Chapter Two

Photographic Debilitation—

The Aesthetic of Vulnerability in Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters*

This chapter explores how the practice of vision interacts with narrative techniques of the novel *Wives and Daughters*, resulting in an aesthetic of feminine vulnerability in terms of characterization of the heroine. As a novel of realism, this work is without doubt narrative in format. Yet inspired by Armstrong and Crary, as have delineated in Chapter One, I argue that the novel's plot development is complicated by photographic impulses. If we look at the novel closely, we may find that actually the novel employs the mechanism of observation—a visually-based technique of representation—to present characters. As this chapter will show, whereas the narrative construction of the novel attempts to push the heroine to develop toward matured womanhood, the photographic techniques emerge constantly to dwarf the image of the heroine, and thus hinder the narrative attempt to achieve the heroine's self-realization.

I. Contradictory Factors in Characterization

Wives and Daughters depicts the socialization of female characters in a nineteenth-century society. Unlike Gaskell's earlier novels of social criticism such as *North and South*, and *Mary Barton*, which associate characters with larger historical condition so as to criticize the impact of industrialization on the Victorians, *Wives and Daughters* forsakes didactic purposes of social critique, and turns to focus the domestic realm of life. Even though the historical scope of the novel is not as grand as the author's previous works, the human relationship in *Wives and Daughters* is by no means simple. As its subtitle "An Every-day Story" indicates, the novel depicts stories about townspeople's daily affairs and social life. Gaskell uses a

fictional town Hollingford as the backdrop. This provincial society is composed of characters from different social ranks and occupations, and they form a complex network of human relationship. There are Mr. Gibson's middle-class family; the aristocratic Cumnor people, who know very well how to take the opportunity of the political reform as a means of social climbing; and the Hamley family, an old ancestry facing the economic competition due to the rise of capitalism. Packed into a small society, these people's relationship intertwines, and their life influences one another.

Within this complex web of human relationship, the novel centers on the young heroine Molly Gibson, concerning her progress of socialization. The heroine's status is defined in terms of her relation with other people. Molly's development could be summed up as a transformation from Mr. Gibson's daughter, to a surrogate daughter of the Hamley, and finally to Mr. Roger Hamley's wife. At the beginning of the novel, Molly is a young and carefree girl, living with her widowed Father, and to whom the townspeople often refer as "the daughter of our medical man" (20). Molly has a strong attachment to her father, considering herself as the only person who could give her father all the comforts and happiness he needed. But as no one could extract himself from the web of social relationships, Molly finds her world is changed as new family members were introduced into her life. There are two important moments that threaten Molly's position in the society: one is the arrival of a stepmother Clare Kirkpatrick, who makes Molly relinquish her attachment to Father; the other is the competition from her stepsister Cynthia Kirkpatrick, whose beauty and coquettish nature almost threaten to take away Molly's prospective husband. Thus, as the story unfolds, Molly's pressures comes from the concern that "how she can find a place to grow up into" (Spencer 130). After passing several trials, eventually obstacles between Molly and Roger are cleared away, and she ends her process of socialization in the Hamley Hall as the mistress of the family. In the end, Molly's

virtues are rewarded, while she wins herself a good reputation and prosperous future.

What arouses the critical attention is the several layers of ambiguity underlying Molly's development. First, in terms of characterization, the image of Molly seems to waver between self-assertion and self-effacement. Sometimes she speaks out vehement ideas in her mind, but other times she hesitates and waits for other people's guidance; at times she could act courageously to rescue or protect her sibling, but in other occasions she is described as vulnerable and needs protection. It seems that there appear two Mollys, one struggling to outweigh the other—the vulnerable and the stronger side to her character—and finally, it is the fragile Molly that conquers her stronger side at the end of the novel. Besides, in terms of the plot, the novel seems to consist of two contradictory lines of development: a development toward self-reliance versus a process into domestication. On one hand, during the heroine's development, many episodes compel her to think and act independently. However, as the story unfolds, her development is pushed into different forms of subordination. Just as Molly is about to be independent from her father's authority, she is ushered into the husband's shelter and command. It seems that the heroine's development is swayed by different social forces, struggling between independence and domestication.

Many critics explain these textual ambiguities of the novel in terms of the patriarchal suppression on female writings. Jane Spencer suggests that the novel's tensions resulte from Gaskell's position as a middle-class female writer writing in a patriarchal society. As Spencer states, "her [Gaskell's] gender and class positions pulled against each other: as a woman she wanted and needed to challenge existing structures; as a middle-class woman she had a good deal of power at stake in them" (29). Thus, it is impossible for Gaskell to subvert the existing structure in a radical way. Felicia Bonaparte approaches the problem by means of psychoanalysis,

