Session 3

Comparisons between Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot using 'The Moorland Cottage' and The Mill on the Floss.

In Session 3 we look at the portrayal of sisters in both George Eliot and Elizabeth Gaskell. Extracts 1, 2, and 3 portray the Dodson Sisters - Mrs Gleg, Mrs Pullet, and Mrs Tulliver from *The Mill on the Floss*. The second set of extracts is from *Wives and Daughters* and the two passages explore the relationship between the Browning sisters and other members of society. We need to consider how these sisters are presented by their respective authors and decide if there is any similarity or differences in their presentation.

The Mill on the Floss

Extract 1

The Miss Dodsons had always been thought to hold up their heads very high, and no one was surprised the two eldest had married so well,—not at an early age, for that was not the practice of the Dodson family. There were particular ways of doing everything in that family: particular ways of bleaching the linen, of making the cowslip wine, curing the hams, and keeping the bottled gooseberries; so that no daughter of that house could be indifferent to the privilege of having been born a Dodson, rather than a Gibson or a Watson. Funerals were always conducted with peculiar propriety in the Dodson family: the hat-bands were never of a blue shade, the gloves never split at the thumb, everybody was a mourner who ought to be, and there were always scarfs for the bearers. When one of the family was in trouble or sickness, all the rest went to visit the unfortunate member, usually at the same time, and did not shrink from uttering the most disagreeable truths that correct family feeling dictated; if the illness or trouble was the sufferer's own fault, it was not in the practice of the Dodson family to shrink from saying so. In short, there was in this family a peculiar tradition as to what was the right thing in household management and social demeanour, and the only bitter circumstance attending this superiority was a painful inability to approve the condiments or the conduct of families ungoverned by the Dodson tradition. A female Dodson, when in "strange houses," always ate dry bread with her tea, and declined any sort of preserves, having no confidence in the butter, and thinking that the preserves had probably begun to ferment from want of due sugar and boiling. There were some Dodsons less like the family than others, that was admitted; but in so far as they were "kin," they were of necessity better than those who were "no kin." And it is remarkable that while no individual Dodson was satisfied with any other individual Dodson, each was satisfied, not only with him or herself, but with the Dodsons collectively. The feeblest member of a family—the one who has the least character—is often the merest epitome of the family habits and traditions; and Mrs Tulliver was a thorough Dodson, though a mild one, as small-beer, so long as it is anything, is only describable as very weak ale: and though she had groaned a little in her youth under the yoke of her elder sisters, and still shed occasional tears at their sisterly reproaches, it was not in Mrs Tulliver to be an innovator on the family ideas. She was thankful to have been a Dodson, and to have one child who took after her own family, at least in his features and complexion, in liking salt and in eating beans, which a Tulliver never did.

Extract 2

Enter the Aunts and Uncles

The Dodsons were certainly a handsome family, and Mrs Glegg was not the least handsome of the sisters. As she sat in Mrs Tulliver's arm-chair, no impartial observer could have denied that for a woman of fifty she had a very comely face and figure, though Tom and Maggie considered their aunt Glegg as the type of ugliness. It is true she despised the advantages of costume, for though, as she often observed, no woman had better clothes, it was not her way to wear her new things out before her old ones. Other women, if they liked, might have their best thread-lace in every wash; but when Mrs Glegg died, it would be found that she had better lace laid by in the right-hand drawer of her wardrobe in the Spotted Chamber than ever Mrs Wooll of St Ogg's had bought in her life, although Mrs Wooll wore her lace before it was paid for. So of her curled fronts: Mrs Glegg had doubtless the glossiest and crispest brown curls in her drawers, as well as curls in various degrees of fuzzy laxness; but to look out on the week-day world from under a crisp and glossy front would be to introduce a most dreamlike

and unpleasant confusion between the sacred and the secular. Occasionally, indeed, Mrs Glegg wore one of her third-best fronts on a week-day visit, but not at a sister's house; especially not at Mrs Tulliver's, who, since her marriage, had hurt her sister's feelings greatly by wearing her own hair, though, as Mrs Glegg observed to Mrs Deane, a mother of a family, like Bessy, with a husband always going to law, might have been expected to know better. But Bessy was always weak!

So if Mrs Glegg's front to-day was more fuzzy and lax than usual, she had a design under it: she intended the most pointed and cutting allusion to Mrs Tulliver's bunches of blond curls, separated from each other by a due wave of smoothness on each side of the parting. Mrs Tulliver had shed tears several times at sister Glegg's unkindness on the subject of these unmatronly curls, but the consciousness of looking the handsomer for them naturally administered support. Mrs Glegg chose to wear her bonnet in the house to-day,—untied and tilted slightly, of course—a frequent practice of hers when she was on a visit, and happened to be in a severe humour: she didn't know what draughts there might be in strange houses. For the same reason she wore a small sable tippet, which reached just to her shoulders, and was very far from meeting across her well-formed chest, while her long neck was protected by a chevaux-de-frise of miscellaneous frilling. One would need to be learned in the fashions of those times to know how far in the rear of them Mrs Glegg's slate-coloured silk gown must have been; but from certain constellations of small yellow spots upon it, and a mouldy odor about it suggestive of a damp clothes-chest, it was probable that it belonged to a stratum of garments just old enough to have come recently into wear.

Mrs Glegg held her large gold watch in her hand with the many-doubled chain round her fingers, and observed to Mrs Tulliver, who had just returned from a visit to the kitchen, that whatever it might be by other people's clocks and watches, it was gone half-past twelve by hers.

