

With reference to one Victorian novel on the module, discuss the ways in which the author of the novel uses objects to convey character and the ways in which characters within the novel use objects to construct public personae and assert status and belonging. Discuss as well how reliable and successful these material constructions of identity are presented as being.

2625 words.

Breaking new ground in the field of material study, Elaine Freedgood has developed a method of ‘reading things’ in literature, arguing that ‘critical cultural archives have been preserved, unsuspected, in the things of realism that have been so little or so lightly read’.¹ Using Freedgood’s theory, material objects can offer a way into a text, revealing how the societies embedded within them function as communities. The society of Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Cranford* expresses itself in ‘fragments and small opportunities’, using fabric and material as a means of asserting their prestige and agency.² In *Cranford*, these textiles can be “read” to understand the collective ideals and identity of its muliebral society, the individual materials fundamentally related to the history and motives of their possessors. This use of fabrics as classificatory signifiers will be examined in relation to the materials of mourning, the transfer of textiles along familial lines, material repurposing as a method of belonging and the subversion of fabric through crossdressing. These material constructions of identity rely on fabrics, articles that are both fragile and external to the body; this renders personal identity an unstable condition throughout the novel.

Materials hold the power of conveying a distinctive status within a society, and these fabrics are used as a means of constructing public and personal identity in *Cranford*. The material etiquette for mourning was sustained by magazines such as *The Queen* and *Woman’s World*, works which set out in detail the correct ‘fabrics, colours and fashions for widows’.³ In *Cranford*, Gaskell makes clear that an inability to adhere to these details resulted in societal scrutiny. When Mrs Fitz-Adam appears ‘dressed in rustling black silk’ following the death of her husband, Miss Jenkyns remarks that ‘bombazine would have shown a deeper sense of her loss’ (pp. 77-8). Mrs Fitz-Adam’s attempt to express her grief falls short; her material failure publicly reflects a lack of sentiment and prosperity, resulting in her ostracization from Cranfordian society. Replacing the discourse of the hushed widow, the material takes on a narrative quality: each ‘yard of flat black bombazine was a word in the story of the wearer’s grief’.⁴ Fabric emerges as a powerful medium for the expression of emotion in *Cranford*, an expression that must observe strict social rules.

¹ Elaine Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 8.

² All quotations from *Cranford* are taken from Elizabeth Gaskell, *Cranford* (London: Penguin Classics, 2005), p. 22.

³ Maria A. Fitzwilliam, ‘The needle not the pen: Fabric (auto)biography in *Cranford*, *Ruth* and *Wives and Daughters*’, *The Gaskell Society Journal*, 14 (2000), p. 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*

Fabric is also a powerful tool for the expression of the self throughout the novel. Miss Matty subverts the material customs of mourning when she asks the ‘little milliner of Cranford to make her caps something like the Honourable Mrs. Jamieson’s’, who responds that the lady in questions wears ‘widows’ caps’ (p. 50). The fabric of mourning offers Miss Matty the power of rewriting her personal history: prohibited from accepting Mr Holbrook’s proposal of marriage in her youth, the cap allows her to assume the fabricated role of widow following his death. The cap assumes a public narrative quality, Mary observing that Miss Matty would put on the cap ‘made in imitation of Mrs. Jamieson’s at all times when she was expected to be seen’ (p. 74). Whilst Miss Matty’s material display is public in nature, it operates within a delimited domain. Indeed, Maria Fitzwilliam argues that Miss Matty’s ‘autobiographical expression [...] falls within the safety of the domestic sphere’, proposing that she ‘can quietly assert her revisionist life story within the Amazonian code of fashion’.⁵ Fabric offers the safest method for Miss Matty to conduct her historical revisionism, constructing a felt identity by procuring the weaving and stitching of the material of grief. This autobiographical expression of widowhood is contrived; the fabric used for the cap reflects a sentiment towards the status of widow, not an actuality. Miss Matty subverts the identity of “widow” and exploits the cap’s use as a signifier, rendering fabric an unreliable method of self-expression. The widow’s cap gives way to the sentimental dimensions of Miss Matty’s character, revealing a woman mourning the loss of an irrecoverable alternate life; a life that offered stability, protection and children.

Just as fabric holds the power to rewrite history, so too can it conjure the past. Marcel Proust argued that ‘the past is hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach of intellect, in some material object’.⁶ In *Cranford*, the past is hidden within Mrs Jenkyns’ paduasoy fabric, hidden itself within another material; the copious sheets of paper forming the ‘yellow bundles of love-letters, sixty or seventy years old’ (p. 53). Mary describes how, within these letters, there was a:

vivid and intense sense of the present time, which seemed so strong and full, as though it could never pass away, and as if the warm, living hearts that so expressed themselves could never die (p. 53).

Despite their yellowing, Mary finds the letters overwhelmingly ‘present’; the power of preservation is contained within the material, striking an intense connection between past and

⁵ Fitzwilliam, ‘The needle not the pen’, pp. 6-7.