arguing that the novel's tension reflects the inner conflict of Gaskell's two "selves"—between "Mrs. Gaskell," the novelist and social self that was exposed to public examinations, and "Gaskell's demon," the unconscious self that rebelled against social conventions which shackled women's liberty and truncated their intelligence (71). Despite that "Mrs. Gaskell" intended to present a romantic story that fulfilled the expectation of the readership, mainly composed of the middle-class, "Gaskell's demon" would not succumb to the conventional expectation imposed upon women—to be submissive wives and daughters. Bonaparte thus contends that even though "Mrs. Gaskell" had granted her heroine a marriage according to an outline submitted to her publisher, during the process of writing, "Gaskell's demon" kept resisting the idea of ending the novel in marriage. The conflict between the two selves of the author eventually results in a textual rupture: as Bonaparte asserts daringly, Gaskell would rather "will her death" than letting her heroine end up within the confinement of patriarchal authority (279). Last but not least, Pasty Stoneman attributes the ambiguity to a feeling of uneasiness commonly shared by female writers. She explains why Gaskell does not look revolutionary in her social problem novels: "Because ideological pressure makes Elizabeth Gaskell uneasy both in her use of 'masculine,' 'public' language and in aligning herself with 'strong-minded' women, we can expect that she will be least authentic when she feels her self most exposed" (Stoneman, *Elizabeth* 44). Stoneman's statement partly explains many Victorian female writers' desire to write under a male pseudonym at the time, such as the Brontë sisters and Gaskell herself. She explains that these writers could hardly feel free to voice out their innermost feeling in an era when there was prevailing antagonistic attitude towards feminism. Therefore, as Stoneman argues, Gaskell's efforts at problem-solving "break down under the pressure of ideology" (*Eliazbeth* 19).

Thus, most studies explain tensions in *Wives and Daughters* in feminist terms.

Critics agree that the textual tension is a feature of Gaskell's work, and the cause is highly related to the patriarchal ideology of the nineteenth-century. And it is indeed brilliant for Bonaparte to argue that the textual break at the end of the novel is a product of contradiction between the author's pressure to write an ending that fulfills the expectation of the middle-class ideology—that women are expected to submit to their fathers and husbands—and Gaskell's innermost belief in female autonomy. In short, feminist critics find a lot of inspiration and produce fruitful results in their readings of Gaskell's work. Besides, approaches by the critics above forge a strong connection between Gaskell's life and her work. Arguments that follow Bonaparte always start from author's autobiographical evidence. They look for evidence of Gaskell's feminist thought in her private letters or personal history, so as to argue against the patriarchal domination in the time when Gaskell was writing. These theories imply that Gaskell herself had a strong intention to speak for women, only that her intention was thwarted by patriarchal oppressions. Even though critics like Spencer and Stoneman point out the gap between the author's intention and the end-product of her endeavors, they still regard Gaskell highly, saying that at least Gaskell's novels expose women's problems to her contemporary readers. I agree with these critics that Gaskell's text is saturated with massages that lay bare a hostile environment to women's subjectivity and survival. However, my interest is to refer back to the text, rather than speculating the author's intention. I propose that the text should be restored to its historical moment and be read against the background of the nineteenth-century visual culture. I will look for clues from the mechanism of representation within the novel, tracing the driving forces within the text that result in the ambivalent image of the heroine.

Another significance of the existing criticism lies in the fact that, in spite of their different viewpoints, the critical investigations above concentrate on one and the

same issue—whether Molly Gibson matures from her trials and experiences. What interest these critics could be delineated like this: does Molly become wiser and learn something from her trials? Or instead, does she merely function as a passive subject, remaining the same person from the beginning to the end, and waiting passively for others to discover her virtue? To the critics mentioned above, their arguments imply that in fact, Molly's character does not go through a transformation. All the episodes in the novel are like a testimony to her perseverance, and in the end she survives from the trials, while her true value is rediscovered. I think their readings identify the novel with what could be called "the novel of ordeal" under M. M. Bakhtin's typology, in which "the hero's life and fate change, but the hero is always presented as complete and unchanging" (12). I agree that the heroine's character remains the same—the novel does not depict a heroine who has gone through a major transformation, or gets to the point of epiphany on a certain moment of life. But I suggest that this static image of the heroine should be construed as a result of two contradicting forces within the text that shape her character at the same time. The mechanism of representation is far more complicated than the paradigm described by the previous critics. As I will prove later in this chapter, on the one hand, there is a narrative pattern in the novel that impels Molly to change; on the other hand, each time when Molly is on the threshold of transformation, there is another drive of the novel, namely the photographic impulse discussed in the previous chapter, pushes her back to the starting point. And this phenomenon is what I call the photographic hindrance to the narrative structure of the novel.

According to Roland Barthes, narrative is composed of small units, and each unit has its particular function. In his "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives" (1973), Barthes defines narrative units according to their functions, analyzing how different units contribute to the meaning production. There are four

essential narrative units: cardinal points, catalysers, indices, and informants.

Cardinal points and catalysers are both crucial to establishing the basic meaning of narrative. Points with cardinal functions are the "hinge-points" of the plot, which are "of direct consequence for the subsequent development of the story" (Barthes, "Structural Analysis" 93). They can be regarded as major turning points of a story. Any decisions of the author or characters made at cardinal moments would result in different plot evolvements. For instance, when the telephone rings, to answer the phone or miss it would lead to different fates of the character (93). It is like coming to a crossroad in the middle of the plot, and to turn right or to turn left will eventually end at different destinations. While cardinal points form the fundamental structure of a story, catalysers are substances filling in the space between hinge points. Catalysers are "consecutive units" in narrative (94). They denote "small actions," which contribute to establish the atmosphere, and to shape characters (McFarlance 14). In the same example given by Barthes, if the character did answer the phone, there were still different ways of answering it. While picking up the receiver gingerly would denote crisis or suspension, answering the phone call leisurely with a cigarette in hand would denote calm and confidence. As Brian McFarlance puts it, the role of catalysers is "to root the cardinal functions in a particular kind of reality, to enrich the texture of these functions" (14). If we compare cardinal points to the frame of a body or a building, then catalysers are like the flesh of the body, and the concrete, bricks, woods, or any other kind of materials that decide the final look of the building.

