

Cranford's "Cracked" Objects: Perception in Collections

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Abstract: This paper proposes that old objects are the crucial metaphor for spinsters' fogyism in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford*. Though capital-resistant and use-based, old objects preserved by Cranfordians primarily support their memory and life philosophy. In this context, old objects are precious collections rather than supplies, referring to their anxiety about materials and social order in the rapidly changing world. On the other hand, around the narrative of the "cracked" objects, Cranfordians (mainly in the case of Matilda Jenkyns) unconsciously connect Cranford to the outside world, breaking down their isolation. The story of Cranford is thus not merely about the disintegrated fogyish utopia but also about old ladies' "peaceful" adoption in the galloping Victorian world.

1. Introduction

Elizabeth Gaskell once observed the sense of "strangeness" emerges in "the phases of society are rapidly changing," and it "yet occurred only" in her preceded generation [1], which implies the generations' crisis that their life routines have been disrupted by the progressing Victorian period. This perception of "strangeness" is employed in her novel *Cranford* – the story of a town ruled by fogyish old ladies who reject the effect of the industrial empire – and stands as the motif of the novel. The story of *Cranford* is usually considered as the process of Female rustication's "inevitable disintegration"[4] led by patriarchal industrialism, however, this disintegration also accords with old ladies' changing attitude towards "strangeness" – the perceived sense of disconnection between the inside of routines and the outside of change. The change is reflected in the novel's metaphor and narrative effects of old objects.

Over-attaching their past life and experience, ladies advocate an "elegant economy" of noble lifestyle, as the material strategy to exclude capital and industrial infiltration. Thus obsolete objects are the main supplies for their daily use. Nevertheless, though use-based, the narratives of old objects primarily serve the nostalgic emotion as the media communicate their memory and life philosophy. In this context, objects are precious collections rather than supplies, referring to their nostalgia and anxiety. On the other hand, implying the disconnections, many of these old objects are "cracked", physically or metaphorically, which offers the "approach" to the outside. It is through the "cracks" Miss Matty extends her personal life and experience to the outside world.

This paper focuses on the metaphor and narrative effect of old objects in *Cranford* and proposes that they are the crucial metaphor for Cranford spinsters' fogyism. Functioned not merely material resistances but nostalgic collections, they tell Cranford's "peaceful" [2] process of self-adjustment rather than passive integration.

2. Old Objects as Collection

Showcasing the global developments in industry, science and culture, The Great Exhibition was held in the purpose-built Crystal Palace in London in May 1851, only a few months before Cranford's serial publication. Thousands of people through the railroad visited this mega-event. Not without controversiality but as "transmitted 'facts'" [7], it condensed "the material progress humankind had made and coordinate[d] those advances in order that the world could work together" [5]. If the exhibition was a living scroll of material progress with a global and industrial view, the fictitious space of Cranford firstly represents xenophobia and technophobia that opposed the Exhibition.

Following the pungent grumble to an outsider Captain Brown who has "[...] connection with the obnoxious railroad", and who "was so brazen as to talk of being poor" [2], Cranford's material anxiety immediately pours out in the introduction of their "elegant economy" in which spinsters "tacitly agreed to ignore that any with whom we associated on terms of visiting equality could ever be prevented by poverty from doing that they wished." "[We] blinded ourselves", as Mary Smith economically put it, that "[i]f we walked to or from a party, it was because the night was so fine, or the air so refreshing; not because sedan-chairs were expensive", or "[i]f we wore prints, instead of summer silks", the same. The extension from the aversion of an external threat to internal material anxiety manifests the Cranfordian (or the half-Cranfordian Smith) perception of a disconnection between public progress and private stagnation. If the Exhibition is the Palace of modern curiosities, Cranford is then an antique museum where the old objects cram.

Disconnection makes Cranford "independent of fashion" [2], but they still crack up as fashion pursuers. This is comically depicted when Lady Glenmire, a noble widow, joins the town: ladies' "expenditure on dress" only refers to "new smart caps" - "old brooches for a permanent ornament, and new caps to suit the fashion of the day". Their primary fashion source is from Miss Betty Barker, whose designs are occasionally from "the pattern of an old cap" of aristocratic Lady Arley. The old design is then "immediately copied and circulated among..." those who have "aristocratic connection" and are "pedigree". Standing firmly on the "elegant economy", the consistency between taste and status is emphasised. Pursuing Lady Arley's cap is pursuing the old hierarchical life, a life of the past order before the industrial and capital today.

In the "historic oscillation...that accompanied the great rise of the European bourgeoisie" [3], whether it was an old brooch or an outmoded cap, they are necessities, signs of status in a way familiar to spinsters, and media conveying the anxiety of "the privilege of birth came to be disputed—that is, a nobility conferred by time, genealogically, upon the previous ruling class". Thus, "on that memorable"[2] evening, ladies, who re-received invitations after once not being invited to Lady Glenmire's welcome party (because they are not "'county' families"), equip "three new caps, and a greater array of brooches than had ever been seen together at one time since Cranford was a town". In this hallucinatory aura, Lady Glenmire is seen by old ladies as one "with a coronet, instead of a cap, on her head", however, the caps would never be coronets.

