The Evolution of Single Motherhood in Victorian England: Tracking Novels and Social Reception from 1853-1894

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by

Steven T. Raines II

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Honors in the English

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Florence Boos
Thesis Mentor

Fall 2016

All requirements for graduation with Honors in the English have been completed.

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In this work I discuss the evolution of single motherhood in Victorian literature and ultimately its influence in creating social change for women; not necessarily social change through legislation or public programs, but rather in the perception of these women and their stance or status in society. I explore four texts, analyzing each text’s portrayal of the single mother and her ultimate fate – Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Ruth* (1853), Olive Schreiner’s *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), Margaret Harkness’ *A City Girl* (1887), and George Moore’s *Esther Waters* (1894), with emphasis for analysis on the first of those texts, Gaskell’s *Ruth* (1853), and the last, Moore’s *Esther Waters* (1894). Although the title of two of these books bears the name of its single mother protagonist, the novels themselves stand in direct contrast to one another. The forty years of separation between these two publications place each character into a completely different world than the other. Looking critically at both *Ruth* and *Esther Waters*, I am able to easily identify the stark contrast between the representation of single mothers of the early and late Victorian era. I supplement my analysis of the novels themselves with research on the critical reception of the works, investigating not only what contemporary critics thought of these works, but also what contemporary authors, fellow acquaintances, and society in general believed. I also complement this with biographical information on the authors and in-depth research on historical context, including research on women of the time period, single mothers, and the repercussions of motherhood for unmarried mothers and illegitimate children. Through combining my analyses of the novels with research on the time period, critical reception of the works, and authorial correspondence, I am able to bring this issue to light and track the evolution of the portrayal of single mothers in Victorian England, finding that by the mid-1890s, with the influence of changing literary styles and social attitudes, literary representations of single mothers had become more favorable.
## Introduction

1. Elizabeth Gaskell and *Ruth* (1853)  
2. Olive Schreiner (Ralph Iron) and *The Story of an African Farm* (1883)  
3. Margaret Harkness (John Law) and *A City Girl* (1887)  
4. George Moore and *Esther Waters* (1894)

## Conclusion

## Works Cited
Introduction

The Victorian era was a time of great social and political change. With the end of the Napoleonic wars and the birth of the Industrial Revolution, English society was evolving faster than ever. Novelists of the period were well known for their reformist tone, although this of necessity functioned within the constraints of Victorian norms and publishing practices. In addition, these standards would dictate what most authors did or did not feel comfortable publishing. In 1861 Charles Knight commented on the reformist impulse of current social fiction, as Joseph Kestner cites in his book *Protest and Reform: The British Social Narrative by Women, 1827-1867*,

All honour to those beguilers of life's dull hours who have laboured to bring us all to a knowledge of each other by repeated efforts, such as those of Charles Dickens; to the illustrious females, such as Elizabeth Gaskell, who have seen in this work an especial vocation...They have their reward, though not a complete one, in seeing the great change which marks the difference between 1831 and 1861. (Knight qtd. in Kestner 209)

This incomplete reward to which Knight alludes is precisely what I will be investigating throughout this essay. I will investigate a change developing in social attitudes toward women and sexuality from 1837 to 1901, discussing the ever-changing portrayals of fictional single mothers in the early and late Victorian novel.

The single mothers I will be investigating were not widows; they were women who engaged in premarital sex and birthed children out of wedlock. During the Victorian era the “purity” of a woman was held in extremely high regard. Without sexual purity – virginity or only post marital sex – a woman was viewed as an outcast. Sally Mitchell explains the repercussions
of these standards in her book *The Fallen Angel: Chastity, Class and Women’s Reading 1834-1880*, quoting William Gayer Starbuck’s *A Woman against the World*, “When a woman falls from purity – there is no return for her – as well may one attempt to wash the stain from the sullied snow. Men sin and are forgiven; but the memory of a woman’s guilt cannot be removed on earth. Her nature is so exquisitely refined that the slightest flaw becomes a huge defect” (Mitchell x). The fall from purity that Starbuck mentions is a common trope and theme of the Victorian novel. The contrast between man and woman stands starkly – men’s sins may be forgiven and forgotten, but women’s sins may not. This ongoing double standard presents itself multiple times in the texts that I will investigate. The societal expectations set for women warranted little room for error.

The Victorian era, whilst being a time of refined peace and prosperity in Great Britain, was also a time of great social injustice. In response, throughout the entirety of this time period authors such as the aforementioned took it upon themselves to intervene upon the behalf of the oppressed. Novels such as Gaskell’s *Ruth* and Moore’s *Esther Waters* do a phenomenal job of both defending and praising the single mother of Victorian England, actively spurring a change in literature and the social environment, suggesting that the single mother’s ill fate was caused and propagated by the society they lived in, not by themselves.

The societal ills that accompanied single motherhood were astonishing and abundant. Historian Ann Higginbotham notes that “some 35-40,000 women [gave] birth to an illegitimate child in England each year during the mid-19th century” (Higginbotham 2). The sheer number of illegitimate children brought desperation to mothers. In the Victorian era, there was no place for women who birthed illegitimate children. These single mothers almost always belonged to the
lower class. In all four of the texts I will investigate, the single mother portrayed belongs to the lower class, and the father belongs to a higher class.

Pressure from possible employers, friends, colleagues, and family members forced single mothers to commit atrocities. Oftentimes, they killed their own children to avoid being ostracized or starving to death. At mid-century, an estimated 12,000 London mothers had murdered their infants without detection (Higginbotham 319). These cruel actions were committed largely out of fear, as the life of a single mother was tumultuous, taxing, and heart-breaking. Unable to obtain work, and unable to provide for their children, these single mothers believed that infanticide was justifiable. The 12,000 London mothers that Higginbotham writes about were the undetected cases that came to the surface – but surely, there were even more. In the mid-1860s, over 80 percent of all coroner’s reports of murder in England and Wales involved infants, many of whom were assumed to be illegitimate (Higginbotham 321). Given the difficulties facing an unmarried mother and her limited options, some infanticide seemed inevitable (Higginbotham 322). Nearly every case of infanticide was spawned not only from fear, but from the need for survival. The severity of the treatment of single mothers by society can ultimately be considered the largest contributing factor in the death of illegitimate children.

The single mother generally had few choices. Two of those choices were either to kill her child, or support it by sin. The “sin” I am referring to, prostitution, was an industry fueled by the demands of men. Published in 1857 Prostitution Considered in its Moral, Social, and Sanitary Aspects, William Acton discusses and estimates the number of prostitutes in Victorian England. “We shall find that 210,000, or one in twelve, of the unmarried females in the country above the age of puberty have strayed from the path of virtue” (18). While Acton did not have reliable statistics and confirmed reports at his disposal while writing this book, he made an educated
estimate based on the number of unmarried mothers in England and the number of illegitimate children. In my research, I was unable to find any statistics more precise than this. Acton’s estimate of 210,000 abandoned women, prostitutes, or unmarried mothers, though, could be dramatically small. Acton used the birth of illegitimate children as his basis for counting the number of prostitutes. This formula, though, did not account for single mothers who were not prostitutes, or prostitutes who gave birth to more than one child. It also did not account for any instances of infertility, abortion, stillbirth, or contraception. Taking all factors into consideration, it is reasonable to consider prostitution a problem that affected a multitude of women in Victorian society.

Prostitution has only recently surfaced as a field of academic study. In her essay “Prostitution and the Nineteenth Century: In Search of the ‘Great Social Evil’”, Fraser Joyce quotes author and professor Ruth Karas, who states that the historian must “steer clear between the dangers of portraying prostitutes as victims by concentrating too much on how others saw them and the danger of decontextualizing them by concentrating too much on their agency“ (Joyce). Karas’s warning demonstrates the delicacy of discussing prostitution in the academic world. Discussing prostitution in the Victorian world, though, was an even more delicate matter. The intricacies of Victorian morality included a strong sense of prudery amongst citizens. Joyce notes: “The reputation the Victorians earned in terms of their sexual prudery means that unbiased contemporary accounts [of prostitutes] are rare” (Joyce). The rareness of unbiased contemporary accounts makes investigating this issue difficult. For this essay, though, I will turn to female novelists and their single-mother heroines to learn more about society’s view of the husbandless mother.
Authors like Elizabeth Gaskell, Olive Schreiner, Margaret Harkness, and George Moore took it upon themselves to write about the controversial, complicated social issue of single motherhood. On occasion, texts from these reformist authors were so controversial that they would choose to publish their works under a pseudonym, such as Olive Schreiner, who chose to publish *The Story of an African Farm* under the name of Ralph Iron, or Margaret Harkness, who chose to publish *A City Girl* under the name John Law. All four respective authors, though, actively fought for a positive change in the social environment in which Victorian single mothers were forced to live.

If a mother could not push herself to engage in infanticide, prostitution, or resort to a baby farmer – a woman paid to execute babies – she would have little choice but to enter the workhouse. Dorothy Haller explains in her academic paper “Bastardy and Baby Farming in Victorian England: “In Desolation and shame, young unwed mothers placed their infants in workhouses where their survival was questionable, committed infanticide, or turned to baby farmers, who specialized in the premeditated and systematic murder of illegitimate infants” (4). In his novel *Esther Waters*, George Moore’s protagonist single mother is faced with the possibility of both baby farmers and the workhouse. Unmarried mothers and their children constituted one of the largest single groups seeking shelter in Victorian workhouses. Some critics of the system complained that workhouses were “almost entirely populated by prostitutes and females of light character, going in to be delivered of their illegitimate offspring” (Higginbotham 36). The workhouse was supposed to function as an option and an asset to those in need – it was an early example of social welfare. The problem, though, was that conditions were so bad that even those in desperate need of help and aid would avoid the workhouse at all costs. George Moore touches on the situation within Victorian workhouses throughout *Esther Waters*. Esther,
even when without other recourse, continually avoids the workhouse, fearing for her child’s safety and well-being above all else. Esther Water’s actions serve as a strong representation of how Victorian single mothers viewed the public workhouses.

