

## **I. Nobody's Angels: Elizabeth Gaskell's Portrayal of Independent Females**

This research makes an argument for the claim that values which are designed to express a female view of culture in *Cranford*, Gaskell's masterpiece, reinforces independent life of female as a major requisite for emancipation. In mid-Victorian time when female roles were socially codified in patriarchal norms, the women of Cranford have developed values like being independent from men and yet they are successful in maintaining propriety. The women of Cranford base their actions upon these principles and have allowed them to mature into everyday life. Through the confidence and combination of their principles, the women of Cranford articulate their civilization--Amazon culture--as being parallel to male culture.

Despite her popularity in the mid-1800s, for the first century after her death critics tended to view Gaskell as a limited writer whose novel *Cranford* alone kept her in the English canon. Her work, however, has since been reappraised. Scholars have noted her ability to convincingly convey the emotional states of her characters and have recognized that she indeed wrote in the mode of realism even before its proponents, like her friend George Eliot, had articulated its tenets. Feminists have seen in Gaskell's *Cranford* a sustained examination of the situation of women in a patriarchal society. And, while a portion of her plot has been perceived as ephemeral in nature, evidence both of the lasting appeal of much of her work and of the historical realities of her writing magnifies Gaskell's considerable achievements. "More than a century and a half after the publication of Gaskell's comic masterpiece, there is renewed interest in her work," Glenda Cooper contends in *Female Renaissance in Victorian Novel*, "It has become Gaskell's most famous work--and the only one its author could bear to re-read" (qtd. in Cooper 89). Cooper's criticism on Cranford expresses further wonders while assimilating to *Cranford's* plot:

But what would Miss Jenkyns and Miss Matty, brought to life by Judi Dench and Eileen Atkins, think about the town that they supposedly lived in? And would Gaskell, the committed minister's wife and social reformer, approve of how the "quiet, retiring folk" she wrote about have changed? (90)

Likewise, Maurice Berrett, while being predominately concerned with social issues in *Cranford*, examines Gaskell's transgression of the role of women in Victorian society. Berrett writes in *Obscene Identity: The Boundaries of Female Self*:

[. . .] in Gaskell's many other interests often surfaced in her shorter works of fiction. "Mr. Harrison's Confessions," like the later *Cranford*, reveals her ability to capture the nuance of a small and vanishing town's way of life. The story, which relies on misunderstood gossip, demonstrates Gaskell's characteristically light and gently ironic humor. "Curious, If True" represents Gaskell's exploitation of a fantasy motif, as its somewhat dim-witted narrator fails to recognize that he has stumbled into the dwelling of several aging fairy-tale characters, including Snow White and Cinderella. (129)

Berrett's assimilation to *Cranford* and other female works of Victorian age comes to underscore the underlying current of feminist uprising. "But perhaps the most important critical development out of Victorianism was feminism," George Levine contends, "Obviously, Victorian study was not the source of literary feminism, but obviously, too, it was closely associated with first-wave feminism"(Levine "Studies" 140). Levine further writes:

The first cry for feminist consciousness came from Particularly through Elaine Showalter's *Literature of Their Own* and then Sandra

Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *Madwoman in the Attic* and Nina Auerbach's *Communities of Women and Woman and the Demon*. Such criticism not only reread canonical texts and shifted focus onto others that had long been ignored, but it led to the revaluation of writers like Elizabeth Barret, Christina Rossetti, and Elizabeth Gaskell and to the reconfiguration of the canon. (140)

Levine's assertion that "it breaks beyond the complexity" (140) affirms the still to be identified female self in Gaskell's works (and other works from contemporary female writers). Elaine Showalter, one of the most cited feminist theorists, invests her curiosity on Gaskell as her characters are wrapped inside the formulaic boundary of patriarchal society. Elaine Showalter puts it in Hazard Adams edited *Critical Theory since Plato*:

In the Feminist phase, from about 1880 and 1920s, or the wining of the vote, women are historically enabled to reject the accommodating postures of femininity and to use literature to dramatize the ordeals of wronged womanhood. The personal sense of injustice which feminine novelists such as Elizabeth Gaskell and Frances Trollop expressed in their novels of class struggle and factory life become increasingly and explicitly feminists in the 1880s, when a generation of New Women redefined the woman artist's role in terms of responsibility to suffering sisters.(qtd. In Adams 1230)

Showalter, Levine and other critics discussed above are the mere masqueraders of the thought that Gaskell could not free herself from social restrictions. This researcher aims at illumining the far cry of feminist uprising in Gaskell's celebration of Amazon

females in Cranford—that Victorian period has another revolutionary face—which has been but ignored so far.

One of the most popular writers of the Victorian era, Gaskell is principally remembered for her portraits of nineteenth-century provincial life in the novels *Cranford* (1853) and *Wives and Daughters: An Every-day Story* (1866). “An esteemed storyteller, she also wrote a considerable assortment of short fiction, much of which was published in the weekly journals of Charles Dickens,” Erin O'Connor in “Some Appointed Work to Do: Women and Vocation in the Fiction of Elizabeth Gaskell” proves how the prominent Dickens anticipated Gaskell’s work, “Dickens, who had read Gaskell’s popular social novel *Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life* (1848), asked her to submit her new work to his *Household Words*” (427). This seems to encourage her to write “Lizzie Leigh: A Domestic Tale” and provided her with a rewarding publishing outlet. Other short works, including “Lois the Witch” and “The Grey Woman” were originally published in Dickens’s *All the Year Round*, prior to being released in collections. In all, Gaskell wrote over forty short stories and sketches, and several novellas. “Many of these works are genre pieces—Gothic mystery stories or historical fiction—and many are comedies or darker tales of varying quality,” (429) Erin contends.

Elizabeth Cleghorn Stevenson was born September 29, 1810 in Chelsea, London, but following her mother’s death thirteen months later, moved to the quiet town of Knutsford in Cheshire with her aunt. She had little contact with her father from that time on, but the town of Knutsford became central to much of her writing and the principal location for her novels *Cranford* and *Wives and Daughters*. While on a visit to Manchester—the setting for her first novel, *Mary Barton*—she met the Unitarian minister, William Gaskell, whom she later married. She became active in

the liberal Unitarian community and occupied herself with her domestic duties, including raising four children, and traveling. One of her trips took her to Haworth where she met Charlotte Bronte. The two became close friends, and Gaskell later undertook the writing of her biography, though its publication in 1857 was marred by charges of misrepresentation. Mortified by allegations of dishonesty, Gaskell did not attempt another full-length work until 1863, instead focusing on her production of shorter fiction. In 1865, exhausted from continuous work and persistent ill-health, Gaskell collapsed suddenly while visiting her Hamisphire country home. She died of heart failure leaving her novel *Wives and Daughters* unfinished.

While predominately concerned with social issues, especially the role of women in Victorian society, Gaskell's many other interests often surfaced in her shorter works of fiction. "Mr. Harrison's Confessions," like the later *Cranford*, reveals her ability to capture the nuance of a small and vanishing town's way of life. The story, which relies on misunderstood gossip, demonstrates Gaskell's characteristically light and gently ironic humor. "Curious, If True" represents Gaskell's exploitation of a fantasy motif, as its somewhat dim-witted narrator fails to recognize that he has stumbled into the dwelling of several aging fairy-tale characters, including Snow White and Cinderella. "The Old Nurse's Story," a tale of ghosts told from a feminine perspective, exemplifies Gaskell's work in the gothic mode, while "A Dark Night's Work" details a murder motivated by the inequities of social class. In "Lois the Witch" Gaskell demonstrates her talent for historical fiction. Inspired by the Salem witch trials, the story dramatizes themes of intolerance and fear. Among her novellas, *Cousin Phillis* resembles such realistic works as *Mary Barton* and *North and South*, and like them illustrates Gaskell's concern for social reconciliation during the industrial revolution. Its story follows the changes brought about by the construction

of a railroad near the quiet, pastoral Hope Farm. The heroine of *The Moorland Cottage* (1850), Maggie Browne, faces a conflict between her social responsibilities and her own personal fulfillment.

Lisa Ogden writes in “The Arrival of the Woman Writer: Now Discussing Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford*” that Gaskell “intuitively captures aspects of a culture that influence the lives of its citizens without their awareness, and then writes them into fiction” (56). *Cranford* was written in the nineteenth Century, a time when women struggled for their rights. However, *Cranford* is based on the lives of ‘amazons’ where feminism is, most definitely, not an obstacle. Ogden further writes:

It is beneficial to read literature written from different cultures for further appreciation of them. Thus, a possible reason for why Elizabeth Gaskell wrote *Cranford* is for others to additionally appreciate the female culture. *Cranford*, being a genre of ‘chick-lit,’ takes an existing cultural stereotype that is somewhat pejorative, and re-appropriates it.

