Gaskell has given herself the opportunity to write freely about "the peculiar force of character", and she does this using a variety of methods including giving factual evidence, stating personal opinion, moralising, using second-hand accounts and making comparisons between people and their fictional representations in the Brontë novels.

As previously stated, Gaskell begins describing the Yorkshiremen in a general way, that is as a group of people with common features, rather than using specific examples or factually supported evidence. Yet the impression of objectivity remains, largely because of the number of balanced sentences used in the narrative to support the 'logical' argument she is putting forward:

> From rarely requiring the assistance of others, he comes to doubt the power of bestowing it: from the general success of his efforts, he grows to depend upon them, and to over-esteem his own energy and power ... Their accost is curt; their accent and tone of speech blunt and harsh. Something of this may, probably, be attributed to the freedom of mountain air and of isolated hill-side life; something be derived from their rough Norse ancestry.

> They have a quick perception of character, and a keen sense of humour ... Their feelings are not easily roused, but their duration is lasting. Hence there is much close friendship and faithful service (pp. 60-1).

I have used many examples from this passage to give a fair representation of what Gaskell is attempting to do in the extract, namely to indicate both the positive and negative characteristics of Yorkshiremen and to convince the reader, that although Yorkshiremen are known widely for their dour and truculent manner, that is not the complete picture.

Part of Gaskell's technique in the opening pages of Chapter II is not only to background the places and people the Brontës grew up amongst but also to elaborate on any interactions between these people and the Brontës. By describing the Yorkshiremen as "individuals", and asserting that, "The remarkable degree of self-sufficiency they possess gives them an air of independence rather apt to repel a stranger ... each man relies upon himself, and seeks no help at the hands of his neighbour" (p. 60), Gaskell is then able in the following chapter, to show the links between major and minor characters in the way they display similar behaviours:

> Mr Brontë was ever on kind and friendly terms with each denomination as a body; but from individuals in the village the family stood aloof ... 'They kept themselves very close,' is the account given by those who remember Mr and Mrs Brontë's coming amongst them (p. 86).

The above quotation from Chapter III also highlights a method used by Gaskell to delineate people's qualities, which is to include information given to her by witnesses. The details given about the Brontës is from, "those who remember", so is very non-specific, but in Chapter II the sources are, more often than not, named: "I remember Miss Brontë once telling me ... Miss Brontë related to my husband a curious instance illustrative of this ... one woollen manufacturer says that ... The gentleman, who has kindly furnished me with some of the particulars I have given" (pp. 61-68). The reasons for the inclusion of these various viewpoints relates back to the issue of the balanced sentences in the opening paragraphs of the chapter. Gaskell maintains a distance between her subject and her own view and by inserting other people's accounts she creates the impression of objectivity.

At other times during the chapter, however, the impression is of deep involvement in the characters being backgrounded. Gaskell gives her own opinions, sometimes to the point of moralising on aspects of the people concerned. This usually occurs when Gaskell is summing up. In the first example given, the narrator has moved from the subject of the character of the people to the time in which they lived, to show the effects their occupations had on their lifestyle. She concludes: "Still, as it is the exceptional and exaggerated characteristics of any period that leave the most vivid memory behind them, it would be wrong, and in my opinion faithless, to conclude that such and such forms of society and modes of living were not best for the period when they prevailed" (p. 62). In the second example taken from the latter part of the chapter the technique is similar, that of summing up a succession of source material and anecdotes with her own conclusion:

> Although I have dwelt on the exceptional traits in the characteristics of these stalwart West-Ridingers, such as they were in the first quarter of this century, if not a few years later, I have little doubt that in the every-day life of the people so independent, wilful, and full of grim humour, there would be much found even at present that would shock those accustomed only to the local manners of the south; and, in return, I suspect the shrewd, sagacious energetic Yorkshire man would hold such 'foreigners' in no small contempt (pp. 72-3).

The narrator's manner veers between objectivity and partisanship. Her technique depends upon the ability to act as a link person, able to summarise and give opinions on information provided by others.

Another technique Gaskell uses when describing characters in The Life of Charlotte Brontë is to make comparisons between the people who inhabited Charlotte Brontë's world and the people who inhabited the Brontë sisters' books. In Volume I, Chapter II, Gaskell links Yorkshiremen to the old man-servant Joseph from Emily's Wuthering Heights: "there is much close friendship and faithful service; and for a correct exemplification of the form in which the latter frequently appears, I need only refer the reader of 'Wuthering Heights' to the character of 'Joseph'" (p. 61). In a later extract from Volume I, Chapter IV, Gaskell makes comparisons between members of Charlotte's family when attending Cowan Bridge School and characters depicted in Jane Eyre:

> The arrangements for this day were peculiarly trying to delicate children, particularly to those who were spiritless, and longing for home, as poor Maria Brontë must have been. For her ill health was increasing; the old cough, the remains of the hooping-cough, lingered about her; she was far superior in mind to any of her playfellows and companions, and was lonely amongst them from that very cause; and yet she had faults so annoying that she was in constant disgrace with her teachers, and an object of merciless dislike to one of them, who is depicted as 'Miss Scatcherd' in 'Jane Eyre,' and whose real name I will be merciful enough not to disclose. I need hardly say, that Helen Burns is as exact a transcript of Maria Brontë as Charlotte's wonderful power of reproducing character could give ... Not a word of that part of 'Jane Eyre' but is a literal repetition of scenes between the pupil and the teacher (p. 104).

The comparison involving 'Joseph' is used in that way as justification for the description of character which Gaskell has just completed. Rather than exemplify her words with second-hand accounts, Gaskell turns to the fiction Emily Brontë created and uses that as an alternative source for substantiating her argument. Although Gaskell thought such characters were self-evidently based on the realities of Yorkshire life, so simple a view would not be possible nowadays. Emily's characterisation of 'Joseph' and others could as well be based on her knowledge of regional and rural types in literature as depicted by writers such as Shakespeare, Byron and Sir Walter Scott.

The second comparison is more complex as it involves links between several people and their corresponding fictional representatives and is a more emotional, subjective piece of writing, shown by the language used in the extract. Any use of comparatives by a writer in the above sense of the word, is always necessarily subjective but Gaskell disregards any sense of caution here when she phrases her sentences in this way:

> one of them, who is depicted as 'Miss Scatcherd' in 'Jane Eyre,' and whose real name I will be merciful enough not to disclose. I need hardly say, that Helen Burns is as exact a transcript of Maria Brontë as Charlotte's wonderful power of reproducing character could give. Her heart ... still beat with unvailing indignation at the worrying and the cruelty to which her gentle, patient, dying sister had been subjected by this woman (p. 104).

The comparison will induce readers of Jane Eyre to believe that that episode in the novel is based on fact.

By reference to Charlotte's own ideas on the subject of the mistreatment as seen in Jane Eyre, Gaskell has been able to include that as source material and add her own condemnation. Had she omitted all references to Jane Eyre and simply recounted that portion of the Brontë sisters' lives without supporting evidence, the justification for her emotive language would have been less creditable. That the language is emotionally loaded is without dispute, especially when confronted with phrases such as, "gentle, patient, dying sister" (p. 104), but by the end of that same paragraph she attempts to vindicate it once again by her use of second-hand accounts: "Those who had been pupils at the same time knew who must have written the book, from the force with which Helen Burns' sufferings are described" (p. 104). Gaskell used those accounts to write about both the positive and negative aspects of the people there. The balanced final sentence of the paragraph mentions the characters of 'good' Miss Temple and 'bad' Miss Scatcherd with the implication that both were representatives of people at Cowan Bridge School and that the pupils themselves recognised the people behind them from the writing in Jane Eyre.

The final point I wish to make about the introduction and portrayal of characters by Gaskell is the novelistic way in which she sometimes wrote about Charlotte. The topic of Charlotte's character will be discussed more fully in a later chapter but one minor technique Gaskell uses is to detail Charlotte's life in seasonal terms: "As the milder weather came on, her health improved, and her power of writing increased. She set herself with redoubled vigour to the work before her" (p. 475); "Before the autumn was far advanced, the usual effects of her solitary life, and of the unhealthy situation of Haworth Parsonage, began to appear in the form of sick headaches, and miserable, starting, wakeful nights" (pp. 459-60); "'For a month or six weeks about the equinox (autumnal or vernal) is a period of the year which, I have noticed, strangely tries me'" (p. 461). In one sense this method of linking Charlotte's health and writing to weather patterns is obvious (Charlotte notes this herself) as anyone in poor health is affected by the warmth or otherwise of their surroundings. However Gaskell viewed the task of writing about such a tragic heroine

as of the utmost importance. Charlotte was a consummate writer who overcame incredible obstacles to achieve publication of her works and one of those obstacles was her health and psychological suffering. Gaskell was able to arrange her material in order to show that Charlotte's moments of deep depression and sickness often coincided with harsh, cold, climatic conditions.

At the outset of this chapter I have incorporated two critics' views on the structure of Gaskell's writing, both of them pointing to the "leisurely" narrative style she employs. This criticism is particularly pertinent when applied to the descriptive passages which often begin by detailing a town or area of countryside but then move from the initial description into an anecdote, the digression often ending up more verbose than the preceding extract. In the opening chapter, Gaskell describes the town of Keighley, the village of Haworth and finally the church, giving a factual account of its location: "the church lies a little off the main road on the left ... The churchyard is on one side of this lane, the school-house and the sexton's dwelling (where the curates formerly lodged) on the other" (p. 55). After continuing with another factual account, this time of Haworth Parsonage, "The house is of grey stone, two stories high, heavily roofed with flags" (p. 56), the description proceeds to include the church and graveyard: "The little church lies, as I mentioned, above most of the houses in the village; and the graveyard rises above the church, and is terribly full of upright tombstones" (p. 56). By using the word "tombstones" Gaskell has reached the point of reminding the reader exactly what the biography is leading to, and in fact what Gaskell is leading to in the first chapter, namely the deaths of Charlotte and the remaining Brontë family members, and so it would be a fair assumption that her next words would include this. It is not however until a page and a half further into the text that the death-notices come: "Here Lie The Remains Of Maria Brontë ... Also Here Lie the Remains Of" (pp. 57-58).

