Hierarchy, Gentility and Humanity
in Elizabeth Gaskell´s Cranford
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Introduction

The Victorian author Elizabeth Gaskell published several novels and short stories between 1848 and 1865, and her writing reflects her time. She lived in the aftermath of the industrial revolution, which brought not only benefits, but also misery, to the people. As a Unitarian minister’s wife in Manchester, Gaskell was exposed to the hardships of her husband’s parishioners on a day-to-day basis. Gaskell took a keen interest in her husband’s work and assisted in his mission, by teaching working-class girls at Sunday school and inviting them to the Gaskell home. John McVeagh argues that Gaskell’s novels “reflect the moods and problems of her society, or that part of society which she knew well, with the minimum of distortion or exaggeration. . .” (1). Gaskell’s social criticism is particularly apparent in her industrial novels *Mary Barton* and *North and South*, where she realistically depicts “the industrial and moral problems of her age . . . with accurate knowledge and with an urgent concern for the sufferer and the outcast which never degenerates into mere sentimentality” (2). The novels reflect the conditions for women, which is also the case in *Ruth*, where the main character is an unmarried mother.

Gaskell did not only write industrial novels. *Cranford* and *Wives and Daughters* are two of her most successful novels, also with women at the centre, which depict small-town or country life without any obvious social criticism. McVeagh points out that Gaskell’s main purpose “is to evoke the tranquil rural life and celebrate the orderly peace of the old ways . . .”, but he also adds that these later novels “display the same fundamental concern with human behaviour, the same basic seriousness, the same moral honesty . . . and the same interest in the plight of ordinary people in ordinary circumstances” (4).

Gaskell initially wrote *Cranford* as a series of vignettes in Charles Dickens’ weekly journal *Household Words* between 1851 and 1853, and it was published as a novel later in
According to Winifred Gérin, Dickens had then been an admirer of Gaskell for some time and helped her to become a professional writer (119ff). The somewhat fragmental character of Cranford is explained by the fact that Gaskell did not intend it to be a novel in the first place. Jenny Uglow notes that originally she did not even plan to write more than one episode (282-283).

The plot of Cranford is mainly set in the 1830s, the time of Gaskell’s youth, with some flashbacks even earlier, to the 1810s. The town of Cranford is based on Knutsford in Cheshire, where Gaskell was brought up by her maternal aunt, Hannah Lumb, from the age of one, after the death of her mother. Gaskell came from a deeply religious background and was introduced to Unitarianism at an early age. Unitarians were Christian dissenters who, among other things, preached tolerance and reason. Hannah Lumb taught her niece the importance of being kind to all fellow humans (24). Angus Easson indicates that Gaskell found doing good and doing one’s duty important doctrines in her religion (12). These principles permeate all her works, including Cranford.

In Cranford, Gaskell analyzes the hierarchy and code of behaviour of a small town society in the nineteenth century. Linda Young describes Victorian Britain as highly hierarchical, from the aristocracy and the gentry through the middle classes and down to the working class. Gentry status, based on pedigree and large landholdings, also required “genteel consciousness, behaviour and values. . .” (49-50). Gentility is defined by Oxford Dictionaries as “social superiority as demonstrated by polite and respectable manners, behaviour, or appearances”. In the eighteenth century, the middle class started mimicking the upper classes, adopting the culture of gentility, thus differentiating themselves from the working class (Young 5, 70-71). Within the middle class there were also different strata based on income and the number of domestics (54). In Gaskell’s fictional town of Cranford, social position entails a good grasp of hierarchy and gentility, which will be studied in this essay.
Cranford is not only a portrayal of a community, but also of individuals and their developments. As mentioned previously, the novel does not focus on men. Gentlemen are scarce in Cranford and if a gentleman happens to move there, he soon disappears, either scared off by the female dominance at the social events or forced out of town by some kind of business. Instead it is the powerful women, jokingly introduced as “the Amazons”, who are in the centre. Most of them have a common denominator. Due to the deaths of their fathers or husbands, their economic conditions have deteriorated, a fact that they do not openly acknowledge. At the outset they appear to live fairly trivial lives, governed by a rigid sense of hierarchy and elaborate, sometimes absurd, rules of behaviour. The ladies are lovingly observed by a first-person narrator, who sometimes writes as an observer, sometimes as an insider, in her capacity as a member of the ladies´ community. As she comments on their little eccentricities, her tone is ironic at times, but rarely without affection and tenderness for her friends.