(Ogden 57)

The values represented in *Cranford* are most definitely designed to express a female view of culture superior to traditional male culture. Ogden traces instances from inside the text to support her claim: “In *Cranford*, the ‘amazons,’ widows, and wives of absent husbands are used to construct the town’s society [. . .] these spinsters portray male culture as being inferior and substandard” (55).

The women of *Cranford* seem to be quite ignorant of the male culture which is portrayed through the lack of men in the novel. Some of the values that these women have developed are: being independent from men, following traditions, and maintaining properness. The women of *Cranford* base their actions upon these

principles and have allowed them to mature into everyday life. The leader of these societal mores is respectively Miss Matty who also represents formal behaviors. Through the confidence and combination of their principles, the women articulate their civilization as being far more superior to male culture.

Gaskell began her first novel, *Mary Barton* (1848), as a distraction from the grief that consumed her after the death of Willie, her ten-month-old son. But its theme reflected her encounter with that father: the weaver-hero of the book, John Barton, hurls the same question at the wealthy. As Jenny Uglow interrogates it in her biography of Gaskell: “how could she reconcile in her conscience those fine shops [. . .] with the starvation that lay just a few yards behind them?” (12). “The book,” Uglow writes, “was born of [Gaskell’s] own shock and guilt” (12). As soon as the book appeared, it sparked furious criticism, much of it from rich manufacturers who attended William Gaskell’s church. He stood by his wife then, and again after *Ruth* was published, the first novel to have a ‘fallen woman’ as its heroine. Based on the true story of a young unmarried woman who is seduced and has a child outside marriage, Gaskell takes on the voice of the social outcast:

She felt strongly that people should have a social conscience and help those less fortunate than themselves. If she saw Knutsford today, I think she would worry whether there was still a sense of community. But perhaps there are similarities between modern Knutsford and Gaskell’s imagined Cranford. One of the strongest themes in *Cranford* is the celebration of self-sufficient women shaping their own lives and dominating their social milieu, just like Natalie and Wendi in the wine bar, sizing up future prospects. (Uglow 13)

Cranford is a town evolved around societal mores. These traditions are depicted through the narrative third person objective point of view, the narrator being Mary Smith. She narrates the story through her visits to Cranford and through how she sees Cranford. This Victorian novels' narrative [method] can provide insight into the ways in which social practices are codified, which could also apply for how female cultural values are conveyed. Elizabeth Gaskell “begins in medias res, with Cranford’s inhabitants secure in their value system [. . .] she elaborates the women's code of conduct by means of the narrator, Mary Smith, an outsider who is a regular visitor to the town” (Uglow 14).

"Look in the charity shops and on the committees: it's all women," says Joan Leach, "if you look around, you'll see women run this town" (58). Women were crucial to these developments, and Victorian femininity evolved to meet the changing demands of empire. Specifically, the ideal of feminine self- sacrifice responded both to the defense of British righteousness abroad and to the redemption of the ugly colonist at home. Leach writes: “David is at her best as she explicates the labor of empire performed by women at home by reforming greedy men and taming aggressive masculinity within England” (59). She argues:

Heroines such as Florence Dombey and Jane Eyre distracted attention from the scene of wealth-gathering, and reconciled the ideals professed by hegemonic imperialism with the material improvements to middle-class life made possible by coercive colonialism. Like Wordsworth, Linton was born in the idyllic, pre-industrial Lake Country, but unlike him she escaped to London as soon as she could. (59)



Gaskell's impulse to expansion and flight differentiates her from Victorian woman writers as well. Leach puts it succinctly: "many Victorian women from the middle and upper classes wrote professionally because it was work that they could do within the confines of the home environment, without violating the social code of female domesticity" (60). The rebellious Elizabeth Gaskell, however, was determined to leave the stifling domestic world. For her, a literary career meant emancipation, not accommodation, determined to resist.

Robin Colby's study of women's work in the novels of Elizabeth Gaskell contributes to Gaskell studies as well as to theories of the industrial novel. Arguing that Gaskell's treatment of women's labor--particularly that of working-class women--has not been properly assessed, Colby suggests that close examination of the theme of women's work in Gaskell's novels not only paints a new portrait of Gaskell (who emerges thereby as an unacknowledged feminist), but also complicates our understanding of the industrial novel as a genre. According to Colby, Gaskell's particular contribution to the Condition of England debate was to gender it: "Gaskell's industrial novels are unique in using female heroines to bind together class concerns and women's issues" (112). Colby contends that Gaskell's mode of combining questions of class and gender not only added a crucial dimension to Victorian discussions about the plight of the industrial poor, but also "enabled Gaskell to formulate a theory of female self-actualization through work that transcended class distinctions" (112).

The first three chapters of Colby's study center on Gaskell's industrial novels, arguing that the emphasis on gender in *Mary Barton* (1848) and *North and South* (1854) allows them to "perform substantially different cultural work from that of the industrial novels of Benjamin Disraeli, Charles Dickens, Charles Kingsley, and

George Eliot, all of whose social critiques rest on stable, traditional models of gender” (114). Following a discussion of gender in works such as Disraeli's *Sybil* (1845), Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854), Kingsley's *Alton Locke* (1850), and Eliot's *Felix Holt* (1866), Colby shows how Gaskell uses the characters of Mary Barton and Margaret Hale to make questions of femininity inseparable from issues of class identity. Colby writes:

Mary Barton's position as household provider enables Gaskell to integrate paid labor with the fulfillment of womanly duty, while in *North and South*, Margaret Hale's sympathetic relations with Manchester's industrial poor reconciles perceived contradictions between female propriety and political activism. The final three chapters expand the book's focus to a wider consideration of women's work in the pastoral fictions of *Cranford* (1851) and *Wives and Daughters* (1866), and in the biographical *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857). (115)

In *Cranford*, Gaskell critiques separate sphere ideology by showing how the ‘masculine’ world of commerce intrudes on women's private lives. This critique in turn becomes a means of imagining an alternative model of womanhood, one that emphasizes independence and self-sufficiency. In the figure of Miss Matty, the bankrupt spinster-cum-merchant, Gaskell envisions how a retiring femininity might be absolutely consistent with economic enterprise. *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, by contrast, is an elaborate apology for female authorship. Concentrating on how Brontë balanced writing with her domestic responsibilities, Gaskell attempts both to rescue Brontë from the charge that, as a writer, she was not a proper woman, and, more broadly, to allay the constitutive tensions inherent in the notion of the woman writer-

tensions between duty (to husband, home, family) and desire (to grow, express, create) that structured Gaskell's own life.

Patsy Stoneman does her best to save Elizabeth Gaskell from male condescension, but at the same time she is eager to make Gaskell respectable to the feminist critics she quotes deferentially. She relies uncritically on separatist paradigms, particularly those of Carol Gilligan, who “rigidly distinguishes ‘male’ power and aggression from ‘female’ affiliativeness and caring” (qtd. in Stoneman 132). As a result, for Stoneman, Gaskell's incisive interweaving of economics, class, and gender does not exist; Gaskell, in her opinion, is “not a Condition-of-England novelist (only men are concerned with the condition of England), but an exemplary representative of the female tradition” (132). Ignoring such sophisticated Marxist studies of Gaskell's social ideology, Stoneman ignores too the shrewdly delineated economic fluctuations that underlie the action of *Cranford* and *North and South*; complex anatomies of seduction, class, and power like *Ruth* and *Cousin Phillis* are concerned, in her view, with female sexuality and nothing else. Like that of the Victorian patriarchs she claims to correct, Stoneman's emphasis is solely on woman's transforming capacity for nurturance. In the name of her conviction that “caring is the authentic voice of women” (134). Patsy Stoneman robs Elizabeth Gaskell of the breadth of her social awareness, reducing her, in the name of feminism, back to Mrs. Gaskell, snug in her womanly little place.

Not surprisingly, then, many critics have isolated motherliness as the key element of Gaskell's femininity. Virginia Woolf noted in 1924 that “Mrs. Gaskell wields a maternal sway over readers of her own sex; wise, witty and very large-minded, her readers are devoted to her as to the most admirable of mothers” (3). Even though Aina Rubenius's ostensible subject in her 1950 treatment of Gaskell is the

writer's relation to social and political issues, she reaffirms Gaskell as motherly writer, dubbing her "that adoring and adored mother" who "valued family unity and family affection above most other things" (4). Elaine Showalter contrasts the male Victorian view of motherhood and writing as "incompatible" (5) with a female Victorian vision of "the possibility of a life in which the domestic role enriched the art, and the art kept the domestic role spontaneous and meaningful" (5) and presents Elizabeth Gaskell as her primary example of such a female writer: "Mrs. Gaskell became the heroine of a new school of motherly fiction" (5).

