

Points to Ponder for October 2022-*Wives and Daughters*.

This is an extract from a letter to Marianne containing advice to Herbert Grey about novel writing (March 1859). Note her comments about objects and not feelings. She goes on to talk about the need for a good plot and restricted conversation. This letter is interesting to read and is available on line. It is worth considering how, or perhaps if, she practices this advice in her own writing.

impatience.  
But I believe in spite of yr objection to the term 'novel' you do wish to 'narrate,'—and I believe you can do it if you try,—but I think you must observe what is *out* of you, instead of examining what is *in* you. It is always an unhealthy sign when we are too conscious of any of the physical processes that go on within {y} us; & I believe in like manner that we ought not to be too cognizant of our mental proceedings, only taking note of the results. But certainly—whether **introspection** be morbid or not,—it is not\ a/ safe {for a nov} training for a novelist. It is a weakening of the art which has crept in of late years. Just read a few pages of De Foe &c—and you will see the healthy way in which he sets *objects* not *feelings* before you. I am sure the right way is this. You are an Electric telegraph something or other,—

*Wives and Daughters* begins before the Reform Act of 1832 and before the railways arrived in Hollingford (Knutsford, after a fashion). This period would match that of Elizabeth's youth in Cheshire. Below is the opening paragraph from *Wives and Daughters*, which has been criticised by some as a poor opening to the novel.

**1 Why do you think ECG opens the text in this way?**

To begin with the old rigmorole of childhood. In a country there was a shire, and in that shire there was a town, and in that town there was a house, and in that house there was a room, and in that room there was a bed, and in that bed there lay a little girl; wide awake and longing to get up, but not daring to do so for fear of the unseen power in the next room—a certain Betty, whose slumbers must not be disturbed until six o'clock struck, when she wakened of herself "as sure as clockwork," and left the household very little peace afterwards. It was a June morning, and early as it was, the room was full of sunny warmth and light.

**2 Why does Elizabeth spend so long on her descriptions of life at 'The Towers' and the characters of the Earl and Countess? Some extracts copied below. How does ECG make these portraits humorous?**

**3 In what ways does she level some criticism without being directly censorious of these land owners?**

**You may be interested to note that Elizabeth herself was a visitor at the industrial school in Swinton (City of Salford)**

Lord and Lady Cumnor: "the earl" and "the countess," as they were always called by the inhabitants of the town; where a very pretty amount of feudal feeling still lingered, and showed itself in a number of simple ways, droll enough to look back upon, but serious matters of importance at the time.

Lord Cumnor had certainly a little time for gossip, which he contrived to combine with the failing of personal intervention between the old land-steward and the tenantry. But, then, the countess made up by her unapproachable dignity for this weakness of the earl's. Once a year she was condescending. She and the ladies, her daughters, had set up a school; not a school after the manner of schools now-a-days, where far better intellectual teaching is given to the boys and girls of labourers and work-people than often falls to the lot of their betters in worldly estate; but a school of the kind we should call "industrial," where girls are taught to sew beautifully, to be capital housemaids, and pretty fair cooks, and, above all, to dress neatly in a kind of charity uniform devised by the ladies of Cumnor Towers;—white caps, white tippetts, check aprons, blue gowns, and ready curtseys, and "please, ma'ams," being *de rigueur*.

**4 What impressions of the text do we take away from Chapter 1?**

**5 How is Molly presented in the passage below and in the opening chapters of the novel. How is this important to the story?**

Molly held Miss Browning's hand very tight as they loitered about in company with several other ladies, and marshalled by a daughter of the Towers, who seemed half amused at the voluble admiration showered down upon every possible thing and place. Molly said nothing, as became her age and position, but every now and then she relieved her full heart by drawing a deep breath, almost like a sigh. Presently they came to the long glittering range of greenhouses and hothouses, and an attendant gardener was there to admit the party. Molly did not care for this half so much as for the flowers in the open air; but Lady Agnes had a more scientific taste, she expatiated on the rarity of this plant, and the mode of cultivation required by that, till Molly began to feel very tired, and then very faint. She was too shy to speak for some time; but at length, afraid of making a greater sensation if she began to cry, or if she fell against the stands of precious flowers, she caught at Miss Browning's hand, and gasped out—

"May I go back, out into the garden? I can't breathe here!"

"Oh, yes, to be sure, love. I daresay it's hard understanding for you, love; but it's very fine and instructive, and a deal of Latin in it too."

**6 What does the passage below tell us about the characters? Gaskell chooses the way of presenting her sentences very carefully. How does the positioning of sentences and use of specific vocabulary guide the readers' views on these characters? Look particularly at the highlighted sentences.**

Mrs. Kirkpatrick came **gliding up to** the place where Molly stood; and began petting her with pretty words and actions, while Lady Cuxhaven **turned over heavy volumes** in search of one that might interest the girl.

"Poor darling! I saw you come into the dining-room, looking so shy; and I wanted you to come near me, but I could not make a sign to you, because Lord Cuxhaven was speaking to me at the time, telling me about his travels. Ah, here is a nice book—*Lodge's Portraits*; now I'll sit by you and tell you who they all are, and all about them. **Don't trouble yourself any more, dear Lady Cuxhaven; I'll take charge of her; pray leave her to me!**"

**Molly grew hotter and hotter as these last words met her ear.** If they would only leave her alone, and not labour at being kind to her; would "not trouble themselves" about her! These words of Mrs. Kirkpatrick's seemed to quench the gratitude she was feeling to Lady Cuxhaven for looking for something to amuse her. But, of course, it was a trouble, and she ought never to have been there.