Indices and informants belong to another classification, because their influence is limited to the level of characters and atmosphere (Barthes, "Structural Analysis" 95). According to Barthes, indices refer to "the character of a narrative agent, a feeling, an atmosphere (for example suspicion) or a philosophy" (96). As the word "indices" means literally, they are elements that project certain meanings in a

narrative. For instance, thick billowing clouds can be an index to a stormy weather, while moonlight is an index to night time. Thus indices are often descriptions in the novel that create atmosphere for a specific scene, but would not determine how the story is going to develop. On the other hand, informants are more straightforward. They are "ready-made knowledge" that "serving to identify, to locate in time and space" (96). For example, the name of a place, the profession of a character, and a certain brand of an item, they are all informants that try to "embed the fiction in the real world" (96). As a result, indices and informants are not crucial elements that shape the meaning of the narrative. They merely operate on the level of atmosphere, and would never alter the direction of the plot. Thus a story might happen in a different country, or even be moved to happen in another era, but it is still possible to preserve the original plotlines and meanings, so long as the cardinal points and catalysers are kept.

Therefore, investigating the compositionality of *Wives and Daughters*, I suggest that the novel contains two methods of representation to characterize the protagonist: narrative techniques—ways that rely on narrative functions to construct the images of characters, and photographic techniques—skills that employ the mechanism of gaze to observe characters. Nevertheless, the heroine's image changes when she is depicted by different techniques. Generally speaking, when Molly is presented by narrative techniques, her image is a lively and even naughty girl. Yet when Molly is presented by photographic techniques, however, her image becomes a dispirited and timid person. As a result, two different images of Molly—a lively one and a languid one—alternate in the novel all the time, and make her image deeply ambivalent.

On the one hand, when employing narrative techniques, the novel constructs Molly's image through narrating devices, including narrating prose that penetrates into a character's psychology, or direct speeches by other characters. I find that

through this method of characterization, Molly's image is constructed as a energetic, lively girl, whose general impression to people could be best summed up in Cynthia's comment on her: "You look more like a delving Adam than a spinning Eve" (345). Cynthia recognizes Molly as more like a little boy, who prefers outdoor activities such as riding and gardening to needle works. And from occasional remarks by Cynthia or Mrs. Gibson, the reader knows that Molly's complexion is suntanned, her hair always unruly, and sometimes her hands get dirty from the gardening works she has just undertaken (345). In addition to these reports about Molly's appearance, a conversation between Mrs. Gibson and Miss Browning also describes her as a little naughty boy:

> "I don't think you would have called Molly a lady the other day, Miss Browning, if you had found her where I did: sitting up in a cherry tree, six feet from the ground at least, I do assure you."
>
> "Oh, but that wasn't pretty," said Miss Browning, shaking her head at Molly. "I thought you'd left off those tomboy ways." (*W & D* 247)

From the conversation above, "tomboyish" becomes the word to describe Molly's general impression. Summing up all the descriptions from other characters, Molly is a girl who might "come upstairs two steps at a time" (247), climbing up in a tree, or scrambling to gather some wild berries on a hedge beside the country path (360). The effect is that: the narrative representation of the novel constructs Molly's image as an unpretentious country girl, lively, animated, and full of spirits.

On the other hand, when using photographic techniques, the novel constructs Molly's image through the mechanism of observation, whether the role of the observer is partaken by the omniscient narrator, or by other characters in the novel. Once the novel employs photographic techniques, the character in concern is like an object of gaze, while readers, sharing with the observer's perspective, become

eyewitnesses of what is happening. I find that through this method of characterization, Molly's image is constructed as a vulnerable girl. The most salient feature of Molly becomes tears in her eyes. For example, when Mr. Gibson asks Molly to explain the slander on her, he sees Molly "look up at him with clear, truthful eyes which filled with tears as she spoke" (419). Roger also witnesses some sentimental reactions of Molly: "her lips trembling, and on the point of crying again" (139). And sometimes when Roger expresses his brotherly concern to Molly, he would see her tears "coming into her eyes in spite of her self" (624). In short, these moments of photographic representation are like snapshots that capture and reinforce Molly's vulnerability. They usually highlight tears in her eyes, amplifying details such as her trembling lips, capturing her sentimental reactions, and thus making her a delicate woman who needs protection.