The disillusionment is confirmed by Mrs Forrester's anecdote about her treasured "fine old lace, the sole relic of better days". In Mrs Forrester's good receipt, the lace was one day soaked in milk to be carefully maintained, however, accidentally swallowed by the cat, it then spent all her efforts to desperately rescue the collar. The old lace in the cat's oesophagus and on Mrs Forrester's collar have separated even opposite connotations. It is the symbol of the noble status that is past and disregarded and the obsolete object rescued and cherished. Old furnishings communicate the capital and industrial "need to devalue such a form of nobility could not be renounced, to firm effectively the notion of individual merit" [3]. On the other, the desperate emotional attachment of Cranfordians is a metaphorical attempt at restoration through the "expedient of belated, retrospective, or alternative ennobling". These two forces in conflict inexorably show that Cranfordians' nostalgia is the true

colour of their resistance to the outside. Old objects are more museum collections than supplies.

Walter Benjamin considers that nineteenth-century collectors detach the objects from functionality and that this is only part of what makes collecting so fascinating [8]. Based on what Kant and Schopenhauer called “disinterested contemplation,” he suggests that collectors’ true goal is to attain a unique perspective on the object that goes beyond that of a typical owner, which involves looking at the object purely for its own sake, rather than for its usefulness. The carefully preserved obsolete objects in Cranford are like collector’s items barely functional on their own; they are “encyclopaedias, containing all the knowledge of the period, the landscape, the industry and its owners.” These things are purely for their use and, as a symbol of Cranford’s nostalgia, also serve as a metaphorical barrier. This barrier almost blocks their access to the outside world, and without breaking the extremes of nostalgia there is no real connection to the times. Perhaps this barrier can only be broken by confronting the non-functionality of nostalgic collectables and exposing them from personalised collections to public view.

This evokes the scenario when Cranford first appears as a closed and fossil space Miss Jenkyns holds an “Amazons” party inviting the Browns. Deborah Jenkyns, the oldest daughter of the highly respected pastoral family, is the central figure among Cranfordians. Though annoyed by the “unguarded admission” of Jessie Brown, the young unaristocratic fair with a Boz-fan father and a shop-keeper uncle, Deborah Jenkyns proposes music to “drown this confession” [2]. Jessie starts to play the Jenkyns’ “old cracked piano”, with Miss Jenkyns’ “beat time, out of time” while “none of [audiences] musical”. The “crack” on the piano is given more meaning than ancient, which, like a barrier broken between the desirable past and the unsatisfactory present, is the feat of Deborah and Jessie. Inside reconciliation and outside destruction are integrated into the cracked piano. This process is more subtly expressed in Matilda Jenkyns and her dealing with old objects – her private perception extending to external experience.

3. Perception through Collections

After the passing of Miss Deborah Jenkyns and Mr Holbrook, the fifth chapter opens with an interesting review: “I have often noticed that almost everyone has his own individual small economies” [2], says Mary Smith. The instances of “saving fractions of pennies” are the retention of items such as “unnecessary waste of paper”, discarded string and rubber and the butter “left unused”. This careful economical management is associated with the evaluation by these people towards these used and discarded things, which are non-value and non-commercialisation in the capitalist market.

Francesco Orlando has discussed literary images of “obsolete objects”, which “proliferate and increase geometrically in Western literature and take on new ranges of meaning” at the historic point in Western modernity lying “just before the French Revolution and in the beginnings of Romanticism”[8]. He considers obsolete objects as “physical things represented as having been, or in the process of being, deprived of or diminished in their functionality”. It is a state of oblivion by the functional evaluation of bourgeois ideology. Adapting Marx’s famous statement on capital commodity production, Orlando compares literature to the “immense accumulation of anti-commodities”, while the obsolete objects in literature are also “anti-commodities” due to their fundamental non-functionality and anti-functionality. That is when the old gentleman calmly accepts the bankruptcy and is “chafed”[2] by the torn “useless bank-book”, or when the poor-eyesight Miss Matty saves excessively on candles, a response from the past to a highly commodified society is shown: “this preoccupation with things that rapidly lose their utility and value testifies to the uncertain social and economic bourgeois world that has succeeded in the continuity of the ancien régime, a world of commodities with built-in obsolescence and of decontextualized kitsch...”[8].

