‘Wonderfully funny’
Guardian

Cranford
Elizabeth Gaskell
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Book Discussion Questions
Cranford by Elizabeth Gaskell
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1.) Describe how the setting and time period affect the story.

2.) Describe the main characters and the role they play.

3.) Why did the characters make the choices they did? How would you have changed their choices/actions?

4.) Describe the relationship of the townspeople.

5.) What social issues does the author address? Compare it to today.

6.) What role do women play in society? Compare it to today.

7.) If you have seen the BBC Masterpiece film production, discuss the similarities and differences of the story.

8.) Would you recommend this book? Why or why not?

Quotes to Discuss:

“’Elegant economy’! How naturally one falls back into phraseology of Cranford! There, economy was always ‘elegant’, and money-spending always ‘vulgar and ostentatious’; a sort of sour-grapeism, which made us very peaceful and satisfied. I never shall forget the dismay felt when a certain Captain Brown came to live at Cranford, and openly spoke about his being poor—not in a whisper to an intimate friend, the doors and windows being previously closed; but, in the public street!” page 8

“Ever since that day there has been the old friendly sociability in Cranford society; which I am thankful for, because of my dear Miss Matty’s love of peace and kindliness. We all love Miss Matty, and I somehow think we are all of us better when she is near us.” page 187
Cranford Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell

The following entry presents criticism of Gaskell's novel Cranford (1853).

INTRODUCTION

One of the most popular writers of the Victorian era, Gaskell is principally remembered today for her novel Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life (1848), which depicts the hardship of the Manchester working classes in the mid-nineteenth century, and for her artistic achievements in the English classics Wives and Daughters: An Everyday Story (1866) and Cranford (1853). In Cranford, Gaskell united her powers of observation with genial humor and gentle pathos to create a portrait of early nineteenth-century provincial life in England. Set in the fictional village of Cranford in the early nineteenth century, the work originally appeared in Charles Dickens's monthly periodical Household Words in December of 1851 as a stand-alone piece entitled “Our Society at Cranford.” At his prompting, however, Gaskell produced eight more episodes, which were later collected into the novel. Portraying Gaskell's wit and delight in the details of everyday life, as well as her lucid prose style and balance of satire and sentiment, Cranford is considered by many to be among the finest novels in English.

Plot and Major Characters

The initial episode of the novel features an incursion into the quiet, provincial village of Cranford by Captain Brown, an man initially repugnant to Miss Deborah Jenkyns—the town's tacit social matriarch, a woman nearly obsessed with decorum and the rules of gentility. Brown soon reveals his thoroughgoing congeniality, allowing Miss Jenkyns and the town's all-female social elite to accept him and his two daughters. Following Brown's demise while attempting to save a child from an oncoming train, the aging Miss Jenkyns offers to look after his daughters. The younger of the two, Miss Jessie, decides to forgo marriage to her lover so that she may care for her elder sister, an invalid. All of this changes when the sister dies and Jessie finds herself free to pursue her engagement. In the following episode, Miss Deborah Jenkyns has also died and the focus of the story turns to her sister, the lovable spinster Miss Matty. Matty has come to replace Deborah as the exemplar of morals and values in Cranford; as such she gradually attempts to change some of the isolationist attitudes that had been adopted by her sister. An adjustment in opinions toward men is already apparent as Matty meets her former suitor, Mr. Holbrook. When she sees Holbrook, Miss Matty discovers that she still loves him, and remembers rejecting him long ago because of her father and sister's objections to his social inferiority. But Gaskell shows that their chance at happiness together has long since passed, and Mr. Holbrook dies soon after the two meet. Meanwhile, Matty decides to allow her maid, Martha, to carry on a romantic relationship with a man—something unheard of while Deborah was alive. The scene shifts again and this time Signor Brunoni, a magician, visits the town and performs his conjuring act. Shortly thereafter, news of a series of robberies spreads, causing a
panic, and the Cranford ladies begin to suspect that the mysterious Brunoni may be the one responsible for the crimes. Later, Brunoni’s innocence becomes apparent and Miss Matty steps forward to assuage everyone's fears and end the hysteria. Sometime thereafter, Matty suffers a near total financial loss as the Town and County Bank—in which she became a shareholder on the advice of her sister Deborah and against that of her father—goes bankrupt. Confronted with poverty, Matty alights upon the idea of putting some old furniture up for sale, and later of selling tea to supplement her vastly reduced income. The community also comes to her aid as a secret meeting is called to discuss ways of helping the old woman. Towards the end of the novel, Matty's brother Peter, who had disappeared years ago, returns from India to live with her. Soon Brunoni performs again to the delight of his audience, and things seem to have returned to normal in Cranford. The novel's narrator closes the story by paying homage to its heroine, observing, “We all love Miss Matty, and I somehow think we are all of us better when she is near us.”