"I don't know what ails sister Pullet," she continued. "It used to be the way in our family for one to be as early as another,—I'm sure it was so in my poor father's time,—and not for one sister to sit half an hour before the others came. But if the ways o' the family are altered, it sha'n't be my fault; I'll never be the one to come into a house when all the rest are going away. I wonder at sister Deane,—she used to be more like me. But if you'll take my advice, Bessy, you'll put the dinner forrard a bit, sooner than put it back, because folks are late as ought to ha' known better."

"Oh dear, there's no fear but what they'll be all here in time, sister," said Mrs Tulliver, in her mild-peevish tone. "The dinner won't be ready till half-past one. But if it's long for you to wait, let me fetch you a cheesecake and a glass o' wine."

"Well, Bessy!" said Mrs Glegg, with a bitter smile and a scarcely perceptible toss of her head, "I should ha' thought you'd known your own sister better. I never did eat between meals, and I'm not going to begin. Not but what I hate that nonsense of having your dinner at half-past one, when you might have it at one. You was never brought up in that way, Bessy."

"Why, Jane, what can I do? Mr Tulliver doesn't like his dinner before two o'clock, but I put it half an hour earlier because o' you."

"Yes, yes, I know how it is with husbands,—they're for putting everything off; they'll put the dinner off till after tea, if they've got wives as are weak enough to give in to such work; but it's a pity for you, Bessy, as you haven't got more strength o' mind. It'll be well if your children don't suffer for it. And I hope you've not gone and got a great dinner for us,—going to expense for your sisters, as 'ud sooner eat a crust o' dry bread nor help to ruin you with extravagance. I wonder you don't take pattern by your sister Deane; she's far more sensible. And here you've got two children to provide for, and your husband's spent your fortin i' going to law, and's likely to spend his own too. A boiled joint, as you could make broth of for the kitchen," Mrs Glegg added, in a tone of emphatic protest, "and a plain pudding, with a spoonful o' sugar, and no spice, 'ud be far more becoming."

With sister Glegg in this humour, there was a cheerful prospect for the day. Mrs Tulliver never went the length of quarrelling with her, any more than a water-fowl that puts out its leg in a deprecating manner can be said to quarrel with a boy who throws stones. But this point of the dinner was a tender one, and not at all new, so that Mrs Tulliver could make the same answer she had often made before.

"Mr Tulliver says he always will have a good dinner for his friends while he can pay for it," she said; "and he's a right to do as he likes in his own house, sister."

"Well, Bessy, I can't leave your children enough out o' my savings to keep 'em from ruin. And you mustn't look to having any o' Mr Glegg's money, for it's well if I don't go first,—he comes of a long-lived family; and if he was to die and leave me well for my life, he'd tie all the money up to go back to his own kin."

The sound of wheels while Mrs Glegg was speaking was an interruption highly welcome to Mrs Tulliver, who hastened out to receive sister Pullet; it must be sister Pullet, because the sound was that of a four-wheel.

Mrs Glegg tossed her head and looked rather sour about the mouth at the thought of the "four-wheel." She had a strong opinion on that subject.

Sister Pullet was in tears when the one-horse chaise stopped before Mrs Tulliver's door, and it was apparently requisite that she should shed a few more before getting out; for though her husband and Mrs Tulliver stood ready to support her, she sat still and shook her head sadly, as she looked through her tears at the vague distance.

"Why, whativer is the matter, sister?" said Mrs Tulliver. She was not an imaginative woman, but it occurred to her that the large toilet-glass in sister Pullet's best bedroom was possibly broken for the second time.

There was no reply but a further shake of the head, as Mrs Pullet slowly rose and got down from the chaise, not without casting a glance at Mr Pullet to see that he was guarding her handsome silk dress from injury. Mr Pullet was a small man, with a high nose, small twinkling eyes, and thin lips, in a fresh-looking suit of black and a white cravat, that seemed to have been tied very tight on some higher principle than that of mere personal ease. He bore about the same relation to his tall, good-looking wife, with her balloon sleeves, abundant mantle, and a large befeathered and beribboned bonnet, as a small fishing-smack bears to a brig with all its sails spread.

It is a pathetic sight and a striking example of the complexity introduced into the emotions by a high state of civilisation, the sight of a fashionably dressed female in grief. From the sorrow of a Hottentot to that of a woman in large buckram sleeves, with several bracelets on each arm, an architectural bonnet, and delicate ribbon strings, what a long series of gradations! In the enlightened child of civilisation the abandonment characteristic of grief is checked and varied in the subtlest manner, so as to present an interesting problem to the analytic mind. If, with a crushed heart and eyes half blinded by the mist of tears, she were to walk with a too devious step through a door-place, she might crush her buckram sleeves too, and the deep consciousness of this possibility produces a composition of forces by which she takes a line that just clears the door-post. Perceiving that the tears are hurrying fast, she unpins her strings and throws them languidly backward, a touching gesture, indicative, even in the deepest gloom, of the hope in future dry moments when cap-strings will once more have a charm. As the tears subside a little, and with her head leaning backward at the angle that will not injure her bonnet, she endures that terrible moment when grief, which has made all things else a weariness, has itself become weary; she looks down pensively at her bracelets, and adjusts their clasps with that pretty studied fortuity which would be gratifying to her mind if it were once more in a calm and healthy state.

Mrs Pullet brushed each door-post with great nicety, about the latitude of her shoulders (at that period a woman was truly ridiculous to an instructed eye if she did not measure a yard and a half across the shoulders), and having done that sent the muscles of her face in quest of fresh tears as she advanced into the parlour where Mrs Glegg was seated.