Gaskell instead digresses from the subject of the tombstones and death to give a history, not only of the church, but also of the grounds on which it was built and includes an anecdote concerning inscriptions and dates on the stone-work:

> The chapel or church claims greater antiquity than any other in that part of the kingdom ... the character of the pillars shows that they were constructed before the reign of Henry VII. It is probable that there existed on this ground a 'field-kirk' or oratory, in the earliest times ... Whitaker says that this mistake originated in the illiterate copying out, by some modern stone-cutter, of an inscription in the character of Henry the Eighth's time (pp. 56-7).

It is extraordinary that although the narrative seems set to move from "tombstones" to the Brontës' deaths, the narrator should take time to background the church and go to such lengths to attempt to historically date it. Gaskell then gives an explanation for her digression, which is in itself another digression: "I have given this extract, in order to explain the imaginary groundwork of a commotion which took place in Haworth about five-and-thirty years ago, to which I shall have occasion to allude again more particularly" (p. 57). Gaskell continues that tale in Chapter II but in Chapter I she returns to the subject of the biography, the Brontë family and in particular Charlotte, when she describes the interior of the church and finally the mural table with the memorial inscriptions. Chapter II contains many examples of digression and anecdote; indeed the whole chapter is a digression from the major story-line.

Many of the anecdotes, which I have examined in terms of a narrative of a detached incident, are used in Chapter II to highlight the peculiarities of particular characters. Gaskell's method then is to begin with a statement, "The West Riding men are sleuth-hounds in pursuit of money" (p. 61), and then to continue in support of that statement, no matter how tenuous the link:

> A man ... who was a small manufacturer, had engaged in many local speculations, which had always turned out well, and thereby rendered him a person of some wealth. He was rather past middle age, when he bethought him of insuring his life; and he had only just taken out his policy, when he fell ill of an acute disease which was certain to end fatally in a very few days. The doctor, half-hesitatingly, revealed to him his hopeless state. 'By jingo!' cried he, rousing up at once into the old energy, 'I shall do the insurance company! I always was a lucky fellow!' (p. 61).

The tale is amusing and adds colour to the chapter, but is most definitely an anecdote because one man's vice cannot be used to generalise about a whole county's character. Another example can be

found four pages on; this time the anecdote concerns Gaskell and her husband and her statement preceding the story is qualified by the use of the words, "a slight illustration" (p. 64). Even when telling the story the narrative moves from that to a tale within a tale, as Gaskell, describing the place where the "little adventure" occurred, stops at the name Addingham and delves into its history:

> From Penigent to Pendle Hill,
> From Linton to Long-*Addingham*
> And all that Craven coasts did tell,
>
> one of the places that sent forth its fighting men to the famous old battle of Flodden Field, and a village not many miles from Haworth (p. 64).

The anecdote provides human interest. Whether it adds much to Charlotte Brontë's life-story is an arguable point but her asides would probably have appealed to some of her readers and Gaskell would have been influenced in this by other writers such as Sir Walter Scott.

Other examples of this can be found wherever Gaskell introduces to us a new aspect of Charlotte's life. Volume I, Chapter VI, describes in detail the period spent at Roe Head School and Gaskell uses similar descriptive techniques, as seen in earlier chapters. The physical appearance of Roe Head is described, "a cheerful roomy country house, standing a little apart in a field ... Two tiers of old fashioned semi-circular bow windows" (p. 125), the history of the place is related and then the anecdotes follow. The longest and most dramatic of the chapter concerns the burning of Cartwright's mill and Gaskell links that story to the main part of her narrative with the words: "Miss Wooler spoke of those times; of the mysterious nightly drillings; of thousands on lonely moors; ... of the overt acts, in which the burning of Cartwright's mill took a prominent place; and these things sank deep into the mind of one, at least, among her hearers" (pp. 134-5). Gaskell refers of course to Charlotte, making a link between the long tale she now recounts and the life she is writing about, and she concludes the anecdote by again making that link with Charlotte's life, this time with reference to her writing, "The readers of 'Shirley' will recognise these circumstances, which were related to Miss Brontë years after they occurred" (p. 136). Her technique here is to imply, by use of anecdote and reference to

Charlotte's writing, that every memorable incident such as the Cartwright case had an influence on Charlotte's life.

After several more well-told tales on the following pages including the story of Mr. Bronte carrying a gun (p. 137), the incident of Mr. Robertson (pp. 137-38), and the bridal party episode (p. 140), Gaskell states this in a more explicit way: "The letter from which I have taken the above extract relates throughout to the immediate neighbourhood of the place where Charlotte Brontë spent her school days, and describes things as they existed at that very time" (p. 141). There is in all of this description a fine line between Gaskell narrating too much background information or digressing beyond a logical point, and Gaskell including as much information as possible about the influences affecting Charlotte's upbringing.

The next anecdote is an example of the former point. There is no bridging of information here from paragraph to paragraph, but merely an extract which is nothing more than simple gossip. Gaskell writes in Volume I, Chapter VIII, of the time Charlotte spent at Roe Head as a teacher but then moves from the relationship between Miss Wooler and Charlotte, "she and Miss Wooler sat together ... and had quite pleasant conversations ... they were not compelled to 'make talk'" (p. 159), directly into the following paragraph, "It was about this time that an event happened in the neighbourhood of Leeds, which excited a good deal of interest" (p. 159). The way back into the narrative at the end of the paragraph is dealt with more competently as Gaskell states, "the case was spoken of far and wide, and at Roe Head among other places" (p. 160), but apart from that belated attempt at justification for the inclusion of the tale, there is no mention made in the narrative as to how Charlotte viewed this story. If the anecdote is meant to remind the reader of Jane Eyre it is by implication rather than explicit statement, and if Gaskell believed that by hearing the story Charlotte was later able to use the ideas in her first and most widely read novel, then the episode should have assumed a greater importance with the linking sentences giving some explanation for tne extract.

A further issue that arises when studying the way in which Gaskell has incorporated background material, is the dramatisation of

scenes and how she achieves this. One early episode in Charlotte's life, and one which has already been referred to in terms of Gaskell's writing, is her stay at Cowan Bridge School along with her sisters, Maria, Elizabeth, Anne and Emily. I have already explained how Gaskell linked their residence there with Charlotte's later writing, of Lowood School in Jane Eyre. Gaskell makes it clear when writing about Cowan Bridge that it was a harsh period in Charlotte's life and so her most obvious reason for dramatising the episode is to heighten the sense of injustice dealt to Charlotte and her family.

There are two ways in which Gaskell has dramatised the subject matter concerning Cowan Bridge. Her first technique is to recount specific scenes using cited second-hand sources and her second method is to use a summary narrative in which events are related in a generalised way. The following extract is an example of a dramatic scene. Gaskell provides the link into the situation by stating her source, "One of these fellow-pupils of Charlotte and Maria Brontë's ... gives me the following" (p. 104), and then proceeds to tell a pitiful tale in such a manner as to isolate and highlight the plight of Maria Brontë. Dramatisation occurs in various ways in the narration of this passage with the most obvious technique involving the use of loaded adverbial and adjectival phrases to emphasise the ill-treatment and abuse at the hands of Miss Scatcherd: "narrow little beds ... poor Maria ... Miss Temple's kind thoughtfulness ... sick child ... black worsted stockings over her thin white legs ... slow trembling movements" (p. 105). These words, used so effectively, add an emotive tone to the scene and make Maria Brontë's sufferings more explicit. The tension of the scene, through the use of the above words, is made acceptable rather than hyperbolic because of the narrator's reminder midway through the scene that her information is based on fact, "(my informant spoke as if she saw it yet, and her whole face flashed out undying indignation)", while the actual inclusion of the bracketed excerpt is yet another technique Gaskell employs to give the impression of immediacy and drama. A word such as "indignation" which is further qualified by the adjective "undying" and verbs such as "flashed" add to the mood of the extract, which suggests compassion on the one hand and anger on the other. In the same extract Gaskell repeats her use of parentheses, this time to

emphasise that Maria was ill, "(the sore from which was not perfectly healed)" (p. 105).

Repetition is used throughout the passage and as in the above example it is there to stress Maria's predicament, which in turn makes the teacher's actions appear unjustified: "she had become so seriously unwell ... so ill, so very ill ... the sick child ... the sick and frightened girl" (p. 105). The repeated sequence also contains indirect speech, "poor Maria moaned out that she was so ill, so very ill, she wished she might stop in bed" (p. 105), and the dialogue used in a scene such as this, and which supports Gaskell's premise, heightens the sense of drama even more. Gaskell also concludes the paragraph in a dramatic fashion by imbuing the final actions with a great sense of drama. The final sentence is long with several clauses leading to the final phrase which is separated from the rest of the sentence by a dash, the climax of the sentence and the entire paragraph. The last few words throw into sharp focus all of the unnecessary suffering Maria has had to endure, a victim to the end, and Gaskell has skilfully organised her material to this end: "My informant says, Maria hardly spoke, except to beg some of the more indignant girls to be calm; but, in slow, trembling movements, with many a pause, she went down stairs at last, - and was punished for being late" (p. 105).