**Major Themes**

Solidly based in the tradition of realist fiction, *Cranford* is thought to represent Gaskell's fictionalization of the small Cheshire village of Knutsford, where she was raised by her maternal aunt following her mother's death. The author describes Cranford as being in the possession of women, and the town itself displays the ideals of a feminine community run according to the principles of custom, gentility, and propriety. In sharp contrast to Cranford, Gaskell gives her readers the nearby commercial world of Drumble (Manchester), where hectic materialism threatens to erode the tranquil stability and traditional moral order of the outlying provincial town. Cranford's virtues are said to be personified in the figure of Miss Matty, who in cultivating a powerful sense of community is central to the novel's themes of fulfillment through generosity, love, and acceptance of change. Sex and gender themes also permeate in the work, with the story frequently interpreted as a series of symbolic male invasions into the otherwise serene, feminine village. Likewise, notions of lingering guilt, repressed female sexuality, and love thwarted by class figure prominently in the novel, particularly in regard to Matty, whose failure to declare her feelings for Mr. Holbrook invokes all of these themes. Additionally, while Miss Matty is generally viewed as the central, heroic character of the work, *Cranford* is occasionally read as a satire of habitual middle-class behavior and thoughtless conformity to custom, a minority opinion that frequently corresponds with an interpretation of Miss Matty as a figure evocative of pathos rather than admiration.

**Critical Reception**

Often dismissed by early critics, many of whom saw it as merely a collection of charming, nostalgic vignettes from provincial life, *Cranford* has since come to be regarded as Gaskell's most significant and representative novel. The work was extremely popular with readers upon its publication, and some of Gaskell's contemporaries among the literati did appreciate its considerable merits, among them Charlotte Brontë who described it as “graphic, pithy, penetrating, shrewd.” Indeed, most modern critics have insisted that the realistic novel additionally contains an ironic, almost subversive element, and that Gaskell does not simply idealize life in a simpler, quieter time and place. Some commentators have also appreciated Gaskell's skillful unification of the plot, even though the novel was originally intended only as a
short story. Critics have also praised Gaskell's characterization of Miss Matty, said to be one of her outstanding literary creations. Others have faulted the work for its ostensible lack of structure, a flaw dismissed by many who have seen the story as thematically unified and essentially character-driven. A good deal of contemporary critical attention has also been focused on the narrative technique of Cranford, and particularly on its narrator, Mary Smith, who develops from a rather unobtrusive presence into an important interpretive figure in the novel. In more recent years, feminist critics of Cranford have endeavored to rectify Gaskell's earlier reputation as a minor novelist, and have recognized in the work themes associated with feminine desire and repression in a male-dominated culture.

Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell 1810-1865

(Born Elizabeth Cleghorn Stevenson; used the pseudonym Cotton Mather Mills) English novelist, biographer, short story writer, and poet.

INTRODUCTION

A figure of the "golden age" of nineteenth-century English literature, Gaskell is best known for her novels of social reform and psychological realism, notably Ruth (1853) and North and South (1854). Her treatment of issues ranging from prostitution to mother-daughter relations both captured the public imagination and caused a great deal of controversy during Gaskell's own lifetime and has attracted the attention of more recent critics interested in problems of authorship and social responsibility. Gaskell's refined and compassionate portrayals of her central characters—often young, unmarried women who suffer misfortune—and her skillful use of detail have established an enduring popularity for and interest in her work.