"Well, sister, you're late; what's the matter?" said Mrs Glegg, rather sharply, as they shook hands.

Mrs Pullet sat down, lifting up her mantle carefully behind, before she answered,—

"She's gone," unconsciously using an impressive figure of rhetoric.

"It isn't the glass this time, then," thought Mrs Tulliver.

"Died the day before yesterday," continued Mrs Pullet; "an' her legs was as thick as my body," she added, with deep sadness, after a pause. "They'd tapped her no end o' times, and the water—they say you might ha' swum in it, if you'd liked."

"Well, Sophy, it's a mercy she's gone, then, whoever she may be," said Mrs Glegg, with the promptitude and emphasis of a mind naturally clear and decided; "but I can't think who you're talking of, for my part."

"But I know," said Mrs Pullet, sighing and shaking her head; "and there isn't another such a dropsy in the parish. I know as it's old Mrs Sutton o' the Twentylands."

"Well, she's no kin o' yours, nor much acquaintance as I've ever heared of," said Mrs Glegg, who always cried just as much as was proper when anything happened to her own "kin," but not on other occasions.

"She's so much acquaintance as I've seen her legs when they was like bladders. And an old lady as had doubled her money over and over again, and kept it all in her own management to the last, and had her pocket with her keys in under her pillow constant. There isn't many old parish'ners like her, I doubt."

"And they say she'd took as much physic as 'ud fill a wagon," observed Mr Pullet.

"Ah!" sighed Mrs Pullet, "she'd another complaint ever so many years before she had the dropsy, and the doctors couldn't make out what it was. And she said to me, when I went to see her last Christmas, she said, 'Mrs Pullet, if ever you have the dropsy, you'll think o' me.' She did say so," added Mrs Pullet, beginning to cry bitterly again; "those were her very words. And she's to be buried o' Saturday, and Pullet's bid to the funeral."

"Sophy," said Mrs Glegg, unable any longer to contain her spirit of rational remonstrance,—"Sophy, I wonder at you, fretting and injuring your health about people as don't belong to you. Your poor father never did so, nor your aunt Frances neither, nor any o' the family as I ever heard of. You couldn't fret no more than

this, if we'd heared as our cousin Abbott had died sudden without making his will."

Mrs Pullet was silent, having to finish her crying, and rather flattered than indignant at being upbraided for crying too much. It was not everybody who could afford to cry so much about their neighbours who had left them nothing; but Mrs Pullet had married a gentleman farmer, and had leisure and money to carry her crying and everything else to the highest pitch of respectability.

"Mrs Sutton didn't die without making her will, though," said Mr Pullet, with a confused sense that he was saying something to sanction his wife's tears; "ours is a rich parish, but they say there's nobody else to leave as many thousands behind 'em as Mrs Sutton. And she's left no leggicies to speak on,—left it all in a lump to her husband's nevvy."

"There wasn't much good i' being so rich, then," said Mrs Glegg, "if she'd got none but husband's kin to leave it to. It's poor work when that's all you've got to pinch yourself for. Not as I'm one o' those as 'ud like to die without leaving more money out at interest than other folks had reckoned; but it's a poor tale when it must go out o' your own family."

"I'm sure, sister," said Mrs Pullet, who had recovered sufficiently to take off her veil and fold it carefully, "it's a nice sort o' man as Mrs Sutton has left her money to, for he's troubled with the asthmy, and goes to bed every night at eight o'clock. He told me about it himself—as free as could be—one Sunday when he came to our church. He wears a hareskin on his chest, and has a trembling in his talk,—quite a gentleman sort o' man. I told him there wasn't many months in the year as I wasn't under the doctor's hands. And he said, 'Mrs Pullet, I can feel for you.' That was what he said,—the very words. Ah!" sighed Mrs Pullet, shaking her head at the idea that there were but few who could enter fully into her experiences in pink mixture and white mixture, strong stuff in small bottles, and weak stuff in large bottles, damp boluses at a shilling, and draughts at eighteenpence. "Sister, I may as well go and take my bonnet off now. Did you see as the cap-box was put out?" she added, turning to her husband.

Mr Pullet, by an unaccountable lapse of memory, had forgotten it, and hastened out, with a stricken conscience, to remedy the omission.

"They'll bring it upstairs, sister," said Mrs Tulliver, wishing to go at once, lest Mrs Glegg should begin to explain her feelings about Sophy's being the first Dodson who ever ruined her constitution with doctor's stuff.

Extract 3

There was one evening-cloud which had always disappeared from Mrs Glegg's brow when she sat at the breakfast-table. It was her fuzzy front of curls; for as she occupied herself in household matters in the morning it would have been a mere extravagance to put on anything so superfluous to the making of leathery pastry as a fuzzy curled front. By half-past ten decorum demanded the front; until then Mrs Glegg could economise it, and society would never be any the wiser. But the absence of that cloud only left it more apparent that the cloud of severity remained; and Mr Glegg, perceiving this, as he sat down to his milkporridge, which it was his old frugal habit to stem his morning hunger with, prudently resolved to leave the first remark to Mrs Glegg, lest, to so delicate an article as a lady's temper, the slightest touch should do mischief. People who seem to enjoy their ill temper have a way of keeping it in fine condition by inflicting privations on themselves. That was Mrs Glegg's way. She made her tea weaker than usual this morning, and declined butter. It was a hard case that a vigorous mood for quarrelling, so highly capable of using an opportunity, should not meet with a single remark from Mr Glegg on which to exercise itself. But by and by it appeared that his silence would answer the purpose, for he heard himself apostrophised at last in that tone peculiar to the wife of one's bosom.