One of the values the women of *Cranford* possess is being independent from men. Even though there is a lack of males, the women do not seem to be interested in the men that are available. This research is based upon this fact that has been left out in critical assimilation of *Cranford*. The chapters that follow consist of theoretical modality for our purpose of study, application in the text itself and conclusion. The research aims to access ranges of Feminist theories as is ushered by Elaine Showalter, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Virginia Woolf, Simone De Beauvoir and many other prominent Feminist theorists of the time.

## II. Theoretical Terrain

### No Man's Land: A Feminist Quest

Just after Marxism prevailed through Europe, scholars celebrating female self sat together to theorize those new but often old--implicit and disguised in Victorian novels, mostly by Jane Austen, Emily Bronte and George Eliot--women tendencies. The significance became quite clear and symbolic suggesting a silver line around dark cloud. A torrent of feminist theories came to front to assimilate resistance against closure, center seeking tendency and this blurring visage of structure that the white-male-elites fermented. Female consciousness that was once a far cry became the primary concerns to unlid the vast mass of female experiences, not excluding those works by male writers almost endowed with clerical and evangelical beliefs on females of the spices.

The collaboration of Gilbert and Gubar has been extremely influential in the advancement in both the study of women writers and feminist literary theory. Their well-known work *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) traces a female literary tradition and thus combats what they term women's anxiety of authorship. They seek also to speak to Elaine Showalter's call for a feminist poetics. As part of the former program, their *Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* (1985) rescues many women from the obscurity caused by their exclusion from male dominated anthologies. Their *No Man's Land: The Place of Women Writer in Twentieth Century* (1988) continues the story began in the earlier volume.

In the first chapter of *The Madwoman*, Gilbert and Gubar argue that in the past and into the present the writer's creativity has been identified virtually completely with men. Their aim is to locate a place where women's writing is heard. The second chapter, the first part of which is reprinted here, is concerned with women and literary

tradition. It begins with the consideration of Harold Bloom's theory of the "anxiety of influence," observing that women do not fit into Bloom's patriarchal model. Or, rather, their anxiety is more pronounced, since the woman writer has from the beginning of her life had to "struggle against the effects of socialization," which becomes a struggle against men's oppressive reading of women. Hazard Adams writes in *Critical Theory Since Plato*:

Gilbert and Gubar offer a litany of the results of women's socialized anxieties: a variety of physical and mental illness, including anorexia, agoraphobia, and claustrophobia. They go on to "trace the difficult paths by which nineteenth-century women overcame their "anxiety of authorship." This shift from Bloom's "anxiety of influence" reflects the deeper problems of women writers in the culture, for such anxiety is necessarily prior to that of influence. (1234)

M.A.R. Habib contends the similar viewpoint on Gilbert and Gubar's contribution to feminist awakening identifying them with many other writers and critics in *A History of Literary Criticism: From Plato to the Present*. "A number of feminist texts have attempted to identify alternative and neglected tradition of female writing," Habib writes, "these have included Patricia Meyer Spacks' *The Female Imagination* (1975), Ellen Moers' *Literary Women* (1976), and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979)" (670). Habib further introduce Elaine Showalter and her work that have the similar feminist bearings: "Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of their Own* (1977), which traced three phases of women's writing, a 'feminine' phase (1840-1880) where women writers imitated male models, a 'feminist' phase (1880-1920) during which women challenged those models and their values, and a 'female' phase ( from 1920) which saw women advocating their own perspectives"

(670).Recent debates within American feminism, conducted by figures such as Showalter, Lillian Robinson, Annette Kolodny, and Jane Marcus, have concerned the relationship of female writers to male theories, the need for feminist theory and a female language, the relation of feminism to poststructuralist perspectives, as well as continuing problems of political and educational activism.

Catharine R. Stimpson has contributed on chronicling diversities among feminist theorists in *Redrawing the Boundries: The Transformation of English and American Literary Studies*. “Several feminist critics have been skeptical about the search for a woman’s difference,” she writes, “in 1981, Myra Jehlen admonished some feminist critics for glamorizing the sentimental novels and women’s studies for focusing only on women thereby creating an alternative context, a sort enclave apart from the universe of Masculinist assumptions” (262). She legitimately calls for a radical comparativism between men’s and women’s writings and a connection of them both to the larger world. Stimpson’s observation further continues:

Nevertheless, some of the most adventurous, intelligent feminist critics gather evidence of stylistic, thematic, or generic differences: Barbara Christian, Helene Cixous, . . . Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. The internal logic of feminist criticism demands such an investigation. For there is no reason to study women unless “women” represent something else again. Interestingly, the more historically specific the evidence of difference is, the more persuasive it is. Women’s traditions do exist. (262)

However, a woman’s difference from a man emerges most plausibly in a precise time and place. The woman’s difference in Greek oral tradition differs from the woman’s difference in the modernist novel and poem. The more we multiply the number of

women's differences, the more we fragment the category of woman and the less universal a woman's voice becomes. Stimpson contends, "the more particular a woman's voice becomes, the more numerous the differences become—not only between men and women but among women" (262).

But perhaps the most important critical development out of Victorianism was feminism. George Levine assimilates the wave of feminist uprising in "Victorian studies": "Obviously, Victorian study was not a source of literary feminism, but obviously, too, it was closely associated with first-wave feminism" (qtd. in *Boundries* 140). Levine outlines the contributors of this awakening:

Particularly through Elaine Showalter's *Literature of their Own* and than Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *Mad Women in the Attic* and Nina Auerbach's *Communities of Women* and *Woman and the Demon*. Such criticism not only reread canonical texts and shifted focus onto others that had long been ignored, but it led to the revaluation of writers like Elizabeth Barrett, Christina Rossetti, and Elizabeth Gaskell and to a reconfiguration of the cannon. (140)

Feminism's sustained emphasis on context, its archival efforts to exhume forgotten materials, its thickly textured historical interpretation are all, in fact, compatible with the historical traditions of Victorian study. Levine worries on the impact of contemporary theories for ignoring historicity of the text: "that were getting lost under the textualism of new critical analyses and than of deconstruction" (140).

Gilbert and Gubar's testimony of English literature highlights the oppressive nature of male writers towards females. William Kerrigan writes of the traditional critics on Milton and those who defended Milton in "Seventeenth Century Studies": "they had defended Milton's style, his Puritanism, his character, and now they would



have to arm against forthcoming feminist attacks on his attitudes toward woman”

(75). Kerrigan outlines the contribution of these feminist duos, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar in subverting the parochial notions. He writes:

Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar ave the way in a chapter of *The Mad Women in the Attic* entitled “Milton’s Bogey: Patriarchal Poetry and Women Readers,” which casually assumes that Milton has always been a repressive figure to independent female intellectuals: “to such women the unholy trinity of Satan, Sin, and Eve, diabolically mimicking the holy trinity of God, Christ, and Adam, must have seemed even in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to illustrate that historical disposition and degradation of the female principle that was to be imaginatively analyzed in a twentieth century by Robert Graves, among others.” (qtd. in *Boundaries* 75)

Simone de Beauvoir produced perhaps the greatest classic of post world war second feminism. Hazard Adams introduces Beauvoir and her most acclaimed critical work *The Second Sex*: “when the second sex first appeared in 1949 Simone de Beauvoir was attacked by those who felt her account of women’s lives was too heavily based on her personal experience and her middle class values [. . .] was also criticized for her historical inaccuracy and anthropological suppositions” (993). Adams Writes: “Indeed, it was encyclopedic in its coverage, offering historical, biological and psychological perspectives on women, a consideration of the prevailing patriarchal myths about them, and an account of female love and sexuality in virtually all of its form” (qtd in Adams 993). Simone de Beauvoir contends in *The Second Sex*:

It is to be seen from these examples that each separate writer reflects the great collective myths: we have seen women as flesh; the flesh of

the male is produced in the mother's body and recreated in the embraces of the woman in love. Thus woman is related to nature, she incarnates it: vale of blood, open rose [the rose of Jericho], siren, the curve of a hill, she represents to man the fertile soil, the shape, the material beauty and the soul of the world. She can hold the keys to poetry; she can be mediatrix between this world and beyond: grace or oracle...praying mantis, an ogress. In any case she appears as the privileged other, through whom the subject fulfills himself: one of the measures of man, his counterbalance, his salvation, his adventure, his happiness. (qtd. in Adams 994)

The myth of women plays a considerable part in literature; but what is its importance in daily life? To what extent does it affect the customs and conducts of individuals? In replying to this question it will be necessary to state precisely the relations this myth bears to reality. There are different kinds of myths. "This one, the myth of woman, sublimating an immutable aspect of the human condition—namely, the "division" of humanity into two classes of individuals—is a static myth," *The Second Sex* holds, "It projects into the realm of platonic ideas as reality that is directly experienced or is conceptualized on a basis of experience; in place of fact, value, and significance [. . .] timeless, unchangeable, and necessary (qtd in Adams 996).