In considering literary portrayals of single mothers, I will begin with the earliest, Gaskell’s *Ruth*. *Ruth*’s plot, characters, reception, publication, and success can all be considered vital factors in understanding the social attitude that early-Victorian England’s citizens possessed towards single mothers.
Elizabeth Gaskell and *Ruth* (1853)

The ground-breaking work that the aforementioned authors set out to perform was spearheaded by Mrs. Elizabeth Gaskell in 1853 with her publication of *Ruth*. Gaskell’s *Ruth* deals with the seldom talked about, and sensitive subject of “fallen women,” Tim Dolin explains in his introduction to *Ruth* that “*Ruth* deals with what the Victorians themselves called the ‘Great Social Evil’: ‘prostitution’ – not, as we understand it, the sex industry, but all forms of what the Victorians classed as female social-sexual transgression” (ix). The female social-sexual transgression that Dolin describes here is the very evil that plagues Ruth and ultimately leads to her fall and demise, as any relationship in the Victorian era that stood outside of social convention was treated practically as prostitution. In the novel Ruth is utterly and completely shunned for having a child out of wedlock, and all of the blame for pregnancy is placed on her shoulders. That blame, though, simultaneously serves as part of the fire that fuels Ruth’s devotedness to her child. Miriam Allott explains the most controversial part of Gaskell’s *Ruth* in her biography, “*Ruth*’s modern readers may wonder what all the fuss was about, perhaps forgetting how much of a pioneer Mrs. Gaskell really was, especially in exposing the double moral standard for men and women” (22). The double moral standard that Gaskell so boldly exposed within *Ruth* can account for the majority of the harsh criticism she received after publishing the novel. Ruth Hilton’s fall within the novel is initiated by Mr. Bellingham, and encouraged almost entirely by him. Although the novel shows that the other characters place an abundance of blame on Ruth, the reader can still conclude that Mr. Bellingham was much guiltier of wrong-doing than Ruth was. His persistence in pursuing Ruth only grows stronger with each instance of her resistance. Gaskell crafts the novel in this way to expose the double-standard that was widely accepted by Victorians – as we see both Ruth and Bellingham try to
cover up their past, one successfully (Bellingham), one unsuccessfully (Ruth). Both of Gaskell’s major characters, Ruth and Mr. Bellingham, do everything in their power to escape the harsh consequences that come with having a child out of wedlock. Unfortunately, though, Ruth’s gender prevents her from escaping culpability as easily as Mr. Bellingham, effectively crafting Ruth Hilton as the novel’s heroine, protagonist, and scapegoat.

As Miriam Allott has argued, Elizabeth Gaskell truly was a great pioneer and reformist. She was one of the first to tackle the delicate issue of single motherhood. Maureen Reddy explains in her biographical collection British Short-Fiction Writers, 1800-1880 that “Gaskell was ahead of most of her contemporaries in seeing women as a class, in the sense of a definable group with certain shared experiences that differ from those of the dominant group” (132). At the time of Ruth’s publication in 1853, conversations about women as a class were only just beginning. Gaskell’s Ruth successfully identified and exposed a significant societal issue that affected only women – single motherhood. As mentioned previously, a plethora of problems spawn directly from this issue: infanticide, starvation, homelessness, and prostitution. Issues like these are precisely why Gaskell chose to attack the topic. She utilized her writing skills and spoke out against the wrongs to which women were subjected.

In Mauren Reddy’s aforementioned biographical account the author explains the recent surge of interest in Gaskell among feminist critics

More recently feminist critics have drawn attention to Gaskell's intense, ongoing interest in women's position in society, and especially in motherhood as both institution and practice...Gaskell was an unconventional, complicated person, a serious artist who strove to articulate in all of her writings what she understood to be the truth of women's lot (123).
What Gaskell understood to be the truth of women’s experience shows brightly throughout the entirety of *Ruth*. Gaskell’s serious and reformist edge did, however, spark hostility from conservatives of the time period, as first indicated in their response to her first novel *Mary Barton*. Barbara Mitchell explains in *Nineteenth-Century British Literary Biographers* that, “Gaskell’s first novel, *Mary Barton*, was published anonymously on 25 October 1848...It was well received in literary circles, but the conservative press felt that Gaskell had presented a distorted picture by siding entirely with the laborers against the employers” (99). Similarly to Olive Schreiner, Elizabeth Gaskell felt the need to publish *Mary Barton* anonymously, in an attempt to shield herself from the critical backlash from conservatives and employers. Gaskell would publish *Ruth* five years after *Mary Barton*, but both novels were primarily driven by a reformist energy. Although *Mary Barton*’s primary aim lies in explaining the relationship between factory workers and factory employers, there is still a single mother featured throughout the text.

Esther Barton, Mary Sr.’s sister, is portrayed as a destitute, alcoholic prostitute. We learn that Esther’s alcoholism and prostitution trace back to her having been a single mother – working in whatever situation possible to earn a living. Esther runs off with a soldier, becomes pregnant with his child, births the child, and then is left by the soldier. This string of events presents itself in nearly the exact same way throughout every text I examine. Esther Barton’s character, though, is presented in a much different light than Ruth Hilton’s character. Esther is portrayed as an utterly and completely lost cause. Her own brother-in-law, John Barton, casts her aside and refuses to help her or listen to her, even though John knows that Esther is only reappearing in his life to try and warn his daughter, and her niece, Mary, of what trouble comes with being courted by an upper-class man. By the end of the novel, though, both Esther’s child and Esther are dead,
suggesting that an ill-fated life and early death are all that lie ahead for the single mother and her child.

By comparing Elizabeth Gaskell, Olive Schreiner, Margaret Harkness, and George Moore, we can see the evolving social attitudes and views of single mothers in Victorian England. The earliest of these, Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Ruth*, was banned by a multitude of citizens and publishers for its sensitivity and threatening plot. In a letter to her friend Eliza Fox, Gaskell writes “Now should you have burnt the 1st volume of *Ruth* as so very bad?...Yet two men have; and a third has forbidden his wife to read it, they sit next to us in Chapel and you cannot think how 'improper' I feel under their eyes” (Shelston 174). Gaskell dealt with an internal battle after the publication of *Ruth*, comparing herself to St. Sebastian tied to a tree and shot with arrows (Shelston 174). Gaskell felt the arrows coming from all angles – her own husband’s congregation, her peers, and many critics. There were, however, contemporaries who sided with Gaskell. Patsy Stoneman explains in her biography *Elizabeth Gaskell* that, “Readers like Charlotte Bronte, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and William Rathbone Greg, on the other hand, applauded Ruth's challenge to the assumption that a woman's sexual 'fall' is the 'leper-sin' from which 'all stand aloof dreading to be counted unclean’” (Stoneman 41). Renowned colleagues like the aforementioned supported *Ruth* and its attack on social attitudes towards “impure” women. Elizabeth Gaskell truly was a pioneer in the fight for single mothers of Victorian England.

Although numerous contemporaries supported and applauded *Ruth*, its sympathetic attitude toward a “fallen woman” still shocked 1853 Victorian England. Prior to its publication, Gaskell’s reformist edge had been almost entirely aimed towards social reform for working class citizens, as we see in *Mary Barton*. As Gaskell confided to Eliza Fox, “I myself, don't see how
Mary Barton and Ruth can be compared. They are so different in subject, style, number of characters - everything, and made differently partly that people might not compare them” (Shelton 174). Eliza Fox was a dear friend of Gaskell’s – and their letters were private. It is safe to assume that everything Gaskell wrote to her she believed without reservation. A fear of Mary Barton, a massive success, being viewed in the same light as Ruth, was definitely present. Prior to writing and publishing Ruth, Gaskell knew there was a factor of risk involved. While not her first time writing for social change, this was her first time centering a novel on a stigmatized woman – a lower class, single mother.

While the general reception of Ruth was critical, some did offer praise. Gaskell continues in her letters to Eliza Fox, “Three or four men have written to approve...two with testimony as valuable as fathers of families...I think I have put the small edge of the wedge in, if only I have made people talk and discuss the subject a little more than they did” (Shelston 175). Excerpts like this one from Gaskell’s letters serve as proof that her motives for publishing Ruth were reformist. The “small edge of the wedge” that Gaskell references in the aforementioned excerpt is precisely what I am investigating throughout this thesis. Ruth’s plot was effective enough to start conversations amongst the general public. Gaskell’s emphasis on the word “men” in the letter stresses the importance of getting both sexes involved in the conversation on single motherhood. Angus Easson explains Gaskell’s purpose in his introduction to Ruth, writing “Gaskell wanted action on behalf of the fallen, including those who, unlike Ruth, are no innocents. Ruth, though, represents that action not through female penitentiaries or societies for emigration, but rather through the community of feeling and understanding” (xxiii-xxiv). Ruth’s publication had a twofold purpose – begin the conversation on “fallen” single mothers, and to call on community, feeling, and understanding as problem solvers for this issue.
Elizabeth Gaskell achieves her purpose of eliciting sympathy for the single mother within *Ruth* through the careful depiction of Ruth Hilton’s character – representing her as pure, susceptible, and naïve. The narrator expresses respect for Ruth’s character throughout the novel, continually portraying her as nearly perfect and free of blame. Minor characters who encounter Ruth always describe her in a similar way, stating things such as “She’s a very lovely creature…Not above sixteen, I should think. Very modest and innocent-looking in her white gown!” (61). Again, Gaskell utilizes this careful depiction of Ruth’s character to represent her as innocent, lovely, and pure. She’s too young to be a fully culpable adult; she is modest and innocent-looking, and she dons a white gown. The white gown symbolizes Ruth’s purity and wholeness – at this point of the novel she has yet to lie with Mr. Bellingham, her lover and soon-to-be father of her child.