**7 Below is an example of Gaskell's advice on writing. What is your opinion of the effect of not explaining feelings?**

"You must go and wish Lady Cumnor good-night, you know, my dear, and thank her ladyship for her kindness to you. She is there, near that statue, talking to Mr. Courtenay."

**Yes! she was there—forty feet away—a hundred miles away! All that blank space had to be crossed; and then a speech to be made!**

**8 What are your views on Dr Gibson's instructions to the governess? ( see passage below).**

"Now, Miss Eyre," said he, summing up his instructions the day before she entered upon her office, "remember this: you are to make good tea for the young men, and see that they have their meals comfortably, and—you are five-and-thirty, I think you said?—try and make them talk,—rationally, I am afraid is beyond your or anybody's power; but make them talk without stammering or giggling. Don't teach Molly too much: she must sew, and read, and write, and do her sums; but I want to keep her a child, and if I find more learning desirable for her, I'll see about giving it to her myself. After all, I'm not sure that reading or writing is necessary. Many a good woman gets married with only a cross instead of her name; it's rather a diluting of mother-wit, to my fancy; but, however, we must yield to the prejudices of society, Miss Eyre, and so you may teach the child to read."

**9 Below is an interesting take on a comment made by EG's uncle, Dr. Peter Holland, whose front door opened onto the graveyard in Knutsford . He allegedly said it was so he could keep his eye on his patients. What are our impressions of Dr. Gibson from these early chapters?**

Mr. Gibson used to tell Mr. Coxe that his motto would always be "kill or cure," ...the best motto a doctor could have; for if he could not cure the patient, it was surely best to get him out of his misery quietly, and at once...Mr. Gibson said in a dry tone, that for his part he should not mind the imputation of homicide, but that it would not do to make away with profitable patients in so speedy a manner; and that he thought that as long as they were willing and able to pay two-and-sixpence for the doctor's visit, it was his duty to keep them alive; of course, when they became paupers the case was different.

**10 Why does EG bring up the idea of Dr Gibson's past love-Jeannie? How does the introduction of Mr Coxe affect our perceptions of Molly and in what ways is this important to the story?**

**11 Furniture is an important indicator of class and character in this novel. Looking at our introduction to Hamley Hall in chapter 6 - what does the furniture and decoration tell us about the characters? This is also important in the next section when Mrs Gibson changes the Gibson's furniture.**

**12 Why does EG describe Molly in this way? Does this remind you of any other Victorian heroine?**

She looked at herself in the glass with some anxiety, for the first time in her life. She saw a slight, lean figure, promising to be tall; a complexion browner than cream-coloured, although in a year or two it might have that tint; plentiful curly black hair, tied up in a bunch behind with a rose-coloured ribbon; long, almond-shaped, soft gray eyes, shaded both above and below by curling black eyelashes.

**13 What about the introduction of the Brownings-do they remind you of anyone and how have they been modified?**

**14 What does this tell us about Clare?**

Yes, Clare would do very well," said Lady Cumnor; "but isn't it her school-time or something? We must not interfere with her school so as to injure her, for I am afraid she is not doing too well as it is; and she has been so very unlucky ever since she left us—first her husband died, and then she lost Lady Davies' situation, and then Mrs. Maude's, and now Mr. Preston told your father it was all she could do to pay her way in Ashcombe, though Lord Cumnor lets her have the house rent-free."

"I can't think how it is," said Lady Harriet. "She's not very wise, certainly; but she is so useful and agreeable, and has such pleasant manners, I should have thought any one who wasn't particular about education would have been charmed to keep her as a governess."

"What do you mean by not being particular about education? Most people who keep governesses for their children are supposed to be particular," said Lady Cuxhaven.

"Well, they think themselves so, I've no doubt; but I call you particular, Mary, and I don't think mamma was; but she thought herself so, I'm sure."

Now it would be difficult to say which of Lady Cumnor's two hearers was the most dismayed at the idea which had taken possession of her. Mrs. Kirkpatrick had no fancy for being encumbered with a step-daughter before her time. If Molly came to be an inmate of her house, farewell to many little background economies, and a still more serious farewell to many little indulgences, that were innocent enough in themselves, but which Mrs. Kirkpatrick's former life had caused her to look upon as sins to be concealed: the dirty dog's-eared delightful novel from the Ashcombe circulating library, the leaves of which she turned over with a pair of scissors; the lounging-chair which she had for use at her own home, straight and upright as she sate now in Lady Cumnor's presence; the dainty morsel, savoury and small, to which she treated herself for her own solitary supper,—all these and many other similarly pleasant things would have to be foregone if Molly came to be her pupil, parlour-boarder, or visitor, as Lady Cumnor was planning. One—two things Clare was instinctively resolved upon: to be married at Michaelmas, and not to have Molly at Ashcombe. But she smiled as sweetly as if the plan proposed was the most charming project in the world, while all the time her poor brains were beating about in every bush for the reasons or excuses of which she should make use at some future time.

Mrs. Kirkpatrick fondled the hand thus placed in hers, and was grateful to the girl for her outspoken opposition to Lady Cumnor's plan. Clare was, however, exceedingly unwilling to back up Molly by any words of her own until Lady Cumnor had spoken and given the cue. But there was something in Molly's little speech, or in her straightforward manner, that amused instead of irritating Lady Cumnor in her present mood. Perhaps she was tired of the silkiness with which she had been shut up for so many days.