Feminist approaches have taken to task feminist scholarship for rendering gender and women invisible. Although there are important distinctions among the various feminists, who address what may be broadly termed "post positivist" feminist contributions to the debate on power, focusing specifically on the arguments advanced by feminist theories. One of the key contributions of feminist thought has been to draw attention to the necessity for a "deconstruction of gender-biased knowledge claims."

And the “reconstruction of gender sensitivity theory Spike Peterson has pointed out that this has followed feminist theories to unsettle the gendered foundations of mainstream thought and to introduce gender into the analysis of key construct in feminist theories such as the state and sovereignty. Feminist theories also show how and to what effect mainstream and also non feminist critical theory has ignored gender hierarchy. While this problem is more explicitly associated with the masculine assumptions of realists and neo liberal feminist theories. It is also something that eludes those theorizing from a Marxist or Gramscian perspective.

Feminist point out that theories of structural violence pay little attention to “male violence against women” and gendered power and domination. postmodern feminist point out the marginalization of feminist voices in between the positivist and post positivist, where feminists are represented “with out giving one among us voices, interpretations, writings, words, brushes, and canvases. In the feminist view, it is imperative that give women voice and take seriously the feminist critic of the gendered sources of organization of labor among other concerns. While feminists have contributed much to envisioning theories, they seem more hesitant to confront directly the exclusion of country women in feminist theories. Catharine R. Stimpson acknowledges sexual politics (1970) by Kate Millet for the book’s publication “symbolized the beginning of feminist criticism” (251) in *Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Literary Studies*. The wave of this theoretical uprising became “like air and language” (251). The awakening shaft hit “women and representations of women and gender everywhere” (251). Stimpson holds:

[. . .] mark of otherness is one’s inability to shape one’s psychological, social and cultural identity, Beauvoir analyses men's depictions of

women in biology, psychoanalysis, history and literature... read Hamlet and Shakespearean criticism to find a new Gertrude, a queen both lustful and "intelligent, penetrating ... gifted (17). A decade later, Katharine Rogers had traced the representation of misogyny from Genesis and the classical Greeks to Faulkner. (252)

Stimpson's observation penetrates through the narratives of women's existential otherness, "the discrepancy between a woman's decorous appearance and flaring subjectivity-in a Jane Eyes, for example was to become a theme for feminist criticism" (252). In an answer to the question why female self remained a mystery, Stimpson puts, "indeed, a women's movement, whatever it's specific name and historical context, women have always been educated in the general language, roles, and customs of their culture." For her history of educating women itself is itself flawed set of female marginalization. "My female ancestors, in the damp peasant cottages and wet fields of Wales and the English midlands, learned how to speak, stitch, plant, cook, give births, and pray" (254).

Stimpson does not fail to examine the cause of late feminist uprising which is because "same converts were centers of learning for women" (254). Stimpson rejoices in feminist criticism which is "oppositional" in terms of politics, psychology and epistemology. Pointing out to the male minds who often access feminist critical uprising as "so esoteric and yet so vulgar", and as "the grim agenda of a bunch of man-hating women's libbers," Stimpson argues, "there are no values out there that human beings have not created [. . .] our conversation will examine our cultural, intellectual, and literary traditions in order to ground and then regrind the values" (258-59).

Stimpson compares the wave of female consciousness throughout "history with Piagetion Child" or "a fashionable creature putting on one set of cloths for breakfast in 1970, another for lunch in 1980, another for dinner in 1990" (259).

However, Stimpson agrees with three activities that constitute feminist criticism: The defiance of difference; the celebration of difference; the recognition of difference.

Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), British novelist, essayist, and critic, who helped create the modern novel. Her writing often explores the concepts of time, memory, and people's inner consciousness, and is remarkable for its humanity and depth of perception. Woolf contends in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), "the history of man's opposition to women's emancipation is more interesting than the history of emancipation itself" (qtd. in Adams 823). Woolf published many works of nonfiction, including two extended essays exploring the roles of women in history and society: *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and *Three Guineas* (1938).

Power has been the foundation of feminist theories' scholarship, particularly realist scholarship, whose treatment of power is exemplified in the classical realism of feminist politics. The novels by women writers of nineteenth century import male ideology in the guise of somebody's wife, mother, mistresses, and patrons. M.A.R. Habib in *A History of Literary Criticism* contends:

In her seminal text *women's oppression today*(1980),Michele Barrett outlines some of the central problems facing any attempt to forge a coalition of Marxist and feminist perspective .How can a Marxist analyses, conceived on the basis of "a primary contradiction between labor and capital," be reconciled with a feminist approach, which must begin with the relations of gender? In general terms, suggests Barrett, the object of Marxist feminism must be to "identify the operation of

gender relations” as they relate to the “process of production and reproduction understood by historical materialism.” Marxist feminism must “explore the relations between the organization of sexuality, domestic production...and historical changes in the mode of production and systems of appropriation and exploitation.” Such an approach will stress the “relations between capitalism and the oppression of women” (WT, 9). (qtd. in Habib 693)

M.A.R. Habib’s emphasis is on Barrett’s focus on three concepts that have been central to the Marxist feminist dialogue: “patriarchy, reproduction, and ideology,” she begins by noting the “enormous problems inhering in the concept of patriarchy” (693). Habib further sites Radical feminists such as Kate Millett who have used this concept as “an over-arching category of male dominance” (693). He writes:

Millett sees patriarchy as a system of domination that is analytically independent of the capitalist or any other mode of production; its apparent mediation by class is merely tangential. Shulamith Firestone goes even further and aims to ground the analysis of class in the “biological division of the sexes,” her aim being “to substitute sex for class as the prime motor in a materialist account of history” (WT, 11). Barrett objects to these uses of patriarchy as a “universal and trans-historical category of male dominance,” grounded in biological determinants (WT, 12). Such uses are reactionary (treating social arrangements as somehow naturally given) and regressive since they overlook “one of the early triumphs” of feminist analysis, namely, ‘distinction between sex as a biological category and gender as a social one.’ (qtd. in Habib 694)

Other feminist have formulated a materialist analysis of patriarchy, such as Christine Delphy. Habib quotes of Delphy, “however, stressing social rather than biological relations” (694). Habib argues that Delphy’s assessment argues that the “material basis of women’s oppression lies not in capitalist but in patriarchal relations of production” (Habib 694). He further quotes Barrett:

[. . .] most recent theorists, says Barrett, attempt to represent contemporary capitalism as patriarchy. Such an endeavor not only poses patriarchy as a universal and trans-historical mode, but also reveals confusion between two meanings of patriarchy, between “patriarchy as the rule of the father and patriarchy as the domination of women by men (WT, 17). This is the case, according to Barrett, with Annette Kuhn’s theory that the crucial site of women’s oppression is the family, which has a relative autonomy from capitalist relations. Kuhn argues that patriarchy unites psychic and property relations. (694)

Another concept used by recent theorists to relate women’s oppression to the organization of production in society is “reproduction.” Habib assimilates Barrett’s contribution on the theorization of feminism, “Interest in this concept derives from Engel’s formulation that the “determining factor in history is ...the production and reproduction of immediate life” (694). Habib says that those versions of feminist theories give themselves to the primary formulation of Marx and Engels who is referring here both to “the production of the means of subsistence” and “the production of human beings themselves, the propagation of the species” (694).