Ruth’s ignorance is made apparent to the reader as well within the early chapters of the book. She has no idea what cohabiting with Bellingham implicates, and only begins to realize its consequences after being struck in the face by a child. This ignorance aids in Ruth’s “downfall,” as she becomes further and further implicated with Bellingham, unaware of what might come. The narrator clearly guides our sympathies toward Ruth – beginning early on, at the close of chapter three,

Ruth was innocent and snow-pure. She heard of falling in love, but did not know the signs and symptoms thereof; nor, indeed, had she troubled her head much about them. Sorrow had filled up her days…the interval of blank, after the loss of her mother, and during her father’s life-in-death, had made her all the more ready to value and cling to sympathy – first from Jenny, and now from Mr. Bellingham (40).
Gaskell’s strong narrative presence that guides our emotions here remains throughout the entirety of the novel. The reader gains a clear understanding of Ruth’s situation – orphaned, lonely, and sad, seeking human connection. Ruth’s innocence and snow-white-purity furthers our sympathies for her, as we find her situation more tragic with the loss of innocence. The portrayal of Ruth’s loneliness and lack of human connection is emphasized by Gaskell to create a commonality between Ruth and the reader, as most readers can relate to a feeling of loneliness. The narrator states, “After her departure, the monotonous idleness of the Sunday seemed worse to bear than the incessant labour of the work-days; until the time came when it seemed to be a recognized hope in her mind, that on Sunday afternoons she should see Mr. Bellingham” (33). An early Victorian readership would have no difficulty in relating to and understanding Ruth’s situation. The cherished Sundays that Gaskell’s readership probably adored brought pain to Ruth because of her terrible loneliness. This scene foreshadows what is to come for Ruth and essentially sheds light on Gaskell’s purpose, pulling together the community these single mothers live in through mutual understanding and feeling.

The official descent of Ruth Hilton’s character into “fallenness” and single motherhood can be placed from the time she left for London with Mr. Bellingham. It was completely outrageous to mention anything sexual in the early Victorian novel, so novelists had to make vague allusions to these occurrences. Elizabeth Gaskell carefully crafts the scene of Mr. Bellingham persuading Ruth to go to London with him, as he begs “Ruth, would you go with me to London? My darling, I cannot leave you here without a home…You must come with me love, and trust to me” (49). The very trust and love that Mr. Bellingham calls for from Ruth is what leads to her complete fall into single motherhood and all of its woes. Mr. Bellingham wants Ruth to place her trust in him, but that trust is not validated whatsoever – as we eventually see Mr.
Bellingham abandon the pregnant Ruth. Gaskell, once again, utilizes a pointed narrative interjection after Bellingham’s assertion to gain reader’s sympathies for Ruth:

Still, she did not speak. Remember how young, and innocent, and motherless she was! It seemed to her as if it would be happiness enough to be with him...The future lay wrapped in a golden mist, which she did not care to penetrate; but if he, her sun, was out of sight, and gone, the golden mist became dark heavy gloom, through which no hope could come. He took her hand (50).

Again, the narrator asserts Ruth’s innocence and ignorance, drawing the sympathies of the reader. The extremely vocal and active narrator creates an internal desire to sympathize with Ruth. The entirety of this section foreshadows precisely what is to come for Ruth – as there is no possibility for a single mother to fully recover within the early Victorian novel. It is interesting to note that while we enter Ruth’s feeling within this passage, she does not actually speak at all, and the paragraph closes with “He took her hand.” Mr. Bellingham, once again, is portrayed by Gaskell as the initiator of the relationship – first openly flirting with Ruth while she works, then going with her on walks, then convincing her to miss church, and now convincing her to come to London with him.

Gaskell’s *Ruth* makes sure to clearly indicate the importance of community and understanding when dealing with the stigmatized Victorian single mother. As Ruth begins to encounter more and more people, we see her relationships or meetings with them abundantly influenced and affected by her relationship with Mr. Bellingham. Upon recognizing a little child, Ruth’s womanly, maternal instinct draws her close to him. The narrator states, “Ruth, who was always fond of children, went up to coo and to smile at the little thing…whose face had been reddening ever since the play began, lifted up his sturdy little right arm and hit Ruth a great blow
on the face...’She’s not a lady!’ said he, indignantly. ‘She’s a bad, naughty girl – mamma said so’” (62). Gaskell parallels the ignorance and innocence of both these characters here – drawing on the child, who is moldable and easily influenced by his mother’s words, as well as Ruth, who is motherless and oblivious. We find fault not with Ruth, or the child, but more with the community they live in.

As the novel progresses, we begin to align our sympathies with the Benson family – namely Thurston Benson, the disabled minister who saves Ruth from the grips of suicide and takes her in when she’s completely distraught and alone. Gaskell embodies the entirety of her message through the Benson family and their actions toward Ruth – as we can assume they are Gaskell’s model citizens in dealing with single mothers. Thurston’s sister Faith, or Miss Benson, symbolizes the possibility for change and evolution in current attitudes. In introducing her, Gaskell writes “The offence, too, (Ruth’s) was one for which the sister, good and kind as she was, had little compassion” (93). The initial lack of sympathy Miss Benson has for Ruth at this point of the novel sets the stage for her development as a character, which will prove to suggest that anybody is capable of coming to sympathize with fellow community members.

Gaskell’s Ruth again attempts to evoke sympathy for Ruth’s character when it is made apparent that she is with child. The eventual birth of Leonard will prove to be Ruth’s salvation from complete despair and doom. Thurston Benson, serving as Gaskell’s primary voice of purpose and reason, explains the importance of Ruth’s childbirth, “While we do all we can to strengthen her sense of responsibility, I would likewise do all we can to make her feel that it is responsibility for what may become a blessing” (101). Gaskell’s overemphasis on the term “we” within this statement once again suggests the importance of community in Ruth’s time of trial. The reader feels more sympathy for Ruth now that she is with child and also is beginning to see
the kindheartedness of the Benson family, which keeps striving to help and aid her in her time of weakness. The character of Miss Benson, by contrast, develops and evolves in her attitude towards Ruth and her situation over time, not immediately. Upon seeing Ruth’s baby for the first time, Gaskell explains Miss Benson’s thought process, “Miss Benson had a strange reluctance to see him. To Ruth, in spite of all that had come and gone, she was reconciled – nay, more, she was deeply attached; but over the baby there hung a cloud of shame and disgrace. Poor little creature, her heart was closed against it – firmly, as she thought” (135). Miss Benson’s involvement with Ruth has opened her heart to her, despite her “fall”, but her heart still remains closed against the baby, Leonard. This theme proves to be a deeper issue of the single mother problem on which Gaskell aims to comment. Ruth’s fall is something that spreads beyond the loss of her esteem and place in society – it extends to her children as well. The unjust “cloud of shame and disgrace” that hangs over Leonard’s head is something the early Victorian readership might be able to sympathize with, as a multitude of Victorian woman reading the novel would also be mothers.

As *Ruth* nears its end, we see several developments that reiterate the central theme of the novel – community. Bellingham is reintroduced to the story with a new name, Mr. Donne. Mr. Donne is running for Parliament and has changed his name to hide his past with Ruth. Their first encounter affects Ruth dramatically, as Gaskell writes, “It seemed as if weights were tied to her feet – as if steadfast rocks receded – as if time stood still; - it was so long, so terrible, that path across the reeling sand” (221). The feeling of being stuck is utilized by Gaskell to demonstrate the effect Bellingham’s very presence has on Ruth. Her character thus far has been as retreating as possible in every situation, but she has finally began to take strides forward, bettering herself and her emotional state. The reappearance of Bellingham is presented by Gaskell to further
challenge Ruth’s character, as we see her handle the situation with a newfound self-respect: “By a strong effort at self-command, she went onwards at an even pace, neither rushing nor pausing to sob and think” (223). Ruth’s self-command is very commendable, and furthers our respect for her, as opposed to the sympathy Gaskell has focused on implicitly until this point. Ruth’s ability to keep moving forward and her strength of self-command are completely newfound. Throughout the beginning and middle of the novel Ruth’s character has yet to find this kind of strength from within, but through her child, Leonard, and the Benson family, she has grown.

The theme of double standards that Gaskell seeks to expose is resurrected again with the meeting of Mr. Donne and Ruth. The narrator states, “His very presence seemed as a sign that their stain would never be washed out of her life” (232). The stain of promiscuous sex is referred to as “theirs,” attributing the fault to both of them, but Mr. Donne has successfully removed it from his own life, changing his name and advancing in station. We see, again, the exposure of this double standard that early Victorians accepted.