Indeed, it is difficult to make a clear-cut distinction between narrative techniques and visual techniques, while it might appear arbitrary when attempting so. The examples above also reveal an intricate relationship between image and language. For instance, sometimes narrative descriptions might contain visual information: the term "delving Adam" Cynthia uses to describe Molly, or the word "tomboyish" Miss Browning chooses to describe Molly's behaviors, might arouses different imagery in different readers' mind. Besides, since the novel is essentially composed of language, it may be argued that the visual techniques are fundamentally built upon narrative. Nevertheless, in the case here, the purpose is not to make a binary distinction of the two techniques, but to highlight how the mechanism of observation—a visually-oriented method—functions in the novel, a narrative structure in essence. I suggest that the fundamental difference between narrative and visual techniques lies in whether they adopt the mechanism of observation. In this case, Roger's observation on Molly could be said to differ from Cynthia's descriptions,

because it appropriates the mechanism of gaze to capture Molly's image, rather than defining her image by using a literary reference coded with meanings. In other words, the visual techniques would produce images that are close to Barthes's "pure images," namely, self-evident images that convey "non-coded iconic messages" (Barthes, "Rhetoric" 36).

So far I have defined the function of narrative and visual techniques. In the next section, I will show in what ways the visual techniques hinder the linear progress of the plot design, and resulting in a broken image of the heroine.

II. Photographic Hindrance to the Narrative Development

This section is going to demonstrate how the visual techniques function in the novel to interrupt the linear sequence of Molly's development. It argues that although the narrative framework attempts to push Molly toward matured womanhood, the visual techniques always emerge and thwart this purpose. If examining the novel closely, one may find that even though the novel presents a linear process of growing from a social novice to a woman with matured character, the heroine's development is full of struggles due to the clash between photographic and narrative techniques. Whereas the narrative technique presents Molly's encouragement, the photographic impulse usually intervenes and tones down her courage. As the narrative technique drives Molly toward maturation, the visual technique would often emerge and pull her back to vulnerable state. The effect of the pushing and pulling by two techniques is that Molly's development becomes an incoherent process, and she never reaches the stage of self-fulfillment.

Before analyzing the effect of photographic techniques, I will spend a few passages explaining the narrative framework of the novel. Generally speaking, the narrative structure of *Wives and Daughters* attempts to push the heroine from

innocence to matured womanhood. Major events in the novel are staged to shape Molly's character, and to enhance her understanding of the reality (Shires 66). For instance, the novel consists of several critical moments in Molly's life—her father's marriage, Mrs. Hamley's death, Cynthia's scandal, and Osborne's secret—that function to forge a stronger character for Molly. They are hinge points in terms of narrative development that would determine whether she becomes wiser from trials, or is overwhelmed by frustration. Besides, by means of several female characters that function as role models, Molly is expected to learn the complexity of life, and to transform from a social novice to an understanding woman. It follows that in *Wives and Daughters* the success or failure of the heroine's development depends on whether she could be matured by her trials, and refines her relation with the society. As Linda M Shires puts it, "Maturing correctly is a prerequisite for functioning well in Victorian bourgeois society" (66).

Several structural designs of the novel fulfill "the novel of development," a common genre of the time that presents a progress of socialization of the central protagonist. First of all, in terms of plot arrangement, like a conventional novel of development, *Wives and Daughters* initiates Molly's story from a secluded and undisturbed life. The opening lines of the novel are tinged with dreamy elements of fairytales, which seem to slow down the flow of time, and reinforce the heroine's childhood as pure and fairylike:

> To begin with the old rigmarole 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…. It was a June morning, and early as it was, the room was full of sunny warmth and light. (*W & D* 1)

This opening brings out an air of childhood innocence and simplicity in Molly's early

years—like a babe in the wood, she has not yet gone through the trials and toils of the reality. As the novel suggests, Molly's simplicity is highly relevant to her father Mr. Gibson, whose discipline keeps her in a state of innocence. As he requires Molly's governess, "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 to her myself" (*W & D* 32). In addition to Molly's education, Mr. Gibson purposely shields Molly from worldly influence, such as fashion or material want. Under the sway of Mr. Gibson, Molly often dresses in plain white, unadorned and simple as a child: "Her frills, her frock, her ribbons were all snow-white" (10). Generally speaking, Molly's life at the beginning of the novel is tranquil and undisturbed. She knows a very few people in town, and her whole world is confined in Mr. Gibson's house.

After the depiction of childhood innocence, the love-letter incident is a turning point that initiates the learning process of the protagonist; it provokes Mr. Gibson to make some changes to their tranquil life, and thus speeds up Molly's first step of socialization. The heroine's secluded life comes to an end as she gradually grows up into a young woman. One day when Mr. Gibson finds out that Mr. Coxe, one of the pupils boarding in his house, is attracted to Molly and attempts to send a love letter to her, he suddenly realizes that Molly is no longer a little girl, but is growing fast into a woman, and is "already the passive object of some of the strong interests that affect a woman's life" (*W & D* 55). Mr. Gibson is relieved to find that Molly is still unaware of Mr. Cox's attention, and more importantly, unconscious of her own emotion. Yet alarmed by this episode, Mr. Gibson determines that something must be done immediately to isolate Molly from temptations. Without hesitation he sends Molly away to spend a long vacation with the Hamleys, whose mason is located seven miles from the town. Ironically, Mr. Gibson's action to shelter Molly actually pushes her

into more association with the society. In the Hamley hall, she would meet her future husband, getting involved in the Hamley's affair, and picking up her old connections with the Hollingford folks. What's more, Mr. Gibson's idea that he should find Molly a protector eventually leads to his second marriage. A stepmother and a stepsister thus enter Molly's simple life, and not only do they become Molly's competitors—one for her Father and the other for the man she loves, but show Molly practical perspectives of the reality. Thus, it can be inferred that Molly's first journey to the Hall signifies Molly's first step into the society.