Biographical Information

Born in London in 1810, Gaskell was the daughter of an occasional minister of the Unitarian Church in England. Gaskell's mother died when Elizabeth was a year old, and Elizabeth was sent to live with her maternal aunt in rural Cheshire, where she attended a school for girls. Educated in fine arts and languages, Gaskell began to read extensively, particularly novels, developing a love for books that would be sustained throughout her life. In 1831, she travelled to Newcastle, Edinburgh, and Manchester to visit prominent Unitarian ministers. In Manchester, she met William Gaskell, a young Unitarian clergyman; they were married in 1832 and lived in Manchester. Of her six children, four daughters survived infancy, and Gaskell maintained close relationships with all of them. It was in response to the death of her second child, William, from scarlet fever in 1845 that her husband suggested Gaskell begin writing as a form of distraction from mourning. The resulting novel, Mary Barton (1848), reflected Gaskell's interest in the plight of families, and particularly of women, affected by the industrialization of England. After the popular success of Mary Barton, Gaskell produced a prolific number of short stories and novels over the remaining years of her life.
Because William Gaskell was a professor of history and literature at Manchester New College, the family was relatively wealthy, and Gaskell became deeply occupied with charitable endeavors as well as with her now-successful writing career, while also finding time to travel in Europe. Additionally, she developed friendships, often sustained primarily through letters, with a number of prominent persons of literary or charitable circles, such as George Eliot, Mary Howitt, Charlotte Brontë, and Florence Nightingale. Gaskell published many of her short stories and serialized novels in *Household Words*, a popular journal that Charles Dickens edited. Gaskell was known in Manchester to be a gracious hostess and a very private celebrity, and she clearly struggled to negotiate the demands of private and public life, as many of her central characters do. At the height of her career, Gaskell was asked by the Reverend Patrick Brontë to write a biography of his daughter Charlotte, who had recently died. This work was published in 1857 as *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* and raised some controversy regarding the accuracy of the account. For many critics, Gaskell's friendship with Brontë had resulted in an overly sympathetic and sentimental tendency in the work, which, according to reviewers and the Brontë family alike, produced major misrepresentations of the subject. Disappointed at the reception of the Brontë biography, Gaskell returned to writing fiction, completing several full-length works. She died in Manchester in 1865, leaving her last novel, *Wives and Daughters* (1864-66), unfinished.

**Major Works**

Gaskell's novels are often characterized as simultaneously industrial and domestic. As a group, they are novels of social reform that focus on deeply personal injustices. Beginning with *Mary Barton*, Gaskell was preoccupied with the role and status of women and specifically of women before marriage. The narratives reveal characters who are struggling to flourish in a strictly contained and frequently irrational world, such as the title characters of *Ruth* and *Sylvia's Lovers* (1863). True to her Unitarian faith, Gaskell wrote with a serious concern for the rational responsibility proper to human beings; yet she also recognized the overwhelming forces of public opinion, economic desperation, and misfortune. Her novels thus reflect a tension between the operations of freedom and destiny. *Mary Barton*, for instance, has tragic elements, but the moral responsibility of the central characters takes precedence. In this way, Gaskell used the interplay of the melodramatic and the ordinary to focus on forms of social injustice. Also, the moral seriousness of Gaskell's novels reflects the concerns of the Victorian era in questioning the legitimacy of authority: the characters with the most political or social power are often the least trustworthy (for Gaskell), and those with little or no power to fashion their own destiny, notably single women, servants, and the poor (such as the heroines of "Lizzie Leigh" [1850] and *Ruth*) are the central or more sympathetic figures. Her writing also reveals an ear highly attuned to dialect and natural conversation. Gaskell's last two novels, *Sylvia's Lovers* and the unfinished *Wives and Daughters*, were praised for the vividness of the characterizations and the portrayals
of ordinary life. Her letters, which span her entire writing career, contain both personal communications and comments upon her own writing and other works of literature.

**Critical Reception**

Gaskell is best known for her insightful understanding and delicate expression of emotional and psychological suffering. W. A. Craik characterizes her as a "primitive"—one whose voice as an author developed not out of the study of classical technique but out of her own keen observational powers and compassion. What is most consistently praised in Gaskell's writing is the realism of plot, setting, and character (in spite of the fact that several stories give a prominent place to the supernatural); attention to detail and to the intimate dynamics of domestic life are also central features of her narratives. According to critical consensus, Gaskell generally avoided a didactic or self-righteous tone by letting the wealth of realistic details of domestic life and the vividness of the characters absorb the political message. The hesitancy that marks Gaskell's early novels evolves into a subtle and "unobtrusive" presence of the author. Very well received during and immediately after her lifetime, Gaskell was dismissed throughout much of the twentieth century as a writer who reflected the conventionality of the Victorian era and was considered a social conservative and a sentimental novelist. Early feminists criticized the "nostalgia" of her resolutions: marriage remained the goal for most of the heroines, and, like Dickens, Gaskell tended to romanticize the natural and the pastoral over and against the industrialized clamor of the urban. More recent critics have instead emphasized the tensions that animate Gaskell's novels and foreshadow major social reforms—tensions between the working and middle classes, between traditional authority and young women, and between the responsibilities of the public and the responsibilities of the individual.
Elizabeth Gaskell: Biography