In the final chapters we are exposed to Bellingham’s severe sickness, and Ruth’s severe sickness as well as death. Gaskell, seeking to raise Ruth’s character yet again, chooses her to be the nurse that saves Bellingham’s life. Ruth’s life, however, cannot be saved. Regardless of any sympathies or commendations granted to Ruth, Gaskell felt the need to close the novel with her death, as this was more than expected for a scorned lower-class, single mother in the early Victorian novel. After Ruth passes away from her illness, Miss Benson and Bellingham both come to see her body. Gaskell writes “He (Bellingham) was awed into admiration by the wonderful beauty of that dead woman. ‘How beautiful she is!’ said he, beneath his breath. ‘Do all dead people look so peaceful – so happy?’” (369). Bellingham’s character repeats sentiments very similar to his initial ones upon encountering Ruth. He is overcome by her physical beauty,
and takes immediate notice of it, much like their first meeting. His character has completely failed in evolving and changing, unlike Miss Benson, who takes the loss of Ruth to heart, mourning her entire being, as opposed to her looks. Speaking to Ruth’s corpse, Miss Benson exclaims,

‘I was not kind to you, my darling…I was not kind to you. I frabbed you, and plagued you from the first, my lamb!...No! I never was kind to you, and I dunnnot think the world was kind to you, my darling, - but you are gone where the angels are very tender to such as you – you are, my poor wench!’ She bent down and kissed the lips, from whose marble, unyielding touch Mr. Donne recoiled, even in thought (370).

Miss Benson’s speech to the deceased Ruth encapsulates the entirety of Gaskell’s purpose. The reiteration of “I was not kind to you” exemplifies the pity and sheer pain Miss Benson feels for initially neglecting Ruth for her “sin” (or, for what is considered her sinful behavior). Miss Benson also exclaims that the world was not kind to Ruth, showing Gaskell’s call for community as the antidote for the plight of single mothers in Victorian England. The kiss Miss Benson bestows upon Ruth closes out this speech, and symbolizes the deep connection between two women, one “fallen” and one pure – the connection Bellingham shrinks away from.
Olive Schreiner (Ralph Iron) and *The Story of an African Farm* (1883)

The next writer I will be investigating is Olive Schreiner. Schreiner’s first novel *The Story of an African Farm* presents some of the fullest fictional arguments on the woman question. The book’s massive success in 1883 was explained as the work of a genius (Showalter 104). Schreiner’s ability to write would attract the attention and praise of great contemporaries like George Moore and Oscar Wilde (Showalter 104). Her success with *The Story of an African Farm*, though, was not wholly attributed to the drawing and portrayal of her female protagonist and single mother, Lyndall. The major focus of the novel was seen as a presentation of the African experience (Showalter 108), and the representation of a strong, independent woman was second to that. Nonetheless, Schreiner’s work towards the advancement and independence of women was crucial. In her review of Ruth First and Ann Scott’s biography of Olive Schreiner, Elaine Showalter writes, “What moves us most about her [Schreiner] finally, and what Scott and First most sympathetically convey, is her own awareness that her failure to create the life of feeling, intellect, and work she envisioned was an honorable one, given her society’s resistance to such fulfillment for its women” (109). Elaine Showalter is correct in asserting Schreiner’s importance. Although Schreiner’s writing career was not as successful as Gaskell’s or Moore’s, she was nonetheless instrumental in the advancement of women. The resistance to such fulfillment for women is something that not only Schreiner, but all of these writers dealt with. Schreiner succeeds in presenting Lyndall’s character as one of the first female protagonists in Victorian literature to claim her own independence and make her own choices completely apart from men.

Olive Schreiner’s *The Story of an African Farm* 1883 differs vastly in purpose from Gaskell’s *Ruth*, but still can be compared in the strong presence of its heroine, protagonist, and
single mother, Lyndall. Lyndall epitomizes the New Woman of the late Victorian era – seeking to better herself and gain success independently. Joan Perkins describes the New Woman in her book *Victorian Woman*, “By the 1890s she was independent, pursued a career, sometimes bore a child out of wedlock (but hid it away) and questioned the necessity of marriage” (241).

At the outset of *The Story of an African Farm*, we are introduced to Lyndall, who exclaims “There will be nothing that I do not know. I shall be rich, very rich” (18). This portrayal of Lyndall, though, differs vastly from that of Ruth, who represents the meek, ignorant, but beautiful woman of the early Victorian era. Lyndall’s character, though, is repeatedly referred to as ‘little,’ “No,” said beautiful little Lyndall” (15), “It is a terrible, hateful ending,” said the little story teller” (20). This description of Lyndall occurs throughout the entirety of the story, foreshadowing her failure to grow, escape societal bounds, and succeed as an independent woman.

Lyndall’s character, while repeatedly referred to as “little,” still maintains some station and agency within the novel – as we see through her actions. The first problem posed to the occupants of the African farm is the presence of the fraudulent con-artist Bonaparte Blenkins. Bonaparte Blenkins sneaks into the good graces of Tant Sannie, the owner of the farm, and eventually brings about the eviction of tenant farmer Otto. Schreiner crafts Otto’s character as loving, gullible, and caring, effectively drawing our sympathies toward him early on, and intensifying our pain at his being kicked out. When Bonaparte Blenkins first arrives, he cons naïve Otto into letting him stay on the farm. The only person who holds a steadfast suspicion of him from the beginning through the end of his time there is Lyndall. After Otto is kicked off the farm because of Bonaparte’s deceitful ways, Lyndall and Em, her stepsister, are locked in their
rooms and forbidden to come out. Schreiner contrasts Em with Lyndall to emphasize the strength and independence within Lyndall,

‘Hoo, hoo!’ cried Em, ‘and they won’t let him take the gray mare; and Waldo has gone to the mill. Hoo, hoo’…’I wish you would be quiet,’ said Lyndall without moving. ‘Does it give you such felicity to let Bonaparte know he is hurting you? We will ask no one. It will be suppertime soon. Listen – and when you hear the clink of the knives and forks we will go out and see him [Otto]’ [55].

This scene represents the first of many that place Lyndall in strong contrast to Em. Em assumes the role of a weak, feeble woman, hopelessly crying at the current situation, while Lyndall remains steadfast, sorting out a plan to achieve her purpose. While Lyndall happens to be unsuccessful in sneaking out to see Otto, we still gain respect for her character through her actions – which include attempting to burn the window of her room to see Otto, representing the sheer determination Lyndall possesses to get what she desires. Schreiner closes this scene with another strong assertion from Lyndall: “When the day comes, and I am strong, I will hate everything that has power, and help everything that is weak” (57). This claim from Lyndall demonstrates her hatred of the system she lives in, which mostly only grants power to men, and not women. It also represents some of Schreiner’s purpose throughout the novel. Like Gaskell in *Ruth* thirty years prior, Schreiner actively seeks to advance the station of the weak and powerless, effectively representing the reformist principles of the Victorian era. Both Gaskell and Schreiner knew that women were “a definable group with certain shared experiences that differ from those of the dominant group” (Reddy 132).

While Lyndall’s character is represented as one without power, she still manages to achieve some of her aims – placing her in contrast to Ruth, who is at the mercy of the world she
lives in. Lyndall’s relationship with Schreiner’s other protagonist, Waldo, symbolizes some of the agency Lyndall possesses. Lyndall claims, “’You must come home with me, Waldo.’ She took his hand, and the boy rose slowly. She made him take her arm, and twisted her small fingers among his” (63). Again, Schreiner uses a physically diminishing descriptor for Lyndall, but also uses words like “must” and “made,” giving Lyndall power over her male peer. Shortly after this scene, Lyndall again exercises what little power she possesses. When Waldo is locked in a closet against his will Lyndall intervenes, taking the key from Bonaparte and Tant Sannie without hesitation, “’Waldo, she said, as she helped him to stand up, and twisted his arm about her waist to support him, ‘we will not be children always; we shall have the power, too, some day.’” She kissed his naked shoulder with her soft little mouth” (84). Lyndall’s character, again, decides she wants something and actively pursues it. Even though Schreiner still mindfully describes her figure as soft and little, she is able to achieve what she wants through self-determination. As the novel progresses, Lyndall eventually leaves to pursue an education at a girl’s school. This point of the novel proves to be pivotal, as we see Lyndall completely changed when she returns, both from her time spent studying, as well as her romantic involvement with an unknown man – the father of her bastard son.

When Lyndall returns, the first real insight that we gain into her character is through her extended conversation with Waldo. Critics have often considered this scene to be one of an attack against men. Lyndall begins the conversation asking, “Don’t you wish you were a woman, Waldo?” (131). Waldo readily answers no, and Lyndall laughs, “I thought not. Even you are too worldly-wise for that. I never met a man who did. This is a pretty ring” (131). The ring Lyndall has is presumably from the man she was romantically involved with while away at school. Lyndall continues to carry the conversation with Waldo, doing nearly all of the speaking. She
states, “I’m sorry you don’t care for the position of women; I should have liked us to be friends; and it is the only thing about which I think much or feel much – if, indeed, I have any feeling about anything” (131). Lyndall’s assertion here represents the importance she has placed on the woman’s movement. Again, Lyndall is represented as a New Woman, striving to better the position of her sex in a world dominated by men, where women have little to no status. While it is clear that Waldo is very important to Lyndall, she informs the reader that she cares much more about the position of women. As Lyndall continues her speech, she begins to describe women in detail, utilizing belittling adjectives yet again “Look at this little chin of mine….We sit with our little feet drawn up under us…” ‘Little one you cannot go’ they say, ‘your little face will burn’” (132). The extreme repetition of little is utilized by Schreiner to ground Lyndall’s character in the society she lives in – to remind her that while her goals and ambitions are massive, her womanhood still makes her small in the world.

