

Sylvia's Lovers-Points to Ponder Session 6

Sylvia's Lovers is one of Elizabeth Gaskell's stories, perhaps their culmination, which show a young woman caught up in large historical events and processes that alter the course of her life, usually for the worse, and over which she has no control. Lois the witch, Phillis and Mary Barton all belong to this group, and so too does Margaret Hale, whose calmly ordered life is changed by nineteenth-century religious controversies, and then by the impact of the industrial revolution. History comes to these young women through men, usually fathers. Daniel Robson and Mr Hale are examples of this. Margaret, middle-class and well educated, is equal to the challenge but Sylvia, Lois and Phillis are passive and what benefit comes from their experience is hard won through endurance and resignation rather than triumph. –Marion Shaw 'Give me Sylvia or I Die' 1st paragraph.

What is the role of the Acre chapters? What, if anything, do they add to the story?

Some critics see them as superfluous, especially when the final volume was already too long—what is your opinion?

Sylvia says she will not forgive or forget what Philip has done. How far does Sylvia stand by this promise?

How does ECG present heroism in these final chapters? In what way is it similar to or different from the heroism presented at the start of the story?

By the end of the story (vol. 3) how do you view Philip and Charlie? Has your view change from the earlier volumes?

ECG was going to call this story 'Philip's Idol', which title best represents the text?

Jenny Uglow describes *SL* as 'unique, exciting and disturbing', what are your views?

'With its themes of suffering, unrequited love, and the clash between desire and duty, *Sylvia's Lovers* is one of the most powerfully moving of all Gaskell's novels reputedly described by the author as the saddest story I ever wrote' (Shirley Foster). What are your views?

'Gaskell's novel, richly engages with the legacy of the Brontë sisters', from a, OUP Introduction to the text. How far do you agree?

'The novel is a modern revenge tragedy in which well-intentioned actions have unforeseen and terrible human consequences'. (Oxford University Press)

The smallness of Sylvia's world is countered by the delicacy, the intensity, and the imaginative power with which Mrs Gaskell observes it.

Andrew Sanders comments that 'many...readers have felt that the real triumphs of the novel lie not in its resolution, but in its first 29 chapters which A W Ward describes as "the best thing Mrs Gaskell had ever done"' These comments refer to the

Jenny Uglow states '*SL* is a novel of longing for the irretrievable, in which energy and zest are slowly undermined and then destroyed'. How far do you agree?