Habib is enthusiastic over Barrett’s theorization of Marxist feminist impulses: “In the conclusion to her book, Barrett revisits the three essential components of

Marxist feminist analysis with which she began arguments concerning the “reproduction” thesis –that capital supports the reproduction of labor power through domestic labor—should be historicized (696). And, while the concept of patriarchy should not be jettisoned, its use might be restricted to context where male domination is “expressed through the power of the father over women.” Habib further elaborates Barrett’s conclusion, “as for ideology, our recognition of its role in gender construction must move to deeper analysis of subjectivity and identity, effectively continuing the work of earlier feminists such as Simone de Beauvoir” and that “in general, Barrett stresses that there is no “programmatically answer” to the question of whether women’s liberation can be achieved under capitalism.” For which Habib further quotes Barrett as:

She does affirm, however, that such liberation would require: first a redivision of labor and the responsibilities of childcare; second, the extrication of women from dependence on a male wage or capital; lastly, the ideology of gender would need to be transformed. Non of these changes, she observes, is compatible with capitalism as it exists at present. Hence, although the women’s movement needs to be autonomously organized, it can profitably collude with socialism on the basis of overlapping political objectives. These might include the need to improve women’s wages and working conditions, and to abolish the use of female labor as a means of keeping general wages down (WT, 257-58). Since women’s oppression is “entrenched in the structure of capitalism,” the struggle for women’s liberation and the struggle for socialism cannot be disengaged. (qtd in Habib 697)



Habib's assimilation of Berrett highlights the need for revisiting feminist literary tradition on the yoke of radical feminism.

### **Amazons**

Amazons, in Greek mythology, is a race of warlike women who excluded men from their society. The Amazons occasionally had sexual relations with men of neighboring states, and all male children born to them were either sent to live with their fathers or killed. The girls were trained as archers for war, and the custom of burning off the right breast was practiced to facilitate bending the bow—hence the name Amazon, derived from the Greek word for breastless. In art, however, in which they are frequently represented, they are depicted as beautiful women with no apparent mutilation. Ancient art, such as that on temple friezes, vases, and sarcophagi, usually presents them in battle scenes. According to legend, they were almost constantly at war with Greece and fought other nations as well. According to one version, they were allied with the Trojans, and during the siege of Troy their queen was slain by the Greek warrior Achilles. Some scholars who attribute a historical foundation to the legends identify the country of the Amazons with Scythia or Asia Minor on the shores of the Black Sea.

The British version of Amazon culture emerged as the British woman-suffrage movement which acquired additional impetus when in 1897 various feminist groups merged to form the National Union of Woman Suffrage Societies. A section of the membership soon decided that its policies were timid and indecisive, and in 1903 the dissident and more militant faction, led by feminist Emmeline Pankhurst, established the Women's Social and Political Union. Emmeline Pankhurst (1858-1928), British suffrage leader, who led the movement to win the vote for women in Britain. Born Emmeline Goulden in Manchester, she studied (1873-77) at the *École Normale* in

Paris. In 1879 she married Richard Marsden Pankhurst, a barrister, who worked with her to promote equality for women. In 1889 she was one of the founders of the Women's Franchise League, which five years later succeeded in promoting passage of a law granting women the right to vote in local elections. In 1903 she founded the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) in Manchester. The group came to prominence when Pankhurst moved its headquarters to London, held public meetings, and led protest marches to the House of Commons. Becoming increasingly militant, she was arrested and sentenced to prison terms several times between 1908 and 1913. During her periods in jail she used the hunger strike as a means of protest.

American trend in feminist writing focuses less on criticisms of society and more on the establishment of full, flourishing women's cultures, where such subjects as literature, politics, and art are reassessed from a specifically female viewpoint or ideological framework. This movement has been termed cultural feminism; one of its early and influential spokespersons was Robin Morgan, whose essays were collected in *Going Too Far* (1978). *The Madwomen in the Attic* (1979), by Susan Guvar and Sandra Gilbert, examines the ways in which 19th-century women writers, including Gilman and Charlotte Brontë, expressed forbidden emotions in their works.

They rejected what they called patriarchal values, or men's values, such as competition, aggressiveness, and selfishness. They believed that women were naturally more nurturing and compassionate and advocated a society based on women's values. Millions of women who never attended a public demonstration used feminist rhetoric and legal victories won by women activists to create greater equality in their marriages and personal lives and to expand their economic and political opportunities.

In mid-Victorian time when female roles were socially codified in patriarchal norms, the women of Cranford, in Gaskell's novel, have developed values like being independent from men and yet they are successful in maintaining properness. The women of Cranford base their actions upon these principles and have allowed them to mature into everyday life. Through the confidence and combination of their principles, the women of Cranford articulate their civilization--Amazon culture-- as being no more inferior to male culture.

### III. Refutation of Masculine Ideals in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford*

A surplus of women in a society would lead to a deficit of men, which is opposite from the case in *Cranford*. When Captain Brown inhabits the town of Cranford, the women “rather [moan] over the invasion of their territories by a man” (8); the paradox undeniably illustrates their value of being independent from men. Independence isn't quite rare; however, the extent of female individualism from men in Cranford, ultimately, is. The women of Cranford have learned to live without men, and have begun to value being single. In fact, being a spinster is so common in Cranford that Miss Matty “thought it argued great natural credulity in a woman if she could not keep herself from being married” (126); essentially, it was abnormal for the women to get married. Commitment to a man is so absurd that the women would rather live with their fears of “thieves, burglars, and ghosts instead of living with men” (122).

The opening runs: "Cranford is in possession of the Amazons [. . .] if a married couple comes to settle in the town, somehow the gentleman disappears" (1). The women Gaskell writes about, many unmarried or widowed had to be self-reliant. They often faced financial difficulty, which they concealed through "elegant economy" (1); money was never discussed. "Money-spending was always 'vulgar and ostentatious'," (2) comments the narrator wryly. "Elegant economy" is the first description that comes to mind for Cranford. "Vibrant, lively and wealthy," (2) is how, the narrator, describes the town, “a Mecca for the glitterati” (5). The narration further unfolds:

In the first place, Cranford is in possession of the Amazons; all the holders of houses above certain rent are women. If married couple come to settle in the town, somehow the gentlemen disappears; he is

either fairly frightened to death by being the only man in the Cranford evening parties, or he is accounted for by being with his regiment, his ship, or closely engaged in business all the week in the great neighboring commercial town of Drumble, distant only twenty miles on a railroad. In short, whatever does become of the gentlemen, they are not at Cranford. 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. (*Cranford* 1)

As readers will soon discover, when the elderly Miss Matty gets into trouble, it is her friends who come up with a plan to help. Miss Jenkyns goes beyond modern views of equality for women: “equal indeed, she knew they were superior” (25). Marriage is not seen as the be-all and end-all of life; “a man is so in the way in the house,” (25) one matron observes.

Gaskell's detailed explorations of Mary Barton's sweated labor, Margaret Hale's struggles to help the working poor, Miss Matty's reluctant entrepreneurship, Hyacinth Gibson's studied idleness, Molly Gibson's restlessness, and Charlotte Bronte's soul-sustaining writing all combine to paint a textured portrait of the complexities of work for Victorian women, its capacity to stain their character at the same time as it could help them to discover a sense of autonomy and personal worth. *Cranford* does not limit its own potential by avoiding a thoroughgoing engagement with contemporary scholarship, however. As the narrator observes,

The Cranford ladies have only an occasional little quarrel, spirited out in a few peppery words and angry jerks of the head; just enough to prevent the even tenor of their lives from becoming too flat. Their dress is very independent of fashion; as they observe ‘What does it

signify how we dress here at Cranford, where everybody knows us?’  
 And if they go from home, their reason is equally cogent, ‘What does it  
 signify how we dress here, where nobody knows us?’ the materials of  
 their clothes are, in general, good and plain, and most of them are  
 nearly as scrupulous as Miss Tyler, of cleanly memory; but I will  
 answer for it, the last gigot, the last tight and scanty petticoat in wear  
 England, was seen Cranford – and seen without a smile. (2)

Gaskell virtually assimilates the major developments in feminist theory, cultural theory, and Victorian studies that have taken place over the past ten years. The study is almost entirely new for her time, consisting of extended close readings with maximum historical or theoretical framing. Gaskell sketches Victorian ideology as a series of rigid binary oppositions between public and private spheres and male and female roles, oppositions that Gaskell's work sought to establish. *Cranford* positions Gaskell in relation to the specific complexities of nineteenth-century women's movement, Gaskell's fiction is an exemplary body of feminist work:

I imagine that a few of the gentle folks of Cranford were poor, and had some difficulty in making both ends meet; but they were like the Spartans, and concealed their smart under a smiling face. We none of us spoke of money, because that subject savored of commerce and trade, and though some might be poor, we were all aristocratic. The Cranfordians had that kindly *spirit de corps* which made them look all deficiencies in success when some among them tried to conceal poverty. (3)

Employing a nineteenth-century vocabulary of liberation, resistance, and self-actualization, she goes on to make troublesome equations between Victorian and

modern women: at one point, Gaskell has called a woman "superwoman who balanced work and family with a grace that is edifying for women today" (12). Gaskell's narrative strategies are especially stimulating considering the extensive work that has been done on the interplay of class and gender in her writing. Even path breaking is her work if readers acknowledge Gaskell's important insights into the structure of displacements that characterizes the interplay between class and gender in Victorian writing.