At the close of Lyndall and Waldo’s conversation, Schreiner portrays the essential argument of The Story of an African Farm through Lyndall,

She leaned her head against the stones, and watched with her sad, soft eyes the retreating bird…”when love is no more bought or sold, when it is not a means of making bread, when each woman’s life is filled with earnest, independent labour, then love will come to her, a strange, sudden sweetness breaking in upon her earnest work; not sought for, but found. Then, but not now. . . ‘(137-8).

The retreating bird can be seen as a symbol for the women of the novel – beautiful, soft, and fragile, yet possessing the ability to soar. That ability to soar, though, is not something that Lyndall will have the pleasure of enjoying, not as a female protagonist and single mother in 1883.
Victorian England. Schreiner suggests that until “each woman’s life is filled with earnest, “independent labour” love will not be found.

We soon learn that Lyndall has rejected her lover’s offer of marriage, and this proves to be her downfall in the plot. As the novel progresses, we learn she was impregnated by her romantic interest from school – the stranger who comes to see her again, in an attempt to spend his life with her. Lyndall is drawn to this man by sheer physical attraction – nothing more. Her virtues and drive as an individual meld with Waldo, but her physical attraction melds with the stranger. This clashing of ideals and desires makes true love impossible for Lyndall. Her ambitious drive to find earnest, independent labor represents her goals and ambitions as a New Woman – but these goals and ambitions prove fatal when mixed with the sexual climate of the society she lives in. Lyndall ultimately fails as a New Woman in the late Victorian era because her ideals and ambitions clash with that of the society she lives in.

As the novel comes to a close, Lyndall makes an attempt to try both possibilities of romantic involvement that she sees available – one being to marry Gregory Rose, an insignificant admirer of Lyndall who pledges his servitude to her, and the other being to leave town with her love interest from school, the man who is presumably the father of her soon-to-be-child. Lyndall attempts to choose both – as she tells Gregory she will marry him in three weeks as “plain, matter-of-fact business” (166), but she also leaves town within that time period to elope with her love interest from school. Lyndall explains the situation she desires with this man, “‘I cannot marry you,’ she said slowly, “because I cannot be tied; but if you wish, you may take me away with you, and take care of me; then when we do not love any more we can say good-bye’” (172). At this point of the novel, Lyndall is attempting to exercise all of her power to the best of her ability. She wants to enjoy the romantic interest of her life, while also obtaining a
husband as a matter of business in a loveless marriage. She willingly denies the prospect of marriage to her lover, demonstrating her independence and blatant disregard for societal bounds. Her character’s fate, though, is bleak, as a single mother-to-be within the late Victorian era, who is also a New Woman attempting to embrace love.

The closing of *The Story of an African Farm* leaves the “fallen woman” and heroine in a position much more desolate than that the protagonist of *Ruth*. The heroines of both these novels suffer the consequences of death for their promiscuous sexual actions, but Schreiner’s Lyndall enjoys none of the affirmations that Gaskell’s Ruth does. Ruth gives birth to her child, and finds redemption through him – effectively garnering the love and respect from her surrogate family as well as actual family. Schreiner’s Lyndall, though, is abandoned by her male love interest and loses her child at birth.

Lyndall’s love interest is also directly contrasted with Ruth’s. Unlike Mr. Bellingham, the man from Lyndall’s past asks for her hand in marriage and begs her to take his hand in unity, but she refuses, exclaiming in her unfinished letter to him, “I cannot be bound to one whom I love as I love you. I am not afraid of the world – I will fight the world” (204). Lyndall’s biting words represent her new-woman-mindset, but fail to match up with her choice of actions. Ultimately, Lyndall dies of sickness and loses her child at birth – symbolizing Schreiner’s essential purpose for her character, which Kathleen Blake explains in *Love and The Woman Question in Victorian Literature*, quoting Schreiner: “’When I find a man as much stronger than I am, as I am than a child, then I will marry him, no one before.’…She did not think celibacy was good for her, but that it would have been a mistake to marry almost any man she had ever seen” (207). Schreiner expresses some autobiographical motifs through the character of Lyndall, as we see both of them express concerns about marrying while trying to move forward as strong, independent new
women. Kathleen Blake describes the effect of Lyndall’s romantic involvement, “Lyndall’s attraction to the masterful man leads to her mortal misfortune. Relinquishing her cool attitude of feminist erotic self-postponement, she becomes a suicidal case of feminine self-postponement in love. She dies of her mixed feelings for her child, which reflect those for her lover” (215). Lyndall’s character fails to follow through on her quest for self-betterment because of her failure to reject sexual impulses. Her character is ultimately defeated at the close of the book, having lost her child in a daze of confusion, trying to sort out her feminist and womanly mindset as well as her desires for romantic fulfilsments. Due to her sex, Lyndall is unable to pursue sexual desires as well as personal, independent advancement. Lyndall stands in direct contrast with Ruth’s Mr. Bellingham (Mr. Donne), who successfully pursues Ruth Hilton and advances in personal status.
Margaret Harkness (John Law) and *A City Girl* (1887)

Only four years after the publication of *The Story of an African Farm*, Margaret Harkness tackled the issue of single motherhood in her novel *A City Girl* published in 1887. Like Schreiner who published her novel under the guise of Ralph Iron, Harkness too used a pseudonym – John Law. The controversial nature of both novels called for pseudonyms upon publication. Harkness would prove to readers of the late nineteenth-century that she was not afraid to discuss sensitive issues in her novels, such as in her 1890 *A Manchester Shirtmaker: A Realistic Story of To-day* published in 1890. Eileen Sypher explains the serious plight of characters of the latter in her book *Late Victorian and Edwardian British Novelists*,

A recently widowed and impoverished seamstress, Mary Dillion, sells her sewing machine to buy food for her baby. Finally, recognizing that it is starving, she overdoses it with opium she has stolen. In this novel Harkness confronts the stereotype that mothers who murder children are merely depraved by depicting such actions as the result of poverty (153).

Showing sympathy for a woman guilty of infanticide was bold and daring for any author, given the social climate of Victorian England. Readers of the time period were taken aback by notions of pity and understanding for a mother guilty of infanticide. Harkness’ reformist edge put her beside earlier peers like Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Elizabeth Gaskell, as well as contemporary peers like Olive Schreiner and George Moore. All of these authors would prove to challenge social norms and prejudices held against single mothers of Victorian England.

Margaret Harkness’ protagonist in *A City Girl*, Nelly Ambrose, is portrayed in a much different light than Gaskell’s Ruth and Schreiner’s Lyndall. In her introduction to *A City Girl*
Deborah Mutch explains, “Nelly is not the innocent, pursued maiden – she is neither tricked nor forced into the affair – but instead she is the ‘Masher of the Buildings’ whose paid employment gives her the freedom to ‘come and go at all hours of the day and night without comment’” (19). Nelly is neither an overly pious and pure individual like Ruth, nor an overly zealous individual like Lyndall; she is more of a balance between the two, showing signs of independence and agency while also being taken advantage of. She maintains enough agency to be the financial provider for her abusive mother and brother, but she does so whilst upholding feminine stereotypes. Deborah Mutch explains, “Even during her period of financial autonomy, Nelly fulfills the female-gendered domestic duties: she enters the store carrying ‘a large market basket’ (45) as she returns from the weekly shopping trip and prepares breakfast for her sleeping mother and brother (51)” (22). This mixing of independence, financial autonomy, and domestic duties represents the gray area in which Nelly’s character lies. She’s nowhere near the oppressive, hateful sphere of Gaskell’s Ruth, and she is much less capable than the fiery, determined Lyndall. Nelly is lost in a haze of uncertainty. Both in character and circumstances she is portrayed as an unremarkable if decent person.

Although Nelly’s character lies between that of Gaskell’s Ruth and Schreiner’s Lyndall she still covets the same things that a stereotypical Victorian woman did: “To sit on a sofa, to read a novelette, to sip coffee with a teaspoon, to have someone put on and take off her boots, was her idea of being a lady” (Harkness 46). Nelly’s desires are much simpler and more predictable than Lyndall’s. She desires the leisure of gentility and social status. As a resident of the East-End, a poor neighborhood, Nelly has no way of acquiring these. Much like Lyndall and Ruth she is pursued by the apartment manager, George: “He [George] had grown fond of Nelly, and had asked her to be his wife” (58). Harkness presents this offer of marriage to the reader
within the first two chapters, demonstrating the desirability Nelly possesses, as well as her agency to refuse: “She was fond of George, but he was not the ideal lover she had dreamed about” (64). Nelly does not refer to George as a companion or a caretaker but rather a lover. This use of the language of love is never present within Gaskell’s *Ruth*, but it is present in Schreiner’s *The Story of an African Farm*, although Nelly does not suffer the fatality that Lyndall does. Harkness demonstrates Nelly’s beauty as well as agency early on in the novel, representing a woman free to make her own choices.

