

# **Preservation and Progress in *Cranford***

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## Introduction and Thesis

Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* was first published between 1851 and 1853 as a series of episodic stories in *Household Words* under the the editorship of Charles Dickens; it wasn't until later that *Cranford* was published in single volume book form. Essentially, *Cranford* is a collection of stories about a group of elderly single Victorian ladies and the society in which they live. As described in its opening sentence, "In the first place, Cranford is in possession of the Amazons; all the holders of houses, above certain rent, are women" (1). *Cranford* is portrayed through the eyes of the first person narrator, Mary Smith, an unmarried woman from Drumble who visits Cranford occasionally to stay with the Misses Deborah and Matilda Jenkyns. Through Mary's observations the reader becomes acquainted with society at Cranford as well as Cranfordian tradition and ways of life.

Gaskell's creation of *Cranford* was based on her own experiences growing up in the small English town of Knutsford. She made two attempts previous to *Cranford* to document small town life based on her Knutsford experiences: the first a nonfiction piece titled "The Last Generation" (1849) that captured her personal memories in a kind of historical preservation, the second was a fictional piece, "Mr. Harrison's Confessions" (1851), which attempted to disguise her memories as humorous fiction. From its beginning, Gaskell's *Cranford* project focused on the retelling of an antiquated society in a kind of historical preservation. At the start of her *Cranford* project, Gaskell, in her early forties, returned to Knutsford and noted the changes that had come to the rural dwelling since her girlhood; it was "...as if science and progress were sweeping away the era of her youth" (Uglow 279). Gaskell embarked on the *Cranford* project as a means of coping with the loss of the past. In *Mrs. Gaskell, The Basis for Reassessment*, Edgar Wright states that Gaskell concerns herself with the continuity of tradition, and that "Cranford is itself a symbol of moral and social virtues and an attitude to life which is worth preserving..." (76). *Cranford* is a replication of the past, and as such it offers an intricate taxonomy of the routines, traditions, rules, values, and norms of various interactions in an old-fashioned small town. In this, *Cranford's* narrative can read like an ethnographic report bent on preserving detail of life lived with the Amazons.

Alison Kiesel elaborates upon the idea of preservation in *Cranford* in her article "Meaning and Misinterpretation in *Cranford*." She describes the society at Cranford on the brink of change, an isolated Garden of Eden doomed to fall into modern times. Cranford is symbolic of a colony on the verge of being colonized by industrial London. For this reading Mary's narrative indicates that an unwelcome change is coming to Cranford; she is likened to an ethnographer in an alien culture,

making careful observations while Cranfordians cling to the past as a means to ward off inevitable outside stimulation. In Kiesel's words:

In this short, deceptively tranquil novel, Gaskell portrays the intricate codes and interpretative systems that this new Eden requires while simultaneously chronicling the story of its transformation/corruption. [...] Through its inescapable penetration by men, industrial and financial capitalism, technology, and alien imports, Cranford approaches a second fall so dire that only the miraculous, messianic return of Peter can redeem it (1003).

Kiesel's reading of *Cranford* still gives the illusion of a traumatically progressive movement from the old to the new. It suggests that the driving force of the novel is change. I would rather postulate that change and the future are not the main drives in *Cranford* but catalysts motivating a desire for historic preservation through literature.

The threat of change and the loss it can incur creates the need to preserve a detailed version of the past. Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* can be interpreted as a piece looking backwards as a means of looking forward; acknowledging and commemorating the existence of a rich and detailed past allows for the closing of its chapters, and thus eventual movement into a new future. In this paper I will be investigating *Cranford* as a piece that addresses the consequences of widescale cultural change. Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* offers insight to the author's pervading ideology regarding different kinds of change and the role that literature takes in its wake. I have divided my work into three main sections; the first centers on the rejection of radical change in Cranford on the level of plot, the second focuses on Gaskell's skepticism of traditional progress in *Cranford* and *Wives and Daughters*, and lastly, the third section addresses how Gaskell uses literature as a kind of historical transmission that helps to cope with change. I intend to prove that Cranford is a representative element of the past, and as such, *Cranford* does not change, but it is a response to change that cements a memory of old-fashioned English countrylife in the minds of readers as an act of historical preservation. Gaskell's creation of this static tableau of the past can be seen as a direct response to encroaching social change. In the creation of such a tableau, Gaskell actively offers a new opportunity of transmitting the essence of the past through literature.

## **Rejection of Radical Change in *Cranford***

The absence of a teleological plot in *Cranford* contributes to the feeling that *Cranford* is, in itself, a non-progressive tableau of the past. In this tableau Gaskell de-emphasizes the existence of a forward moving time flow by creating few successions of causally related events in the plot. Because of its episodic structure and attention to superfluous detail, it is difficult to find a trail of causation in *Cranford* that could serve as the skeleton for a plot. *Cranford's* different episodic

descriptions are almost like capsulized moments in time that bear little relation or connection to one another, and in this way, the method of publishing as a series is directly mirrored in the narrative structure. From one isolated episode to the next few causal ties are found through which one suspects the development of a comprehensive, overarching plot. Gaskell does not show Cranford's movement toward a future, or even a teleological plot focused on outcome, because the Cranford as Mary Smith knows it does not have a future; the outcome of the plot is inconsequential. Instead, *Cranford* is a work of nostalgia in itself, obsessed with the taxonomy of outdated, and often absurd rituals in the earlier part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. *Cranford's* plotless narrative structure indicates a society not changing or moving forward, but on the verge of becoming extinct. Therefore, the focus and driving force of the novel is one of preservation: the execution of Cranford's memoirs before its inevitable decay.