In November 1865, when reporting her death, The Athenaeum rated Gaskell as "if not the most popular, with small question, the most powerful and finished female novelist of an epoch singularly rich in female novelists." Today Gaskell is generally considered a lesser figure in English letters remembered chiefly for her minor classics Cranford and Wives and Daughters: An Every-day Story. Gaskell's early fame as a social novelist began with the 1848 publication of Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life, in which she pricked the conscience of industrial England through her depiction and analysis of the working classes. Many critics were hostile to the novel because of its open sympathy for the workers in their relations with the masters, but the high quality of writing and characterization were undeniable, and critics have compared Mary Barton to the work of Friedrich Engels and other contemporaries in terms of its accuracy in social observation. The later publication of North and South, also dealing with the relationship of workers and masters, strengthened Gaskell's status as a leader in social fiction. Gaskell's fiction was deeply influenced by her upbringing and her marriage. The daughter of a Unitarian clergyman who was a civil servant and journalist, Gaskell was brought up after her mother's death by her aunt in Knutsford, a small village that served as the prototype not only for Cranford but also for Hollingford in Wives and Daughters and the settings of numerous short stories and novellas. In 1832 she married William Gaskell, a Unitarian clergyman in Manchester in whose ministry she actively participated and with whom she collaborated to write the poem "Sketches Among the Poor" in 1837.

"Our Society at Cranford," now the first two chapters of Cranford, appeared in Dickens' Household Words on 13 December 1851 and was itself a fictionalized version of an earlier essay "The Last Generation in England." Dickens so liked the original episode that he pressed Gaskell for more; at irregular intervals between January 1852 and May 1853 eight more episodes appeared.

Two controversies marred Gaskell's literary career. In 1853 she shocked and offended many of her readers with Ruth, an exploration of seduction and illegitimacy prompted by anger at moral conventions that condemned a "fallen woman" to ostracism and almost inevitable prostitution — a topic already touched on in the character of Esther in Mary Barton. The strength of the novel lies in its presentation of social conduct within a small Dissenting community where tolerance and rigid morality clash. Although some Element of the "novel with a purpose" is evident, Gaskell's sensitivity in her portrayal of character and, even more, her feel for relationships within small communities and families show a developing sense of direction as a novelist. Although critics praised the soundness of the novel's moral lessons, several members of Gaskell's congregation burned the book and it was banned in many libraries. Even Gaskell admitted that she prohibited the book to her own daughters, but she nevertheless stood by the work.

The second controversy arose following the 1857 publication of The Life of Charlotte Brontë. The biography's initial wave of praise was quickly followed by angry protests from some of the people dealt with. In a few instances legal action was threatened; however, with the help of her husband and George Smith the problems were resolved without recourse to law. The most significant complaint resulted from Gaskell's acceptance of Branwell Brontë's version of his dismissal from his tutoring position (he blamed it on his refusal to be seduced by his employer's wife) and necessitated a public retraction in The Times, withdrawal of the second edition, and a revised third edition, the standard text. Despite the initial complications and restrictions necessitated by conventions of the period (Gaskell did not, for example, deal with Brontë's feelings for Constantin Heger), The Life of Charlotte Brontë has established itself as one of the great biographies; later biographies have modified but not replaced it.

During 1858 and 1859 Gaskell wrote several items, mainly for Dickens, of which two are of particular interest. My Lady Ludlow, a short novel cut in two by a long digressive tale, is reminiscent of Cranford, yet the
setting and social breadth anticipates *Wives and Daughters*. The second work, *Lois the Witch*, is a somber novella concerning the Salem witch trials which prefigures Gaskell's next work, *Sylvia's Lovers*, by its interest in morbid psychology. *Sylvia's Lovers* is a powerful if somewhat melodramatic novel. The first two volumes are full of energy; they sparkle and have humor. The ending, however, shows forced invention rather than true tragedy. Regarded by Gaskell as "the saddest story I ever wrote," *Sylvia's Lovers* is set during the French Revolution in a remote whaling port with particularly effective insights into character relationships.

Most critics agree that *Cousin Phillis* is Gaskell's crowning achievement in the short novel. The story is uncomplicated; its virtues are in the manner of its development and telling. *Cousin Phillis* is also recognized as a fitting prelude for Gaskell's final and most widely acclaimed novel, *Wives and Daughters: An Every-Day Story*, which ran in *Cornhill* from August 1864 to January 1866. The final installment was never written, yet the ending was known and the novel as it exists is virtually complete. The plot of the novel is complex, relying far more on a series of relationships between family groups in Hollingford than on dramatic structure. Throughout *Wives and Daughters* the humorous, ironical, and sometimes satirical view of the characters is developed with a heightened sense of artistic self-confidence and maturity.

Gaskell was hostile to any form of biographical notice of her being written in her lifetime. Only months before her death, she wrote to an applicant for data: "I disapprove so entirely of the plan of writing 'notices' or 'memoirs' of living people, that I must send you on the answer I have already sent to many others; namely an entire refusal to sanction what is to me so objectionable and indecent a practice, by furnishing a single fact with regard to myself. I do not see why the public have any more to do with me than buy or reject the ware I supply to them" (4 June 1865). After her death the family sustained her objection, refusing to make family letters or biographical data available.