⁶ Marcel Proust, *In Search Of Lost Time Vol 1: Swann's Way*, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (New York: Penguin Random House, 1998), p. 51.

present. Miss Matty's deceased relatives are rematerialized by their existence within the letters, their 'warm, living hearts' preserved in these objects of deep personal sentiment. The letters trace exchanges between Miss Matty's parents, focusing particularly on her mother's desire to acquire white paduasoy fabric. After much petitioning, Mr Jenkyns eventually sent his bride 'a whole box full of finery' (p. 54), including the sought after paduasoy. The subsequent letters take on a more affectionate tone, Miss Matty's mother addressing him 'my dearest John' (p. 54), and they are soon married; in this instance, fabric serves to bond and mollify a union.

Mary notes that the paduasoy 'figured again in the letters, with almost as much vigour as before', reading that the material was 'being made into a christening cloak for the baby' (p. 55). The transfiguration of the paduasoy from a finery of Mrs Jenkyns' wedding trousseau to a dress used for her child's christening reflects a shift in her motivations. Andrew Miller suggests that the 'circulation of the fabric indicates [her] transposition from girlish vanity to maternal pride'.⁷ Miller's assertion simplifies Mrs Jenkyns' incentives, assigning her emotions that fit neatly into the reductive categories of 'bride' and 'mother'. It is perhaps more convincing to view Mrs Jenkyns' relationship with paduasoy as part of a Cranfordian system of repurposing, a system operated and ruled by the self-sufficient women governing the town. Mrs Jenkyns transforms the material to which she has ascribed such precious value, repurposing and reinventing the paduasoy to associate it with a new stage in her life. In doing so, she sparks a bond that will travel through the material, resurfacing itself beyond death. Miss Matty tells Mary that, the day after Mrs Jenkyns died, the household received a parcel from India,

from her poor boy. It was a large, soft, white India shawl, with just a little narrow border all round; just what my mother would have liked. (p. 71)

With its intense sentimental value, the white fabric becomes an inalienable possession, attached to the Jenkynses as they navigate their relationship with their pasts and familial history. The paduasoy rematerializes after Mrs Jenkyns' death, her family solidifying the connection between past and present and mother and son by burying her in Peter's gift. The reoccurrence of the prized fabric acts to hold the fractured family together, Christina Lupton arguing that it 'seems a currency of inherent value'.⁸ The recirculation of the fabric along the household line thus conveys a family psychology, the repurposing of the paduasoy used as a means of recovering the past and repairing the present.

⁷ Andrew Miller, *Novels Behind Glass: Commodity Culture and Victorian Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), p. 25.

⁸ Christina Lupton, 'Theorizing Surfaces and Depths: Gaskell's *Cranford*', *Criticism*, 50:2 (2008), p. 243.

This culture of repurposing is fostered by the Cranfordian ladies in order to construct a strong sense of belonging. Repurposing occurs out of necessity, and comes to form the standard production of goods in Cranford. Julia Clarke notes that:

Repurposing makes up what Gaskell calls the ‘elegant economy’ of Cranford. Cranford [...] is a community stricken by a distinctly polite and vehemently unspoken poverty; it is made up of upper-class ladies with little money to back their titles.⁹

Gaskell’s ‘elegant economy’ reflects the Cranfordian attitude that ‘money-spending’ is ‘vulgar and ostentatious’ (p. 8), the women of the town carefully balancing their gentility with their lack of material wealth. Through the repurposing of textiles, the ladies of Cranford can perform the lifestyle they were born into, constructing an appearance of wealth by transforming old textiles into new commodities. Hailing from Cranford’s industrial neighbour, Drumble, the lens through which Mary observes this economy is fascinating. She is enamoured with the Cranfordian habit of gathering fallen ‘rose-leaves’ to:

make into a potpourri for someone who had no garden; the little bundles of lavender flowers sent to strew the drawers of some town-dweller, or to burn in the chamber of some invalid. (p. 22)

As a society of elderly and childless women now incapable of reproduction, the Cranfordians repurpose materials as a means of “making”. Assembling the resources of their natural environment, the ladies reconstruct these materials to produce objects that will support and sustain their neighbours. In this process, the Cranfordians are able to feign normality amid poverty, fabricating a sense of belonging for those without the financial means to engage in a modern system of production. The economic organisation of Cranford can thus be read as a protest against the growing industrialism of the Victorian period and the emerging commercial production of goods. Indeed, Jill Rappoport argues that the Cranfordians operate a ‘system of sympathy conservation’, in which the aim of business ‘is to conserve rather than consume or accumulate’.¹⁰ The production and exchange of repurposed materials thus acts to bolster alliances and uphold an insulated community, the repurposed fabrics reflecting the town’s shared public values and feminine ideals. Fabrics convey the quietly innovative character of

⁹ Julia Clarke, “A Regular Bewty!”: Women Remaking and Remade in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Cranford*, *The Gaskell Society*, 33 (2019), p. 43.