This conversation about the economy is going one way but all of a sudden Mary Smith somehow

shifts it to one of the most crucial events in the novel: the heartbroken Matilda wants to burn the old letters and, before doing so, “describing its contents to the other”[2]. The old letters are memories not only of the Jenkyns family, but also of past ages - environments, smells, and traces of touch; and this is perceived by Mary who never knew it was such a sad thing to read them. When Matilda dropped her parents’ crusted letter “...into the middle of the fire, watching each blaze up, die out, and rise away, in faint, white, ghostly semblance, up the chimney”, the burning fascinates both Matilda and Mary by “watching the destruction.” Burning is the physical “farewell” to the past, in which process the dim candle is replaced by the firelight of letters and “the room is now bright enough.” Nevertheless, “farewell” imminently stops when Miss Matty finds Deborah and Peter’s letters and then regrets destroying them. The sense of the past, emanating from parents’ letters, flows to the next generation, through the memory evoked by the letters of the old-maidish, stern sister and the rebellious, awakened brother. The rummaging memory recalls one of the most powerful stories in Cranford, that is of Peter - a kid who leaves the closed community. This resistance to discarding invites a crack of yesterday, in which modern consciousness and traditional orders are struggling, and by which Mary Smith is impressed and later corresponds to the “lost” Peter Jenkyns. The obsolete objects, extending from economical management to personal letters, make the material resistance to the modern outside turn to preserve the memory of the Victorian females’ personal experience, which connects yesterday with the future.

Going afterwards, this structure occurs continuously - the transference from the public experience, or the events reflecting the external economic and colonial world, to personal experience. The physical penetration of the external world into Cranford or the reception of the external world by personal experience starts in the episode of the Browns’ arrival. After the exotic magician, Samuel Brown performs in the town, several waves of panic occur. This panic is both in response to the male invasion and the perceived inability to deal with the globalisation and colonisation processes of the developing outside. This unease naturally dissolves into the ladies’ generosity towards the trouble-plagued Browns. The fear of the outside world turns to some personal chatting about whether there should be a husband to protect the family. Again, Miss Matty starts a fractured speech, in which the discussion of marriage and family relates to her perceptions of the outside and the inside, the past and the future, opening with her diary. The diary in two columns is about the expectations, at the beginning of a day, a month, or a lifetime, and conclusions that remind you of the impermanence, not only for which Miss Matty is sad, but also for the divided feelings when habitual and routine formed in the process are interrupted. She extends the old diary to her trajectory, her and Deborah’s dreams, and the celibate’s regrets. It is perceivable for her the impermanence of the bigger world, in which “a little credulity” would help one “on through life very smoothly...in everything.” The diary going on with the fractured narrative links the unpredictable personalised life with a more general experience. A few chapters later the object of separation and connection, like the column diary, reappears when Mary intends to send a letter to Agar Jenkyns. The “gaping slit” on the wooden pane metaphorically divided time and space, past and present, domestic and foreign, village life and the colonial enterprise. Yet when the letter drops in, it also connects the personal sphere with a broader world. The experience of an internal - the bankruptcy of the Jenkins family - extends to the external, eventually bringing back Peter Jenkyns and defusing Miss Matty’s financial crisis.

The obsession with old objects gradually halts when Miss Matty went bankrupt, selling off everything but essential items. The bankruptcy of capital investment brings the support of Mary’s father and the home return of Peter Aga Jenkyns. The discard of the obsolesces and the invitation of the outsider does seem to reveal a female utopia dependent on patriarchal industry, capitalism and expansion, as the ladies’ innocent accepting does: “[t]he pearl necklace disappeared; and about that time many handsome and useful presents made their appearance in the households of Miss Pole and Mrs Forrester; and some rare and delicate Indian ornaments graced the drawing-rooms of Mrs

Jamieson and Mrs FitzAdam". Peter's presence is a form of salvation to make Cranford refresh.

Yet, an elderly Victorian ladies' self-help is neglected, as Matilda starts her career "to accommodate" the old spinster's business "in a moral and socially conscient" [6] with her friend's continuous support. Just as the curtain "...drawn so as to exclude the dead brick wall of a neighbour's stable" implies, Matilda's desperate livelihood is "yet left so as to show every tender leaf of the poplar which was bursting into spring beauty"[2]. This crack can be the disintegration of stifled Cranford self-regulation, the predicament of changing society, the leap from past to present and future, and also a gate unconsciously built by Cranford inside. It is what should be seen in the sudden ending compliments -the cracks in objects and disconnected narratives in the very limited personal perception.

4. Conclusion

The collective lifestyle of the spinsters' community in the Victorian English country town can be read both as a possibility to replace the existing patriarchal model of social existence and as an active process of adjustment in a non-dualistic way. Cranford is at once nostalgically utopian and with the predicament and divisive space. This contradictory narrative stems from Gaskell's multiple awareness of different perceptions by region and gender in changing era; namely, the Victorian old ladies' passivity in a fast-moving society was trapped in a more private, rural, non-modern sphere, and thus relatively adapted to modernity process more slowly; at the same time, a female-dominated, closed society, whether patriarchal or matriarchal, was unrealistic. In articulating this awareness, the interspersed cracked narratives together with the obsolete objects are used to express the ambivalent adjustment and invitation of new, the sense of a broader world in nostalgic internal perception. The root cause of such strange issues was a social, generational, age, and gender disconnect. And Cranford's disintegration from the perspective of older Victorian women was a process of confronting and dealing with these strange problems, that is, of slowly embracing them. Whatever the outcome, it is a gradual transformation of a "love of peace and kindness" [2].

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