By downplaying causal events that might come together to weave a progressive plotline, Gaskell slows the flow of time in *Cranford*, creating a crystalized social situation that does not focus on progress and development, but on preservation of a given moment. Cranford is in itself an isolated social bubble suspended in time; it does not join the outside world in its movement towards change, but hangs back in space as some leftover remnant of the past. In this section I intend to prove that Cranford is an element of the past; such a one that cannot or will not move forward into modernity because of its failure to adapt to newly developing influences mandatory for its progress.

In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, *Cranford* was received by an audience whose national identity and unity was dependent on invaluable innovations made possible by industrialization. England was a rapidly developing nation that valued technological advancement and economic progress, both of which propelled society into a fast-paced pattern of constant change. According to Maureen Moran, in this period "Scarcely a single aspect of daily life was untouched by science and technology" (55). Because of this, Victorian England underwent a dynamic revolution in its traditions, values, and identity. For the sake of clarity, I will label this kind of change as *radical*, because it is directly associated with Industrialism and the kind of change it represents was completely new and innovative, meaning, it did not exist previously in Victorian culture. *Cranford* captures a picture of an older, more stagnant England isolated from the influences of modernity and rejecting the possibilities of radical change. The juxtaposition of the situations of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century English reader versus that of the characters at Cranford supplies much of the humor in the novel. *Cranford* is written for an audience that has accepted radical change, an audience that practices more modern customs than those at Cranford. The modern Victorian reader is meant to understand that customs at Cranford belong to an older age; they are different, much less "advanced" than those of the reader and therefore humorous. For example, Miss Deborah Jenkyns' preference for Dr. Johnson's

*Rasselas* over Dickens' enormously popular *The Pickwick Papers* might be quite an antiquated opinion in the 1850's, but the fact that Miss Jenkyns "considered herself literary" based only on her knowledge of Johnson and ownership of "a number of manuscript sermons, and a pretty good library of divinity" (7) is most likely to be ridiculous to the modern reader.

The distance between the reader and the characters not only provides this kind of humor, but also a sense that societies such as Cranford are part of a dying breed. The Victorian reader, being versed in the widespread "modern" Victorian conventions and values, separates Cranfordian convention as old-fashioned and abnormal, thereby equating them and it with the past. In its opening passages of the first chapter, the reader learns that Cranford is not a masculine center of business and industry, but a primarily domestic sphere maintained by women. Men are almost completely absent from Cranford; the narrator comments:

What could they do if they were there? The surgeon has his round of thirty miles, and sleeps at Cranford; but every man cannot be a surgeon. For keeping the trim gardens full of choice flowers without a weed to speck them; for frightening away little boys who look wistfully at the said flowers through the railings; for rushing out at the geese that occasionally venture into the gardens if the gates are left open; for deciding all questions of literature and politics without troubling themselves with unnecessary reasons or arguments; for obtaining clear and correct knowledge of everybody's affairs in the parish; for keeping neat maid-servants in admirable order; for kindness (somewhat dictatorial) to the poor, and real tender good offices to each other whenever they are in distress, the ladies of Cranford are quite sufficient. 'A man,' as one of them observed to me once, 'is *so* in the way in the house!' (1).

This excerpt seems to suggest that the absence of men in Cranford contributes to its stagnancy. Men do not occupy Cranford because there is no economic occupation to be had, and similarly, no industrial business can be found in Cranford because there are no men to promote it. This immediately shows that Cranford hangs behind the rest of the world in the pursuit of industrial progress. Most of the radical change in Victorian England occurred in the public sphere, which was primarily occupied by men. Women, being confined to the realm of the domestic sphere, had much smaller roles in promoting the technological, industrial, and economical changes that were dynamically influential. Therefore, men were the primary carriers of modernity and progress of the age, for with them they brought industrial innovations and commerce essential to 19<sup>th</sup> century economy. In "*Cranford: Cow in Grey Flannel or Lion Couchant?*", Rowena Fowler postulates that "By banishing men to the margins of her Utopia, Gaskell makes fun of male claims to centrality" (719). More importantly, without men at Cranford, the town does not progress; furthermore, since it is only occupied by women Cranford is ascribed a kind of domestic stagnancy. Cranford is located outside of the realm of Victorian industrialization on an isolated island of static domesticity.