Moreover, during the heroine's process of socialization, as one could find in a typical novel of development, there are many characters introduced to Molly's life and function as catalysts to her growth. Since Molly's first visit to the Hamley Hall, she gets to know more and more inhabitants in Hollingford, and their experiences and conducts become either exemplars for Molly to follow, or errors for her to avoid. For instance, against the example of her inconsiderate stepmother, Molly learns to think for others; following her father's example as a benevolent doctor, she cultivates a sympathetic heart. From Amiée's situation, she witnesses how it would be like being a widow and an unwelcome daughter-in-law in the society; she herself even has gone through the experience of a social outcast, though fortunately her reputation is rightfully restored in the end. Osborne's tragedy makes her realize that birth and death are both part of the circle of life; Lady Harriet's support lets her understand the value of friendship. In other words, the novel invests different functions on characters, so as to enhance the heroine's process of maturation. While Molly witnesses different fates of her social acquaintances, she also learns the meaning of birth, marriage, and death before she virtually experiences them on her own.

Finally, just as a novel of development ends in the protagonist's fulfillment, *Wives and Daughters* presents a union between Roger and Molly. Actually, when

Gaskell died a sudden death in November 12, 1865, the story was left unfinished with still one more chapter to be written. Yet according to the outline submitted to her publisher earlier in 1864, Gaskell had ordained a marriage for her hero and heroine. And based on this outline, the then editor of *Cornhill* Magazine, Frederick Greenwood, wrote a postscript to close up the story, which was included as a part of the novel ever since the first publication of *Wives and Daughters* later in 1866. The design for a happy ending reflects what Frank Kermode termed: "the desire of consonance" of the narrative structure (17). As Kermode argues, the ending of a novel has an underlying desire to achieve "a satisfying consonance with the origins and with the middle" (17). That is to say, it is essential that the ending must be in accord with the beginning. Thus *Wives and Daughters* prescribes a happy ending for the heroine after staging several trials and tests along the way of her socialization. The ending in marriage is the ultimate goal of the female protagonist in a conventional novel of development, and is often regarded as a reward to the heroine's virtue.

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After analyzing the novel's structural design that aiming to present the protagonist's growth, it is time to see how the photographic techniques interfere the heroine's development. As mentioned above, the story presents Molly's progress of socialization in chronological order. In the following section, I will demonstrate that within the four critical moments of Molly's life as mentioned above, whenever Molly successfully tackles with a problem, there are usually counterpoints to tone down her achievement; every time she manages to muster up courage to cope with a situation, there are always descriptions that diminish her capability. The result is an image of a girlish woman, who reveals a mixing quality of capability and inability. It echoes what Sandford commented that, "Weakness is an attraction, not a blemish" (quoted in

Stoneman, *Elizabeth* 176).

A. Silenced anger

Facing the first crisis of life, her father's marriage, Molly's important task is to form a strong character and to be independent; nevertheless, the clash of narrative and photographic techniques disturbs deeply this process. Based on the story, Molly cultivates a strong attachment to Mr. Gibson after they live together for a long time. She once said to Mr. Gibson that she wished to use a chain to tie them up together (*W & D* 25). Molly even appoints herself as the mistress of the family, who takes care of household chores, ensuring that each day Mr. Gibson could go to see his patients without worries. Now that a third person joins the family, Molly has to surrender her habitual tasks associating with delights to the stepmother. Moreover, Molly must learn to be more independent than before, instead of relying on her parents. It is because the new Mrs. Gibson, who is expected to give Molly motherly care and instruction, turns out to be very shallow, inconsiderate, and unperceptive person (185). What's worse, Molly has to keep silent on her stepmother's folly from time to time, for fear that she might hurt her father's feeling or arouse his sense of regret.

During this episode, to begin with, the narrative technique stresses Molly's reaction against the idea of submitting to her new mother. She doubts the value of self-sacrifice, wondering if she must suppress her own feeling for the sake of others' happiness. As the narrator's voice presenting her mind, "does thinking more of others mean giving up her very individuality, quenching all the warm love, the keen desires, that made her herself?" (*W & D* 138). Thus she tells Lady Harriet indignantly, "I should hate to be managed" (165). And in replying to Roger's suggestion that she would get through the jam by and by if she represses her emotion and surrender to her stepmother, Molly's reaction is,

> "No, I shan't!" said Molly, shaking her head. "It will be very dull when I

> shall have killed myself, as it were, and live only in trying to do, and to be, as other people like. I don't see any end to it. I might as well never have lived. And as for the happiness you speak of, I shall never be happy again" (*W & D* 139).

Molly's words reveal her rebellious thought against the idea of self-sacrifice. It seems that Molly has a strong mind of her own regardless of the social convention, and she tries to safeguard her personal will rather then succumbing to someone else's demands.

Nevertheless, in the same passage, a moment of gaze from the omniscient narrator betrays her resolution. Some descriptions on her looks immediately contradict her words: "her lips trembling, and on the point of crying again" (139). This observation on her look attenuates the power of her anger embodied in her words. It not only feminizes her appearance, but also reduces her reactionary force. The effect is a mixture of girl-woman—although her words express rebellious thought, her behaviors give an impression of vulnerability. With occasions like these, as a result, the photographic impulse of the novel hinders the narrative attempt to establish a strong will for the heroine.