The other method Gaskell has used in the Cowan Bridge chapter, to dramatise events, is to write a summary narrative. Instead of relating a specific scene, she has viewed a subject in a general way and in the following example has written about events over a lengthy period. As in the Maria Brontë/Miss Scatcherd extract, Gaskell is dramatising events to show what was, in her opinion, a time of hardship and deprivation for the pupils at the school. On this occasion it is the food and the cook that come under her scrutiny:

> But the cook ... was careless, dirty and wasteful. To some children oatmeal porridge is distasteful, and consequently unwholesome, even when properly made; at Cowan's Bridge School it was too often sent up, not merely burnt, but with offensive fragments of other substances discoverable in it. The beef, that should have been carefully salted before it was dressed, had often become tainted from neglect; and girls, who were schoolfellows with the Brontës, during the reign of the cook of whom I am speaking, tell me that the house seemed to be

> pervaded, morning, noon, and night, by the odour of rancid fat that steamed out of the oven in which much of their food was prepared ... the water had been taken out of the rain-tub, and was strongly impregnated with the dust ... The milk, too, was often 'bingy' ... On Saturdays, a kind of pie, or mixture of potatoes and meat, was served up, which was made of all the fragments accumulated during the week. Scraps of meat from a dirty and disorderly larder, could never be very appetizing ... Many a meal the little Brontës went without food, although craving with hunger (pp. 102-3).

As in the other extract the chief means of dramatisation occurs as a result of the language used; the strong and emotive verbs, adjectives and adverbs, many of which are negatives, impart a condemnatory tone to the narrative. The carefully balanced sentences, apparent in the way Gaskell depicts minor characters, are largely absent from this summary. Instead, words or phrases are grouped in threes, "the cook ... was careless, dirty and wasteful ... at Cowan's Bridge School it was too often sent up, not merely burnt, but with offensive fragments of other substances discoverable in it", and these combinations add to the censorious tone. Gaskell adds criticism to criticism to effectively give impact to the scenes she is describing. Thus, the house that the Brontë sisters lived in was not merely smelly but contained awful odours within it, "morning, noon and night" (p. 102).

The plight of the children is dramatised not only by the use of hard-hitting words and as well the sentence structure, but also by the use of contrast. At the end of the long passage concerning the cook and the food, where the description is explicit and larger than life, the narrative progresses to the Brontës and the tone changes with the language employed: "children whose appetites were small ... accustomed to food ... prepared with a delicate cleanliness ... the little Brontës ... They were not strong" (p. 103). The effect of the comparison between the gross food and the undernourished Brontës is to highlight their situation and provide the necessary information for the eventual climax of the chapter, the deaths of both Maria and Elizabeth Brontë, deaths that were regarded by Gaskell as having been brought about in part by those school conditions. Every word that Gaskell uses to describe the Brontës in the above extract helps present them as victims and the reader is able to feel sympathy for

them because of the carefully sustained manner in which Gaskell has dramatised the events.

Gaskell's techniques of dramatisation are similarly repeated in other areas in the biography, but as the narrative continues the pattern changes slightly and while it is Gaskell who summarises and describes specific scenes, Charlotte also does this on occasion through her letters. An example of this occurs during the narration of Branwell's decline and death. Gaskell displays the same lack of caution in dramatising the subject of Branwell's troubles, as she did when writing of Cowan Bridge, but as in that extract, she allows other viewpoints, namely Charlotte's, to support her contention. Gaskell's method of summarising such material here is comparable to other examples in the book and that Branwell's ruin had been brought about by somebody else is forcefully asserted. Again the adjectives, adverbs and verbs are incisive and when strung together into phrases form themselves into a powerful descriptive passage:

> there was some good left in this corrupted, weak young man, even to the very last of his miserable days ... the man became the victim; the man's life was blighted, and crushed out of him by suffering, and guilt entailed by guilt; the man's family were stung by keenest shame. The woman - to think of her father's pious name - the blood of honourable families mixed in her veins - her early home underneath whose roof-tree sat those whose names are held saintlike for their good deeds, - she goes flaunting about to this day in respectable society; a showy woman for her age; kept afloat by her reputed wealth (pp. 280-1).

Other factors adding to the sense of drama of the writing include twice-repeated "man" which is used in a rhetorical manner, as well as the way "the man" and his sufferings are contrasted with "the woman" and her vices. In the following pages Gaskell uses other devices to dramatise Branwell's plight, including direct speech, "'The poor old man and I have had a terrible night of it; he does his best - the poor old man! but it's all over with me;' (whimpering) 'it's *her* fault, *her* fault'" (p. 284). The bracketed "whimpering" provides a graphic insight into just what kind of character Branwell had been reduced to. Gaskell also dramatises her own thoughts with the exclamations, "Let her live and flourish! ... Let her live and repent!" (p. 283), but she leaves many of the final scenes of Branwell's life to Charlotte: "All

that is to be said more about Branwell Brontë, shall be said by Charlotte herself, not by me" (p. 284).

This handing over of the narrative complies with Gaskell's stated intention that where possible in the biography Charlotte's words should have precedence over hers, and is also understandable because Charlotte's account was a first-hand rather than second-hand account. It is unusual however, in that Gaskell had already given so much detail surrounding Branwell and his fall from favour: "I may as well complete here the narrative of the outward events of Branwell Brontë's life" (p. 282). Finally, even more striking is the realisation that her words are ironic at her own expense. Charlotte does dramatise Branwell's death-scene in a letter. The account is well-drawn and immediate; the sufferings of Branwell and the other Brontës are easily pictured:

> 'The past three weeks have been a dark interval in our humble home ... He died, after twenty minutes' struggle ... He was perfectly conscious till the last agony came on ... A deep conviction that he rests at last - rests well, after his brief, erring, suffering, feverish life - fills and quiets my mind now. The final separation, the spectacle of his pale corpse, gave me more acute bitter pain than I could have imagined" (p. 352).

Yet in spite of that quietly drawn report and in spite of her earlier pronouncement that all further words on Branwell would be Charlotte's words, Gaskell herself concludes with a descriptive narrative far more dramatic and graphic than Charlotte's. She employs similar methods to those used earlier, including indirect speech and exclamation, with the added technique in this instance of metaphor used to enforce the premise both of the utter waste Branwell's death was, and the guilt "the woman" should be feeling about it. Gaskell begins in the same way as other dramatised extracts, with citation of a source, and ends in hyperbole:

> I have heard, from one who attended Branwell in his last illness, that he resolved on standing up to die. He had repeatedly said, that as long as there was life there was strength of will to do what it chose; and when the last agony came on, he insisted in assuming the position just mentioned. I have previously stated, that when his fatal attack came on, his pockets were found filled with old letters from the woman to whom he was attached. He died! she lives still, - in May Fair. The Eumenides, I suppose, went out of existence at the time when the wail was heard, 'Great Pan is dead'. I think we could better have

> spared him than those awful Sisters who sting dead conscience into life.
>
> I turn from her for ever (p. 353).

Despite Gaskell's affirmations to the contrary, she could not allow Charlotte's words to complete any event, and when dramatising, the final voice is more often than not, Gaskell's.

A device frequently used in dramatisation which is seldom used by Gaskell in the biography, is direct speech. I have quoted several examples of indirect speech in illustrating Gaskell's techniques but even this is a minor part of her technique. There is one important scene, however, in which dialogue is used and it is significant because it depicts a rare coming-together of Charlotte as author and Charlotte as daughter. Gaskell's painstaking introduction to the scene is probably an indication of the reasons behind the relative paucity of direct speech in other parts of the biography: "She informed me that something like the following conversation took place between her and him. (I wrote down her words the day after I heard them; and I am pretty sure they are quite accurate)" (p. 325). In these lines she not only cites her source but then tries to reassure us about the preciseness of them in a verbose manner, a technique that could become unwieldy if used too often.

The scene that takes place concerns Charlotte telling her father of the publication of Jane Eyre and it highlights the relationship between the two; the comic elements, the gentleness, the concern and also the retiring, private natures of both.

> Now, however, when the demand for the work had assured success to 'Jane Eyre', her sisters urged Charlotte to tell their father of its publication. She accordingly went into his study one afternoon after his early dinner, carrying with her a copy of the book, and one or two reviews, taking care to include a notice adverse to it ...
>
> 'Papa, I've been writing a book.'
>
> 'Have you, my dear?'
>
> 'Yes, and I want you to read it.'
>
> 'I am afraid it will try my eyes too much.'
>
> 'But it is not in manuscript: it is printed.'
>
> 'My dear! you've never thought of the expense it will be! It will be almost sure to be a loss, for how can you get a book sold? No one knows you or your name.'

> 'But, papa, I don't think it will be a loss; no more will you, if you will just let me read you a review or two, and tell you more about it.'
>
> So she sate down and read some of the reviews to her father; and then, giving him the copy of 'Jane Eyre' that she intended for him, she left him to read it. When he came into tea, he said, 'Girls, do you know Charlotte has been writing a book, and it is much better than likely?' (p. 325).

This scene is not over-dramatised. It is instead a very moving example of the way in which dramatisation can occur without the inflated language or any of the exaggeration that can accompany it.

Another area in the biography where direct speech is to be found, and where it has an important function in dramatising the narrative, is that of death and in particular the episodes concerning the deaths of Anne, Emily and Charlotte. Each of these three characters is attributed with climactic final statements, a novelistic method Gaskell has carried over into the biography. In one of Gaskell's earlier novels, Mary Barton, several characters' final words are the focal point of scenes. In Mary Barton Gaskell shows the divisions in society between the working class and the mill-owners in industrial England and several of the deaths that occur highlight the disparity between the two classes and illustrate the consequences of industrialisation. It is both a literary and societal tradition for one's final words to be seen as a fitting conclusion to a life and of value to those who are left behind. Ben Davenport, the poor worker in Mary Barton, dies in unfortunate circumstances leaving his wife with many children and no money and so his dying words are of vital interest:

> They saw his lips move, and bent to catch the words, which came in gasps, and not in tones.
>
> 'Oh Lord God! I thank thee, that the hard struggle of living is over.'
>
> 'Oh, Ben! Ben!' wailed forth his wife, 'have you no thought for me? Oh, Ben! Ben! do say one word to help me through life.'
>
> He could not speak again (p. 110, Mary Barton)[3]

Similarly, the death of Alice Wilson in the same novel, is important because the focus of attention is placed on the difference between lifestyles before and after industrialisation; after the environment had been changed irrevocably.