One factor necessary to radical change is the introduction of new social elements into a

society that inspire new innovation and customs. Society at Cranford strives to isolate itself from outside influence in an effort to maintain old traditions and lifestyles. Outsiders are seen as intruders who threaten the balance of Cranfordian life. Men are especially dangerous in that their sex threatens to destroy Cranfordian society on more than one front (e.g. through technology, marriage, commerce, crime, etc.). Yet not all outsiders threaten the existence of Cranford (primarily women), so long as they are able to conform with the preferred traditions and behavior at Cranford. Cranfordians are able to admit some into their society, because, according to Miss Pole, "As most of the ladies of good family in Cranford were elderly spinsters, or widows without children, if we did not relax a little, and become less exclusive, by-and-by we should have no society at all" (55). Such admittants into the ranks of Cranford must be able to adapt to "the strict code of gentility" demanded by social tradition (55). But upon the intrusion of a more radical, male outsider, such as occurs with Captain Brown's move to Cranford, "The ladies of Cranford were already rather moaning over the invasion of their territories by a man and a gentleman" (3). Captain Brown is eventually accepted at Cranford but dies before his presence inspires any change, which, as described by Margaret Croskery, shows that "...propulsive plots and characters consistently vanish before they can direct story" (205-206).

Outsiders also cause characters a great deal of anxiety in Cranford concerning tradition and propriety. When a certain male cousin of Miss Matty's asks to stay with her during a journey, Mary reflects upon the obligation stating that "Of course it *must* suit her, as she said; ... but I am sure she wished the Major had stopped in India and forgotten his cousins out and out" (23). Matty then proceeds to worry about how to receive a gentleman visitor- "Must I put razors in the dressing-room? Dear!dear! and I've got none."(23)- which draws attention to Cranfordians' position outside of normal convention, for what other society would be so bereft of men and know so little about their needs? Outsiders enforce a certain amount of reluctantly received change in the behavioral patterns at Cranford, which helps to reveal the strangeness of Cranford's isolated social situation.

The idea of outsiders infiltrating Cranford can also lead to downright panic. After the performance of the magician "Signor Brunoni" rumors of robberies in Cranford escalate and the vicious penetration of Cranford by strangers, foreigners, and Miss Pole's "murderous gang" (82) becomes a most important social concern. According to Mrs. Forrester, whose opinion was approved by others, "The Cranford people respected themselves too much, and were too grateful to the aristocracy who were so kind as to live near the town, ever to disgrace their bringing up by being dishonest or immoral; therefore, we must believe that the robbers were strangers- if strangers, why not foreigners?" (77-78). Society at Cranford separates itself from the rest of the world by making a moral distinction between its grateful and good members and the troublesome and

threatening outsider. The characters' beliefs about outsiders show that Cranford stands little chance of changing and conforming with the outside world, and, even further, that outsiders need to conform to it. Cranfordians choose to separate themselves from the rests of the world, favoring their own social members and customs over more "worldly" ones.

Other various elements representing future movement toward modernity present themselves in Cranford, but are consistently rejected, and even show to be harmful to Cranfordians. The railroad, a typical 19<sup>th</sup> century symbol for radical industrial progress, existed in Cranford but was "vehemently petitioned against" and even called "obnoxious" (3). The railroad proves itself to be dangerous to the inhabitants at Cranford; Captain Brown is killed saving a child from its tracks, though according to Deborah Jenkyns the "poor, dear, infatuated man" was just as much killed by his newfangled taste in literature as he was by the train (15 and 19). The railroad, or any other 19<sup>th</sup> century means of travel, could also be held responsible for the death of Mr. Holbrook, who, according to Matty "...might have lived this dozen years if he had not gone to that wicked Paris, where they are always having revolutions" (34). Mr. Holbrook's death suggests *Cranford's* inability to shift its attention to new environments without being severely affected. Mr. Holbrook's radical journey proved to be too much of a shock for him; even upon his return to Cranford he is unable to take up his old habits again. Miss Pole describes:

Poor Thomas! That journey to Paris was quite too much for him. His housekeeper says he has hardly ever been round his fields since, but just sits with his hands on his knees in the counting-house, not reading or anything, but only saying what a wonderful city Paris was! Paris has much to answer for if it's killed my cousin Thomas, for a better man never lived (33).

Captian Brown's and Mr. Holbrook's encounters with the outside world suggests that exposure to modernity threatens the wellbeing of Cranford's members, and hints that *Cranford* itself is unable to adapt to radical change.

Cranfordians also choose to separate themselves from the world in terms of fashion. One may assume that with the growing venues of advertisement in England in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century homogenic fashion norms were able to span all distances within the country's borders. Standards and trends in fashion could be set and paid attention to by a larger, national audience. But at Cranford, the ladies seem to give little heed to the mandates of national fashion. Mary explains, "Their dress is very independent of fashion: as they observe 'What does it signify how we dress here at Cranford, where everybody knows us?'"(2). Mary describes the use of "calashes" or "a covering worn over caps, not unlike the heads fastend on old fashioned gigs" and comments on the terrible fascination such headgear had for the children of Cranford (56). The overuse of brooches is another fashion deviation made by the gentility. For the most honorable first-time visit to Lady



Glenmire, Mary claims that the amount of brooches adorning the ladies cumulatively exceeds that of any other time (64). In the thick description of an ethnographer she states:

I counted seven brooches myself on Miss Pole's dress. Two were fixed negligently in her cap (one was a butterfly made of Scotch pebbles, which a vivid imagination might believe to be the real insect); one fastened her net neckerchief; one her collar; one ornamented the front of her gown, midway between her throat and waist, and another adorned the point of her stomach. Where the seventh was I have forgotten, but it was somewhere about her, I am sure (64).

