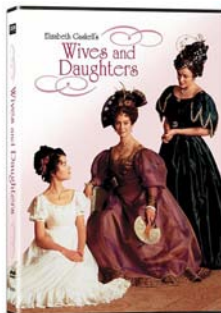


Discussion Questions

- 1 The women in *Wives and Daughters* lead daily lives that conform to 19th century gender roles for women of their class: they manage the household, arrange flowers, do needlework, and take direction from their husbands, brothers, and fathers. Does the novel offer any critique of Victorian male authority? From a 21st-century perspective, would you consider Elizabeth Gaskell a feminist?
- 2 Elizabeth Gaskell lived during a period when the traditional social and political structure of English society was changing. Does *Wives and Daughters* challenge traditional ideas of social class? List the characters in descending order by their social class. Then list the characters in descending order for quality of mind and/or strength of character. How closely do the two lists match up? What do you think Gaskell believed about the importance of social class?
- 3 Friendship is a prominent theme in the novel. Select three sets of friends from the story. What does each show about the nature of friendship? Which friendships are unexpected or surprising? Which friendships are strongest, and why?
- 4 *Wives and Daughters* has been praised for the three-dimensional quality of its characters, even those who are less appealing, such as Mrs. Kirkpatrick. How does Gaskell help us understand and sympathize with the novel's less likeable characters? How does she reveal the flaws of the more sympathetic characters, such as Molly? Is there a character in her novel that is too good to be true? Is there a character that is too bad to be believable?
- 5 Anthony Howell, who plays Roger in the film, describes his character as "an unheroic hero." How does Roger differ from a typical hero? From the other men in the novel? From his brother Osborne? Why is it significant that Roger is a scientist and an explorer? What does this rising star at Cambridge need to learn from Molly?
- 6 The parent/child relationships in the Gibson household and at Hamley Hall are at the emotional center of the novel. What universal stories does the novel tell about parents and their children? Which relationships did you find most compelling or believable? What are the barriers that keep parents and their children from understanding each other more completely? Do similar barriers still exist today?
- 7 *Wives and Daughters* begins like many fairy tales: a single father with a daughter remarries, bringing a stepmother with children of her own into the household. How is Gaskell's story similar to and different from stepmother fairy tales you recall? Why do you think so many storytellers have used the stepmother plot?

- 8 Gaskell died before she finished *Wives and Daughters*. The manuscript ends after Roger leaves again for Africa without telling Molly how he feels. Gaskell's notes indicated that she intended to write a love scene and a happy ending for Molly and Roger upon Roger's return. How did screenwriter Andrew Davies choose to script the final scenes? What do you think of his ending? Is the film's imagined ending consistent with the rest of the novel and the period in which it was written? How do you think Elizabeth Gaskell would react if she had a chance to see the end of the film?
- 9 Andrew Davies believes that *Wives and Daughters* will appeal to today's audiences because it is a story about second families—common in the 19th century because of high death rates and common today because of divorce and remarriage. Do you agree? What other themes, conflicts, or ideas in this 19th century novel are relevant for modern readers?

Wives and Daughters, by Elizabeth Gaskell, was first published in 1866. For more about the MASTERPIECE film *Wives and Daughters* and related features, visit <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/wives/index.html>.



You can purchase the *Wives and Daughters* DVD from shoppbs.org. Enter code BOOKANDFILM during checkout to receive a 15% discount.

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