"Well, Mr Glegg! it's a poor return I get for making you the wife I've made you all these years. If this is the way I'm to be treated, I'd better ha' known it before my poor father died, and then, when I'd wanted a home, I should ha' gone elsewhere, as the choice was offered me."

Mr Glegg paused from his porridge and looked up, not with any new amazement, but simply with that quiet, habitual wonder with which we regard constant mysteries.

"Why, Mrs G., what have I done now?"

"Done now, Mr Glegg? done now?—I'm sorry for you."

Not seeing his way to any pertinent answer, Mr Glegg reverted to his porridge.

"There's husbands in the world," continued Mrs Glegg, after a pause, "as 'ud have known how to do something different to siding with everybody else against their own wives. Perhaps I'm wrong and you can teach me better. But I've allays heard as it's the husband's place to stand by the wife, instead o' rejoicing and triumphing when folks insult her."

"Now, what call have you to say that?" said Mr Glegg, rather warmly, for though a kind man, he was not as meek as Moses. "When did I rejoice or triumph over you?"

"There's ways o' doing things worse than speaking out plain, Mr Glegg. I'd sooner you'd tell me to my face as you make light of me, than try to make out as everybody's in the right but me, and come to your breakfast in the morning, as I've hardly slept an hour this night, and sulk at me as if I was the dirt under your feet."

"Sulk at you?" said Mr Glegg, in a tone of angry facetiousness. "You're like a tipsy man as thinks everybody's had too much but himself."

"Don't lower yourself with using coarse language to me, Mr Glegg! It makes you look very small, though you can't see yourself," said Mrs Glegg, in a tone of energetic compassion. "A man in your place should set an example, and talk more sensible."

"Yes; but will you listen to sense?" retorted Mr Glegg, sharply. "The best sense I can talk to you is what I said last night,—as you're i' the wrong to think o' calling in your money, when it's safe enough if you'd let it alone, all because of a bit of a tiff, and I was in hopes you'd ha' altered your mind this morning. But if you'd like to call it in, don't do it in a hurry now, and breed more enmity in the family, but wait till there's a pretty mortgage to be had without any trouble. You'd have to set the lawyer to work now to find an investment, and make no end o' expense."

Mrs Glegg felt there was really something in this, but she tossed her head and emitted a guttural interjection to indicate that her silence was only an armistice, not a peace. And, in fact hostilities soon broke out again.

"I'll thank you for my cup o' tea, now, Mrs G.," said Mr Glegg, seeing that she did not proceed to give it him as usual, when he had finished his porridge. She lifted the teapot with a slight toss of the head, and said,—

"I'm glad to hear you'll thank me, Mr Glegg. It's little thanks I get for what I do for folks i' this world. Though there's never a woman o' your side o' the family, Mr Glegg, as is fit to stand up with me, and I'd say it if I was on my dying bed. Not but what I've allays conducted myself civil to your kin, and there isn't one of 'em can say the contrary, though my equils they aren't, and nobody shall make me say it."

"You'd better leave finding fault wi' my kin till you've left off quarrelling with your own, Mrs G.," said Mr Glegg, with angry sarcasm. "I'll trouble you for the milk-jug."

"That's as false a word as ever you spoke, Mr Glegg," said the lady, pouring out the milk with unusual profuseness, as much as to say, if he wanted milk he should have it with a vengeance. "And you know it's false. I'm not the woman to quarrel with my own kin; you may, for I've known you to do it."

"Why, what did you call it yesterday, then, leaving your sister's house in a tantrum?"

"I'd no quarrel wi' my sister, Mr Glegg, and it's false to say it. Mr Tulliver's none o' my blood, and it was him quarrelled with me, and drove me out o' the house. But perhaps you'd have had me stay and be swore at, Mr Glegg; perhaps you was vexed not to hear more abuse and foul language poured out upo' your own wife. But, let me tell you, it's your disgrace."

"Did ever anybody hear the like i' this parish?" said Mr Glegg, getting hot. "A woman, with everything provided for her, and allowed to keep her own money the same as if it was settled on her, and with a gig new stuffed and lined at no end o' expense, and provided for when I die beyond anything she could expect—to go on i' this way, biting and snapping like a mad dog! It's beyond everything, as God A 'mighty should ha' made women so." (These last words were uttered in a tone of sorrowful agitation. Mr Glegg pushed his tea from him, and tapped the table with both his hands.)

"Well, Mr Glegg, if those are your feelings, it's best they should be known," said Mrs Glegg, taking off her napkin, and folding it in an excited manner. "But if you talk o' my being provided for beyond what I could expect, I beg leave to tell you as I'd a right to expect a many things as I don't find. And as to my being like a mad dog, it's well if you're not cried shame on by the county for your treatment of me, for it's what I can't bear, and I won't bear——"

Here Mrs Glegg's voice intimated that she was going to cry, and breaking off from speech, she rang the bell violently.

"Sally," she said, rising from her chair, and speaking in rather a choked voice, "light a fire up-stairs, and put the blinds down. Mr Glegg, you'll please to order what you'd like for dinner. I shall have gruel."

Mrs Glegg walked across the room to the small book-case, and took down Baxter's "Saints' Everlasting Rest," which she carried with her up-stairs. It was the book she was accustomed to lay open before her on special occasions,—on wet Sunday mornings, or when she heard of a death in the family, or when, as in this case, her quarrel with Mr Glegg had been set an octave higher than usual.