The ladies at Cranford fail to conform to national norms dictating fashion, but instead maintain a group identity rooted to their own isolated town.

As resident of the modern town of Drumble, Mary seems to recognize some of the more eccentric fashion deviations that members of Cranford attempt and tries to prevent them. When Miss Matty commissions Mary to the procurement of a sea-green turban for Signor Brunoni's magic performance, Mary was "...most particularly anxious to prevent her from disfiguring her small, gentle, mousey face with a great Saracen's head turban"; she instead brings a more acceptable ladies cap for her to wear (96). Mary also tries to see that Miss Matty purchases silk of a more sober, appropriate color. Mary tries to influence Matty into choosing "a quiet sage-green that had faded into insignificance under the more brilliant colours..." over Matty's preferred lilac silk with yellow spots (105). Mary's stronger reactions can provide the reader with a kind of gauge for higher levels of social peculiarity; if Mary cannot accept something at Cranford it is more likely to be rejected by the outside world. Mary's attempts to censure some of the more eccentric fashion at Cranford emphasizes its extreme deviation from the rest of the society.

As mentioned before, Cranford itself was not a town of trade or industry, and would stand very little chance of ever becoming so due to its members' complete and utter abhorrence for the vulgarity of trade. In *Cranford's* opening chapter Mary explains a social willingness to spartanly smile in the face of poverty; "Death was as true and as common as poverty; yet people never spoke about that, loud out in the streets. It was a word not to be mentioned to ears polite" (2-4). In Cranford "...economy was always 'elegant,' and money-spending always 'vulgar and ostentatious'" (3), so one may assume that nothing would be less desirable than the promotion of greater trade and commerce in Cranford. The gentry who were forced by poverty to take up any sort of business did so in the most non-obtrusive, out-of-sight ways possible so as not to disrupt the "elegant economy" at Cranford. The Miss Barkers float their milliners shop respectively by selectively choosing only proper clientel; "They would not sell their caps and ribbons to anyone without a pedigree" (52). After the failure of the Town and County Bank, which gives most reason to support an argument for Cranford's outright dismissal of trade, Miss Matty is forced to take up some form of work to

support herself. Mary's assessment of her skills admits that Matty has "...nothing she could teach to the rising generations of Cranford, unless they had been quick learners and ready imitators of her patience, her humility, her sweetness..." (113). Miss Matty's skills in domestic handicraft, such as making "spills" and knitting garters, could be valueable, but Mary wonders "...would Miss Matty sell, for filthy lucre, the knack and the skill with which she made trifles of value to those who loved her?" (113). Selling her handicraft would probably be considered inappropriate at Cranford; Talia Schaffer explains that "(Domestic handicraft) carried sentimental rather than financial value and confirmed personal relationships between maker and recipients" (Schaffer 222). Matty does not degrade herself by teaching her skills, but the solution of opening a tea shop in her own home satisfies Cranford's "genteel" demands. Mary reasons:

Tea was neither greasy nor sticky- grease and stickiness being two of the qualities which Miss Matty could not endure. No shop window would be required. A small, genteel notification of her being licensed to sell tea would, it is true, be necessary, but I hoped that it could be placed where no one would see it (114).

In this sense Matty does not convert to economical modernity promoted by Industrial radical change; she does condescend to trade but only on her own strict terms.

Matty goes even further from the worldly norms of masculine trade by consulting Mr. Johnson, Cranford's shopkeeper, about whether her business will have a negative effect on his. Mary's father, one such representative of said worldly norms of masculine trade, scoffs at Matty's concern for her rival. Mary reports: "My father called this idea of hers "great nonsense" and 'wondered how tradespeople were to get on if there was to be a continual consulting of each other's interests, which would put a stop to all competition directly.'" , but then adds to herself and the reader: "And, perhaps, it would not have done in Drumble, but in Cranford it answered very well" (124). Miss Matty's actions are dictated by her own beliefs and conscience, not by the cold conventions of a growing capitalist society. Matty's feminine consideration pays off as it is shown that "Cranford's bumbling collective practicality wins out over both market forces and social convention" (Fowler 724). This provides more evidence showing that Cranford separates itself as something different from the world; it does not conform to normally accepted conventions, which in turn suggests its inevitable decay. For, as Mary's father states, "such simplicity might be very well in Cranford, but would never do in the world" (124). Cranford is not moving or changing in attempts to catch up with the rest of the world, but clinging to its own society's beliefs about economical progress. The friendliness and trust portrayed by Cranford's old-fashioned country trade would probably not survive in a predominantly capitalist England.