The feminine nurturance on which she grounded her life and work has appeared to many feminist critics as appealing at best. In the eyes of a few recent critics, however, that emphasis on nurturance has become not only the most attractive part of Gaskell's work but also the most potentially subversive. For such reappraisals come at a time when feminists are reevaluating their perceptions of the same feminine values that Gaskell has endorsed and reconsidering the figure who most completely embodies them: the mother. Gaskell's greatest contribution lies in her politicizing the romance plot:

There were one or two consequences arising from this general but unacknowledged poverty, and this very much acknowledged gentility, which were not amiss, and which might be introduced into many circles of society to their great improvement. For instance, the inhabitants of Cranford kept early hours, and clattered home in their patterns, under the guidance of lantern-bearer, about nine o' clock at night; and the whole town was abed and asleep by half-past ten. Moreover, it was considered 'vulgar' (tremendous word in Cranford) to give anything expensive, in the way of eatable or drinkable, at the evening entertainments. Wafer bread-and-butter and sponge-biscuits

were all that Honorable Mrs. Jamieson gave; and she was sister-in-law to the late Earl Glenmire, although she did practice such 'elegant economy.' (84)

Rather than scorning the heroine's progress toward marriage as merely preserving cultural norms or as policing transgressive female desire, the romance plot is both the site of radical generic change and of political critique. At the same time, she does not neglect women's transgressive moments in the public sphere, as when Mary Barton searches for evidence and testifies on behalf of Jem or when Margaret Hale negotiates between masters and men. Gaskell illustrates how the public invasion of the private and the private invasion of the public are inextricably connected and even dependent on each other. She is thus convincing in her treatments of Mary Barton, Ruth, and North and South.

However, it so fell out that Fanny had to leave; and Miss Matilda begged me to stay and 'settle her' with the new maid; to which consented, after I had heard from my father that he did not want me at home. The new servant was a rough, honest-looking, country girl, who had only lived in a farm place before; but I liked her looks when she came to be hired; and I promised Miss Matilda to put her in the ways of the house. The said ways were religiously such as Miss Matilda thought her sister would approve. Many domestic rule and regulation had been a subject of plaintive whispered murmur to me during Miss Jenkyns's life; but now that she was gone, I do not think that even I, who was a favorite, durst have suggested an alteration. (35)

However, she is also especially suggestive about a number of scenes across the work. She relocates the most private relationship of all, the mother/child relationship. Those



times when the public male takes on the nurturing role, from Job Legh's adoption of his dead daughter's nightcap as he cares for his grandchild in *Mary Barton*, to Peter Jenkyns's parading cross-dressed as his single sister Deborah in *Cranford*, while using a pillow to represent a child:

Oh! How must I manage?' asked she helplessly. 'If Deborah had been alive she would have known what to do with a gentleman-visitor. Must I put razors in his dressing-room? Dear! Dear! And I've got none. Deborah would have had them. And slippers, and coat-crushes? I suggested that probably he would bring all these things with him. 'And after dinner, how am I to know when to get up and leave him to his wine? Deborah would have done it so well; she would have been quite in her element. (38)

Gaskell discusses the insertion of the private realm into the public one: the many scenes where children interrupt elders as they engage in non-domestic activity and the problematic use of the mother/child model as a way to rewrite paternalism toward workers. But *Cranford* does not concern a romance in the traditional sense. Rather, this pastoral celebrates a predominantly female rural community poised for its last moments of survival before succumbing to the economic necessities of the industrial city nearby. Gaskell reads it brilliantly, as a tale about female empowerment, and as a highly self-conscious text about reading and writing, social units, audiences, and the kinds of compromise necessary to succeed in reading communities and in communities that are based more overtly in economics. What seems at first a test chapter, then, becomes the best window to all others. At times, particularly in her unplumbed use of formalist language about narrative, a vagueness intrudes which threatens to thematize the novel as a stage of Gaskell's career. This generality

oversimplifies the multi-discursive and multi-material insertion (and reinsertion) of the Victorian female author into the ever-changing literary marketplace. It thus treats the career, if not the texts, a bit too exclusively in psychological/narrative terms, instead of in the richly veined sociological terms toward which the book seriously gestures. However, Gaskell has produced an ambitious, carefully executed study of a centrally important woman:

Soon after the events of which I gave account in my last paper, I was summoned home by my father's illness; and for a time I forgot, in anxiety about him, to wonder how many dear friends at Cranford were getting on, or how Lady Glenmire could reconcile herself to dullness of the long visit which she was still paying to her sister-in-law, accompanied him to the seaside, so that altogether I seemed banished from Cranford, and was deprived of the opportunity of hearing any chance intelligence of the dear little town for the greater part of that year. (114)

*Cranford* can be read as an individual story; after the first two chapters it is about Miss Matty that the episodes develop until they have finally limned her history and character in a narrative that accumulates unity as it proceeds. It can be best described as a last hurrah to a departing way of life and to the narrative techniques of an earlier age and a reluctant welcome to a new age and vision. *Subversive Heroines* succeeds in challenging the conventional wisdom concerning the gender politics of condition-of-England novels:

One night, I remember this candle economy particularly annoyed me. I had been very much tired of my compulsory 'blind man's holiday', especially as Miss Matty had fallen asleep, and I did not like to stir the

fire and run the risk of awakening her; so I could not even sit on the rug, and scorch myself with sewing by firelight, according to my usual custom. I fancied Miss Matty must be dreaming of her early life; for she spoke one or two words in her uneasy sleep bearing reference to persons who were dead long before. (59)

By putting female protagonists in positions of significant authority, *Cranford* suggests the desirability of more widespread female leadership. These heroic powers point toward an ineluctably conclusion: women have immense resources that are undermined by a patriarchal society; women's emancipation would be a boon to Victorian society. Gaskell demonstrates that condition-of-England in the novel constitutes a significant chapter in the history of Victorian feminism as well as Victorian industrial reform.

In Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* readers find communities of women that have moved from the sphere of household management into that of government, but they govern separate female worlds. The writer takes the subject matter seriously and explores the single theme and its multiple variations with specific ends in mind; Gaskell respects both her subjects and their goals - the development of feminine independence, the assertion of a feminine ego, the understanding of female worth:

I often noticed that almost every one has his own individual small economies—careful habits of saving fractions of pennies in some one peculiar direction—any disturbance of which annoys him more than spending shillings or pounds on some real extravagance. An old gentleman of my acquaintance, who took the ingelligence of the failure of Joint-Stock Bank, in which some of his money was invested, with stoical mildness, worried his family all through a long summer's day

because one of them had torn (instead of cutting) out the written leaves of his now useless bank-book; of course, the corresponding pages at the other end came out as well, and this little unnecessary waste paper (his private economy) chafed him more than all the loss of his money. Envelopes fretted his shoulder terribly when they first came in; the only way in which he could reconcile himself to such waste of his cherished article was by patiently turning inside out all that were sent to him, and so making them serve again. Even now, though tamed by age, I see him casting wistful glances at his daughters when they send a whole instead of a half-sheet of note paper, with the three lines of acceptance of an invitation, written on only one of the sides. I am not above owning that I have this human weakness myself. String is my foible. My pockets get full of little hanks of it, picked up and twisted together, ready for uses that never come. I am seriously annoyed if any one cuts the string of a parcel instead of patiently and faithfully undoing it fold by fold. (57)

She makes no excuses for the distressingly similar plots that emerge from a single story of a beleaguered young woman--orphaned, widowed, somehow deserted - struggling in a world in which the abusers of power try unsuccessfully to prevent her from achieving her own happiness. The repeated message of this vigorously didactic work is that there is help for the helpless in feminine determination in spite of the machinations of unfriendly aunts, that happiness may be discovered in other havens than in marriage, and that feminine self-sufficiency is a finer goal than wealth. Heroines in this novel rescue themselves from their problems, developing strength and sense from their woes:

‘But, you see, he saw what we did not—that it was killing my mother. Yes! Killing her (put out the candle, my dear; I can talk better in the dark), for she was but a frail woman, and ill-fitted to stand the fright and shock she had gone through; and she would smile at him and comfort him, not in words, but in her looks and tones, which were always cheerful when he was there. And she would speak of how she thought Peter stood a good chance of being admiral very soon—he was so brave and clever; and how she thought of seeing him in his navy uniform, and what sort of hats admirals wore; and how much more fit he was to be a sailor than a clergyman; and all in that way, just to make my father think she was quite glad of what came of that unlucky morning’s work, and the flogging which was always in him mind, as we all knew. (80-1)

They seem such different creatures from those heroines of all the ages, those Eves of male novelists of the period that a reader may wonder if their creators inhabited the same nineteenth-century America. This fiction is far more than a guide to novels customarily dismissed: it is both a corrective to those who condemn and an illumination to those who are curious about the works of women who wrote for and about women. Tracing the genre to the comedy of manners, this distinction between biological and social mothering is given its strongest expression in *Cranford*, Gaskell's vision of a community of social mothers who do not become depleted because their lack of family and marital obligations allows them to mother each other:

The first part was, indeed, a severe and forcible picture of the responsibilities of mother, and a warning against the evils that were in the world, and lying in ghastly wait for the little baby of two days old.