As a result, during this crisis, whereas narrative techniques attempt to push Molly to form a strong will, the photographic impulse of the novel always emerges and interrupts her courage and resolution. The result is an image of Molly that wavers between rebelliousness and submissiveness.

B. Curtailed power

Molly's second task is to cultivate her capability to help other people, learning to release herself from self-indulged egotism to altruism; however, as the following examples will demonstrate, the contradictory forces of photographic and narrative techniques make her image waver between a capable woman who can console other

people, and a vulnerable girl who needs protection.

In this episode, the narrative establishes Molly's first stay at the Hamley Hall as a breakthrough from her secluded life. Based on the novel's descriptions, Molly fits in the Hamley's family very well ever since her first arrival. Very soon Molly becomes an important emotional supporter to the family—she gives the invalid Mrs. Hamley soothing comforts, cheering up Squire Hamley's spirit, and being like a little sister who adores and accompanies Roger. Before long Molly earns the status as a daughter surrogate in the family, and is cherished by other members in that house. For instance, once Mrs. Hamley says to Molly, "You're a real blessing to mothers, child! You give one such pleasant sympathy, both in one's gladness and in one's sorrow; in one's pride… and in one's disappointment" (86). Because Molly dedicates a lot to the family, when she leaves the Hamley Hall, the whole family feels something is missing. As the narrator describes, the squire thinks of Molly constantly: "It has been so pleasant to have her there daily fulfilling all the pretty offices of a daughter, cheering the meals, so often tête-a-tête betwixt him and Roger, with her innocent wise questions, her lively interests in their talk, her merry replies to his banter" (*W & D* 152). And Mrs. Hamley is the person who felt most acutely when Molly is summoned back home. In short, there are many passages that delineate Molly as a helpful assistant, indicating that her first step into the society is successful. It seems that staying at the Hamley Hall is the first time she has a chance to dedicate to other people rather than being sheltered by her father.

However, during the same episode, narrative descriptions on Molly's success are constantly interrupted by photographic descriptions that turn her image from that of a helper to the one being helped. In this case, the photographic descriptions consist of moments that resort to other characters' eyes to present Molly's manners and looks. For instance, both Mr. and Mrs. Hamley's observations on Molly expose

her vulnerability. Since the day Molly arrives, Mrs. Hamley observes traces of sadness "in Molly's eyes and changes of color," realizing that Molly is sensitive to the issue of her father's second marriage (*W & D* 68). Under Squire's inspection, Molly also appears as an inexperienced child who needs guidance. There is a scene when Molly and Squire take a walk together in the garden. When the squire "watches her protectively on her way along the field-path," he suddenly feels an urge to shelter the girl from any worries (75). Similarly, through the perspective of Mr. and Mrs. Hamley, Molly's behavior remains childlike, who would be seen "dancing and singing inarticulate ditties about the house and garden" (79). Because Molly still has an air of simplicity, Mrs. Hamley determines to treat her gently, and to be more careful when speaking to her lest she might hurt Molly's feeling, while Mr. Hamley keeps reminding himself, "One has need to be on one's guard as to what one says before her" (75). As a result, Molly's power to influence people is immediately curtailed.

Other than Mr. and Mrs. Hamley, Roger is another character in the same scene that provides photographic perspectives on Molly, which at once belittles and feminizes the heroine's image. In an episode Molly and Roger are talking together about Mr. Gibson's future marriage. Through Roger's viewpoint, the novel exposes the girlish quality in Molly's image:

> She had never spoken so long a sentence to him before; and when she had said it, though she did not take her eyes away from his, as they stood steadily looking at each other, she blushed a little; she could not have told why. Nor did he tell himself why a sudden pleasure came to him when he gazed at her simple expressive face. (*W & D* 140)

This passage is visually oriented not only because it is based on eye contacts, but also because it captures Molly's image through the perspective of Roger. Although the two people are observing each other at the same time, it is Roger's viewpoint that

dominates, and brings out more visual information about Molly's behaviors for the readers. Molly's blush betrays her lack of confidence—she is not yet sure if her opinion is worthy other's attention, and if her long speech would be approved by someone who appears much wiser and superior to her. Her expressive countenance also discloses the fact that she is not sophisticated enough to hide her emotions from other peoples' inspection. In short, this passage debilitates Molly's capability by arousing a feminine image. Molly becomes merely an object pleasant to be looked at under Roger's gaze.

In the same passage, obviously, Roger's observation turns Molly into a girl who needs guidance. After Molly's long speech questioning the value of self-sacrifice, Roger decides to provide his own insight for her as an advice. While he is talking, he notices that "Molly opens her eyes wide" when she hears Roger using the word "metaphysics" (140). So Roger couldn't help wondering, "Had she been talking metaphysics without knowing it?" (140) Here I suggest that with this glimpse of Molly captured by Roger, Molly is reduced to a novice who does not realize her full potential. A superior mentor is thus required to find out her merits, and to discover the "unconscious depth" in her words (139). In other words, Molly's charm seems to lie in her unrealized potential. It is her simplicity, rather than her capability, that becomes a major factor of her attraction to Roger. Eventually, Molly's role as a helper is reversed to a girl who needs guidance.

