The Sexton’s Hero.

As the title suggests this story is an examination of heroism and what it means to be a hero.

‘The Sexton’s Hero’, published in William Howitt’s *Journal II* which Suzanne Lewis describes as ‘didactic, stodgy and short lived’, appeared in September 1847. This was seven years after Carlyle published his six lectures *On Heroes and Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History,*  and three years before a near neighbour of Gaskell’s suffered the tragic loss of a child while crossing Morecambe Bay*.*

On the day we will look at Gaskell’s sources for this story, one of which will be the misadventures suffered while crossing Morecambe Bay, of which there were many, despite the provision of guides, a service which began as early as the 16th century. One crossing point went from close to where the Gaskells spent many summer holidays after 1843-the Arnside/Silverdale area; another went from lower down the Lancashire Coast.

The second source will be an examination of Carlyle’s text, mentioned above and the Gospel of St John: ‘Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends’, in relation to Gaskell’s work. Suzanne Lewis, in her introduction to the Oxford edition of Gaskell’s *Moorland Cottage and other Stories*, explains that these works stood: ‘in intimate relation to Gaskell’s text, although never named’.

The main focus of the discussion will be on the concept of heroism in this story and in the nineteenth century as a whole.

It might help to think about the concepts in this short poem ‘The Hero’ by W H Auden from his series *The Quest* (c 1955)

**The Hero**He parried every question that they hurled:  
"What did the Emperor tell you?" "Not to push."  
"What is the greatest wonder of the world?"  
"The bare man Nothing in the Beggar's Bush."  
  
Some muttered: "He is cagey for effect.  
A hero owes a duty to his fame.  
He looks too like a grocer for respect."  
Soon they slipped back into his Christian name.  
  
The only difference that could be seen  
From those who'd never risked their lives at all  
Was his delight in details and routine:  
  
For he was always glad to mow the grass,  
Pour liquids from large bottles into small,  
Or look at clouds through bits of coloured glass.

**Some points to ponder:**

**1** This was a very early story, published a year before her first novel, *Mary Barton*; what do we see of Gaskell’s later themes and style in this work?

**2** Gaskell describes the Sexton’s Hero as ‘moral and sensible’ Would you agree?

**3** In his work *The Victorian Frame of Mind*, Walter Houghton avers that the era’s ‘…need for a Messiah is the central motivation of Carlyle’s *Heroes.* How might this story be relevant to the idea of a Messiah?

**4** What religious significance might the Sexton have? What other figures in literature might the Sexton bring to mind?

**5** How does Gaskell create tension and dramatic impact in the passage below?

So now you know where we were that awful night. For we'd crossed the first channel about two mile, and it were growing darker and darker above and around us, all but one red line of light above the hills, when we came to a hollow (for all the sands look so flat, there's many a hollow in them where you lose all sight of the shore). We were longer than we should ha' been in crossing the hollow, the sand was so quick; and when we came up again, there, again the blackness, was the white line of the rushing tide coming up the bay! It looked not a mile from us; and when the wind blows up the bay it comes swifter than a galloping horse. "Lord

help us" said I; and then I were sorry I'd spoken, to frighten Letty; but the words were crushed out of my heart by the terror. I felt her shiver up by my side, and clutch my coat. And as if the pig (as had screeched himself hoarse some time ago) had found out the danger we were all in, he took to squealing again, enough to bewilder any man. I cursed him between my teeth for his noise; and yet it was God's answer to my prayer, blind sinner as I was. Aye! you may smile, sir, but God can work through many a scornful thing, if need be.

"By this time the mare was all in a lather, and trembling and panting, as if in mortal fright; for though we were on the last bank afore the second channel, the water was gathering up her legs; and she so tired out! When we came close to the channel she stood still, and not all my flogging could get her to stir; she fairly groaned aloud, and shook in a terrible quaking way. Till now Letty had not spoken; only held my coat tightly. I heard her say something, and bent down my head.

""I think, John — I think — I shall never see baby again!"

"And then she sent up such a cry — so loud, and shrill, and pitiful! It faily maddened me. I pulled out my knife to spur on the old mare, that it might end one way or the other, for the water was stealing sullenly up to the very axle−tree, let alone the white waves that knew no mercy in their steady advance. That one quarter of an hour, sir, seemed as long as all my life since. Thoughts, and fancies, and dreams, and memory ran into each other. The mist, the heavy mist, that was like a ghastly curtain, shutting us in for death, seemed to bring with it the scents of flowers that grew around our own threshold; it might be, for it was falling on them like blessed dew, though to us

it was a shroud. Letty told me at after, she heard her baby crying for her, above the gurgling of the rising waters, as plain as ever she heard anything; but the sea−birds were skirling, and the pig shrieking; I never caught it; it was miles away, at any rate.

"Just as I'd gotten my knife out, another sound was close upon us, blending with the gurgle of the near waters, and the roar of the distant (not so distant though); we could hardly see, but we thought we saw something black against the deep lead colour of wave, and mist, and sky. It neared and neared: with slow, steady motion, it came across the channel right to where we were.

"Oh, God! it was Gilbert Dawson on his strong bay horse.

"Few words did we speak, and little time had we to say them in. I had no knowledge at that moment of past or future — only of one present thought — how to save Letty, and, if I could, myself. I only remembered afterwards that Gilbert said he had been guided by an animal's shriek of terror; I only heard, when all was over, that he had been uneasy about out return, because of the depth of fresh, and borrowed a pillion, and saddled his horse early in the evening, and ridden down to Cart Lane to watch for us. If all had gone well, we should ne'er have heard of it. As it was, old Jonas told it, the tears down−dropping from his withered cheeks.

"We fastened his horse to the shandry. We lifted Letty to the pillion. The waters rose every instant with sullen sound. They were all but in the shandry. Letty clung to the pillion handles, but drooped her head as if she had yet no hope of life. Swifter than thought (and yet he might have had time for thought and for temptation, sir — if he had ridden off with Letty, he would have been saved, not me), Gilbert was in the shandry by my side. "

"Quick!" said he, clear and firm. "You must ride before her, and keep her up. The horse can swim. By God's mercy I will follow. I can cut the traces, and if the mare is not hampered with the shandry, she'll carry me safely through. At any rate, you are a husband and a father. No one cares for me."

**6** Why does the Sexton ask his listeners not to hate him: *‘Do not hate me, gentlemen. I often wish that night was a dream. It has haunted my sleep ever since like a dream, and yet it was no dream’?*

7 Why do you think Gaskell removed the women from the end of this story? What effect does that have on the narrative?

**8**

"How would you then define a hero?" I asked….

"My idea of a hero is one who acts up to the highest idea of duty he has been able to form, no matter at what sacrifice. I think that by this definition we may include all phases of character, even to the heroes of old, whose sole (and to us, low) idea of duty consisted in personal prowess."

"Then you would even admit the military heroes?" asked I.

"I would; with a certain kind of pity for the circumstances which had given them no higher ideas of duty. Still, if they sacrificed self to do what they sincerely believed to be right. I do not think I could deny them the title of hero."

"A poor, unchristian heroism, whose manifestation consists in injury to others!" I said.

We were both startled by a third voice.

"If I might make so bold, sir" — and then the speaker stopped.

How does the Sexton’s story support or undercut this discussion on heroes and heroism?

**9**- Suzanne Lewis describes Howitt’s *Journal* as didactic and stodgy, do you read Gaskell’s story in this way?