But Mrs Glegg carried something else up-stairs with her, which, together with the "Saints' Rest" and the gruel, may have had some influence in gradually calming her feelings, and making it possible for her to endure

existence on the ground-floor, shortly before tea-time.

Points to Ponder

How does Eliot present the Dodson women?
How are these characters similar and how are they different?
What is the importance of dress in these extracts?
What does Eliot tell us about the mores of Victorian Society?

Wives and Daughters

Extract 1

Molly, too, felt the change of atmosphere keenly; and she blamed herself for so feeling even more keenly still. But she could not help having a sense of refinement, which had made her appreciate the whole manner of being at the Hall. By her dear old friends the Miss Brownings she was petted and caressed so much that she became ashamed of noticing the coarser and louder tones in which they spoke, the provincialism of their pronunciation, the absence of interest in things, and their greediness of details about persons. Ch 2

Extract 2

"Oh, Molly! I thought you'd never come back. Such a piece of news! Sister has gone to bed; she's had a headache—with the excitement, I think; but she says it's new bread. Come upstairs softly, my dear, and I'll tell you what it is! Who do you think has been here,—drinking tea with us, too, in the most condescending manner?"

"Lady Harriet?" said Molly, suddenly enlightened by the word "condescending."

"Yes. Why, how did you guess it? But, after all, her call, at any rate in the first instance, was upon you. Oh, dear Molly! if you're not in a hurry to go to bed, let me sit down quietly and tell you all about it; for my heart jumps into my mouth still when I think of how I was caught. She—that is, her ladyship—left the carriage at 'The George,' and took to her feet to go shopping—just as you or I may have done many a time in our lives. And sister was taking her forty winks; and I was sitting with my gown up above my knees and my feet on the fender, pulling out my grandmother's lace which I'd been washing. The worst has yet to be told. I'd taken off my cap, for I thought it was getting dusk and no one would come, and there was I in my black silk skull-cap, when Nancy put her head in, and whispered, 'There's a lady downstairs—a real grand one, by her talk;' and in there came my Lady Harriet, so sweet and pretty in her ways, it was some time before I remembered I had never a cap on. Sister never wakened; or never roused up, so to say. She says she thought it was Nancy bringing in the tea when she heard some one moving; for her ladyship, as soon as she saw the state of the case, came and knelt down on the rug by me, and begged my pardon so prettily for having followed Nancy upstairs without waiting for permission; and was so taken by my old lace, and wanted to know how I washed it, and where you were, and when you'd be back, and when the happy couple would be back: till sister wakened—she's always a little bit put out, you know, when she first wakens from her afternoon nap,—and, without turning her head to see who it was, she said, quite sharp,—'Buzz, buzz, buzz! When will you learn that whispering is more fidgeting than talking out loud? I've not been able to sleep at all for the chatter you and Nancy have been keeping up all this time.' You know that was a little fancy of sister's, for she'd been snoring away as naturally as could be. So I went to her, and leant over her, and said in a low voice,—

"'Sister, it's her ladyship and me that has been conversing.'

"'Ladyship here, ladyship there! have you lost your wits, Phœbe, that you talk such nonsense—and in your skull-cap, too!'

"By this time she was sitting up—and, looking round her, she saw Lady Harriet, in her velvets and silks, sitting on our rug, smiling, her bonnet off, and her pretty hair all bright with the blaze of the fire. My word! sister was up on her feet directly; and she dropped her curtsey, and made her excuses for sleeping, as fast as might be, while I went off to put on my best cap, for sister might well say I was out of my wits to go on chatting to an earl's daughter in an old black silk skull-cap. Black silk, too! when, if I'd only known she was coming, I might

have put on my new brown silk one, lying idle in my top drawer. And when I came back, sister was ordering tea for her ladyship,—our tea, I mean. So I took my turn at talk, and sister slipped out to put on her Sunday silk. But I don't think we were quite so much at our ease with her ladyship as when I sat pulling out my lace in my skull-cap. And she was quite struck with our tea, and asked where we got it, for she had never tasted any like it before; and I told her we gave only 3s. 4d. a pound for it, at Johnson's—(sister says I ought to have told her the price of our company-tea, which is 5s. a pound, only that was not what we were drinking; for, as ill-luck would have it, we'd none of it in the house)—and she said she would send us some of hers, all the way from Russia or Prussia, or some out-of-the-way place, and we were to compare and see which we liked best; and if we liked hers best, she could get it for us at 3s. a pound. And she left her love for you; and, though she was going away, you were not to forget her. Sister thought such a message would set you up too much, and told me she would not be chargeable for the giving it you. 'But,' I said, 'a message is a message, and it's on Molly's own shoulders if she's set up by it. Let us show her an example of humility, sister, though we have been sitting cheek-by-jowl in such company.' So sister humphed, and said she'd a headache, and went to bed. And now you may tell me your news, my dear."