¹⁰ Jill Rappoport, ‘Conservation of Sympathy in *Cranford*’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 36:1 (2008), p. 100.

Cranford, the ladies of the town snubbing the industrialist production of objects and steadfastly preserving their status by sentimentally transforming old materials into something new.

Fabrics are thus inherently connected to the construction of public norms and values in *Cranford*. These norms are subverted when material is “misused”, disrupting societal boundaries and wreaking havoc on sheltered village life. The conventional treatment of fabric in Cranford is challenged by Peter’s crossdressing, a narrative practice that Ute Kauer explains ‘was a very rare phenomenon in the nineteenth century’.¹¹ The infrequency of crossdressing in literature renders its occurrence particularly shocking for Victorian readers; this sense of scandal can be traced in Miss Matty’s tone as she relates her family’s shame to Mary. She explains how Peter dressed in Deborah’s:

old gown, and shawl, and bonnet; just the things she used to wear in Cranford, and was known by everywhere; and he made the pillow into a little - you are sure you locked the door, my dear, for I should not like anyone to hear - into - into - a little baby, with white long clothes. (pp. 64-5)

Looking to give the old ladies of Cranford ‘something to talk about’ (p. 65), Peter appropriates fabrics that signify Deborah’s identity and uses them to create an outrageous public display. Peter’s transposition of the ‘pillow’ into ‘a little baby’ forms a somewhat disturbing parallel with the female Cranfordian system of repurposing, Peter perverting the maternal sense of production by materialising a phantom baby from white fabric. This parallel is strengthened by the ‘white long clothes’ of the fabricated baby that echo Mrs Jenkyns’ paduasoy, a material whose treatment adhered to the Cranfordian procedures of material management. Stuttering from shame, Miss Matty is acutely aware that Peter is not merely subverting the boundaries of gender; he is also subverting the boundaries of fabric that are so carefully governed in her small village.

As Peter’s father approaches the scene, he spots a crowd ‘close together, peeping and peeping’, gathered to view what the rector believes to be ‘a new rhododendron that was in full bloom’ (p. 65). When his eyes finally allow him to understand the scene before him, he rushes to dematerialise his cross-dressed son:

¹¹ Ute Kauer, ‘Narrative Cross-Dressing in Charlotte Brontë’s *The Professor*’, *Brontë Society Transaction*, 26:2 (2001), p. 167.

[he] seized hold of poor Peter, and tore his clothes off his back – bonnet, shawl, gown, and all – and threw the pillow among the people over the railings [...] he lifted up his cane, and flogged Peter! (p. 65)

The materials used by Peter to disguise himself as Deborah are listed by Miss Matty in reverse order to her original description, suggesting the utter deconstruction of her brother's fabricated public personae. Reverend Jenkyns' blazing fury at his son's misappropriation of fabric stems from his spiritual belief in the sinfulness of men wearing women's clothing, worsened by the sense of sexual immorality Peter has cast on Deborah – and subsequently their entire family – in his performance. For Peter, these signifying fabrics are a means of escaping the career that had been 'pleasantly mapped out' (p. 62) for him:

He was to win honours at Shrewsbury School, and carry them thick to Cambridge, and, after that, a living a waited him, the gift of his godfather, Sir Peter Arley. (p. 62)

Peter's manipulation of fabric reveals his desire for displacement from the masculine future set out for him. In his performance of female characters, he rejects the public personae constructed for him by his father and challenges his concept of ideal masculinity. Carolyn Lambert argues that, in Peter's crossdressing, Gaskell challenges 'dominant social and cultural mores', presenting a 'view of masculinity which [...] embraces aspects of feminine sensitivity'.¹² Peter attempts to adapt fabrics to explore his femininity; this extension of self has disastrous and brutal consequences, emphasising the strict organisation of fabric in Cranford. The personae constructed by Peter's self-expression through fabrics is spurned, broken down and beaten, revealing the unreliability of fabric as a material construction of identity.

Continuously striving to rewrite themselves and establish their identities in a delimited setting, the people of Cranford turn to fabric to construct their public personae and assert agency. Materials provide external resolutions for individuals grasping with their sense of self, using fabric to project a desired identity and character. Fabric is ultimately an external construction of identity; it cannot reliably alter one's interior. Having had her life decisions made for her, Miss Matty reclaims control by using the widow's cap to rewrite her past and construct a sympathetic status of widowhood. The paduasoy exists as a white thread throughout the novel, preserving connections across generations and upholding a strong sense of familial history. The repurposing of fabric allows the Cranfordians to imitate their born status, despite their

¹² Carolyn Lambert, Cross-dressing and interpretations of gender in *Cranford* and 'The Grey Woman', *The Gaskell Journal*, 24 (2010), p. 82.

prevailing lack of material wealth. This governance of fabric is disrupted by Peter, who subverts the gendered boundaries of material in order to displace himself from the public personae constructed for him. *Cranford* is brimming with processes of rewriting, repurposing and reshaping, fabric coming to form the very makeup of the novel's eccentric society.

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