Critical awareness of Gaskell as a social historian is now more than balanced by awareness of her innovativeness and artistic development as a novelist. While scholars continue to debate the precise nature of her talent, they also reaffirm the singular attractiveness of her best works.

(From *An Encyclopædia of British Women Writers*, pp. 186-187)

**An Elizabeth Gaskell Chronology**

1810  September 29: Elizabeth Cleghorn Stevenson is born to William and Elizabeth Stevenson, nee Holland, in Chelsea, London.

1811  October 29: Elizabeth Cleghorn’s mother dies. November: Mrs. Hannah Lumb, Elizabeth Cleghorn’s aunt, takes her to Knutsford, Cheshire, to rear her.

1814  Elizabeth’s father is married a second time, to Catherine Thomson.

1821  Elizabeth attends a boarding-school near Warwick run by the Misses Byerley.

1822  Her brother John Stevenson joins the Merchant Navy.

1824  Elizabeth’s school moves to Stratford-on-Avon, where she remains for two years, including the holidays. She studies, apart from general subject, French, Italian, and Latin.

1827  Elizabeth goes to live with her father at 3 Beaufort Row, Chelsea.
1828  John Stevenson disappears while on a voyage to India.

1829  March 22: Elizabeth’s father dies.
      September: Elizabeth goes to Knutsford for a short visit to her aunt, Mrs. Lumb, then to Newcastle-on-Tyne to the home of the Rev. William Turner, where she stays two years.

1831  Elizabeth spends most of the year at Edinburgh in company with Mr. Turner’s daughter Ann. She meets the Reverend William Gaskell (1805-1884), minister of Cross Street Chapel, Manchester.

1832  August 30: Elizabeth is married to the Rev. William Gaskell at St. John’s Parish Church, Knutsford; they leave for a wedding trip to Festiniog, Wales.
      September 29: The Gaskells arrive from their wedding trip at their home, 14 Dover Street, Manchester.

1833  Mrs. Gaskell’s first child, a daughter, is stillborn.

1834  September 12: A second daughter, Marianne, is born.

1837  February 5: A third daughter, Margaret Emily (known as Meta), is born.
      January: A poem composed by Mrs. Gaskell and her husband, entitled “Sketches Among the Poor”, No. 1, appears in *Blackwood’s Magazine*.

1840  William Howitt includes in his *Visits to Remarkable Places* a description of Clopton Hall written by Mrs. Gaskell.

1841  Mr. and Mrs. Gaskell visit Heidelberg, touring the Rhine country.

1842  October 7: A fourth daughter, Florence Elizabeth, is born. The Gaskells move to 121 Upper Rumford Street, Manchester.

1845  August 10: The Gaskells’ son William, born on October 23, 1844, dies of scarlet fever at Festiniog, Wales. Elizabeth collapses after his death. In order to distract her from her grief, her husband encourages her to write a novel (*Mary Barton*).

1846  September 3: A fifth daughter, Julia Bradford, is born.

1847  “Libbie Marsh’s Three Eras” and “The Sexton’s Hero” are published in *Howitt’s Journal*.

1848  “Christmas Storms and Sunshine” is published in *Howitt’s Journal*.

1849  *Mary Barton* is published in two volumes by Chapman & Hall, London.
      Mrs. Gaskell dines with Charles Dickens and visits Thomas Carlyle at Chelsea.
      June: She spends her vacation at the Lake District, and meets William Wordsworth.
      “The Last Generation in England” is published in the American *Sartain’s Union Magazine* in July; it anticipates her novel *Cranford*.
      “Hand and Heart” is published in *The Sunday School Penny Magazine* from July to November.
      The Gaskells move to 84, Plymouth Grove, Manchester.

1850  January 31: Dickens writes, asking her to contribute to *Household Words*.
      March and April: “Lizzie Leigh” appears in the first two issues of *Household Words*. 
August 19: Mrs. Gaskell meets Charlotte Brontë, who stays with the Kay-Shuttleworth family at Briery Close, near Lake Windermere.


December: The Moorland Cottage is published by Chapman & Hall.

1851

February-April: “Mr. Harrison’s Confessions” appears in The Ladies’ Companion.

June 7: “Disappearances” is published in Household Words.

June 27: Charlotte Brontë visits Mrs. Gaskell in Manchester.

July: Elizabeth Gaskell visits London and the Great Exhibition.

December 13: Cranford begins appearing in Household Words.