So Molly told her small events; which, interesting as they might have been at other times to the gossip-loving and sympathetic Miss Phœbe, were rather pale in the stronger light reflected from the visit of an earl's daughter. Ch 14

Extract 3

At the present time there are few people at a public ball besides the dancers and their chaperones, or relations in some degree interested in them. But in the days when Molly and Cynthia were young—before railroads were, and before their consequences, the excursion-trains, which take every one up to London now-a-days, there to see their fill of gay crowds and fine dresses—to go to an annual charity-ball, even though all thought of dancing had passed by years ago, and without any of the responsibilities of a chaperone, was a very allowable and favourite piece of dissipation to all the kindly old maids who thronged the country towns of England. They aired their old lace and their best dresses; they saw the aristocratic magnates of the country side; they gossipped with their coevals, and speculated on the romances of the young around them in a curious yet friendly spirit. The Miss Brownings would have thought themselves sadly defrauded of the gayest event of the year, if anything had prevented their attending the charity ball, and Miss Browning would have been indignant, Miss Phœbe aggrieved, had they not been asked to Ashcombe and Coreham, by friends at each place, who had, like them, gone through the dancing-stage of life some five-and-twenty years before, but who liked still to haunt the scenes of their former enjoyment, and see a younger generation dance on "regardless of their doom." They had come in one of the two sedan-chairs that yet lingered in use at Hollingford; such a night as this brought a regular harvest of gains to the two old men who, in what was called the "town's livery," trotted backwards and forwards with their many loads of ladies and finery. There were some postchaises, and some "flys," but after mature deliberation Miss Browning had decided to keep to the more comfortable custom of the sedan-chair; "which," as she said to Miss Piper, one of her visitors, "came into the parlour, and got full of the warm air, and nipped you up, and carried you tight and cosy into another warm room, where you could walk out without having to show your legs by going up steps, or down steps." Of course only one could go at a time; but here again a little of Miss Browning's good management arranged everything so very nicely, as Miss Hornblower (their other visitor) remarked. She went first, and remained in the warm cloak-room until her hostess followed; and then the two ladies went arm-in-arm into the ball-room, finding out convenient seats whence they could watch the arrivals and speak to their passing friends, until Miss Phœbe and Miss Piper entered, and came to take possession of the seats reserved for them by Miss Browning's care. These two younger ladies came in, also arm-in-arm, but with a certain timid flurry in look and movement very different from the composed dignity of their seniors (by two or three years). When all four were once more assembled together, they took breath, and began to converse.

"Upon my word, I really do think this is a better room than our Ashcombe Court-house!"

"And how prettily it is decorated!" piped out Miss Piper. "How well the roses are made! But you all have such taste at Hollingford."

"There's Mrs. Dempster," cried Miss Hornblower; "she said she and her two daughters were asked to stay at Mr. Sheepshanks'. Mr. Preston was to be there, too; but I suppose they could not all come at once. Look! and there is young Roscoe, our new doctor. I declare it seems as if all Ashcombe were here. Mr. Roscoe! Mr. Roscoe! come here and let me introduce you to Miss Browning, the friend we are staying with. We think very highly of our young doctor, I can assure you, Miss Browning."

Mr. Roscoe bowed, and simpered at hearing his own praises. But Miss Browning had no notion of having any doctor praised, who had come to settle on the very verge of Mr. Gibson's practice, so she said to Miss Hornblower,—

"You must be glad, I am sure, to have somebody you can call in, if you are in any sudden hurry, or for things that are too trifling to trouble Mr. Gibson about; and I should think Mr. Roscoe would feel it a great advantage to profit, as he will naturally have the opportunity of doing, by witnessing Mr. Gibson's skill!" …

"Who is that lovely girl in pink, just come in?"

"Why, that's Cynthia Kirkpatrick!" said Miss Hornblower, taking up a ponderous gold eyeglass to make sure of her fact. "How she has grown! To be sure, it is two or three years since she left Ashcombe—she was very pretty then—people did say Mr. Preston admired her very much; but she was so young!"

"Can you introduce me?" asked the impatient young surgeon. "I should like to ask her to dance."

When Miss Hornblower returned from her greeting to her former acquaintance, Mrs. Gibson, and had accomplished the introduction which Mr. Roscoe had requested, she began her little confidences to Miss Browning.

"Well, to be sure! How condescending we are! I remember the time when Mrs. Kirkpatrick wore old black silks, and was thankful and civil as became her place as a schoolmistress, and as having to earn her bread. And now she is in a satin; and she speaks to me as if she just could recollect who I was, if she tried very hard! It isn't so long ago since Mrs. Dempster came to consult me as to whether Mrs. Kirkpatrick would be offended, if she sent her a new breadth for her lilac silk-gown, in place of one that had been spoilt by Mrs. Dempster's servant spilling the coffee over it the night before; and she took it and was thankful, for all she's dressed in pearl-grey satin now! And she would have been glad enough to marry Mr. Preston in those days."

"I thought you said he admired her daughter," put in Miss Browning to her irritated friend.

"Well! perhaps I did, and perhaps it was so; I'm sure I can't tell; he was a great deal at the house. Miss Dixon keeps a school in the same house now, and I'm sure she does it a great deal better."

"The earl and the countess are very fond of Mrs. Gibson," said Miss Browning. "I know, for Lady Harriet told us when she came to drink tea with us last autumn; and they desired Mr. Preston to be very attentive to her when she lived at Ashcombe."

"For goodness' sake don't go and repeat what I've been saying about Mr. Preston and Mrs. Kirkpatrick to her ladyship. One may be mistaken, and you know I only said 'people talked about it.'"

Miss Hornblower was evidently alarmed lest her gossip should be repeated to the Lady Harriet, who appeared to be on such an intimate footing with her Hollingford friends. Nor did Miss Browning dissipate the illusion. Lady Harriet had drunk tea with them, and might do it again; and, at any rate, the little fright she had put her friend into was not a bad return for that praise of Mr. Roscoe, which had offended Miss Browning's loyalty to Mr. Gibson.