Cranford actively rejects radical change; it is a society that refuses to adapt to new

innovations necessary to progress in the modern Victorian world. Cranford proves not to be a place of the future, nor even a place of the present, but a stagnant remnant of the past. Gaskell's creation of *Cranford* as such can only indicate a drive to preserve a replication of the past in response to the unstoppable progression of the future. This intense focus on preservation reveals Gaskell's belief in literature as an adequate mode of channeling the past.

## **Traditional Modes of Progress**

As a holistic work, *Cranford* does not represent, nor suggest radical progressive movement, yet it is not without a few examples of progressive transition. I have labeled this kind of change and the progress it promotes as *traditional* because its existence is not a product of the Industrial Revolution, and therefore it separates itself from other radical changes discussed in the previous section. As shown in the previous argument, radical changes in technology, economic trade, social interaction, and national standards of identification are unsuccessful in propelling Cranford forward into progressive movement. Gaskell's successful model of progress in *Cranford* is marriage. In the midst of developmental stagnancy in *Cranford*, characters representing some sort of marital and reproductive activity suggest an ability to transition into the future. Still, like radical change, even traditionally accepted changes caused by marriage are suspected in bringing negative consequences to Gaskell's created societies. In this section I intend to show that even though Gaskell allows for her characters to progress traditionally through marriage, she reveals herself to be doubtful if such progress actually yields dependable advantages. Gaskell seems to advocate taking extreme care in choosing one's partner in marriage, because like all change, marriage can incur negative consequences and loss for the individual.

In *Cranford*, Gaskell portrays marriage in a very solemn light. Most of the characters show no desire to marry, and/or little regret for having never married. For example, upon the news of Lady Glenmire's engagement to Mr. Hoggins, Miss Pole is described as giving "...a long congratulation to Miss Matty that so far they had escaped marriage, which she noticed always made people credulous to the last degree; indeed, she thought it argued great natural credulity in a woman if she could not keep herself from being married; ..." (91). In congratulating themselves for never having married, ladies such as Miss Pole admit to the negative consequences that are suspected to follow such a union. Yet despite Cranford's suspicion, in some cases marriage is the only necessary means of survival for its members. In *Cranford*, a traditional mode of progress such as marriage becomes characters' means of self-preservation.

Considering that marriage is taken very seriously in Cranford, those characters who do dare

to venture into its realm do only so under extreme circumstances. Three such characters who risk marriage for the sake of self-preservation are Jessie Brown, Martha, and Lady Glenmire. Jessie Brown, daughter of Captain Brown, is left alone and penniless upon the death of her father and sister. She is forced to give up her house in Cranford and change her whole way of life; "She had something above twenty pounds a year, besides the interest of the money for which the furniture would sell; but she could not live upon that" (17). Miss Brown is saved from poverty and the disgrace of having to work by the proposal of her former suitor, Major Gordon. Jessie Brown's unfortunate situation dispels the normal Cranfordian dismissive attitude towards marriage. Miss Matty is ready to sound the alarm at the impropriety of finding "...a gentleman sitting in the drawing-room with his arm round Miss Jessie's waist!", but Deborah recognizes that desperate times call for desperate measures, and to her sister responds: "The most proper place in the world for his arm to be in. Go away, Matilda, and mind your own business" (19). Whereas such a proposal from Major Gordon may have previously been pondered longer by Miss Brown, or more seriously disputed by Cranfordians, the circumstances assume immediate acceptance. Marriage preserves the dignity and well-being of Jessie Brown, and therefore is an accepted mode of progress in Cranford.

After the financial bankruptcy of her beloved mistress, servant Martha is hard-pressed to preserve herself and Miss Matty by means of marriage. Her drastic situation and loyalty to Matty spurs her to take hold of opportunity of aligning herself with her suitor, Jem Hearn. Matty's initial response is to exclaim "Marriage is such a very solemn thing!" and after Martha's plan Mary describes:

...Miss Matty sat down and cried very heartily, and accounted for it by saying that the thought of Martha being married so soon gave her quite a shock, and that she should never forgive herself if she thought she was hurrying the poor creature. I think my pity was more for Jem, of the two; but both Miss Matty and I appreciated to the full the kindness of the honest couple, although we said little about this, and a good deal about the chances and dangers of matrimony (116).

For the ladies in at Cranford, the "dangers of matrimony" threaten the existing simplicity of their peaceful, single lives, but is resolutely embraced when threatened by the bigger, meaner enemy of poverty.

Lady Glenmire also marries under more extreme circumstances, but also according to her own individual feelings. Cranford seems to view her as a widow who has done her marital duty; she married Scottish nobility and bears the title of "Lady" like a badge of honor. But Lady Glenmire's compromising economical situation perhaps helped persuade her to enter into a second marriage beneath her social status. Miss Pole remarks "She has married for an establishment, that's it. I suppose she takes the surgery with it" (99). Miss Matty's reason for Lady Glenmire marrying Mr.