> And death came to her as a welcome blessing, like as evening comes to the weary child. Her work here was finished, and faithfully done.
>
> What better sentence can an emperor wish to have said over his bier? In second childhood ... she said her 'Nunc Dimittis', - the sweetest canticle to the holy.
>
> 'Mother, good night! Dear mother! bless me once more! I'm very tired, and would fain go to sleep'. She never spoke again on this side of Heaven (pp. 405-6, Mary Barton).

Alice had never adjusted to these changes and her final words bear testimony to that; they are a fitting and dramatic representation of her inability to adapt to the new pressures.

In The Life of Charlotte Brontë Gaskell continues this technique. The chapter in which Emily dies consists largely of Charlotte's letters, with Gaskell acting as a link person in the narrative. As Emily's condition deteriorates Gaskell increases the tension in her story-line by using both Charlotte's letters and her own connecting passages to show Emily's determination to refuse medical help:

> 'In this state she resolutely refuses to see a doctor; she will give no explanation of her feelings, she will scarcely allow her feelings to be alluded to' ... When a doctor had been sent for, and was in the very house, Emily refused to see him. Her sisters could only describe to him what symptoms they had observed; and the medicines which he sent she would not take, denying that she was ill (p. 355).

This tension builds to the point where Gaskell uses direct speech: "The morning drew on to noon. Emily was worse: she could only whisper in gasps. Now, when it was too late, she said to Charlotte, 'If you will send for a doctor, I will see him now.' About two o'clock she died" (p. 357). Direct speech is the means by which Gaskell shows the irony of the situation and she narrates this in a skilful manner. The extract is structurally isolated; it is a paragraph separated from the letters of Charlotte's that both precede and follow it, and by including the short sentence immediately after the direct speech the impression is given of death occurring immediately after Emily's last words. These words of Emily's sustain the direction her character has taken throughout the biography, that of a wilful, stubborn, eccentric individual.

Anne Brontë's final words also neatly encapsulate the manner in which her character has been depicted, but more importantly they add

dramatic impact to her death scene. On this occasion the scene is narrated by, "Charlotte's beloved friend of more than twenty years" (p. 372), but Anne's words are in sharp contrast to Emily's, showing acceptance of her approaching death:

> She clasped her hands, and reverently invoked a blessing from on high; first upon her sister, then upon her friend, to whom she said, "Be a sister in my stead. Give Charlotte as much of your company as you can." She then thanked each for her kindness and attention.
>
> 'Ere long the restlessness of approaching death appeared, and she was borne to the sofa; on being asked if she were easier, she looked gratefully at her questioner, and said, "It is not *you* who can give me ease, but soon all will be well, through the merits of our Redeemer." Shortly after this, seeing that her sister could hardly restrain her grief, she said, "Take courage, Charlotte; take courage." Her faith never failed, and her eye never dimmed till about two o'clock, when she calmly and without a sigh passed from the temporal to the eternal (pp. 374-5).

The effect of direct speech here is twofold; it focuses attention on Anne Brontë giving the reader a rare insight into her personality and it also closes her life in an appropriate and realistic manner.

The effect of Charlotte Brontë's final words is also one of completion. Throughout the biography the narrative has emphasised the tragedy in the Brontës' lives but the example of direct speech on the final page of Volume II, Chapter XIII, is not only another aspect of the tragedy but also clearly indicates the happiness Charlotte had enjoyed in the latter stages of her life. Charlotte's death-bed scene is dramatic, as are Emily's and Anne's; the direct speech intensifies the drama to give each scene a focal point:

> Wakening for an instant from this stupor of intelligence, she saw her husband's woe-worn face, and caught the sound of some murmured words of prayer that God would spare her. 'Oh!' she whispered forth, 'I am not going to die, am I? He will not separate us, we have been so happy' (p. 524).

Gaskell's primary concern when backgrounding, dramatising, and describing certain characters is to make links; to bridge the gap between subject matter and reader. Often, in particular when backgrounding or characterising, she digresses from the main story-line to

incorporate additional material, usually of the anecdotal variety. She justifies this several times by explaining that every detail is needed to fully understand the character of Charlotte but often the digressions become isolated incidents rather than linked episodes that while interesting because of the unusual information and eccentric personalities Gaskell includes, does not add significantly to the main story-line, that being Charlotte's life.

Footnotes

1 John McVeagh, "Notes on Mrs. Gaskell's Narrative Technique", Essays in Criticism, 18, (1968), p. 465.

2 Edgar Wright, Mrs. Gaskell: The Basis for Reassessment, (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 82.

3 Elizabeth Gaskell, Mary Barton, ed. Stephen Gill, (Harmaondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1970), p. 110. All further page references given from Mary Barton are for this edition.

CHAPTER FOUR

Edgar Wright, in his book Mrs. Gaskell: The Basis for Re-Assessment, when discussing technique in Cranford and The Life of Charlotte Brontë, states:

> The objective narrator has arrived. Such a character should not however be confused with the type of narrator that Isherwood imagined as a camera. Mary Smith, who sets a precedent for those that follow, is one with the group she describes, her sympathies are actively involved, but she can stand sufficiently apart from the central issues to report them clearly, her own views and comments touching the narrative with irony.
>
> It was a method natural to the social observer and easily developed to deal with a range of people and emotions by altering the character and interests of the narrator. It was used for articles and for occasional stories such as 'Morton Hall' and 'My French Master', and when the major effort of the *Life* was called for, Mrs. Gaskell adopted it naturally, leaving characters to speak for themselves in their letters and quietly describing background or linking the narrative together with little direct intervention[1].

Wright's premise is then that the narrator in The Life of Charlotte Brontë has achieved a fair balance between over-distancing and under-distancing:

> In 1912 Edward Bullough formulated the problem of what he called 'psychic distance' as that of making sure a work is neither 'over-distanced' nor 'under-distanced'. If it is over-distanced it will seem, he said, improbable, empty, artificial or absurd, and we will not respond to it. Yet if it is under-distanced the work becomes too personal and cannot be enjoyed as art[2].

At a first reading Wright's comments seem correct; much of the biography is composed of Charlotte Brontë's letters and Gaskell, the writer of the biography, acts as a link between letters, a go-between whose sympathies lie with her subject, but whose objectivity is maintained also. Part of the justification for Wright's stance are Gaskell's own words found both near the beginning and end of the book:

> But I do not pretend to be able to harmonize points of character, and account for them, and bring them all into one consistent and intelligible whole. The family with whom I have now to do shot their roots down deeper than I

> can penetrate. I cannot measure them, much less is it for me to judge them. I have named these instances of eccentricity in the father because I hold the knowledge of them to be necessary for a right understanding of the life of his daughter (p. 90);
>
> I have little more to say. If my readers find that I have not said enough, I have said too much. I cannot measure or judge of such a character as hers. I cannot map out vices, and virtues, and debateable land (p. 526).

Her insistence upon a narrative of non-judgement, shown clearly by the repetition almost word for word of her argument earlier in the biography, seems straightforward but instead leads to irony; the reader is aware of discrepancies between the stated intentions of the narrator and her actual narration. Gaskell chooses not to judge yet does so, often. In the quotation from p. 90 Gaskell implies that she is not judging, rather she is merely giving the facts as they are, yet the language used to convey characteristics about Mr. Brontë is judgemental, she cannot escape that conclusion.

Many of her statements are more overtly judgemental, as in the following quotations, where although she has stated she will not judge, "vices and virtues" she in fact does: "The difficulty that presented itself most strongly to me when I first had the honour of being requested to write this biography, was how I could show what a noble, true, and tender woman Charlotte Brontë really was ... I do not deny for myself the existence of coarseness here and there in her works, otherwise so entirely noble" (pp. 490, 495). Gaskell's attempts to keep a distance between her subject and her own views, and to adopt an impartial stance, were confounded by several factors; her friendship with Charlotte, her identification with her as a fellow author, and her further identification with her as a fellow northerner.

The primary effect of Gaskell's judgements in the biography is to position her as guardian and advocate of the Brontë family, against those who would choose to criticise them. As a narrator who bridges gaps between her subject and the reader she attempts often to explain things away. I have shown in the chapter on chronology, how she disrupts the time sequence frequently to show every possible influence

upon Charlotte's character and in doing this her words often become firstly defensive and then judgemental. There are two directions these judgements take; Gaskell either interprets much of the information backgrounding the Brontë family in a positive favourable manner, or she condemns critical material of a negative nature and the people associated with it.

Although Gaskell states she does not wish to judge Charlotte or the Brontë family, there are no doubts about her own sense of mission in writing the biography: "I weighed every line with my whole power and heart, so that every line should go to its great purpose of making *her* known and valued as one who had gone through such a terrible life with a brave and faithful heart"[3]. She follows through with this resolution by complementing her narration with Charlotte's friend Mary's words:

> 'She thought much of her duty, and had loftier and clearer notions of it than most people, and held fast to them with more success. It was done, it seems to me, with much more difficulty than people have of stronger nerves, and better fortunes. All her life was but labour and pain; and she never threw down the burden for the sake of present pleasure. I don't know what use you can make of all I have said. I have written it with the strong desire to obtain appreciation for her. Yet, what does it matter? She herself appealed to the world's judgment for her use of some of the faculties she had, - not the best, - but still the only ones she could turn to strangers' benefit. They heartily, greedily enjoyed the fruits of her labours, and then found out she was much to be blamed for possessing such faculties. Why ask for a judgment on her from such a world?' (p. 526).

Gaskell is never content to leave the tributes to other sources: "But I turn from the critical, unsympathetic public, - inclined to judge harshly because they have only seen superficially and not thought deeply. I appeal to that larger and more solemn public, who know how to look with tender humility at faults and errors; how to admire generously extraordinary genius, and how to reverence with warm, full hearts all noble virtue" (p. 526). These words which conclude the biography encapsulate the dichotomy Gaskell faced. She intends leaving it up to the public to judge but at the same time recognises the inability of the "critical" public to judge properly. Therefore she reminds them again, using her own judgement, of the character of Charlotte, "extraordinary genius ... noble virtue."