Nelly’s lover, and the father of her child, Mr. Arthur Grant, is introduced shortly after her suitor George. Arthur is politically involved, married, and a member of the upper-class. After her first night meeting him, Nelly thinks of him incessantly, “‘He’s forgotten me by now,’” she said, turning restlessly on her pillow, wondering when her mother would come to bed and the buildings grow quiet; ‘forgotten me altogether’” (67). Nelly’s thoughts and musings are wrong – Arthur has not forgotten her. He shows similar attraction to her and their relationship starts to develop. Arthur takes her out to the theater and Nelly has a wonderful time, “She looked down into the pit, in which she had always sat on previous visits, and felt a ‘lady’ for the first time in her life” (71). Sitting with the upper-class patrons and looking down at fellow ‘commoners,’ Nelly feels a rise in stature, but her meetings with Arthur suddenly stop, and it is implied that there were sexual relations between the two.

At this point the novel jumps from winter to spring and places Nelly back at work in the east end. She visits her employer, a “cold woman who prides herself upon being virtuous; no one so barren of comfort as a wife who has had no temptation to leave the path of righteousness” (93). Nelly’s employer, the sweater wife, is the first critic of Nelly for her sexual promiscuousness. “Poor little trembling Nelly only half understood the paragon’s speech, but felt
as though she were being thrust down, down into a pit, the bottom of which she could never read, into which she must sink, alone, helpless” (93). Harkness describes Nelly as “poor,” “little,” and “trembling,” portraying Nelly in the same light as Gaskell’s Ruth. This brief and belittling description, though, is one of very few throughout the novel. Even though she serves as the family provider, Nelly is kicked out of her home by her mother and brother. While she is ridiculed and berated by her employer, mother, and brother, Nelly moves forward past her mistake. She is able to achieve some sort of reconciliation for her sexual mistakes, achieving it through aid from the Salvation Army and rapprochement with her suitor George.

After losing her employment, Nelly is helped by George who takes her to the Salvation Army. Editor Deborah Mutch explains the general perception of the Salvation Army in Victorian England, “The Salvation Army’s work to alleviate the suffering of the poor would work against the principles of self-help propounded by both Liberals and Radicals” (123). This clashing of philosophies between the Salvation Army and Liberals or Radicals creates a tension between the contemporary reader and the text, as it is safe to assume a majority of Harkness’ readership supported either the Radicals or Liberals of the time period, though some would also have favored individual efforts to help the poor.

Once brought into the care of the Salvation Army, Nelly is primarily taken care of by the Captain. The Captain and George engage in a brief argument about Nelly and women as a whole. The captain expresses his belief, “Well, I don’t see myself why women should have only one sweetheart and men half-a-dozen” (102). Unlike Gaskell’s Ruth or Schreiner’s The Story of an African Farm, Harkness’ A City Girl presents the reader with a male character who believes in sexual equality between men and women. The Bensons help Ruth Hilton through her struggle, but they never condone her behavior; they help her move down the path of atonement. The
Captain, though, proclaims his indifference to Nelly’s past actions. Nelly’s family handles the news of her child much differently. Her brother Tom claims, “We can’t have that squalling brat in the shop. Yer can’t expect it. You must put it out to nurse” (104). Tom is referring to the practice of baby farming, which Nelly understands and quickly refuses, “Do you think I’d part with my baby?’ cried Nelly, “my own little baby!” (104). Nelly’s refusal to surrender the baby to a baby farmer elevates her character in the eyes of the audience. She also states that she will never return home to her mother and brother, suggesting that she would never put herself alongside people who would suggest baby farming, even if they are her own family.

Despite Nelly’s efforts to save the baby, the child eventually dies of sickness. Mr. Arthur Grant comes to see the Salvation Army in hopes of helping Nelly in some way. Upon arriving, he is barred from seeing Nelly, and without much resistance, leaves to walk with the Captain. Mr. Arthur Grant speaks to the Captain “I thought she was going to be married’…’Her sweetheart [George] was very much cut up about the babe,’ replied the Captain ‘I hope, now that it’s dead, he will go to the poor lass’” (124). The Captain, looking out for Nelly’s best interest, explains his hope that George will still wed her. Even though she has sex out of wedlock and gives birth to an illegitimate child, there is still a chance for her to marry. This serves as a hint to Arthur Grant to not pursue Nelly again.

The final chapter of the novel, “A Funeral and a Wedding”, details the burials of Nelly’s child and her marriage to George. Nelly’s initial thoughts in this chapter are bleak, “Cut off from the past, seeing no hope from the future, she did not seem to care what happened to her now she had lost the baby. Girlish pleasures seemed such silly things. She had no wish now for the theaters and outings” (128). Nelly’s sadness springs directly from the loss of her child. With the separation from Mr. Arthur Grant, she sees no connection to the past, and with the death of her
child she sees no connection to the future. The girlish pleasures she had once desired “To sit on a sofa, to read a novelette, to sip coffee with a teaspoon” (46), had now become insignificant and frivolous to her. Nelly’s only chances at happiness and redemption are through George. “When she reached home she found, to her great surprise, George the caretaker, upon the doorstep” (129). Nelly’s first descriptor of George earlier in the novel was ‘lover,’ but now she refers to him as the caretaker. The caretaker goes on to tell Nelly where he intends to go: “Into the country. There’s a society, or a club, just started…it’s a very nice place, and a lot cleaner than the buildings” (130). George goes on to describe his advancement in social station, gaining employment as a gardener and caretaker in the little village outside of London. He soon tells Nelly, “You’ll have to come with me, Nell. We’ll let bygones be bygones, and get married” (131). George’s marriage proposal is actually a statement and not a question. He does not ask Nelly to marry him, but rather tells her. She responds “Oh, George”, sobbed Nelly, “I ain’t worth it” (131). The novel comes to a close shortly after this scene with Nelly and George’s engagement. Harkness never actually presents the reader with the wedding, but their marriage is very heavily implied. George states his marriage proposal to Nelly, to which she replies with a sob, suggesting that her agency and independence are not as prevalent as they were earlier in the novel.

Nelly’s image as a single mother in A City Girl is an interesting blend of the two prior single mothers investigated thus far. There is no strong evidence of her being overly innocent or ignorant, but there is also no evidence of her being fiery and independent. Rather, she maintains some agency throughout the novel, providing for her mother and brother, while also being provided for by her male counterparts, the Captain from the Salvation Army and George. She is not given a fictional death, however, like Gaskell’s Ruth or Schreiner’s Lyndall. She actually
manages to redeem herself through marriage, and climb slightly upward in social class, leaving the East-End with George.
George Moore and *Esther Waters* (1894)

Shortly after Harkness’s publication of *A City Girl* 1887 and *A Manchester Shirtmaker: A Realistic Story of To-day* (1890), contemporary George Moore released his mostly well received novel *Esther Waters* in 1894. The novel brought Moore praise from Prime Minister William Gladstone as well as financial security (Regan xxxvi). Susan Dick explains in her biographical collection *Victorian Novelists after 1885*, “*Esther Waters* soon showed that Moore was still a novelist of importance. The critics were generally pleased with the book, and though Smith banned it, Mudie did not” (200). Stephen Regen explains in his introduction to the Oxford edition of *Esther Waters*:

> William Faux, the head of W.H. Smith’s circulating library, told the *Daily Chronicle* in an interview that the company had refused to circulate *Esther Waters* among its 15,000 subscribers because of its ‘outspokenness’. Comparing Moore’s work with that of Hardy, Faux hinted that it was probably the seduction scene that had prompted the ban (xxxii).

Faux’s pointing to the seduction scene as reason for the ban suggests that W.H Smith was not as forward-thinking as Charles Mudie, whose circulating library was extremely renowned and influential. His choice to ban or not ban a book determined whether or not the majority of middle-class families would have access to it. By allowing *Esther Waters* to be a part of his library, Mudie gave the book an ample amount of exposure. Alongside supporters like William Gladstone and Charles Mudie was Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who intervened in the *Daily Chronicle* debate, insisting in a letter on 1 May 1894 that W.H Smith had no right to keep from the public “a great and a very serious work…a good book – good both in literature and in ethics” (Regan xxxvi). Support from the prime minister, a major publisher, and a highly respected
contemporary author like Sir Arthur Conan Doyle assured the favorable reception of *Esther Waters*.

The essential focus of Moore’s *Esther Waters* was twofold – portraying the dangers of horse betting, and unveiling the plight of single mothers. Susan Dick goes on to explain Moore’s relationship with the novel, “Moore would always point to *Esther Waters* as proof that he had a social conscience. He had earned a reputation in the 1880s as an iconoclast and even a threat to public morals; yet here was a novel which led, he later boasted, to the establishment of homes for unwed mothers (201). Moore’s reputation as a threat to public morals was wholly overturned by the plot and characters of *Esther Waters*. The book’s central character and heroine, Esther Waters, proves her resiliency, work ethic, and strength throughout the entirety of the novel. Her consistent unwillingness to enter a workhouse can serve as evidence of Moore’s boast of helping further the establishment of homes for unwed mothers.