Hoggins may ring more true; for Mr. Hoggins was "very pleasant-looking" and "very good-tempered and kind-hearted" (99), but the advantages she gains from entering such an engagement cannot go overlooked. The Cranford ladies eventually succumb to accepting the new Mrs. Hoggins and her various reasons for re-marrying, after an initial assessment that was intense and scrutinizing. This suggests that only more drastic situations supply fully acceptable reasons for marrying in Cranford. One does not marry simply for the sake of marriage itself, as perhaps would have been the case between Miss Matty and Mr. Holbrook. Marriage in Cranford is meant to serve practical purposes, not ones purely sentimental. It is also assumed that a woman who risks entering a marriage with a man should be compensated by the alleviation of some other economical and/or social instability. In this Gaskell seems to be advocating for extreme care in a woman's alliance with a man. The women in Cranford acknowledge the care that must be given to such a serious alliance, and are perhaps all the better for remaining single rather than taking the risk of subjecting themselves and their freedom to the authority of another.

*Cranford* is not the only novel Gaskell wrote that conveys a skepticism towards marriage. Gaskell's final novel *Wives and Daughters*, published in book form in 1866, portrays some of the same hesitancy towards this traditional progress that *Cranford* does by focusing on the negative consequences that can follow a bad marriage. *Wives and Daughters* tells the story of Molly Gibson, a girl growing up in the 1820-30's with her widower father in a rural English village. Molly grew up having "a very happy childhood" (31); she and her father, Dr. Gibson, share a close relationship in that "the two had the most delightful intercourse together- half banter, half seriousness, but altogether confidential friendship" (28). Molly's happy and carefree existence comes to a sudden halt when he decides to take a second wife. Sadly for Molly, the new Mrs. Gibson's introduction into the family thrusts unwanted change upon Molly's traditional way of life. For example, Mrs. Gibson insists on making decorative changes to her new home, and despite Molly's attempts to preserve some of her own dead mother's memory in the furniture, Mrs. Gibson uninhibitedly scourges the house of such items. "So Molly's little white dimity bed, her old-fashioned chest of drawers, and her other cherished relics of her mother's maiden-days, were consigned to the lumber room" (164). Molly has these and other undesirable changes forced upon her during Mrs. Gibson's assimilation into her home, making it clear that the Gibsons' adaptation to change included a loss of past traditions and ways.

More importantly than the loss of possessions and daily tradition, Mrs. Gibson disrupts the once intimate relationship that Molly had with her father. The narrator describes:

...a dismal sort of perplexity on Molly's part as to whether her father was quite aware of her

stepmother's perpetual lapses from truth; and whether his blindness was wilful or not. Then she felt bitterly enough that, though she was as sure as could be that there was no real estrangement between her and her father, yet there were perpetual obstacles thrown in the way of their intercourse; and she thought with a sigh that if he would but come in with authority, he might cut his way clear to the old intimacy with his daughter, and that they might have all the former walks and talks, and quips and cranks, and glimpses of real confidence once again; things that her stepmother did not value, yet which she, like a dog in the manger, prevented Molly's enjoying (332-3).

Dr. Gibson's poor choice in marriage creates a rift between father and daughter. Although the story reaches some happy resolutions in the end, Molly is never fully able to re-establish the same relationship she once had with her father. *Wives and Daughters* shows that hasty alliances made in marriage can lead to the internal suffering of a whole family. In this novel Gaskell seems to suggest that however traditionally accepted, marriage is not an unquestionably positive mode of progress. *Wives and Daughters* indicates that even traditional change such as marriage tends to include loss of certain aspects of the past.

Both *Cranford* and *Wives and Daughters* offer insight into Gaskell's somewhat doubtful position on traditional progress such as marriage. As discussed earlier, Gaskell's intention in writing *Cranford* was to preserve a commemorative tableau of the past, not to show a society changing and adapting with the times. Even marriage, Cranford's one accepted mode of progress, is one in which the ultimate goal is to preserve one's former status and way of life. Progress in general, both radical and traditional, is not a goal in *Cranford*. In her work, Gaskell seems to suggest that progress, whatever its form, is not to be blindly accepted as something that automatically yields benefits. Change can be harmful, therefore it should be questioned; its advantages and disadvantages need to be weighed carefully by the individual and society, just like the Cranford ladies' careful scrutinies over Lady Glenmire's engagement. *Wives and Daughters* lends support to this idea in that it shows the harmful results of not making a careful assessment of character before entering into an unbreakable partnership. Both novels suggest that change does not necessarily assume positive outcomes for all. Gaskell does not fully advocate for radical change or even traditional progress for that matter. Instead, she concerns herself with coping with change in a way that insures the preservation and commemoration of the past.