I have stated previously that Gaskell's judgements concerning the Brontë family are usually positive and even in narrating Branwell's story Gaskell tends to champion him over the woman he was involved with, the woman Gaskell saw as ruining his life. This is spite of an earlier pronouncement on Branwell's character, made when Gaskell considers his physiognomy: "I have seen Branwell's profile; it is what would be generally esteemed very handsome; the forehead is massive, the eye well set, and the expression of it fine and intellectual; the nose too is good; but there are coarse lines about the mouth, and the lips, though of handsome shape, are loose and thick, indicating self-indulgence, while the slightly retreating chin conveys an idea of weakness of will" (pp. 197-8). It is difficult to assess how much of Gaskell's judgement on Branwell's physiognomy affecting his character, was based on the knowledge gained in hindsight of Branwell's debauched life, but Gaskell often linked appearance and character in this way, not only in the biography but in the novels also: "she was talking to Fanny; about what, he could not hear; but he saw his sister's restless way of continually arranging some part of her gown, her wandering eyes, now glancing here, now there, but without any purpose in her observation; and he contrasted them uneasily with the large soft eyes that looked forth steadily at one object, as if from out their light beamed some gentle influence of repose"[4]. The contrasting characterisation drawn here from North and South is between the heroine Margaret who has the essential attributes of constancy and stability, and Fanny who is essentially a fickle and shallow person.

Similarly then, Branwell's character was determined upon but he was still a Brontë and Gaskell made more explicit judgements against those who were later to 'ill-treat' him. Alan Shelston, writing in the Introduction to this edition, discusses the reasons for the inclusion of the explicit statements made against Lydia Robinson, the woman Branwell was involved with, and concludes:

> What is of major interest to us in Mrs. Gaskell's use of such contentious material is not the degree of accuracy in her accounts ... but why she should have exposed herself to such risks ... The obvious answer must, I think, be that she was determined at all costs to show how Charlotte Brontë had suffered ... in the Robinson affair as the senior member, Patrick excepted, of a family for whom Branwell's excesses must have been a nightmare experience. If Carus Wilson and Lydia Robinson

> were in any way responsible for Charlotte's sufferings, then their responsibility must be revealed (p. 28).

The implication of Shelston's argument is that both Branwell and Lydia Robinson were equally responsible for the distress caused to the rest of the family, in particular Charlotte, but Gaskell is far more judgemental in her treatment of Robinson than she is of Branwell.

Gaskell is quite explicit in her condemnation of Robinson and although at one point she states, "It is no excuse for him to say that she began the first advances, and 'made love' to him" (p. 273), the manner in which that sentence and the rest of that particular paragraph is narrated indicates clearly where Gaskell's sympathies lie. She begins the paragraph by listing Branwell's good qualities: "full of available talent, a brilliant talker, a good writer, apt at drawing, ready of appreciation, and with a not unhandsome person" (p. 273). She then includes details of Robinson: "a married woman, nearly twenty years older than himself" (p. 273). There is a subtle implication in this piece of writing that anyone in a relationship who is married and quite a few years older invariably holds the power. This message is continued in the next sentence (quoted above) where although Gaskell states, "It is no excuse for him", the reader is entitled to draw the opposite conclusion, namely that Branwell should be excused because Robinson, older and married, began the first advances, made love to him and he was in a precarious position as a private tutor employed in her household. Gaskell then acts as judge in a blistering attack on Robinson's character: "She was so bold and hardened, that she did it in the very presence of her children, fast approaching to maturity ... He was so beguiled by this mature and wicked woman" (p. 273).

This type of narration continues in later episodes where the condemnation becomes more harsh and Branwell's exoneration continues. Gaskell contrasts Branwell's, "yearning love he still bore to the woman" (p. 280), and Robinson, "who had got so strong a hold upon him" (p. 280), before moving from harsh descriptive passages, "she goes flaunting about to this day in respectable society; a showy woman for her age" (p. 281), to moralising passages, "Now let us read not merely of the suffering of her guilty accomplice, but of the misery she caused to innocent victims, whose premature deaths may, in part, be

laid at her door" (p. 281). Gaskell is not only moralising in the last quotation; she is also making direct links between the Robinson affair and the deaths of at least Emily and Anne and possibly Charlotte. Gaskell's criticism here relates directly to Shelston's argument quoted previously and demonstrates the lengths to which Gaskell was prepared to go to defend the Brontë family.

Just as Gaskell judges in a condemnatory tone people she considers brought misery to the Brontë family - Carus Wilson and others who ran Cowan Bridge School, Lydia Robinson and other unnamed people for whom they had worked as governesses - she is equally critical of those reviewers who she felt judged the Brontë sisters' novels without consideration of all the factors present in their unusual backgrounds. The effect of her judgements in this area is similar to the effect of her criticisms against Lydia Robinson. She acts as the defender of the Brontës' integrity; they are no longer able to speak, so she speaks on their behalf, and if anything she is more powerful and more stirring in her pronouncements against some reviewers than she ever was against Robinson:

> Every one has a right to form his own conclusion respecting the merits and demerits of a book. I complain not of the judgment which the reviewer passes on 'Jane Eyre'. Opinions as to its tendency varied then, as they do now ... But when - forgetting the chivalrous spirit of the good and noble Southey, who said: 'In reviewing anonymous works myself, when I have known the authors I have never mentioned them, taking for granted they had sufficient reasons for avoiding the publicity' - the Quarterly reviewer goes on into gossiping conjectures as to who Currer Bell really is, and pretends to decide on what the writer may be from the book, I protest with my whole soul against such want of Christian charity. Not even the desire to write a 'smart article', which shall be talked about in London, when the faint mask of the anonymous can be dropped at pleasure if the cleverness of the review be admired - not even this temptation can excuse the stabbing cruelty of the judgment. Who is he that should say of an unknown woman: 'She must be one who for some sufficient reason has long forfeited the society of her sex'? Is he one who has led a wild and struggling and isolated life, - seeing few but plain and outspoken Northerns, unskilled in the euphuisms which assist the polite world to skim over the mention of vice? Has he striven through long weeping years to find excuses

> for the lapse of an only brother; and through daily contact with a poor lost profligate, been compelled into a certain familiarity with the vices that his soul abhors? ... through all these dark waters the scornful reviewer have passed clear, refined, free from stain, - with a soul that has never in all its agonies, cried 'lama sabachthani,' - still, even then let him pray with the Publican rather than judge with the Pharisee (pp. 359-60).

The attack on the reviewer is ironic because when using terms such as, "scornful reviewer" and "stabbing cruelty" Gaskell is resorting to the very methods she is arguing against. Gaskell's most harsh judgements are made when she is defending other judgements that have been brought against the Brontës, usually by critics or the reading public. The large passage quoted above is ironic also, in that the reviewer's conclusions concerning Charlotte Brontë are partially correct; Charlotte was a woman of reclusive habits. What Gaskell is attempting to achieve by answering the critic in this manner, however, is to explain Charlotte Brontë to those people who do not know what it is to live in isolated Yorkshire, do not know what it is to suffer and do not know the burdens of caring for a sick brother. Gaskell is taking the role of bridge-person yet again but in this example her explanations take the form of judgements.

There are other similar extracts in the biography and they are often inserted, when the subject of narration has little to do with publishing. One such example in Volume II, Chapter XII, concerns Charlotte's refusal of Mr. Nicholls' first proposal of marriage. Gaskell once again explains Charlotte's reasons for taking this step, reasons which involved her father's views against marriage and his ill-health, but she then moves from that, "she made haste to give her father a promise that, on the morrow, Mr Nicholls should have a distinct refusal" (p. 491), directly to the reviewers: "Thus quietly and modestly did she, on whom such hard judgments had been passed by ignorant reviewers, receive this vehement, passionate declaration of love, - thus thoughtfully for her father, and unselfishly for herself, put aside all consideration of how she should reply, excepting as he wished!" (p. 491). Gaskell takes every possible opportunity to explain Charlotte's character and in this instance she not only passes judgement on reviewers, but also testifies as to what kind of proposal

Charlotte received, "vehement, passionate", without citing the source of these statements. She then judges Charlotte by her actions, "quietly and modestly ... thoughtfully ... unselfishly", and finally by implication judges Charlotte's father. The implication here is that if Charlotte possessed the above-quoted characteristics, then Mr. Brontë possessed the opposite qualities including selfishness and thoughtlessness, in not permitting the relationship to continue.

Gaskell rarely links passages without passing judgement of some kind. Although, as stated previously, Charlotte's letters take precedence as the narrative continues, Gaskell sometimes requires only a sentence or two between letters to quickly assess characters in her own words, as in this example where a judgement is made of Miss Wooler's character immediately after a reference to her by Charlotte:

> 'But Miss Wooler says I must go to Mary next Friday, as she promised for me on Whit-Sunday; and on Sunday morning I will join you at church, if it be convenient, and stay till Monday. There's a free and easy proposal! Miss Wooler has driven me to it. She says her character is implicated.'
>
> Good, kind Miss Wooler! however monotonous and trying were the duties Charlotte had to perform under her roof, there was always a genial and thoughtful friend watching over her, and urging her to partake of any little piece of innocent recreation that might come in her way (p. 162).

This technique magnifies the perspective, with Charlotte showing and Gaskell telling.