Mrs. Gaskell’s chalk drawing portrait is made by George Richmond. It is now in the National Portrait Gallery, London.

1852


April 12: Mrs. Gaskell provides Charlotte Brontë with an outline of Ruth.


September: Dickens visits Manchester as manager of the farce Used Up and is entertained by Mr. and Mrs. Gaskell.

December: “The Old Nurse’s Story” is published in Household Words.

1853

January: Ruth is published in three volumes by Chapman & Hall.

January 22: “Cumberland Sheep Shearers” appears in Household Words.

April 22: Charlotte Brontë visits Mrs. Gaskell in Manchester.

June: Cranford is published by Chapman & Hall.

Late summer: Mr. and Mrs. Gaskell and their two elder daughters travel in Normandy.

September: Mrs. Gaskell visits Charlotte Brontë at Haworth.

October 22: “Bran”, a poem, appears in Household Words.

November 19-26: “Morton Hall” appears in Household Words.


The Christmas number of Household Words contains “The Squire’s Story” and “The Scholar’s Story”, the latter a poem.

Mrs. Gaskell begins writing North and South in the winter of 1853-4.

1854

February 25: “Modern Greek Songs” appears in Household Words.

April: Mr. Gaskell becomes senior minister of Cross Street Chapel, Manchester.

May 20: “Company Manners” appears in Household Words.

May: Charlotte Brontë makes her last visit to Mrs. Gaskell’s.

Mrs. Gaskell and Marianne visit France in the autumn. On their return they visit Florence Nightingale in London.

September 2- January 27, 1855: North and South appears in Household Words.

1855

June 16: Charlotte Brontë dies and her father, the Reverend Patrick Brontë, requests her to write a life of his daughter; she accepts and begins to gather material.

North and South is published in two volumes by Chapman & Hall.


October 6-20: “Half a Lifetime Ago” appears in Household Words.

Lizzie Leigh and Other Stories is published by Chapman & Hall.

1856

December 13-27: “The Poor Clare” appears in Household Words.

December 27: “A Christmas Carol”, a poem, appears in Household Words.


1859 Early summer: Mrs. Gaskell and her daughters spend part of the summer at Whitby, where she gathers material for “Sylvia’s Lovers’. *Round the Sofa and Other Tales* is published by Sampson Low & Company. October 8-22: “Lois the Witch” appears in *All the Year Round*. The Christmas number of *All the Year Round* contains “The Crooked Branch”.


1861 January 5-19: “The Grey Woman” appears in *All the Year Round*.

1862 May: “Six Weeks at Heppenheim” appears in The *Cornhill Magazine*. February: Mrs. Gaskell, accompanied by her daughter Margaret Emily and a friend, Isabel Thompson, leave for Paris, Normandy and Brittany. Involved in the relief effort for the destitute people hit by the Lancashire Cotton Famine, Mrs. Gaskell overstrains herself and has to recuperate at Eastbourne.


1864 April-June: “French Life” appears in *Fraser’s Magazine*.

1865 Spring: Mrs. Gaskell, accompanied by members of her family, travels in France, staying part of the time with Madame Mohl in Paris and part at Dieppe. Summer: Mrs. Gaskell buys a home, The Lawn, near Holybourne, in Hampshire. *The Grey Woman and Other Tales* is published by Smith, Elder & Company. November 12: Mrs. Gaskell dies suddenly at The Lawn, while at tea with some members of her family.

1866 *Wives and Daughters* is published unfinished posthumously in two volumes by Smith, Elder & Company.

1884 June 11: The Rev. William Gaskell dies aged 78; he is buried beside his wife at Brook Street Unitarian Chapel in Knutsford.
Sources


The amazing secret life of Cranford creator Elizabeth Gaskell

By TONY RENNELL

Triumph over tragedy: Elizabeth Gaskell

On the surface, she was the ideal Victorian wife and mother, a 19th-century domestic goddess. The clue was in the name she used on her books - not Elizabeth Gaskell but Mrs Gaskell. It distinguished her from other women writers of the time, such as Jane Austen and George Eliot, who were spinsters and childless.

And it was true. Married to a minister, bringing up four children, keeping hearth and home, engaging herself in charity, the author of Cranford embodied old-fashioned femininity.

From the comfort of that married bliss, she ran a canny eye over the outside world, its quirks and its characters, especially those souls who, unlike her, were without men.

She created the town of Cranford - based on Knutsford in Cheshire where she spent the most formative years of her childhood and often returned to as an adult.

Now it has been lovingly and scintillatingly brought to life in a BBC1 TV drama, with Dame Judi Dench and Dame Eileen Atkins, on Sunday nights.