## **Historical Transmission Through Literature**

As a whole, *Cranford* is a non-progressive snapshot of the past; a portal through which future readers may travel to access the essence of another era. By making *Cranford* into a novel that does not change or progress, Gaskell allows for a new kind of literary experience that focuses on

the transmission of the core nature of another culture and time to readers. Historical transmission of this sort allows readers to hold onto a little piece of history, and in this way literature like *Cranford* helps society to cope with change. *Cranford* is meant to transport readers from any time and place to Gaskell's interpretive re-enactment of the past. Gaskell encapsulates the essence of her memories of Knutsford in book form, allowing others to share a similar experience. In doing so, she comes to terms with the loss of the past and releases it, thereby enabling the reader to do the same. The previous two sections discussed Gaskell's rejection of radical and traditional change/progress because of the loss it may induce, this section will address Gaskell's solution for change: historical transmission through literature.

Beyond *Cranford*, Gaskell seems to generally use writing as a tool for coping with change and loss. Jenny Uglow's biography of Gaskell, titled *Elizabeth Gaskell, A Habit of Stories*, states "All her life, as her letters show, Gaskell had a great capacity for putting disasters, great or small, behind her and writing 'That's *that*', or even 'hang 'em!'" (Uglow 91). For Gaskell, writing seems to supply a means of closure, and therein transition. For example, Gaskell uses her writing as a means to come to terms with the death of her firstborn child. Gaskell gave birth to a stillborn daughter in 1833, and "She kept the misery of her baby's death to herself, but inwardly she chose to remember rather than forget" (Uglow91). Gaskell commemorates her daughter by writing this sonnet:

On Visiting the Grave of My Stillborn Little Girl  
Sunday, July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1836

I made a vow within my soul, O Child,  
When thou wert laid beside my weary heart,  
With marks of death on every tender part  
That, if in time a living infant smiled,  
Winning my ear with gentle sounds of love  
In sunshine of such joy, I still would save  
A green rest for thy memory, O Dove!  
And oft times visit thy small nameless grave.  
Thee have I not forgot, my firstborn, thou  
Whose eyes ne're opened to my wistful gaze,  
Whose sufferings stamped with pain thy little brow;  
I think of thee in these far happier days,  
And thou, my child, from thy bright heaven see  
How well I keep my faithful vow to thee (Uglow 91-2).

Gaskell's writing shows her grief in losing her daughter, but suggests a transitional healing with the birth of another child. Like *Cranford*, Gaskell's sonnet is a piece looking backwards as a means of looking forward; it acknowledges loss, the commemoration of which helps the author to cope and attain closure, and thereby enabling her to emotionally move on.

After the loss of her first child and upon the birth of her second daughter, Marianne, Gaskell

began writing a diary to record her daughter's early childhood. In this diary, Gaskell takes the same ethnographical care to cite all the small details of her daughter's progress. According to Uglow "She notes everything: how many teeth Marianne has, what she eats, the 'little triumphing noises' she makes when she thinks she is going to be picked up from her cot" (95). After already experiencing the loss of one child, Gaskell takes active measures in capturing the nature of her second. Gaskell adheres to the use of writing for the sake of memory preservation in the event of possible loss. Uglow states "The more she loved her child, the more she feared she might lose her. [...] As with her sonnet to her stillborn child, writing could be a means of holding on to the beloved" (95). Gaskell herself writes "...I sometimes think I may find this little journal a great help in recalling the memory of my darling child if we should lose her" (Uglow 95). Gaskell's writing not only becomes a means of coping with change, but also a way to prevent the loss of memory that is coupled with it. In more than just *Cranford*, Elizabeth Gaskell's writing centers on the preservation of a particular piece of history in the midst of change.

In the act of Gaskell's written preservation, literature becomes a means for alleviating the pressures of change because it counters time; literature captures the heart of a single moment and allows it to circulate to new generations of readers. Literature also enables the author to reach out to a more distant audience because stories and the messages they convey survive their authors, connecting with and impacting various generations of readers. "We may accept 'the death of the author', but the habit of stories does not die" (Uglow "A Note, and Acknowledgement" x). Furthermore, in an increasingly interconnected and technologically advanced world, stories are not limited by physical distance, but can span physical boundaries not crossed by the author herself. A contemporary reader may not be able to experience first-hand the type of village life that once flourished at Knutsford in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, but one can open a book such as *Cranford* and experience a solid, ontological representation. In this, Gaskell acknowledges the power of storytelling as a means of historical transmission. For Gaskell herself, stories and literature could most certainly act as substitutes for real life experience. She writes a letter to writers William and Mary Howitt describing:

I feel a stirring instinct and long to be off into the deep grassy solitudes of the country, just like a bird wakens up from its content at the change of the seasons and tends its way to some well-known but till then forgotten land. But as I happen to be a woman instead of a bird, as I have ties at home and duties to perform, and as, moreover I have no wings like a dove to fly away... why I must stay at home and content myself with recalling the happy scenes which your books bring up before me (Uglow 4).

Gaskell describes a longing to up and fly, to see and experience other landscapes with the freedom



of a bird. But her duty and even physical form as a woman prevent her, so her experience is substituted with stories from books to appease her yearning.