Another subject on which Gaskell speaks freely and in so doing passes judgement, concerns the status of women and their ability to write as well as perform their female duties in their own households. In writing about Charlotte and, "her life as Currer Bell, the author; her life as Charlotte Brontë, the woman" (p. 334), Gaskell had found the ideal opportunity to take a stand for women such as herself and Charlotte, who found a double life difficult to lead. Gaskell's opinions are not radical; she has an unerring sense of responsibility towards producing a fair impression of a man's duties as opposed to a woman's duties. Nonetheless, she does speak out and she does judge a situation which was obviously difficult for her personally:

> Henceforward Charlotte Brontë's existence becomes divided into two parallel currents - her life as Currer Bell, the author; her life as Charlotte Brontë, the woman. There were separate duties belonging to each character - not opposing each other; not impossible, but difficult to be reconciled. When a man becomes an author, it is probably merely a change of employment to him. He takes a portion of that time which has hitherto been devoted to some other study or pursuit; he gives up something of the legal or medical profession, in which he has hitherto endeavoured to serve others, or relinquishes part of the trade or business by which he has been striving to gain a livelihood; and another merchant or lawyer, or doctor, steps into his vacant place, and probably does as well as he. But no other can take up the quiet, regular duties of the daughter, the wife, or the mother, as well as she whom God has appointed to fill that particular place: a woman's principal work in life is hardly left to her own choice; nor can she drop the domestic charges devolving on her as an individual, for the exercise of the most splendid talents that were ever bestowed. And yet she must not shrink from the extra responsibility implied by the very fact of her possessing such talents. She must not hide her gift in a napkin; it was meant for the use and service of others. In an humble and faithful spirit must she labour to do what is not impossible, or God would not have set her to do it (p. 334).

The judgements present in this extract are not harsh, and there appears to be no irony in her argument, which presents the struggle for women between realising an artistic gift and fulfilling a woman's role in life. Still there are judgements implicit in each thread of her argument; men find it easier to pursue a writing career because it becomes for them part of their vocation in life, merely taking over another pursuit or interest. Women on the other hand have to arrange their writing around their mothering and household duties; they cannot abandon those, therefore it is more difficult for them to succeed.

Gaskell often makes assumptions, having been given very little evidence upon which to base them and she usually manipulates them to fit her idea of the story-line. One important aspect of the Brontë story that is continually emphasised by Gaskell is the fact that the children were left motherless from an early age. This is important to

Gaskell because she is then able to imbue the biography with a sense of tragedy, an idea which is carried throughout: "Charlotte was motherly friend and guardian ... this loving assumption of duties beyond her years, made her feel considerably older than she really was" (p. 111); "her invalid weakness was only a fresh claim upon their tender regard, from the solitary woman, whom they had first known as a little, motherless school-girl" (p. 466). Although it is literally true that the Brontës did lose their mother when young, they did in fact have someone to replace her, their aunt, Miss Branwell. Charlotte may have been the oldest surviving child but she did have a mother-figure who took responsibility for the household. Gaskell, however, downplays this constantly, not only by references to the poor, motherless children, but by reducing the qualities and importance of Miss Branwell by the method of personal judgement:

> About a year after Mrs. Brontë's death, one of her elder sisters came from Penzance to superintend her brother-in-law's household, and look after his children. Miss Branwell was, I believe, a kindly and conscientious woman, with a good deal of character, but with the somewhat narrow ideas natural to one who had spent nearly all her life in the same place. She had strong prejudices, and soon took a distaste to Yorkshire ... The children respected her, and had that sort of affection for her which is generated by esteem; but I do not think they ever freely loved her (pp. 96-7).

Gaskell forms other judgements about the family without substantiating them. In writing of Mrs. Brontë's illness she states: "according to my informant, the mother was not very anxious to see much of her children, probably because the sight of them, knowing how soon they were to be left motherless, would have agitated her too much" (p. 87). Once again, by inserting the word, "probably", Gaskell is able to present an image of the children as she wants to see them, alone and neglected, just as later in that same chapter the image shown is that of a family almost unnaturally perfect in their affections for one another: "I do not suppose that there ever were a family more tenderly bound to each other" (p. 93). This is another judgement made without substantiation.

As stated earlier, many of the statements made about the Brontë family are positive showing in particular the way they coped with adversity. At the heart of these comments lie the judgements made

concerning Charlotte and although Gaskell highlights her non-judgemental stance at various stages in the biography, her own material and the viewpoints she allows through other people's letters are clear evidence against this stance. Easson states, "through stimulating our emotional reaction she surely has led the reader to judgement"[5], and it is Gaskell's techniques of emotional colouring, which turn Charlotte into a tragic heroine, that I will discuss in the following chapter.

Footnotes

1 Edgar Wright, Mrs. Gaskell: The Basis for Reassessment, (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 245.

2 Wayne Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 122.

3 J.A. Chapple and A. Pollard, (ed.), The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1966), p. 345.

4 Elizabeth Gaskell, North and South, (ed.) A. Easson, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 161.

5 Angus Easson, Elizabeth Gaskell, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1979), p. 152.

CHAPTER FIVE

Most critics agree that Gaskell used the biography to depict Charlotte Brontë as a tragic and suffering heroine, although they disagree on the issue of how widely Gaskell rearranged material to show Charlotte in this way. Wright in Mrs Gaskell: The Basis for Reassessment states: "this was such a character as Mrs. Gaskell might have wished to imagine for herself as the heroine of a novel, but with the authenticity of life and of greatness ... The story of Charlotte Brontë's life was a sombre and absorbing one; as a heroine in Mrs. Gaskell's sense Charlotte needed only the slightest touch to be perfectly adapted to this interpretation"[1]. Easson's argument continues in that direction: "The literary greatness of Charlotte Brontë is taken for granted. It needs no justification or explanation; the life of the author does ... Charlotte emerges ... a Christian heroine, restrained, sacrificing, determined in her duty"[2]. Shelston's words in the Introduction to the First Edition are similar but place more emphasis on the part played by Gaskell in the 'heroinization' of Charlotte:

> it is Charlotte Brontë the suffering woman rather than Currer Bell the successful author who had attracted Mrs. Gaskell's attention from the start ... her previous success as a novelist made her particularly susceptible to a view of Charlotte Brontë which would make of her a heroine beside whom the heroines of fiction would seem but the creations of fantasy that indeed they were. The effect of this instinctive 'fictionalization' was not, of course, to produce a picture of Charlotte Brontë that is definably 'untrue' - although there are indeed inaccuracies, and manipulations of the evidence that can be described, without injustice, as distorting. It does mean that, where the *Life* was concerned, Charlotte Brontë, like the heroine of fiction, was liable to be conceived as much in terms of the author's imaginative needs and priorities as in terms of an objective consideration of the evidence, and this was bound to produce a partial account of her life (pp. 24-5).

Shelston's argument of "'fictionalization'" occurring is true; any editing out of available material concerning a character's life involves viewing that person's life from a specific perspective:

> some actual lives ... will inevitably resemble fiction because they seem to have been shaped by circumstance with an aesthetic eye ... The true autobiographer ...

> must select and arrange the events of his life so as to give them a narrative shape and pattern. Even the diarist eliminates from his record countless trivial details. A diarist who makes a second draft of his diary ... is moving toward fiction already[3].

It is true that to write a diary or an autobiography is to move towards the creation of a fiction; a fiction concerning one's self-identity. Scholes and Kellog in writing of the autobiographer and diarist could equally be discussing the biographer, as in each instance the process consists of background reading, followed by the gathering, selection and presentation of information. Inevitably the final presentation is a paring down of much accumulated material. This was the process Gaskell went through in writing The Life of Charlotte Brontë, with her perspective being that of a friend who wanted the public to know of the harsh life Charlotte Brontë, the author, had led: "my children who loved her would like to have what I could write about her; and the time may come when her wild sad life, and the beautiful character that grew out of it may be made public"[4]. Although Gaskell has been criticised for that perspective taken, that criticism has in turn been answered: "Mrs. Gaskell ... is perhaps mainly responsible for the association of the Brontës with high tragedy, but few of her successors in writing about the Brontës have been willing to abandon the tragic note"[5].

In taking the role of Charlotte's advocate in the biography and presenting her as the tragic heroine, Gaskell is once again bridging gaps on several levels. I have already shown in the chapter on judgements how Gaskell identified closely with Charlotte as a fellow northerner and a fellow author but although the two women had these features in common, there were also great differences. Gaskell was a city dweller, a married woman with children, a woman who travelled for the love of it and who was supported by a group of close friends. Charlotte on the other hand had few of these things. One of the most significant features of her life was that she was a recluse who was nervous with strangers and it was in part this characteristic that drew Gaskell towards writing about her, the need to make known those qualities of Charlotte that were concealed by her retiring nature. A crucial reason then for this bridging was the need to explain Charlotte's background, her triumph in acceptance by publishers and particularly the circumstances leading to her early death.

Accordingly, Gaskell focuses not only on her tragic death, but also on the deaths of the remaining family and it is these deaths, beginning with Maria Brontë's and ending with Charlotte's, that provide so many climactic points. Gaskell heightens the effects of these crucial scenes by the use of foreshadowing and anticipation and also by the placing of emotional or affective language in groups around these climaxes. When one considers that there were six deaths in the Brontë family preceding Charlotte's, and that she had to endure and suffer the loss of each, it is not surprising that death figures so largely in the biography.

As stated in the chapter on chronology, instead of beginning the biography with Charlotte's birth, Gaskell begins with her death and the deaths of other family members as recorded on the memorial in Haworth Church. Gaskell begins the anticipation then, at this very early stage, bringing the tragic aspects of their lives to the fore, and at the same time includes affective diction to add an emotional tone to the subject:

> At the upper part of this tablet ample space is allowed between the lines of the inscription; when the first memorials were written down, the survivors, in their fond affection, thought little of the margin and verge they were leaving for those who were still living. But as one member of the household follows another fast to the grave, the lines are pressed together, and the letters become small and cramped. After the record of Anne's death, there is room for no other.
>
> But one more of that generation - the last of the nursery of six little motherless children - was yet to follow, before the survivor, the childless and widowed father, found his rest. On another tablet, below the first, the following record has been added to that mournful list (pp. 58-9).