All the Cranford women are single, and their gossip, their snobberies, their foibles and their worries are exposed to laughter, but not ridicule. Mrs Gaskell was a satirist, but a gentle one.

Yet if this gives the author a cosy image it would be misleading. The family bliss disguised terrible demons. Beneath the surface, her life was beset by tragedies. She wrote to forget.

She was born as Elizabeth Stevenson in 1810 in Chelsea, daughter of an eccentric, bookish man, who worked for the Treasury in Whitehall.

Gaskell’s singletons: Their gossip, snobberies, foibles and worries are exposed to laughter, but not ridicule.

Cranford stars (l to r) Lisa Dillon, Dame Eileen Atkins, Dame Judi Dench and Imelda Staunton

She was her 40-year-old mother's eighth child in 13 years, six of whom had died. A year after Elizabeth was born, the poor woman died from exhaustion.
The motherless child was sent to live with Aunt Lumb, her mother's sister, in rural Cheshire. There she grew up happily in the loving care of the woman she later called "my more-than-mum2. There were cousins to play with and relatives to cosset her.

The inquisitive child took note of country-town life around her. There were, she recalled later, "11 widows of respectability who kept house, besides spinsters innumerable".

In that tight-knit community, she had the template for Cranford.

There were two blots on her landscape. However kind her relations, she was hurt by her father's rejection, and was lonely. When he remarried, he did not send for her until several years later - and when he did, her stepmother resented her.

Stays with her family in London when she was nine ended in tears. The couple's attention focused on the two new children of the marriage. Elizabeth's only friend in London was her brother - the other survivor of their mother's brood - but when she was 12, he went to sea and she was alone again.

Boarding school was her salvation. Surprisingly for a girl of her generation she had a good education, and was encouraged to read widely and to write. She loved visiting and learning about historic places. It was the start of her passion for collecting stories.

Letters streamed from her to family and friends, demanding chit-chat, pressing for "more details, more details", spicy glimpses into people and events that would characterise her future writing. She made notes and kept journals.

Then, as she was beginning to get her life on track, she was knocked back by two disasters. In 1828 her brother John was lost at sea. Six months later her father died too, from a stroke. She was just 18.

With no firm ties, Elizabeth felt unable to settle. She strayed from her Aunt Lumb's care to distant relatives in Newcastle; she travelled to Edinburgh, then back to London, ending up often at Knutsford.

She longed to meet men at London balls. There was one in Park Lane, she was told to her excitement, that had "capital flirting places in the balcony".

But what she really longed for was marriage - and she soon met her man.

The Reverend William Gaskell was an unlikely beau for this giddy girl. He was scholarly and austere, a classicist like her father. Some thought him dry and rule-bound, but not Elizabeth. He was five years older than her, tall and thin, and very attractive.
He was a minister in the Unitarian Church, the Protestant sect in which she had grown up. It was a non-conformist group, intellectually driven, with a faith that emphasised individual salvation combined with a strong streak of social conscience.

Lady of the manor: Francesca Annis, as Lady Ludlow, hosted the annual garden party at the Hanbury Court in Sunday's episode

Marriage to Gaskell thrilled and lifted Elizabeth - only for her to be dashed down again when she gave birth to a still-born girl.

This unnamed infant never left her, as she wrote in a heart-wrenching sonnet:
"Thee have I not forgot, my first-born, thou
Whose eyes ne'er opened to my wistful gaze."

She was soon pregnant again, however, and bore a healthy daughter, Marianne. But the earlier experience had scarred her and she began writing a diary of her new child's life, in case she or the child died. This began her life as a writer.

A second girl was born, Meta. Then a third child, a boy, but he died before his birth was even recorded. Aunt Lumb was dead, too. In her grief for all this loss Elizabeth wrote more stories, ghostly ones full of tragedy, like her life.

Another girl, Florence, eased the pain. A year later, a son was delivered safely and named William, after his father. Her life as a mother was busy, but she was happy. Then, on holiday in Wales, William died of scarlet fever aged just nine months.

Elizabeth was distraught and took to her bed. Her husband, desperate to distract her, encouraged her to start a bigger writing project than she had tackled before - to write a novel.

Three years later, her first book, Mary Barton, was published. It was a bleak love story set in the Manchester slums. She wrote in the preface: "The tale was formed and the first volume written when I was obliged to lie down constantly on the sofa and I took refuge in invention to exclude the memory of painful scenes."

The writer of ten books and dozens of short stories and magazine articles was on her way - but at what a cost.

Elizabeth now became part of several social circles. There were her Unitarian friends - informed, clever and concerned. There was a sisterhood of free-thinking women, including Florence Nightingale and Charlotte Bronte.
But it was the literary circles into which she was invited that gave her greatest joy
and in which she would find herself most at home.