Meanwhile Miss Piper and Miss Phœbe, who had not the character of esprit-forts to maintain, talked of the dresses of the people present, beginning by complimenting each other.

"What a lovely turban you have got on, Miss Piper, if I may be allowed to say so: so becoming to your complexion!"

"Do you think so?" said Miss Piper, with ill-concealed gratification; it was something to have a "complexion" at forty-five. "I got it at Brown's, at Somerton, for this very ball. I thought I must have something to set off my gown, which isn't quite so new as it once was; and I have no handsome jewellery like you"—looking with admiring eyes at a large miniature set round with pearls, which served as a shield to Miss Phœbe's breast.

"It is handsome," that lady replied. "It is a likeness of my dear mother; Dorothy has got my father on. The miniatures were both taken at the same time; and just about then my uncle died and left us each a legacy of fifty pounds, which we agreed to spend on the setting of our miniatures. But because they are so valuable Dorothy always keeps them locked up with the best silver, and hides the box somewhere; she never will tell me where, because she says I've such weak nerves, and that if a burglar, with a loaded pistol at my head, were to ask me where we kept our plate and jewels, I should be sure to tell him; and she says, for her part, she would never think of revealing under any circumstances. (I'm sure I hope she won't be tried.) But that's the reason I don't wear it often; it's only the second time I've had it on; and I can't even get at it, and look at it, which I should like to do. I shouldn't have had it on to-night, but that Dorothy gave it out to me, saying it was but a proper compliment to pay to the Duchess of Menteith, who is to be here in all her diamonds."

"Dear-ah-me! Is she really! Do you know I never saw a duchess before." And Miss Piper drew herself up and craned her neck, as if resolved to "behave herself properly," as she had been taught to do at boarding-school thirty years before, in the presence of "her grace." By-and-by she said to Miss Phœbe, with a sudden jerk out of position,—"Look, look! that's our Mr. Cholmley, the magistrate" (he was the great man of Coreham), "and that's Mrs. Cholmley in red satin, and Mr. George and Mr. Harry from Oxford, I do declare; and Miss Cholmley, and pretty Miss Sophy. I should like to go and speak to them, but then it's so formidable crossing a room without a gentleman. And there is Coxe the butcher and his wife! Why all Coreham seems to be here! And how Mrs. Coxe can afford such a gown I can't make out for one, for I know Coxe had some difficulty in paying for the last sheep he bought of my brother." Ch 26

And what does Cynthia say? Is she enjoying herself?"

"Oh, yes, I think so. They've had a dinner-party; and one night, when mamma was at Lady Cumnor's, Cynthia went to the play with her cousins."

"Upon my word! and all in one week? I do call that dissipation. Why, Thursday would be taken up with the journey, and Friday with resting, and Sunday is Sunday all the world over; and they must have written on Tuesday. Well! I hope Cynthia won't find Hollingford dull, that's all, when she comes back."

"I don't think it's likely," said Miss Phœbe, with a little simper and a knowing look, which sate oddly on her kindly innocent face. "You see a great deal of Mr. Preston, don't you, Molly?"

"Mr. Preston!" said Molly, flushing up with surprise. "No! not much. He's been at Ashcombe all winter, you know! He has but just come back to settle here. What should make you think so?"

"Oh! a little bird told us," said Miss Browning. Molly knew that little bird from her childhood, and had always hated it, and longed to wring its neck. Why could not people speak out and say that they did not mean to give up the name of their informant? But it was a very favourite form of fiction with the Miss Brownings, and to Miss Phœbe it was the very acme of wit.

"The little bird was flying about one day in Heath Lane, and it saw Mr. Preston and a young lady—we won't say who—walking together in a very friendly manner, that is to say, he was on horseback; but the path is raised above the road, just where there is the little wooden bridge over the brook—"

"Perhaps Molly is in the secret, and we ought not to ask her about it," said Miss Phœbe, seeing Molly's extreme discomfiture and annoyance.

"It can be no great secret," said Miss Browning, dropping the little-bird formula, and assuming an air of dignified reproval at Miss Phœbe's interruption, "for Miss Hornblower says Mr. Preston owns to being engaged—"

"At any rate it isn't to Cynthia, that I know positively," said Molly with some vehemence. "And pray put a stop to any such reports; you don't know what mischief they may do. I do so hate that kind of chatter!" It was not very respectful of Molly to speak in this way to be sure, but she thought only of Roger; and the distress any such reports might cause, should he ever hear of them (in the centre of Africa!) made her colour up scarlet with vexation.

"Heighty-teighty! Miss Molly! don't you remember that I am old enough to be your mother, and that it is not pretty behaviour to speak so to us—to me! 'Chatter' to be sure. Really, Molly—"

"I beg your pardon," said Molly, only half-penitent.

"I daresay you did not mean to speak so to sister," said Miss Phœbe, trying to make peace.

Molly did not answer all at once. She wanted to explain how much mischief might be done by such reports.

"But don't you see," she went on, still flushed by vexation, "how bad it is to talk of such things in such a way? Supposing one of them cared for some one else, and that might happen, you know; Mr. Preston, for instance, may be engaged to some one else?"

"Molly! I pity the woman! Indeed I do. I have a very poor opinion of Mr. Preston," said Miss Browning, in a warning tone of voice; for a new idea had come into her head.

"Well, but the woman, or young lady, would not like to hear such reports about Mr. Preston."

"Perhaps not. But for all that, take my word for it, he's a great flirt, and young ladies had better not have much to do with him."

"I daresay it was all accident their meeting in Heath Lane," said Miss Phœbe.

