Mrs Gaskell's works reveal a strong commitment to life. This should not surprise us in a woman who lived her own life so fully, enjoying her children's growth and company, travel, food and drink and lively conversation. In her fiction this commitment is seen in the many examples of self-redemption, even in the jaws, as it were, of tragedy, loss and death. Susan Dixon, in 'Half A Life-Time Ago', would seem condemned to spending the remainder of her life bitter and regretful, cut off from the world in her lonely farmhouse, her youth and love wasted. But a snowstorm and a heroic effort on her ex-lover's behalf lead her to find renewed commitment to life in looking after his wife and family. Margaret Hale, alone and cast down by loss of her family and friends, contemplates retirement from life into a convent. She is rescued by love. Miss Matty's sad life is redeemed by her brother's return. Ruth's whole story might be said to be one of self-redemption.

'Sylvia's Lovers', however, is a rather different case, in that it presents us with problems to which there seems no solution, in this world at least. The reconciliation of the two main protagonists comes too late, when she is worn out with cares and loss, and he maimed and disfigured. The loss which is, even partially, made good in so many of her novels and tales, here appears irredeemable. There is a strong sense of entrapment running through the book, and seen in human terms in the hopeless pursuit of one human being by another. Sylvia desires Kinraid; Philip, Sylvia; Hester silently yearns after Philip and Coulson after Hester. At two extremes Kinraid and Coulson find a reconciliation with their desires – Kinraid by carelessly...
marrying a wealthy and beautiful Southerner and turning his back on his whole past life; Coulson by marrying a worthy, dull girl 'as soon as he was convinced his object was decidedly out of his reach' (244). But Sylvia, Philip and Hester are all condemned to self-sacrifice, seclusion and regret.

As striking as the sense of powerlessness in the human state is the way in which people are intimately bound up with place. Seldom can a novelist's deliberate cultivation of a setting have yielded richer rewards than Mrs Gaskell's decision to visit Whitby and set her tale there. Her imaginative achievement is one which combines an absorption of local history and customs, the sense of an age, both in domestic details and 'public' history and a strong feeling for the topography of an area and its metaphoric potential.

Time and place come together in such pervasive details as the difficulty of travel, the self-sufficiency and parochialism of small communities and the general slowness of life - at times a slowness and inactivity which could induce boredom in the shallow-minded, as when Daniel Robson is trapped at home by bad weather. The importance Mrs Gaskell attached to historical perspective on human actions is witnessed by her remarks on human modes of thought:

It is astonishing to look back and find how differently constituted were the minds of most people fifty or sixty years ago; they felt, they understood, without going through reasoning or analytic processes, (SL 318)

This may be a Romantic myth, but it suggests that these people are in a world more instinctive than our own, one less distracted by complexity of thought and manners, one in which the heart is more open to other hearts, feelings are clearer and stronger, affections simpler and more directly expressed. In this it contrasts with the more evasive, subtle discourse of Wives and Daughters or North and South. The distance in time gives a further dimension to the question of knowledge also. Philip's literacy is not to be taken for granted. He has a special power in a society which functions well without 'book-learning' most of the time, but is pathetically vulnerable when the distant and