It had been thought wiser not to put her name on Mary Barton. Women writers
were still regarded suspiciously. But her secret was soon out and when she went to
London she was feted as a talented new writer.

Charles Dickens, whose David Copperfield was also just published, invited her to
dinner. This was the start of a long literary collaboration and friendship. He wanted
any novels she could write to serialise in Household Words, a literary magazine he was
launching.

Cranford was published in this way, starting life as six episodes, before being compiled into a
book - as were most of her novels, in Dickens's or other magazines.

Elizabeth often worked to his bidding as he demanded new stories, calling her "my dear
Scheherazade", likening her to the legendary storyteller of Arabian Nights.

She was never short of tales - all the gossip and intelligence she had gathered over the years
found a home.

Dickens admired her writing, but he could not stop tinkering with her words. They quarrelled
often, but they could also be flirtatious. Their friendship, however, never went beyond the
bounds of propriety.

Propriety was important to Elizabeth. She never forgot that she was Mrs Gaskell, but she was an
unusual wife for Victorian times and hers was an unconventional marriage.

Both William and Elizabeth led hectic lives. He worked a lot and was often away, while she
balanced motherhood with writing, travelling, socialising.

There was her charity work, too - visiting the poor and taking up cases of abused children.
Elizabeth would also involve herself in other peoples' lives, such as advising Charlotte Bronte on
whether or not to marry a man she didn't love.

Her literary success paid well. She received £200 for Mary Barton, and from then on the
payment for her books rose rapidly. The Gaskells moved to a big house in Manchester, and hired
servants and someone to look after the girls. They took holidays to France and Italy.

But the couple were leading increasingly separate lives. He hated London, which she loved.
When she was there she was in a whirl of friends and contacts. "I had so many calls to pay," she
wrote to her daughter Marianne.

The North, though the inspiration of so much of her work, was beginning to bore her.
Manchester parties were, "large, vulgar and over-dressed".
It may have seemed that she and William were drifting apart. But love and respect never died. He was always the critic she turned to first. She deferred to his editing, not Dickens's.

There was only one moment when her head may have turned and her heart fluttered.

On a tour with her daughters, they visited Rome and she was entranced by the soft voice and manners of a 30-year-old American, Charles Norton.

He WAS nearly 20 years younger than her. He flattered her with his devotion and impressed her with his knowledge. Charles's feelings for her were genuine. She was a spontaneous woman, passionate about life and fun to be with. Life swirled around her and he was glad to be part of it.

He became a friend, nothing more, but it was a friendship that lasted until the end of her life. She never forgot their time together. "It was in those charming Roman days that my life culminated," she wrote to a friend. "I shall never be so happy again. I don't think I was ever so happy before."

Yet she swiftly moved on. She was busier than ever - new books, new stories, new friends, such as the Pre-Raphaelite painters, Holman Hunt and Rossetti.

Elizabeth Gaskell was now a woman who wanted it all, working at a prodigious rate to keep her life together.

But it was damaging her health. She had headaches that left her prostrate and fainting fits that floored her. She was exhausted. "I am so tired of spinning my brain," she wrote.

The solution she conceived was to leave the grime of Manchester and lure her reluctant husband to live with her in the South of England.

In secrecy she bought a large house in Hampshire for the two of them to enjoy in their old age. It cost her £2,600 (£174,000 in today's money), half paid for with a mortgage. Her girls, who were in on the secret, were told not to tell their father. He disapproved of debt.

Her latest book, Wives And Daughters, was appearing in Cornhill magazine and she was rushing to meet its deadlines, while re-furnishing the new home and trying to let out the old one in Manchester without William finding out.

Finally, she moved in and, while she unpacked, she set aside the last episode of Wives And Daughters. It would never be finished.

On Sunday November 12, 1865, she and her daughters spent a lazy morning before Elizabeth walked up the lane to church. The vicar thought she looked extremely well.

At 5pm, everyone sat in the drawing room for tea. Elizabeth was gossiping, relating a conversation she'd had with a judge when, mid-sentence, she stopped, gasped and slumped down dead from a heart attack.
The news had to be broken to her husband that not only had his wife died, but in a house he never knew she had bought for them.

She was 55 and William, the man she unfailingly loved, was consigned to a widowhood of his own, for 23 more years. After so many tragedies in her life, perhaps that was the final one.

As for Cranford, now delighting a new audience a century-and-a half later, it was her favourite of all her books.

"It is the only one I can read again," she told the artist John Ruskin shortly before her death. "Whenever I am ailing or ill, I take it down and laugh over it afresh."