There are several themes introduced in this paragraph that are referred to later in the biography; these include the quick manner in which death followed death in the Brontë family and the trials Patrick Brontë had to endure over a lifetime as he witnessed these deaths. The strength of the quotation from Gaskell is conveyed largely through the image of the writing on the tablet stone, with the parallel between the space and lettering becoming smaller and the number in the family decreasing. There is more power and sense of tragedy when

Gaskell shows physically what has happened to the family than when she narrates in emotive language.

As an example of the methods Gaskell uses to depict Charlotte as a heroine with a tragic background I have closely examined a specific chapter, namely Volume II, Chapter I. This chapter covers several aspects of her life; her relationship with her father, her concerns as a writer and her relationships with her sisters and with her closest friend, Ellen. The techniques Gaskell has employed involve the discriminate use of Charlotte's own letters, the highlighting of several crucial points by emotive diction and the relating of incidents which depict Charlotte as a heroine. This was the stage of Charlotte's, Emily's and Anne's lives when they had published poetry with little success and were now working on their first novels and as well, it was a time of concern over Mr. Brontë's ill-health and Branwell's situation. Gaskell relates scenes and comments on them as in this example:

> among the dispiriting circumstances connected with her anxious visit to Manchester, Charlotte told me that her tale came back upon her hands, curtly rejected by some publisher, on the very day when her father was to submit to his operation. But she had the heart of Robert Bruce within her, and failure upon failure daunted her no more than him. Not only did 'The Professor' return again to try his chance among the London publishers, but she began, in this time of care and depressing inquietude, - in those grey, weary,uniform streets, where all faces, save that of her kind doctor, were strange and untouched with sunlight to her, - there and then, did the brave genius begin 'Jane Eyre'. Read what she herself says: - 'Currer Bell's book found acceptance nowhere, nor any acknowledgement of merit, so that something like the chill of despair began to invade his heart.' And, remember, it was not the heart of a person who, disappointed in one hope, can turn with redoubled affection to the many certain blessings that remain. Think of her home, and the black shadow of remorse lying over one in it, till his very brain was mazed, and his gifts and his life were lost; - think of her father's sight hanging on a thread; - of her sisters' delicate health, and dependence on her care; - and then admire as it deserves to be admired, the steady courage which could work away at 'Jane Eyre', all the time 'that the one volume tale was plodding its weary round in London' (p. 305).

Gaskell begins the passage with a brief description of the incident that has resulted in Charlotte's depression. All of the descriptive words used in that first sentence are negatives which reinforce her mood, "dispiriting ... anxious ... curtly rejected", and Gaskell also uses the pivotal word "very" for emphasis, to show how poorly timed the rejection of her novel was to coincide with her father's operation. The following sentence, containing the comparison between Charlotte and the great hero, Robert Bruce, emphasises her courage and resilience, to be followed by the repetition of the word "failure", having the implication that Charlotte had everything against her but her heroic qualities pulled her through. That idea continues in the next sentence where Gaskell leaves the climax until the final few words and meanwhile builds up to it with more images of the despondency Charlotte had to face at that time, "time of care and depressing inquietude ... grey, weary, uniform streets ... all faces ... were strange and untouched with sunlight to her". She leads into the climax with the alliterative phrase "there and then", to be followed by Gaskell's own assessment of Charlotte's character at this time ("brave genius") and finally depicts what the "brave genius" did, "begin 'Jane Eyre'".

Gaskell's achievement here is significant; she has carefully built up a picture of the depression Charlotte was suffering at this time due to both her writing rejections and her father's illness preying on her mind and she has juxtaposed that with the fact that Charlotte was beginning to write her greatest novel. Gaskell continues by including a carefully chosen statement by Charlotte, supporting Gaskell's depiction of Charlotte's mood, "'the chill of despair began to invade his heart'". The final segment of the quoted extract highlights again the tragic aspects of Charlotte's life through an emotive piece of rhetoric which reminds the reader of her circumstances. Gaskell includes every act of suffering pertinent to Charlotte at the time, even including her position as 'mother' to her younger, ill sisters regardless of the fact that they were all now adults, and in doing this she makes several pleas on behalf of Charlotte: "And, remember ... Think of her home ... think of her father's sight ... and then admire as it deserves to be admired". Gaskell here takes on the role of interpreter, filling in the gaps in

the reader's knowledge so that any conclusion reached about Charlotte is one made with all the information she believes is necessary.

At other times in the chapter Gaskell portrays Charlotte as a heroine by emphasising the conflict she felt between her womanly role in life and her writer's role:

> Sometimes weeks or even months elapsed before she felt that she had anything to add to that portion of her story which was already written. Then, some morning, she would waken up, and the progress of her tale lay clear and bright before her, in distinct vision. When this was the case, all her care was to discharge her household and filial duties, so as to obtain leisure to sit down and write out the incidents and consequent thoughts, which were, in fact, more present to her mind at such times than her actual life itself. Yet notwithstanding this 'possession' (as it were), those who survive, of her daily and household companions, are clear in their testimony, that never was the claim of any duty, never was the call of another for help, neglected for an instant (p. 306).

Gaskell shows in her narrative here the struggle Charlotte faced in playing out these two roles but she always stresses Charlotte's familial duties ahead of others. This is not solely to show Charlotte's exceptional qualities. For Charlotte to be accepted by her readers there was the need to depict her as a woman similar to conventional women in attitudes towards her family.

Women at that time in society were still disadvantaged in terms of activities able to be pursued outside their family roles. Known female writers were rare; female writers who wrote about subjects contained within the Brontë sisters' novels were even rarer. Emily Brontë's Wuthering Heights had a wildness about it that even Gaskell felt obliged to give explanations for, Charlotte wrote about an independent, plain, governess in a manner shocking to many readers, particularly female ones of the day and Anne wrote in The Tenant of Wildfell Hall about a woman who was forced through circumstances to leave her husband, another contentious issue at that time. Gaskell, as advocate for Charlotte, was compelled to give people an insight into another facet of her life and to convince them that she was a woman bound by her duties just as other women were. The heroic qualities are made even more apparent when the struggle within Charlotte is described; the family always comes first even when it is

clear Charlotte is a "genius" (p. 305). Gaskell stresses this fact not only with the logic of her argument but also with the way she presents it, particularly the repetition, "never was ... never was".

Gaskell continues her argument on the same page when she gives another example of Charlotte's devotion and hard work:

> she [Tabby] reserved to herself the right of peeling the potatoes for dinner; but as she was growing blind, she often left in those black specks ... Miss Brontë was too dainty a housekeeper to put up with this; yet she could not bear to hurt the faithful old servant, by bidding the younger maiden go over the potatoes again, and so reminding Tabby that her work was less effectual than formerly. Accordingly she would steal into the kitchen, and quietly carry off the bowl of vegetables, without Tabby's being aware, and breaking off in the full flow of interest and inspiration in her writing, carefully cut out the specks in the potatoes, and noiselessly carry them back to their place. This little proceeding may show how orderly and fully she accomplished her duties, even at those times when the 'possession' was upon her (pp. 306-7).

Yet again Gaskell points to the struggle between the two sides of Charlotte's life and in using this memorable 'potato specks' episode she is able to show both the extraordinary lengths to which Charlotte went in her duties and how mundane some of her duties were for a person of her ability. Gaskell was obliged to draw her reader's attention to Charlotte Brontë as a woman first and writer second; many of the people of the day would have been horrified at the reverse of this.

As well as the examples already given of the tragic and heroic aspects of Charlotte's character Gaskell also allows glimpses of these features when she includes short extracts from Charlotte's own letters. These extracts invariably support her linking narrative:

> Charlotte adhered to the decision of her conscience, which bade her remain at home, as long as her presence could cheer or comfort those who were in distress, or had the slightest influence over him who was the cause of it. The next extract gives us a glimpse into the cares of that home ...
>
> 'I hope you are not frozen up; the cold here is dreadful ... We have all had severe colds and coughs in

> consequence of the weather. Poor Anne has suffered greatly from asthma, but is now, we are glad to say, rather better. She had two nights last week when her cough and difficulty of breathing were painful indeed to hear and witness, and must have been most distressing to suffer; she bore it, as she bears all affliction, without one complaint ... She has an extraordinary heroism of endurance ... Nothing happens at Haworth; nothing, at least, of a pleasant kind. One little incident occurred about a week ago, to sting us to life; but if it gives no more pleasure for you to hear, than it did for us to witness, you will scarcely thank me for adverting to it. It was merely the arrival of a Sheriff's officer on a visit to B., inviting him either to pay his debts or take a trip to York. Of course his debts had to be paid. It is not agreeable to lose money, time after time, in this way; but where is the use of dwelling on such subjects? It will make him no better' (pp. 309-10).

Gaskell's main idea in the narrative preceding Charlotte's letter re-emphasises her earlier contention; Charlotte's heroism often consisted of small everyday duties that to her were essential and part of her role as the oldest, surviving child in the family. In this example these duties involved caring for Anne and paying off Branwell's debts while suffering the embarrassment his notoriety brought on the family. Gaskell's inclusion, from Charlotte's letter of details on Anne's illness is not there merely to illustrate the severity of the weather. The effect is twofold; firstly it shows the intensity of Anne's illness and indicates how hard it was to endure, both for Anne and the family who cared for her, "painful indeed to hear and witness" (p. 309). By implication Gaskell is also drawing parallels between Anne's illness and Charlotte's many illnesses and sufferings portrayed throughout the biography. When Charlotte talks of Anne's "'extraordinary heroism of endurance'" (pp. 309-10), and adds, "'but I certainly could not imitate her'", numerous examples of Charlotte's severe headaches, spells of consumption and nervous illnesses brought on by weariness and tension are there, to be compared to Anne's consumptive illness. When Charlotte goes on to talk of Branwell's misadventures the effect is complete. Branwell's life is another form of endurance for Charlotte and the extraordinary heroism of Anne, written about by Charlotte, is implicitly what Gaskell is stating about Charlotte.