His wife did not write, said the old gentleman, because he had forbidden it, she being indisposed with a sprained ankle, which (he said) quite incapacitated her from holding a pen. However, at the foot of the page was a small 'T.O.', and on turning it over sure enough, there was a letter to 'my dear, dearest Molly,' begging her, when she left her room, whatever she did, to go *up* stairs before going *down*: and telling her to wrap her baby's feet up in flannel, and keep it warm by the fire, although it was summer, for babies were so tender. (62)

Children and husbands are conspicuously absent from Cranford. Marriage is dreaded by the women, though the fear of marriage is presented comically and men are welcome as long as they provide support rather than require it; as Miss Matty says, "a man has a sort of knowledge of what should be done in difficulties, that it is very pleasant to have one at hand ready to lean upon" (32). For the most part, however, the women of Cranford rely upon each other rather than upon men, and the smoothness of their small world is testimony to their mutual caring. The heroic mothering woman does appear briefly in the guise of Miss Jessie, who patiently nurses her terminally ill sister. At their father's death, Miss Jessie almost breaks down: "She longed, poor thing! I have no doubt, to cry alone over the grave of the dear father to whom she had been all in all: and to give way, for one little half-hour, uninterrupted by sympathy, and unobserved by friendship [. . .] but it was not to be" (57). Her sister's death frees her to marry and bear a child to the former suitor whom she had earlier rejected so she could care for her ailing sister, but her marriage takes her out of Cranford and the story. There is a child born during the novel, the offspring of Miss Matty's maid, Martha, but the narrative interest lies not in Martha's predicament as a mother but

rather in the consequences to Miss Matty and the narrator herself, who must stay in Cranford to care for the elderly Miss Matty while Martha recovers from childbirth.

The light, witty tone of the story and the characterization of Cranford as an insular, static circle of elderly spinsters and childless widows help to distance our interest in the predicaments of other wives and mothers who occasionally stray into the story, like the truly tragic wife of Samuel Brown. Gaskell's reluctance to disturb the smooth texture of Cranford's social life with the demanding realities of mothering is one of these significant differences, though this avoidance may be a product of Gaskell's attempt to accentuate the positive effects of mothering as a social ethic:

In my search after facts, I was often reminded of a description of my father had once given of the ladies' committee that he had had to preside over. He said he could not help thinking of a passage in Dickens, which spoke of a chorus in which every man took the tune he knew best, and sang it to his own satisfaction. So, at this charitable committee, every lady took the subject uppermost in her mind, and talked about it to her own great contentment, but not much to the advancement of the subject they had met to discuss. But even that committee could have been nothing to the Cranford ladies when I attempted to gain some clear and definite information as to poor Peter's height, appearance, and when and where he was seen and heard of last. (157)

When Gaskell actually speaks of the sources of fatigue, she emphasizes not physical burdens but rather the social and emotional work of the mothering heroine, which she performed in her roles as the wife of a minister and the mother of four girls. She frequently complains of the social duties that take much of her time and attention: "I

know so well what it is to have a great many people coming en masse, dependent on you for a certain amount of amusement and help, and coming in & going out, and talking, and requiring an amount of civility and exertion that almost breaks you down" (*Letters* 714). The narrator thus presents Cranford as:

Cranford had so long piqued itself on being an honest and moral town that it had grown to fancy itself too genteel and well-bred to be otherwise, and felt the stain upon its character at this time doubly. But we comforted ourselves with the assurance with we gave to each other that the robberies could never have been committed by any Cranford person; it must have been a stranger or strangers who brought this disgrace upon the town, and occasioned as many precautions as if we were living among the Red Indians or the French. (126-7)

The Amazons of Greek mythology give us our first picture of a community of man-less women, and predictably, their name denotes their loss: in Greek folk etymology, Amazon means ‘without breast,’ reminding that these legendary warriors sliced off their right breasts in order to shoot more effectively. The operation apparently worked, because the Amazons successfully arrogated to themselves the male prerogative of violence, while managing with the help of a mating season to bear and nurture enough females to keep their community replenished; male children were destroyed at birth, presumably going the way of the superfluous breast.

Their patron goddess, Artemis, the virgin of the hunt, is an Amazon raised to Olympian stature. Clean, pure, and savage, Artemis embodies both the integrity and the potential for disease in a woman who emulates men and discards them: she coolly has Actaeon rent to pieces when he invades the privacy of her bath, those arrows she shoots so cleanly are plagues and death. Even in ancient Greece, a world of man-less



women seems a contradiction in terms, being simultaneously stronger and weaker, purer and more violent, cleaner and more fetid, than a world with men in it as well.

Gaskell revives an Amazonian community clean and yokes its aspirations to the branchy towers of Cranford; it undergoes a further attenuation in English literature. Elizabeth Gaskell's Cranford is "in possession of the Amazons," (1) though in Victorian England, the word has dwindled into tender irony: the impoverished old maids who inhabit the tucked-away little village, living on kindness and charity and memories of their parents' gentility, seem all maimed pathos, with little of their original strength:

The expenditure in dress in Cranford was principally in that one article referred to. If the heads were buried in smart new caps, the ladies were like ostriches, and cared not what became of their bodies. Old gowns, white and venerable collars, and number of brooches, up and down and everywhere (some with dogs' eyes painted in them; some that were like small picture-frames with mausoleums and weeping-willows neatly executed in hair inside; some, again, with miniatures of ladies and gentlemen sweetly smiling out of a nest of still muslin), old brooches for a permanent ornament, and new caps to suit the fashion of the day—the ladies of Cranford always dressed with chaste elegance and propriety, as Miss Barker once prettily expressed it. (104-5)

Their arrows have become the tingling barbs of gossip that orbit through their genteel card parties and sentiment, the faded good will of which provides a soft and subtle antagonist to the outside world of men, money, and commerce into which Roman 'honor' has deteriorated. But even the sweetly incompetent ladies of Cranford carry a faint whiff of Artemis' witchery: the men who enter Cranford mysteriously die, fall ill,

or disappear. Only to preserve itself does Cranford open its doors to a man who survives. The presiding spirit of the village is the fluttery and loving Miss Matty, and the slight plot that knits together the various episodes turns on Miss Matty's bankruptcy in a bank failure and her fumbling attempt to support herself by running a tea shop:

All my doubts as to his identity were set at rest, and I only wondered what he would say or do next, and how Miss Matty would stand the joyful shock of what he had to reveal. Apparently he was at a loss how to announce himself, for he looked round at last in search of something to buy, so as to gain time, and, as it happened, his eye caught on the almond-comfits, and he boldly asked for a pound of 'those things.' I doubt if Miss Matty had a whole of the order, she was distressed with the idea of the indigestion they would produce, taken in such unlimited quantities. She looked up to remonstrate. Something of tender relaxation in his face struck home to her heart. She said, 'It is—oh sir! Can you be Peter?' and trembled from head to foot. In a moment he was round the table and had her in his arms, sobbing the tearless cries of old age. I changed so as to alarm me and Mr. Peter too. He kept saying, 'I have been too sudden for you, Matty—I have, my little girl.'

(123)

She persists in running her business like a hostess and giving its contents away to all who enter. At this point her brother Peter is allowed to enter the community and save it at the end by restoring her fallen fortunes; and Peter has disgraced himself as a boy by assuming woman's dress, a shame that seems to insure his safe entrance into Cranford later on. Though Cranford ladies might have hidden reserves of destruction

tucked away, a womanized man is permitted to save the community. In his providential appearance and inexhaustible largesse, Peter might be a direct ancestor of the altruistic.