"I know nothing about it," said Molly, "and I daresay I have been impertinent, only please don't talk about it any more. I have my reasons for asking you." She got up, for by the striking of the church clock she had just found out that it was later than she had thought, and she knew that her father would be at home by this time. She bent down and kissed Miss Browning's grave and passive face.

"How you are growing, Molly!" said Miss Phœbe, anxious to cover over her sister's displeasure. "'As tall and as straight as a poplar-tree!' as the old song says."

"Grow in grace, Molly, as well as in good looks!" said Miss Browning, watching her out of the room. As soon as she was fairly gone, Miss Browning got up and shut the door quite securely, and then sitting down near her sister, she said, in a low voice, "Phœbe, it was Molly herself that was with Mr. Preston in Heath Lane that day when Mrs. Goodenough saw them together!"

"Gracious goodness me!" exclaimed Miss Phœbe, receiving it at once as gospel. "How do you know?"

"By putting two and two together. Didn't you notice how red Molly went, and then pale, and how she said she knew for a fact that Mr. Preston and Cynthia Kirkpatrick were not engaged?"

"Perhaps not engaged; but Mrs. Goodenough saw them loitering together, all by their own two selves—"

"Mrs. Goodenough only crossed Heath Lane at the Shire Oak, as she was riding in her phaeton," said Miss Browning sententiously. "We all know what a coward she is in a carriage, so that most likely she had only half her wits about

her, and her eyes are none of the best when she is standing steady on the ground. Molly and Cynthia have got their new plaid shawls just alike, and they trim their bonnets alike, and Molly is grown as tall as Cynthia since Christmas. I was always afraid she'd be short and stumpy, but she's now as tall and slender as anyone need be. I'll answer for it, Mrs. Goodenough saw Molly, and took her for Cynthia."

When Miss Browning "answered for it" Miss Phœbe gave up doubting. She sate some time in silence revolving her thoughts. Then she said:

"It wouldn't be such a very bad match after all, sister." She spoke very meekly, awaiting her sister's sanction to her opinion.

"Phœbe, it would be a bad match for Mary Pearson's daughter. If I had known what I know now we'd never have had him to tea last September."

"Why, what do you know?" asked Miss Phœbe.

"Miss Hornblower told me many things; some that I don't think you ought to hear, Phœbe. He was engaged to a very pretty Miss Gregson, at Henwick, where he comes from; and her father made inquiries, and heard so much that was bad about him that he made his daughter break off the match, and she's dead since!"

"How shocking!" said Miss Phœbe, duly impressed.

"Besides, he plays at billiards, and he bets at races, and some people do say he keeps race-horses."

"But isn't it strange that the earl keeps him on as his agent?"

"No! perhaps not. He's very clever about land, and very sharp in all law affairs; and my lord isn't bound to take notice—if indeed he knows—of the manner in which Mr. Preston talks when he has taken too much wine."

"Taken too much wine! Oh, sister, is he a drunkard? and we have had him to tea!"

"I didn't say he was a drunkard, Phœbe," said Miss Browning, pettishly. "A man may take too much wine occasionally, without being a drunkard. Don't let me hear you using such coarse words, Phœbe!"

Miss Phœbe was silent for a time after this rebuke.

Presently she said, "I do hope it wasn't Molly Gibson."

"You may hope as much as you like, but I'm pretty sure it was. However, we'd better say nothing about it to Mrs. Goodenough; she has got Cynthia into her head, and there let her rest. Time enough to set reports afloat about Molly when we know there's some truth in them. Mr. Preston might do for Cynthia, who's been brought up in France, though she has such pretty manners; but it may have made her not particular. He must not, and he shall not, have Molly, if I go into church and forbid the banns myself; but I'm afraid—I'm afraid there's something between her and him. We must keep on the look-out, Phœbe. I'll be her guardian angel, in spite of herself."

Miss Brownings came to call and hear the double batch of news. Mrs. Goodenough had called the very day on which they had returned from Miss Hornblower's, to tell them the astounding fact of Molly Gibson having gone on a visit to the Towers; not to come back at night, but to sleep there, to be there for two or three days, just as if she was a young lady of quality. So Miss Brownings came to hear all the details of the wedding from Mrs. Gibson, and the history of Molly's visit at the Towers as well. But Mrs. Gibson did not like this divided interest, and some of her old jealousy of Molly's intimacy at the Towers had returned.

"Now, Molly," said Miss Browning, "let us hear how you behaved among the great folks. You must not be set up with all their attention; remember that they pay it to you for your good father's sake."

"Molly is, I think, quite aware," put in Mrs. Gibson, in her most soft and languid tone, "that she owes her privilege of visiting at such a house to Lady Cumnor's kind desire to set my mind quite at liberty at the time of Cynthia's marriage. As soon as ever I had returned home, Molly came back; indeed, I should not have thought it right to let her intrude upon their kindness beyond what was absolutely necessary."

Molly felt extremely uncomfortable at all this, though perfectly aware of the entire inaccuracy of the statement.

"Well, but, Molly!" said Miss Browning, "never mind whether you went there on your own merits, or your worthy father's merits, or Mrs. Gibson's merits; but tell us what you did when you were there."

Ch 40

Points to Ponder

How does Gaskell present these two sisters?

What difference, if any, does their marital status have? All Eliot's sisters are married, Gaskell's are single women?

How important is status to these families?

In what way is their presentation similar to or different from Eliot's?

What is Gaskell's social agenda and is it different from Eliot's?

How important is dress and fashion in Gaskell's extracts?