To sum up Molly's second task, the clash between photographic and narrative techniques creates an image of what I call "the charm of incapability" for the heroine. As the novel switches strategies of representation, Molly's image wavers between a capable woman who could console other people, and a vulnerable girl who needs protection. Whereas narrative descriptions endeavor to construct Molly's capability, photographic descriptions emerge now and then to highlight her helplessness and

vulnerability. That is to say, descriptions based on vision always counterbalance the linear development of the narrative lines. And the result is a mixture of capability and incapability, a semi-independent woman struggling on the way to fulfill her potential.

C. A compromised triumph

The third crisis happens when Molly becomes a scapegoat in Cynthia's scandal. Although the narrative accolades Molly's perseverance, and the plot development accumulates to a triumphant moment of her life, Molly's achievement is soon counterbalanced by photographic representations of her feeble state of health due to her sudden illness.

The story goes that after Cynthia is engaged to Roger, Molly decides to help Cynthia break up her previous secret engagement with Mr. Preston, so as to exempt her from Father's and future husband's blame. Yet while acting as Cynthia's messenger, Molly is mistaken by the townspeople as having a clandestine affair with Mr. Preston. As the rumor spreads, Molly becomes an object of denigration in town, where "every one makes it their business to cast dirt on a girl's name who has disregarded the commonest rules of modesty and property" (*W & D* 543). As depicted in a chapter titled "An Innocent Culprit" (XLVIII), Molly realizes that everyone in town "is civil to her, but no one is cordial"; she could feel in many social occasions that "she is only tolerated, not welcome" (548). It becomes the toughest time for Molly, and the greatest challenge to her wisdom. As the novel describes that, "To have everybody—all her world—thinking evil of her, did seem hard to the girl who had never thought or said an unkind thing of them" (547).

In terms of narrative devices, the narrating prose highlights Molly's courageous deeds during the time she falls victim to scandals. In spite of her difficult situation, Molly decides to bear slanders for the sake of Cynthia. Because Molly fears that

Cynthia's complicated past might enrage Mr. Gibson, hurt Roger's feeling, or even impel Cynthia to leave Hollingford, she willingly becomes Cynthia's scapegoat rather than speaking any word in defense of herself. Molly is determined to defy the townspeople with silence, and to "bear the burden of her own free will" (*W & D* 549), believing that the scandal would eventually cease so long as she keeps doing the right things. In response to Mr. Gibson's desperate inquiry, Molly simply says, "It is like tooth-drawing, it will be over some time. It would be much worse if I had really been doing wrong" (547). And she is the person who consoled her father courageously: "We should outlive these rumors, never fear" (545). It seems that many trials and tasks in the early stage of Molly's life have turned her into a determined woman who could act upon her own judgment.

Meanwhile, the novel carefully prepares for Molly's triumph over the battle against the injustice. After several events testing Molly's power of forbearance, Lady Harriet emerges as *deus ex machina* to restore Molly's reputation. After her private investigation, one day Lady Harriet arrives at Hollingford and openly demonstrates her strong supports to Molly. With Lady Harriet's patronage, Molly's brave heart and deeds are eventually disclosed to the townspeople, which marked Molly's moment of victory. What's more, at about the same time when Molly's reputation is restored, another plot sequence reinforces the glorious moment of Molly's life—the Hamley's gratitude toward Molly's devotion. As described in the chapter "Molly Gibson's Worth is Discovered" (LIV), all at once many people find out they are indebted to Molly in many ways. Squire Hamley is extremely grateful to Molly's unconditional support; Mr. Gibson realizes how important Molly is to him; and Mrs. Gibson even changes her picky attitude toward Molly. This seems to be a rewarding moment in Molly's life: after a long time of acquiescence and endurance, Molly's development finally reaches a successful point.

This episode is often quoted as evidence of Molly's strong will and independent character, but few critics have indicated that as a matter of fact, this short moment of glory is soon anti-climaxed by Molly's chronicle illness. Molly's health breaks down due to her intensive labor and devotion to the Hamleys. The novel depicts that under the Hamleys' regard, the "faintly-smiling, tearful Molly" is transported from the Hamley Hall to her father's house for medical care (*W & D* 613). In other words, it could not be ignored that after Molly's triumph, a chronicle illness ensues and almost threatens to claim her life—an anti-climax to Molly's successful moments.

I suggest that a great number of photographic techniques emerge and expose Molly's poor state of health ever since her illness. Because of some photographic techniques, Molly's image is reversed to a feminine character—a woman who is prone to tears and easily agitated. For instance, from Roger's perspective, he sees the invalid Molly "colored all over" when she is aware of his regard; he even sees Molly "suddenly began to tremble with emotion" when she tries to suppress her intense feeling (632). The omniscient narrator exposes Molly's frailty too. When depicting a conversation between Roger and Molly, the narrator's eyes witness subtle changes on Molly's face: "The pink flush came out on Molly's cheeks; once or twice she was on the point of speaking, but again she thought better of it; and the pauses between the faint disjointed remarks became longer and longer" (*W & D* 632). Exposing to the gaze of the narrator, Molly's image is reduced to a pitiful object that deserves other character's concern. Last but not least, Lady Harriet's observation on Molly also works against her power. In a scene when Lady Harriet visits Molly on her sickbed, she sees Molly's sentimental reaction as an expression of gratitude: "She [Molly] stopped, for she could hardly go on without open crying, and she did not want to do that" (642). When Lady Harriet tries to cheer her up, she sees that "Molly kept silence, though her lips quivered from time to time" (644). As a result, this illness

confiscates Molly's power to handle the critical situation, since her role is reduced from an active giver to a passive receiver. The heroine's passivity is also enhanced by photographic techniques, which turn her into a fragile object under scrutiny, and reverse her role from an observer to the one being observed.