However, literature is not the only means of historical transmission. Voices and feelings of the past are also representable through letters. Yet, in real life, as well as in *Cranford*, Gaskell seems to prefer the transmission of history through stories. In the Victorian era, letters could be extremely personal, meant for the circulation of a private audience and not for public announcement. Gaskell acknowledges this fact during her work on *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*; "Elizabeth herself carefully edited the letters of Charlotte Brontë when she presented her life to the public" (Uglow 244). Like Miss Matty, Elizabeth Gaskell's daughters burned their mother's letters after her death (Uglow 22), perhaps signifying a conscious rejection of letters as proper modes of historical transmission. Unlike stories, letters fail to convey the holistic nature of a person. This fact is acknowledged and discussed in *Cranford*. Miss Matty, although somewhat unwilling, steels herself for "destroying such as ought not to be allowed to fall into the hands of strangers" (36). Mary has difficulty understanding Matty's reasons for destroying her family's letters, which gave "a vivid and intense sense of the present time, which seemed so strong and full, as if it could never pass away, and as if the warm, living hearts that so expressed themselves could never die, and be as nothing to the sunny earth" (37). Yet perhaps Matty, not only protecting her family's privacy, is also concerned with the misinterpretation of her family's character. Letters fail to tell the stories behind the people who write them. For example, if misconstrued or taken out of context, Miss Matty's mother's letters could give a stranger the impression that the author, Molly, was simple and ignorant. Molly's letters focus on the importance of clothing and appearance; she responds to her fiancé's "passionate ardour" with "six or seven letters [that] were principally occupied in asking her lover to use his influence with her parents... to obtain this or that article of dress, more especially the white 'Paduasoy'" (38-9). Matty's mother's letters describe her pride in the physical appearances of her children in simplistic, and poorly spelled terms: "Dear mother, I wish you could see her! Without any parshality, I do think she will grow up a regular bewty!" (39). These letters fail to capture the big-hearted, gentle, and loving person Matty paints her mother to be. However, Matty is able to fill in the gaps these letters leave with stories of her mother's life, focusing on the tender grief she felt at losing her son Peter. Matty describes her depth of feeling and motherly desperation when looking for her lost son:

At first my mother went calling low and soft, as if to reassure the poor boy, 'Peter! Peter, dear! it's only me!'; but, by-and-by, as the servants came back from the errands my father had sent them, in different directions, to find where Peter was... my mother's cry grew louder and wilder. 'Peter! Peter my darling! where are you?' for she felt and understood that that long kiss meant some sad kind of 'good-bye.' The afternoon went on- my mother

never resting, but seeking again and again in every possible place that had been looked into twenty times before, nay, that she had looked into over and over again herself. [...] At last (and it was nearly dark), my father rose up. He took hold of my mother's arm as she came with wild, sad pace through one door, and quickly towards another. She started at the touch of his hand, for she had forgotten all in the world but Peter (46-7).

This example contributes to the insufficiency of letters to convey the holistic representations of people and their pasts. Matty's story informs the reader that despite her somewhat silly letters written in her youth, Molly Jenkyns cared very deeply for her children. In the pairing of these two chapters that describe the burning of the Jenkyns' family letters and the loss of Peter, Gaskell seems to suggest that it is storytelling that validates and further unlocks the secrets of the people behind the letters. Hilary M. Schor states "The novel gives voice to what cannot otherwise be expressed: to the silent sufferings of women like Miss Matty; to the enforced silence of the letters of dead loved ones, which live only in the continued affection of the living..." (297). Storytelling allows for the fullest expression of character and provides the reader with a more holistic understanding of people and their interactions.

Throughout her lifetime, Gaskell's writing reveals personal anxieties about change; her writing becomes a tool for coping with the anxieties of change by using stories and literature for historical transmission. Through stories Gaskell allows access to the past, thereby allowing for literature to become a solution for change and loss.

## **Concluding Remarks**

The little progressive movement allowed in *Cranford* is not driven by change, but instead by preservation. Change is not the engine of the novel, but a factor outside the novel inspiring the author to preserve an untampered representation of the past. Overall, Gaskell does not present herself as a straightforward advocate for radical or traditional change because it entails some kind of loss. Yet despite her negative outlook on change, she acknowledges its inevitability in the creation of literature that retells and transmits representations of the past. In this, Gaskell's focus of historical transmission in writing becomes a way to cope with change. Gaskell's literature creates a portal that allows access to a past untouched by change; it is a portal that channels the essence of a past independent of the temporal and physical restrictions on a normal individual. The creation of literature that allows this kind of ontological historical transmission alleviates the consequences of change by easing the loss of the past. If the past can be accessed through literature, perhaps it is not lost. Elizabeth Gaskell's writing promotes the idea that that literature counteracts loss of the past incurred by change, and by canceling out its main disadvantage, literature enables people to accept

change and move forward towards a new future. Gaskell's backwards-looking focus on the past and its preservation through literature essentially reveals itself to be a kind of forward-looking concerned with transition into the future. In this round-about way, preservation essentially allows for progress.

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