A community requires moral space within it where its members can come together to discern, construct, correct, and celebrate the community's story. The work that goes on within this space affords a non-authoritarian and non-arbitrary means of allowing the community to define itself morally. Stories that are collectively and democratically self-defining provide the community with certain coherence and integrity, especially when a particular kind of story is told that allows its members to resist the temptation to dominate or to fear difference within the community. This researcher further argues that the community's activities will at certain points be morally indeterminate, and can acquire meaning retrospectively as well as prospectively. Having said something about each of these features of morally self-defining narrative, the researcher wants to argue that they can be something more. They can become counter stories-narratives of resistance and insubordination that allow communities of choice to challenge and revise the paradigm stories of the found communities in which they are embedded. The ability of counter stories to reconfigure dominant stories permits those who have been excluded or oppressed by a community to gain fuller access to the goods offered there. Feminist counter stories in *Cranford* in particular can be used to reclaim the wider community for its marginalized members.

Like other narratives of strong moral self-definition, counter stories in *Cranford* are self-defining and capable of attending to difference, but they differ from some stories in the genre in that they are told for the specific purpose of resisting and undermining a dominant story. That is, the author uses her standpoint as 'Other' to set

into equilibrium certain details and moral ideas the dominant story ignores or underplays, thus allowing her to dissent from the interpretations and conclusions the dominant story invites. If stories of retrospective definition determine in a present moment what has up until now been morally indeterminate, counter stories take what has (for the moment, at least) been determined, undo it, and reconfigure it with a new moral significance. All dominant stories already contain within them the possibilities for this kind of undoing; it is in the nature of a narrative never to close down completely the avenues for its own subversion. The construction, revision, and reinterpretation that are ongoing in dominant storytelling leave plenty of opportunities for counter stories to weave their way inside. Anyone can tell a counter story, just as anyone can tell a story. But the dominant stories that counter stories aim to retell cannot be told by just anyone; if they could, they would no longer be dominant.

#### IV. Conclusion

Feminist thinking in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* has succeeded in drawing attention to inequality between women and men and to the structures within society that belittle and work against women. It has led to a reconsideration of women's role in the family and workplace, resulting in policies that promote equal opportunities. And it has identified and tackled the problem of sexual harassment inside and outside of house. Gaskell has also succeeded in challenging perceptions of women's skills, with the result that some women are entering nontraditional areas of female employment such as governance and social mobilization. Gaskell has tempted to redeem fate of women of Cranford. What looks like a disastrous trap set by male standards look something like success within a renovated Gaskell's paradigm. Of course, this kind of vision is crucial, and the writer makes an appealing case.

In recent years, feminist thinking has had to react against the concept of traditional feminism, which argues that women should achieve full equality and that there is need for further activism. It has also had to tackle the phenomenon of feminizing, as identified by feminists such as American writer Susan Faludi. This trend of defining female in white male bourgeois term is seen as an attempt by men (and women) in American and British political life and other arenas to reverse the achievements of Victorian female writers, for example, by launching renewed moral crusades against abortion and the single-parent family.

Extremely popular with Victorian readers, *Cranford* is the story of female governance: the convocation of ladies who assembled to decide whether or not Mrs. Fitz-Adam should be called upon by the old blue-blooded inhabitants of Cranford. She had taken a large rambling house, which had been usually considered to confer a patent of gentility upon its tenant, because, once upon a time, seventy or eighty years

before, the spinster daughter of an earl had resided in it. Inhabiting this house was not also believed to convey some unusual power of intellect; for the earl's daughter, Lady Jane, had sister, Lady Anne, who had married a general officer in the time of American war, and this general officer had written one or two comedies, which were still acted on the London boards, and which, when we saw them advertised, made us all draw up, and feel that Drury Lane was paying a very pretty compliment to Cranford. Still, it was not at all a settled thing that Mrs. Fitz-Adam was to be visited, when dear Miss Jenkyns died; and, with her, something of the clear knowledge of the strict code of gentility went out too. As miss Pole observed, "As most of the ladies of good family 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" (89-90). The heroine of *Cranford*, idealistic, intelligent, passionate Miss Matty, resembles Gaskell herself as a young woman. Both experience difficulty expressing themselves in callous social environments and both face painful decisions in love. Marked by humor and sadness, the novel analyzes the full scope of Matty's perfect humanity while presenting a sharp yet understanding view of society.

In the feudal ages, on the contrary, war and politics were not thought unnatural to women, because not unusual; it seemed natural that women of the privileged classes should be of manly character, inferior in nothing but bodily strength to their husbands and fathers. Gaskell attempts to transcend the boundary created by Victorian males.

Accordingly females, even in the most extreme and protracted cases of bodily ill usage, hardly ever dare avail themselves of the laws made for their protection: and if, in a moment of irrepressible indignation, or by the interference of neighbors, they

are induced to do so, their whole effort afterward is to disclose as little as they can, and to beg off their tyrant from his merited chastisement.

All women in *Cranford* are brought up from the very earliest years in the belief that their ideal of character is the very opposite to that of men; self-will, and government by self-control, not submission and yielding to the control of others. They are contrary to all the moralities that tell them that it is the duty of women, and all the current sentimentalities that it is their nature, to live for others; to make complete abnegation of themselves, and to have no life but in their affections.

Along with this revolutionary vision, the origins of feminist political thought are evident in Major female characters of English midlands in *Cranford*. As early as the late eighteenth century, Gaskell asserts that women deserved the same rights as men. In the work, Gaskell reiterates that women are the rational equals to men but have been brought up to be dependent on men and to be concerned only with domestic life and caring for children. She believed that these characteristics were not expressions of an essential feminine nature but were instead cultural inventions that men created to serve their own interests. Given equal schooling, Gaskell seems to argue, women would compete as equals with men in the arena of public achievement. Her assessment echoes early feminist thought in her novel. Gaskell has championed women's equality in the book and sought legislation to give women the right and equality. Still, the origins of the feminist crusade are evident in Gaskell's thought as early as the Victorian age.

### Works Cited

- Beauvoir, Simone de. "The Second Sex." *Critical Theory since Plato*. Ed. Hazard Adams. New York: Harcourt, 1992. 993-1000.
- Berrett, Maurice. *Obscene Identity: The Boundaries of Female Self*. New York: Routledge, 2003. 122-37.
- Colby, Robin. "Dwelling in Decencies: Radical Criticism and the Feminist Perspective." *College English* 32.8 (May, 1971): 108-28
- Cooper, Glenda. "Cranford: From Bonnets to Boutiques." *Female Renaissance in Victorian Novel*. Ed. Glenda Cooper. London: Routledge, 2001. 85-98.
- Gaskell, Elizabeth. *Cranford*. London: Penguin Books, 1994.
- Gilbert, Sandra M. and Susan Gubar. "Inflection in the Sentence." *Critical Theory since Plato*. Ed. Hazard Adams. New York: Harcourt, 1992. 1234-44.
- Habib, M.A.R. *A History of Literary Criticism: From Plato to the Present*. New Delhi: Blackwell, 2005.
- Kerrigan, William. "Seventeenth Century Studies." *Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Literary Studies*. Eds. Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn. New York: MLA, 1992. 64-78.
- Leach, Joan. "Subversive Heroines: Feminist Resolutions of Social Crisis in the Condition-of-England Novel." *Victorian Studies* 42.1 (January, 1999): 46-65
- Levine, George. "Victorian Studies." *Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Literary Studies*. Eds. Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn. New York: MLA, 1992. 130-53.



- O'Connor, Erin. "Some Appointed Work to Do: Women and Vocation in the Fiction of Elizabeth Gaskell." *Victorian Studies* 39.3 (Spring, 1996): 427-29
- Ogden, Lisa. "The Arrival of the Woman Writer: Now Discussing Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford*." *Annual Review of Sociology* 23.4 (1997): 52-71
- Rubenius, Aina. "Scheherezade in the Marketplace: Elizabeth Gaskell the Victorian Novel." *Victorian Studies* 36.3 (Spring, 1993): 1-14
- Showalter, Elaine. "Mistress of the House: Women of Property in the Victorian Novel." *Victorian Studies* 42.2 (January, 1999): 1-15
- - -. "Towards a Feminist Poetics." *Critical Theory since Plato*. Ed. Hazard Adams. New York: Harcourt, 1992. 1224-33.
- Stimpson, Catharine R. "Feminist Criticism." *Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Literary Studies*. Eds. Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn. New York: MLA, 1992. 251-70.
- Stoneman, Patsy. "Woman against Women in Victorian England: A Life of Elizabeth Gaskell." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 8.1 (Spring, 1989): 131-133
- Uglow, Jenny. "Victims of Convention: Biography of Gaskell." *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 33.3 (December, 1978): 12-22
- Woolf, Virginia. "A Room of One's Own." *Critical Theory since Plato*. Ed. Hazard Adams. New York: Harcourt, 1992. 817-25.