George Moore’s twofold purpose is portrayed entirely through the character of Esther Waters by the careful elicitation of sympathy for her. Like Gaskell’s Ruth, Esther possesses a strong sense of faith in religion: “The simplest human sentiments were abiding principles in Esther – love of God, and love of God in the home” (30). This similarity between Ruth and Esther suggests a likeness between characters. Moore also describes Esther’s first encounter with the soon-to-be father of her child, “William [Latch] had overtaken her in the avenue, he had expostulated with her, he had refused to allow her to pass. She had striven to tear herself from him, and, failing, had burst into tears” (9). Esther’s failure to break away, followed by subsequent tears, represents her inability to claim her independence and strength at the outset of the novel, echoing scenes from Gaskell’s *Ruth*. Moore continues to garner our sympathy for Esther, explaining her background, “This early life had lasted until she was ten years old. Then
her father died” (21). The loss of her father is intensified by the presence of her alcoholic and abusive step-father, Mr. Saunders, “he [Mr. Saunders] would say, ‘This week I’ll spend five bob more in the pub – that’ll teach you, if beating wont’” (22). Echoing a terrible and soon absent home life, Moore’s Esther stands in direct comparison with Ruth, Lyndall, and Nelly, who are all represented as without close or loving family. This feeling of loneliness is only intensified when seventeen year old Esther is forced to take service, regardless of the character of her employers or what the place was like (23). The service she takes leads her to Woodview, a breeding ground for horses, horse betting, and horse racing, as well as home of William Latch.

Esther Waters, much like Ruth Hilton, possesses a sense of innocent ignorance at the outset of the novel, “One of these days a young man would come to take her out. What would he be like? She laughed the thought away. She did not think that any young man would bother much about her” (37). Shortly after laughing the thought away, William approaches Esther to inquire “Are you going for a walk?” (37) The two continue on a walk, and everything around them becomes beautiful for Esther, “the most insignificant objects – seemed inspired, seemed like symbols of her emotion” (39). The attraction to William that Esther feels is similar to the attraction Ruth feels for Mr. Bellingham. Young, ignorant, and alone, Esther clings to any form of attention or human interaction she can find.

After a horse race where almost everyone at Woodview wins their bets, a servants’ ball is given at the Shoreham Gardens (57). William, again, makes an advance towards Esther: “A song was demanded, and at the end of the second verse William threw his arm round Esther. “’Oh, Esther. I do love you’” (59). Like Ruth Hilton and Nelly Ambrose, Esther Waters is the subject of a man’s advances. William asserts his love for Esther, and though she is not convinced, he continues, “He squeezed her tightly, and continued his protestations. ‘I do, I do, I do love you,
Esther”” (59). The repetition of ‘I do’ emphasizes William’s desire. Like Bellingham and Mr. Arthur Grant, he uses his words rather than actions to express love. After a long night of dancing and drinking Esther begins to be receptive of William’s advances, “Her heart filled with love for her big William. What a fine fellow he was! How handsome were his shoulders!” (61). Esther falls prey to the advances of William, and soon enough, they become engaged. Moore does not explicitly state their sexual relations, but the moment is heavily implied:

They lay together in the warm valleys… William threw his around round her, whispering that she was his wife. The words were delicious in her fainting ears, and her will died in what seemed like irresistible destiny. She could not struggle with him, though she knew that her fate depended upon her resistance, and swooning away she awakened in pain, powerless to free herself. (62)

Esther’s inability to struggle with William represents her desire for love and companionship. Although she knows that her fate and livelihood depend on her resistance, she powerlessly concedes to William’s advances. Moore goes on to describe the great amount of beer consumed by everyone at the ball, as well as Esther’s hazy remembrance of sex with William (62).

Shortly after their sexual engagement, William begins to distance himself from Esther. At first, he feigns desire to marry: “I am very fond of you, Esther, and I will marry you as soon as I have earned enough or won enough money to give you a comfortable ‘ome” (64). Again, William verbalizes his motive to marry. His reliance on words rather than actions foreshadows his inability to commit, echoing the same empty promises that Mr. Bellingham made Ruth. The major difference between Ruth and Esther, though, comes in how they handle abandonment. William becomes engaged to Peggy, a girl of higher social status with a large inheritance, and Moore describes Esther’s reaction, “She went into the scullery, drew the door after her, sat down,
and hid her face in her apron. A stifled sob or two, and then she recovered her habitual gravity of expression, and continued her work as if nothing had happened” (70). This passage is the first of many to show Esther’s strength and resiliency in the face of abandonment and struggle.

William’s engagement to Peggy hurts Esther, but she stifles useless crying and pushes forward.

Through the narrator and use of free indirect discourse, we find out that Esther is with child and likely to lose her position at Woodview. After seven months of hiding her pregnancy, Esther finally confides in the gentle Mrs. Barfield. Upon hearing Esther’s news, she exclaims, “My Poor girl! My poor girl! You do not know what trial is in store for you. A girl like you, and only twenty!...Oh, it is a shame! May god give you courage to bear up in your adversity!’ (74).

Mrs. Barfield’s encouraging words echo those that the Bensons gave Ruth. Before dismissing her from her station, Mrs. Barfield tries to take some responsibility for Esther’s predicament, and sends her off with a letter of character and four pounds. The letter and money symbolize not only Mrs. Barfield’s good nature, but also the human capacity to help. Moore and Gaskell both turn towards community as an answer to the situation of single motherhood, but Moore does not place all of his hope on it as Gaskell does. Instead, he finds a good deal of the answer in Esther’s ability to overcome adversity and persevere in the trials to come.

After leaving Woodview, Esther returns to London, where her step-father makes her pay rent. She’s unable to stay at home for long, and soon she has to go out into the city alone with her child. Moore writes, “In these hours she realized in some measure the duties that life held in store, and it seemed to her that they exceeded her strength” (94). At first, the duties of life seem to exceed Esther’s strength. But through sheer will and determination, she makes do. Her first moment of happiness since her encounter with William comes after the birth of her child, Jackie, “She was happy, her babe lay beside her” (105). After the brief moment of happiness, though,
Esther is forced to find work and leave Jackie with the nurse, Mrs. Spires. After leaving him there for a brief while, Esther suddenly becomes uneasy and quits her job, heading straight Mrs. Spires. Moore reveals to the reader that Mrs. Spires is actually a baby farmer – taking children from young and abandoned single mothers for five pounds, and disposing of them for profit. In a rush of maternal instinct, Esther enters Mrs. Spires’ house and wrestles the baby from her, running off into the night with nowhere to go. After avoiding the workhouse at all costs, Esther finally finds work as a servant and expresses her joy at the opportunity to work 16 hours a day for 16 pounds a year, leaving her 3 pounds a year for herself after Jackie’s expenses (133).

Although Esther finds honest work, Moore foreshadows that there is still trouble to come for the dutiful mother, “Hers is an heroic adventure if one considers it – a mother’s fight for the life of her child against all the forces that civilization arrays against the lowly and the illegitimate. She is in a situation today, but on what security does she hold it?... three months out of a situation and she too would be on the street as a flower-seller, match-seller, or –“ (143). Moore’s language in this passage carefully portrays not only the trials Esther will face, but also the ferocious maternal instinct she possesses. Her fight is not for her own survival, but rather her child’s, and it is the forces of civilization that fight against her, not of individual persons. Moore’s choice of civilization rather than mankind or humanity suggests that the fault of Esther’s plight lies with the organization of a society which excludes its least fortunate members. The ‘or – ‘ that abruptly ends this passage is Moore’s way of hinting at the possibility of falling into prostitution, suggesting that the subject matter would be too delicate to put into words.

Multiple years pass and Esther continually changes stations in an attempt to support Jackie and herself. Esther confides in a possible employer, Miss Rice: “It is the child I’m thinking of. He was then a little baby and it didn’t matter; we was only there a few months.
There’s no one that knows of it but me. But he’s a growing boy now, he’ll remember the workhouse, and it will always be a disgrace” (153). Esther’s absolute unwillingness to reenter the workhouse suggests how bad the living conditions were. Only once had she entered, when Jackie was a babe, and now she would do anything to avoid it. We find out that in the time period between jobs, Esther has “declined an offer of marriage, and was rarely persuaded into a promise to walk out with any of her admirers” (154). Esther continues working and pressing forward in her tumultuous life, actively avoiding any male companionship.

One of the more prominent suitors in the novel is Fred Parsons, a soon-to-be retired businessman who belongs to the religious group of Plymouth Brethren. Fred is a more open-minded and gentle man than most of the other men in the novel. The meagre little man of about thirty-five expresses his desire to marry Esther, who explains that she had a child eight years prior (158). The news of Esther’s sex out of wedlock does not startle him, though, as he responds, “I did not mean to reproach you; I know that a woman’s path is more difficult to walk in than ours. It may not be a woman’s fault if she falls, but it is always a man’s. He can always fly from temptation” (158). Offering defense for the “fallen woman” here, Fred Parsons echoes the Captain from Margaret Harkness’ A City Girl. Fred’s defense of Esther and women in general elevates his character in the eyes of the reader. He not only shows admiration for Esther, but he also shows genuine empathy and understanding. His assertion that “it may not be a woman’s fault if she falls” alludes to the fault of “fallen women” lying with men. He also mentions that men can always fly from temptation – contrasting with Schreiner’s birdlike-imagery that describes Lyndall’s ability to soar (Schreiner, 137-38).

Esther soon accepts Fred Parson’s offer of marriage, and the two are engaged to be married in the spring, although upon its arrival, Esther moves the engagement back to autumn.
She also runs into William on the street for the first time since being forced to leave Woodview nearly eight years prior. William protests and tries to speak with Esther, but she furiously resists, “Her whole nature was now in full revolt, and quick with passionate remembrance of the injustice that had been done her, she drew back from him, her eyes flashing” (165). Moore utilizes an intense word choice in this passage to portray the defensive, survival instinct innate within Esther. After being abandoned for eight years Esther sees William’s presence as nothing but trouble, and she soon learns that his marriage with Peggy is falling apart. William, though, continuously presses in an attempt to gain favor with Esther. Unflinchingly, Esther at first refuses William’s advances but allows him to take their son Jackie out for an afternoon.