Gaskell becomes more explicit about the suffering in Charlotte's life, by either referring directly to it as narrator commenting on the life of her subject, or by use of parallel situations as in one lengthy example which compares Charlotte's state of mind directly after the deaths of Branwell, Emily and Anne, with the depicted psychological condition of her heroine, Shirley Keeldar, at a moment of extreme turmoil in her life in the novel Shirley:

> Down into the very midst of her writing came the bolts of death. She had nearly finished the second volume of her tale when Branwell died, - after him Emily, - after her Anne; - the pen, laid down when there were three sisters living and loving, was taken up when one alone remained. Well might she call the first chapter that she wrote after this, 'The Valley of the Shadow of Death' ...
>
> 'Till break of day, she wrestled with God in earnest prayer.
>
> 'Not always do those who dare such divine conflict prevail. Night after night the sweat of agony may burst dark on the forehead; the supplicant may cry for mercy with that soundless voice the soul utters when its appeal is to the Invisible. "Spare my beloved," it may implore. "Heal my life's life. Rend not from me what long affection entwines with my whole nature. God of Heaven - bend - hear - be clement!"' (pp. 379-80).

Gaskell begins the quoted extract with an emotive piece of writing calling the untimely deaths of the Brontës, "bolts of death", and then naming each member of the family in dramatic fashion with a double pause consisting of a comma and dash, after each name. The emotive diction continues with the comparison between the three, "living and loving", and the, "one alone". This is followed by the extract from Shirley written by Charlotte soon after the deaths. The fictional piece is in fact very similar in subject matter to a letter written by Charlotte and quoted two pages previously:

> I left Papa soon, and went into the dining room: I shut the door - I tried to be glad that I was come home. I have always been glad before ... But this time joy was not to be the sensation. I felt that the house was all silent - the rooms were all empty. I remembered where the three were laid - in what narrow dark dwellings - never more to reappear on earth. So the sense of desolation and bitterness took possession of me. The

> agony that *was to be undergone*, and *was not* to be avoided, came on. In underwent it, and passed a dreary evening and night, and a mournful morrow (p. 376).

This letter demonstrates the emotion Charlotte had to undergo upon her return home after Anne's death in Scarborough and the process of trying to pass that first night back neatly parallels the turmoil 'Shirley' was going through. Charlotte uses italics to stress the despair she felt and the language, "desolation ... bitterness ... agony", is stark and contrasts sharply with both Gaskell's writing on p. 380 quoted earlier and Charlotte's writing from Shirley also on p. 380. However, each extract is included to reinforce Gaskell's narrative which at this stage in the biography is highlighting the tragedy of Charlotte's loss of so much in such a short span of time.

In the examples quoted in the previous paragraph, Gaskell links extracts which include Charlotte's letter and fictional writing, to give prominence to the idea of tragedy in the biography. At other stages in the narrative she reflects on this idea and tells the reader directly of her impressions of this aspect of Charlotte's life. Gaskell inserts these summaries at places in the text which have been light-hearted for the previous few pages. By doing this the reader is constantly reminded of the dark side of Charlotte's life.

In Volume I, Chapter VII, after several pages of anecdotal writing about life in and around Roe Head, Gaskell pauses to reflect on Charlotte's character as glimpsed through some of her early letters: "In looking over the earlier portion, I am struck afresh by the absence of hope, which formed such a strong characteristic in Charlotte ... In after-life, I was painfully impressed with the fact, that Miss Brontë never dared to allow herself to look forward with hope; that she had no confidence in the future" (p. 143). This extract found early in the book is supported by a similar claim found later in Volume II, Chapter VIII:

> If I say again what I have said already before, it is only to impress and re-impress upon my readers the dreary monotony of her life at this time. The dark, bleak season of the year brought back the long evenings, which tried her severely: all the more so, because her weak eyesight rendered her incapable of following any occupation but knitting by candle-light. For her father's

> sake, as well as for her own, she found it necessary to make some exertion to ward off settled depression of spirits (p. 434).

This second quotation is inserted in a chapter that otherwise contains fairly light-hearted correspondence by Charlotte regarding publication of her novels, reviews and newly-published books by other authors. In fact the letter that precedes the extract on p. 434 ends on a positive note with Charlotte, having visited friends some months previously, writing to explain the pleasant feelings she had felt upon seeing these people and in being allowed to appreciate the beauty of the place. At several places in the text, Gaskell, in attempting to detail Charlotte's background, intercedes with information that places too much stress on the unfortunate aspects of Charlotte's life. On occasion this occurs when the line of narrative is heading in another direction but is forced back to the subject of tragedy as in the extracts just quoted.

At other times, however, Gaskell, in writing of the circumstances surrounding the Brontë family, describes scenes that were tragic and in doing so uses language that is affective, yet the result is not forced and the effect of it succeeds in gaining reader sympathy. In the following example Gaskell anticipates the deaths of Emily and Anne:

> It was the household custom among these girls to sew til nine o'clock at night. At that hour ... They put away their work, and began to pace the room backwards and forwards, up and down ... At this time, they talked over past cares, and troubles; they planned for the future, and consulted each other as to their plans. In after years, this was the time for discussing together the plots of their novels. And again, still later, this was the time for the last surviving sister to walk alone, from old accustomed habit, round and round the desolate room, thinking sadly upon the 'days that were no more' (p. 166).

The way in which Gaskell has moved in her discussion from three people to one and from the present time of their youth to the future, is repeated in reverse towards the end of the biography. When looking at Charlotte as the sole-surviving Brontë child Gaskell shows her in that same parlour looking back into the past:

> She went on with her work steadily. But it was dreary to write without any one to listen to the progress

> of her tale, - to find fault or to sympathise, - while pacing the length of the parlour in the evenings, as in the days that were no more. Three sisters had done this, - then two, the other sister dropping off from the walk, - and now one was left desolate, to listen for echoing steps that never came, - and to hear the wind sobbing at the windows, with an almost articulate sound (pp. 380-81).

This simple technique of repetition of both the subject of a paragraph and some of the language used within it, is effective in reinforcing the pathos in Charlotte's life. The repetition also completes a cyclic movement that is similar to the circularity of narrative that I discussed in Chapter I and it produces the same effect, that of satisfying the readers both intellectually and aesthetically.

Gaskell does not hesitate to promote Charlotte's heroic qualities. She is quite open in her advocacy of Charlotte whenever defence is felt to be required. Even when writing about Charlotte's steps into the world of governessing, Gaskell intercedes on her behalf to explain: "No doubt, all who enter upon the career of a governess have to relinquish much; no doubt, it must ever be a life of sacrifice; but to Charlotte Brontë it was a perpetual attempt to force all her faculties into a direction for which the whole of her previous life had unfitted them" (p. 210).

Gaskell achieves two things in this paragraph. Firstly, she acknowledges and pays tribute to the large number of governesses who are forced, through circumstance, to take a role in life that is not desired. By identifying with those women, she immediately gains the reader's support before continuing on to her second point. Here she argues that if many people found this life one of "sacrifice", the reader must consider how much more so it was for Charlotte, whose upbringing and personality meant that she was totally unsuited for this role. Again the implication is that Charlotte demonstrated heroism in trying to live her life to the full when circumstances were against her.

Footnotes

[1] Edgar Wright, Mrs. Gaskell: The Basis for Reassessment, (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 150.

[2] Angus Easson, Elizabeth Gaskell, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1979), pp. 151, 155.

[3] Robert E. Scholes and Robert Kellog, The Nature of Narrative, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 257-8.

[4] J.A. Chapple and A. Pollard, (ed.), The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1966), pp. 347-8.

[5] T.J. Winnifrith, The Brontes and Their Background: Romance and Reality, (London: The MacMillan Press Ltd., 1973), p. 9.

CONCLUSION

In The Life of Charlotte Brontë Elizabeth Gaskell has established a narrator who acts as a 'bridge-person'; a narrator who explains one type of English person to another. Gaskell's ability to explain, in order to make a set of facts concerning a person or group of people clear to others, is an important feature of the narrative. Gaskell establishes herself as a fellow Northerner of Charlotte's and a fellow author, and in doing this is able to write about Charlotte for an audience of educated Southerners who might have been repelled by her background and character had any less refined and less able person promoted her status. In connection with this and as part of her role as 'bridge-person', Gaskell makes known in detail the character of Charlotte Brontë to a public who knew the author's works but not the reclusive person behind the pseudonym. Similarly Gaskell is able to act as an advocate and spokesperson for women such as Charlotte, yet through the narrative show clearly her awareness of the roles and responsibilities of both men and women in society at that time.

The narrative in The Life is organised and orderly in terms of both volume and chapter structure and content, which has a cyclical movement from Charlotte's death, through her life and ending with her death again. At the same time the narrator demonstrates an ability to move away from any self-imposed controls and instead at times shows her capacity for apparent improvisation in the arrangement of material. This is particularly borne out by an examination of the chronological structure. Although the narrative does move in a general direction from the more distant past to the more recent past, Gaskell disrupts this sequence often to shift either to points between the two perspectives or to her own time. In this way she is able to include viewpoints on the Brontë family from as many sources as possible, ranging from letters written before Charlotte was born, to interviewing and using information given after Charlotte's death.

Gaskell also exhibits, in her narrator's 'voice' a great variation between involvement and non-involvement in the events of the text. At times the manner is that of an external, objective on-looker. These attempts are few and far between, however, and more common is a semblance of deep involvement in the events. This

involvement is made more obvious when explicit judgements are made. At several points in the biography Gaskell states that she will not judge but despite these pronouncements she is very prone to judging everything connected with the positive image of the Brontë family, in an approving manner, and everyone who had negative associations with the Brontë family, in a disapproving manner.

To sum up, Gaskell has been able to structure the biography using the techniques of arrangement of chapters and volumes, disruption of the chronology, selection of relevant letters of Charlotte's, insertion of emotive language and formation of judgements, to depict Charlotte as a woman who lived a tragic but heroic life.

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