CLASSICS LIBRARY · STORY MAP

# Ruth

**Elizabeth Gaskell** · *1853 · original English text*

There is an assize-town in one of the eastern counties, once distinguished by the Tudor sovereigns, whose old importance surprises the modern traveller. From that town the book follows Ruth Hilton, a young apprentice, into a fall, a concealment, a long repentance, and a costly redemption. The hosted text is Gaskell's original English, Project Gutenberg #4275, complete. Teach the "fallen woman" plot with tact and gravity.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

## What does Christian compassion require when a young woman has fallen, and a child is born, and a good house must decide whether truth and mercy can live together, and how should a school read that story without gossip?

*"There is an assize-town in one of the eastern counties which was much distinguished by the Tudor sovereigns, and, in consequence of their favour and protection, attained a degree of importance that surprises the modern traveller."*

opening

Ruth is a novel of sin, secrecy, repentance, and mercy, written by a Christian moralist who will not make the fallen woman a joke or a mere warning. Mr Benson's household takes Ruth in. A lie is told for a time, and has a cost. The close is a death, and a child's words—"My mother is dead, sir"—and an old adversary led by sympathy to comfort the son. Teach with tact and gravity, for older students. The book is a plea for compassion; it is also exact about the cost of sin and of concealment.

KEY CHARACTERS

**Ruth Hilton**
*The young woman whose fall, concealment, repentance, and death the book follows*

**Thurstan Benson**
*The minister whose household takes her in, and whose compassion is the book's Christian center*

**Faith Benson**
*His sister, who shares the risk and the care of that household*

**Bellingham**
*The man of the fall, whose charm and selfishness the book does not excuse*

**Mr Bradshaw**
*A figure of respectability who is hard, and who, at the close, is moved to comfort the son*

**Ruth's son**
*The child of the story, who says at the close, "My mother is dead, sir."*

AN ASSIZE-TOWN, AND A LAST WORD

> *"There is an assize-town in one of the eastern counties which was much distinguished by the Tudor sovereigns, and, in consequence of their favour and protection, attained a degree of importance that surprises the modern traveller."*
>
> opening

> *"My mother is dead, sir."*
>
> the close

**Grades 11–12**
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01
### An Assize-Town
THE OPENING

*The book opens on an eastern assize-town of old Tudor favour, whose picturesque grandeur, a hundred years ago, surprises the later traveller. Ruth Hilton's early life belongs to this place.*

- The first sentence is exact, including "favour" in the English spelling and "assize-town"
- The town is not named in that sentence; do not invent a place-name the opening does not give
- Ruth is young, inexperienced, and placed where she can be harmed; the early chapters should be read with care
- This is already a novel of a society, not only of one girl

> *"There is an assize-town in one of the eastern counties which was much distinguished by the Tudor sovereigns, and, in consequence of their favour and protection, attained a degree of importance that surprises the modern traveller."*
>
> opening

02
### The Fall
THE EARLY CHAPTERS

*Ruth, an apprentice, is led into a fall. Bellingham's charm and selfishness are the book's first moral fact about the man. The book is frank, and it is reserved; teach it that way.*

- Do not put a prurient scene on the map. Name the fall as the book names it, with gravity
- The desertion that follows is part of the sin's cost, not an accident only
- Ruth is not a type in Gaskell's hands; she is a particular young woman, with a soul
- For older students; prepare the reading

03
### The Bensons, and a Concealment
THE MIDDLE OF THE BOOK

*Thurstan Benson and his sister Faith take Ruth in. A child is born. A story is told to the world that is not the whole truth. Mercy and a lie live for a time in the same house.*

- The Bensons' compassion is the book's Christian center; take it seriously
- The concealment has a cost, and the book will not forget it
- Mr Bradshaw and the town's respectability are the social weather of this life
- Teach the moral complication: kindness is not the same as a lie, and a lie is not the same as kindness

04
### Truth, Cost, and a Last Mercy
THE LATER CHAPTERS, AND THE CLOSE

*The truth comes out, and it costs. Ruth's later life is a long making-good, including a costly service in sickness. She dies. Her son can find, when surprised in his grief, nothing to say but "My mother is dead, sir."*

- The last movement includes Mr Bradshaw, once hard, now leading and comforting the son, unable for a moment to speak to his old friend Benson "for the sympathy which choked up his voice, and filled his eyes with tears."
- "My mother is dead, sir." is the child's account of the loss; teach it with gravity
- Do not invent a last-minute social triumph the book does not give
- The close is mercy after judgment, not a shrug at the earlier sin

> *"My mother is dead, sir."*
>
> the close

05
### The Hosted File, and How to Teach It
PG #4275

*The hosted text is complete, original English, 1853. A Christian novel of a "fallen woman," taught with tact and gravity, for older students.*

- Gaskell is pleading for compassion without denying sin; keep both
- This may be read with other Victorian novels of repentance and of the social world, but it is its own case and its own mercy
- Quote the hosted wording, including "favour" and "assize-town"
- Do not treat the subject as gossip, and do not treat the heroine as a lesson only

Sin and Repentance | Christian Compassion | Truth and Concealment | A Costly Mercy | A Child of the Story | A Town's Judgment

## What to watch for as you read

GRADES 11–12

1. The book opens: "There is an assize-town in one of the eastern counties which was much distinguished by the Tudor sovereigns, and, in consequence of their favour and protection, attained a degree of importance that surprises the modern traveller."
2. This is Gaskell's original English, 1853, PG #4275, complete. Teach the "fallen woman" plot with tact and gravity, for older students. It is not gossip.
3. The Bensons' compassion is the Christian center. A concealment is told, and it has a cost. Mercy and a lie are not the same.
4. The close includes the child's words, "My mother is dead, sir," and Mr Bradshaw leading and comforting the son. Teach it as mercy after judgment, not as a shrug.
5. The book pleads for compassion without denying sin. Keep both.

**Quotations** are verbatim from the original English text, Project Gutenberg #4275, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/ruth/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.