Therefore, although Molly has gradually formed a strong character under many trials, in this anti-climatic episode, photographic descriptions destroy the strong will she possesses. Because of these visually based descriptions, Molly is once more reduced to a delicate and tearful girl, so much so that the heroine's formation of strong character, and her struggles toward autonomy are impeded once more.

D. Unfulfilled potential

The last critical moment in Molly's life is Osborne's death, the time for her to face the last challenge—whether she could work single-handedly to help the Hamleys pass through the dire time after Osborne's death. Nevertheless, due to the clash between narrative and photographic techniques, Molly wavers between acting upon her own judgment and submitting to Father's authority.

According to the novel's narrating prose, when the news of Osborne's sudden death reaches the Gibson family, Molly is the most composed person in the house. She cautiously inquires the messenger to verify the truth, and then orders her tearful servant to prepare for her horse. She knows well that it is no time for tears, and she must set off immediately to the Hamley Hall. Molly's first thought goes to the old squire, knowing that the news would be a great blow to him. She tells her mother resolutely, "I am going. I must go. I cannot bear to think of him alone" (581). Another mission Molly has in mind is to disclose Osborne's status, as she was entrusted before—that Osborne not only is secretly married to a French woman, but also has a child. As a secret-bearer, it is time to fulfill Osborne's wish. So Molly rides by herself for seven miles to get to the Hamley Hall. Molly's timely arrival

gives the old squire a lot of comfort. Even though it is not easy for a young woman to face death so closely, and to see the body of Osborne lying still before her eyes, Molly expresses her capacity to sooth the grief-stricken old squire. Her independent action and judgment signify a moment of breakthrough in her life.

Nevertheless, these narrative descriptions on Molly's ability are soon counterbalanced by some highlights on her manners. When Molly turns to look for her father's advice, the novel exposes Molly's disturbing emotion from the viewpoint of Mr. Gibson:

> A fit of sobbing came upon her, which her father was afraid would end in hysterics. But suddenly she mastered herself, and looked up into his anxious face, and smiled to reassure him. "I could not help it, papa!"
> "No, I know. Go on with what you were saying. You ought to be in bed; but if you have a secret on mind you won't sleep." (*W & D* 585)

This detailed observation on Molly's manners exposes her vulnerability at once. Under the moment of photographic scrutiny, Molly becomes a fragile girl who struggles to control her emotion and to suppress her fears. The previous descriptions of Molly's determination to help others are soon reduced by these visual-oriented descriptions on her sentimentality. And her role as a helper immediately reverses to the one who appeals to her father for comfort. Besides, the readers are allowed to witness Molly's gingerly behavior as if through an imaginary camera lens. Occasionally Molly glances at her father in-between her sentences, observing his reactions and looking for signs of his approval (*W & D* 588). Sometimes she would look at her father, "as if questioning him as to the desirableness of telling the few further particulars that she knew" (588). Sometimes she elbows her father to finish the lines that she failed to deliver: "'And the child,' whispered Molly to her father" (590), so Mr. Gibson takes over her speech to explain to the squire. Because of her

father's composed manner, by and by Molly controls her emotion and reveals the whole truth she knows about Osborne.

As a result, the clash of different techniques of representations marks the female protagonist in such a way as to split into two incompatible personalities, and thus making the heroine waver between courageousness and cowardice, and between Father's authority and her own judgment. When descriptions of Molly's autonomy are interrupted from time to time by photographic descriptions on her tearful face, the heroine's courage is soon reduced. Her capability is eventually diminished by her sentimental behavior. The effect of this episode is that Molly Gibson looks like a sensitive girl who manages to be brave when facing a difficult situation that she does not have enough experience to cope with. She tries hard to be strong in spite of her sensitive heart and limited experience. Under this circumstance, it is Mr. Gibson who handles the whole situation with his rational mind, trying to pacify Molly's disturbing emotions. Molly's capability is eventually overshadowed by her father's authority.

This chapter has demonstrated the clash between narrative techniques and photographic techniques in Gaskell's novel *Wives and Daughters*. From the examples above, it becomes clear that Molly's images under photographic representation form a sharp contrast to those delineated by narrative representation. Photographic observations in the novel always stress the feminine qualities of the heroine. They highlight her tears, stressing her delicacy, and feminizing her appearance. The effect is like taking a picture of the heroine: with these snapshots, the novel captures her moments of weakness, freezing her sad looks, and turning the heroine's frustration into an art of vulnerability. Therefore, as photographic techniques clash with narrative techniques in Gaskell's text, Molly's image remains ambivalent throughout the novel. When she is depicted by narrative techniques, her

image is a lively and naughty girl; yet when presented by photographic techniques, she immediately becomes a fragile and feminine character.