Now stuck at a crossroads between Fred Parsons and William, Esther is left with a difficult decision (197). Pondering the possibilities, “she fell asleep to a dream of a husband possessed of the qualities of both, and a life that was neither all chapel nor all public-house” (198). Esther eventually choose the more ‘natural-like’ route, as William is the father of her child (201). George Moore’s decision to send Esther back with William eight years after her abandonment is a curious one. In none of the three prior novels discussed have we seen an abandoned single mother who reconnects with the father of her child. Mr. Bellingham, Lyndall’s mystery man, and Arthur Grant all disappear from the plot with no possibility of returning. Only William Latch returns and attempts to win back the favor of Esther, suggesting that maybe there is a chance for redemption. That chance for redemption, though, implicates all three parties involved – Esther, William, and Jackie.

Shortly after moving in with William, Esther is thrown back into a life of public houses, drinking, and horse-betting. Moore tests the strength of her character by imposing new obstacles and threats to her livelihood. Although she now has a solid situation as the barmaid of her
husband’s public house, there is a still danger looming for Esther, who explains to William, “It is all the fault of this betting. The neighborhood is completely ruined. They’re losing their ‘omes and their furniture, and you’ll bear the blame of it” (263). Esther warns William of the innate danger in illegal horse-betting and drinking, trying to pull him away from both. William, though, is unable to be saved by Esther’s warnings. He soon falls ill, due to alcohol and tobacco, and is informed that he must travel to Egypt where the air is more tolerable. Esther stands loyally by his side and tries to dissuade him from giving up hope – she actually tells him to continue betting so they can afford the trip to Egypt. William gives faint protest and explains that he would rather die and leave his fifty pounds to Esther and Jackie (295). The concessions from both Esther and William represent a genuine and loving relationship. Both characters, despite prior desires, want the best for one another. Moore portrays their relationship as normal and tender to further our sympathies for Esther and her situation. Unlike Ruth’s Mr. Bellingham, we actually feel some sympathy for William who tries to shorten his own life for Esther and Jackie.

Esther ceaselessly battles William’s illness, nursing and taking care of him all on her own. She cannot bring herself to confide in Jackie, for fear that a sordid story would soil his childhood. Moore writes, “Though it would have been an inexpressible relief to her to have shared her trouble with her boy, she forced back her tears and courageously bore her cross alone, without once allowing its edge to touch him” (297). Esther’s selfless nature truly shines through in this passage, as Moore utilizes biblical allusions to represent the continual sacrifice Esther makes. She forces back her tears and courageously moves forward, just like when she had to maintain her composure at Woodview after her desertion by William.

William is eventually confined to his death-bed where Esther patiently tends to his needs. William confides in her, “I’m afraid I’ve not led a good life. I wouldn’t listen to you when you
used to tell me of the lot of harm the betting used to bring on the poor people what used to come to our place” (301). William’s admission of wrong here demonstrates Esther’s intelligence and wisdom. Upon entering William’s life again, she immediately warned him of the troubles that come with gambling and drinking. Although it took him until his death bed to admit wrong, he nonetheless does. Esther soon allows Jackie to come and see his father, too. William confides again, this time to Jackie, “I see it all clearly enough now. Your mother, Jack, is the best woman in the world. She loved you better than I did. She worked for you – that is a sad story. I hope you’ll never hear it” (307). William places Esther directly above him and praises her on his death bed. Neither Gaskell, Schreiner, nor Harkness portray the father of the single mother’s child in this light. Only Moore presents the reader with a regretful, apologetic, and belatedly honest man.

After spending seven years with Esther, William finally passes away. The remaining money that he did have was lost on a horse bet, and the remaining money Esther had was spent on the funeral and burial for William. Alone and without station, again, Esther travels back to Woodview – freed because her son Jackie is now a young man of fifteen. Upon arrival, Esther discovers Mrs. Barfield – the kind woman who had helped her, despite her “fall,” fifteen years prior. The two begin conversing, and Esther explains Jackie’s current situation, “It is sad to think he had to enlist. But, as he said, he couldn’t go on living on me any longer” (324). Jackie voluntarily enlists in the army to free his mother of the financial burden. Despite all of the obstacles and turmoil that Esther and Jackie undergo, Esther’s son is able to lead an honorable and decent life. The final paragraph of narration within Esther Waters reads, “She was only conscious that she had accomplished her woman’s work – she had brought him up to man’s estate, and that was her sufficient reward. What a fine fellow he was!” (326). Esther’s consciousness of accomplishing women’s work resonates with the reader. There is no glorious
ending to Esther’s story. She does not advance in station and nothing special or extraordinary happens to her, but her child survives and moves onward to honorable manhood. Unlike *Ruth, The Story of an African Farm*, or *A City Girl, Esther Waters* presents a late Victorian readership with a naturalist portrayal of a single mother and child who both survive, suggesting that the Victorian single mother is no longer seen as a “sinful” and “wretched” person, but rather a strong-willed, loving woman.
Conclusion

In Gaskell’s *Ruth*, Schreiner’s *The Story of an African Farm*, Harkness’s *A City Girl*, and Moore’s *Esther Waters* the central themes and messages are delivered through a single mother protagonist. All four of these single mothers belong to the lower class, and all four are involved with a man above their station. Through carefully investigating the portrayal and fate of each of these characters, I am able to arrive at my conclusion; literature of the Victorian era was utilized by reformist authors to portray the evolution in social perceptions of single mothers, suggesting that the answer to their plight is through community and a feeling of understanding.

The first of these novels, Gaskell’s *Ruth*, features an overly pure and ignorant protagonist, Ruth Hilton, who is helped tremendously by the Benson family. Ruth Hilton is ultimately killed at the closing of the novel, but her child lives on. In the next novel, Schreiner’s *The Story of an African Farm*, the protagonist Lyndall attempts to achieve her sexual desires as well as goals and ambitions as a New Woman. Lyndall attempts to do so in a completely independent way, allowing no one to help her, and ultimately this leads to her and her child’s death. In the third novel, Harkness’s *A City Girl*, the protagonist Nelly actively pursues her love interest, and consequently loses the baby at birth. Nelly receives help from the Salvation Army in her most desperate hour of need, and she does remain alive; she is able to redeem herself in marriage to a man of her station. The final novel, Moore’s *Esther Waters*, is driven by a strong, independent single mother, who receives only a little help from her first employer Mrs. Barfield. The protagonist overcomes a plethora of difficulties and adversities, eventually finding a secure job and maintaining life. Her child lives on as well and pursues a noble career in the military.
George Moore’s *Esther Waters* was highly touted and celebrated by literary critics of the time period such as Arthur Quiller-Couch, who wrote a glowing, laudatory review in the *Speaker* on 31 March 1894:

> In "Esther Waters" we have the most artistic, the most complete, and the most inevitable work of fiction that has been written in England for at least two years. Its plainness of speech may offend many. It may not be a favorite in the circulating libraries or on the bookstalls. But I shall be surprised if it fails of the place I predict for it in the esteem of those who know the true aims of fiction. (367)

The utter and complete praise that Couch gives Moore speaks volume to the success of *Esther Waters*. Couch’s decision to specifically point out the possibility of *Esther Waters* not being a favorite on the circulating library shelves suggests that the sensitivity of the novel still brought repercussions in certain literary circles.

The success of *Esther Waters* was not confined to the late Victorian era alone. Its afterlife expands not only to new editions, but to a stage version and film. Stephen Regen explains in his introduction to the Oxford edition of *Esther Waters*:

> George Bernard Shaw recommended the play to the stage society, and two performances took place at the Apollo Theatre, London, on 10-11 December 1911. *Esther Waters: A Play* was published by William Heinemann in London in 1913…The film was produced by Ian Dalrymple and Peter Proud in 1948…The novel has also twice been adapted for short television series, in 1964 and 1977” (xxxviii).
George Moore’s massive success in *Esther Waters* produced a multitude of reproductions, including plays, films, and TV series. The resounding echo that Moore left on society was felt not only in 19th-century England, but also 20th-century England and 20th-century North America.

While Moore’s novel garnered the most applause, respect, and attention, it is important to still look at the four novels discussed in this thesis together. In Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Ruth*, the heroine resists later advances from the father of her child, and Schreiner, Harkness, and Moore all portray their single mothers as having the agency to decline a marriage offer. It is also interesting to note that the only novel which features a single mother protagonist who does not receive any help or support from fellow community members is *The Story of an African Farm*, and that this novel is also the only work to present the reader with a dead child and dead mother. Ruth receives help from the Bensons; Nelly receives help from the Salvation Army, and Esther receives help from Mrs. Barfield. The stark contrast that Schreiner’s Lyndall stands in suggests that regardless of the strength, fortitude, or independence of an individual it is essential for fellow community members to reach out and help those less fortunate. These shifting portrayals reflect the contemporary evolution in literary modes, as didactic realism is succeeded by more naturalistic portrayals. In addition, a widening of media outlets in late 19th century permitted the expression of a greater range of literary sympathies, and the rise of the women’s movement and the expansion of the electorate shifted attention to the problems of ordinary life as desirable topics for literary analysis. As a result *Ruth, The Story of an African Farm, A City Girl, and Esther Waters* all chronicle with sympathy the fate of the single mother, and the last of these, George Moore’s *Esther Waters*, is even able to represent his protagonist as a heroic survivor.
Works Cited