In what ways are the Cranford ladies´ strong views on hierarchy and gentility affected, when they face outsiders, who are not familiar with the Cranford norms of propriety, or when they encounter fellow humans in need? This is the issue to be explored in this essay. It will be shown that even though hierarchy and gentility rule in Cranford, humanity overrules. Furthermore, it will become apparent that unselfishness and goodness bring goodness, as well as happiness, in return to the unselfish individual.

The essay consists of three chapters. Chapter One first deals with the hierarchy in Cranford and within the ladies´ community. The basis of rank is then developed. The second part of Chapter One explores what behaviour and manners are considered “genteel” or “vulgar”. In Chapter Two, the Cranford views on gentility are put to the test and in Chapter Three the views on hierarchy.
According to Patsy Stoneman, the focus of the critics’ appreciation has varied quite drastically since Gaskell’s first novel, *Mary Barton*. At the time of publication, the identity of the author was unknown as Gaskell used a pseudonym. The critics initially reviewed it positively as “forcible”, but as the sex of the author was revealed, they started to look for female qualities in her work instead (3). This resulted in a depreciation of the industrial novels and a preference for “the more domestic content of *Cranford*”, a view which prevailed until the 1950’s (4). Then a renewed interest in the social criticism of *Mary Barton*, prompted by Kathleen Tillotson, was followed by praise for both *Mary Barton* and *North and South* from Marxist critics, such as Raymond Williams and Arnold Kettle. Stoneman claims that these two novels are the reason why Gaskell still “appears on university syllabuses” at the end of the 1980’s (5). As there seems to be less recent criticism of *Cranford*, but a renewed public interest, induced by the 2007 BBC dramatization, this could be a gap for this essay to fill. The works of Jenny Uglow and Arthur Pollard have been particularly useful for the essay and Borislav Knezevic’s article has also been interesting, as it specifically concentrates on gentility and rank in *Cranford*. This study goes beyond these and other works in that it attempts to give a more detailed survey of rank and gentility and a more in-depth picture of how rules are broken for the sake of humanity.
Chapter 1: Hierarchy and Gentility: The Backbone and Face of Cranford Society

In Cranford, hierarchy is crucial to the inhabitants, governing every aspect of their everyday lives. This chapter will first show how hierarchy is reflected in some key episodes. It will then analyze what factors form the basis of this hierarchy and the restrictions and behaviour needed in order to maintain, or even improve, rank within it.

The overall structure of the population of Cranford is shown in a gathering at the Assembly Room. It appears that Cranford society used to include a fair number of the aristocracy, but times have changed. The narrator, Miss Mary Smith, describes the state of the room as “dingy; the salmon-coloured paint had faded into a drab; great pieces of plaster had chipped off from the white wreaths and festoons on its walls; but still a mouldy odour of aristocracy lingered about the place. . .” (105). The visit also gives us hints about the ladies´ positions in Cranford hierarchy. In the absence of the county families, the ladies can move from the second to the first row in the room. We can thus conclude that they are at the top of the remaining Cranford society. The seating also proves the ladies´ superiority in rank in relation to the shopkeepers, who “huddled together on the back benches” (105). If there are any members of the working class, they are not mentioned.

So in terms of social standing the ladies are sandwiched somewhere between the superior aristocracy and the inferior merchants, but what is the basis of their rank? As the ladies are spinsters or widows, they have little influence over rank themselves. It is principally determined by the position of the men in their lives, the spinsters´ fathers or the widows´ late husbands. It is also influenced by connections to the aristocracy, even relatively distant ones. The following passage clearly illustrates this. Moreover, it shows the hierarchy within the ladies´ own community and so deserves to be quoted at some length. It is Miss Betty Barker,
daughter of a clerk, formerly a ladies’ maid but now a retired milliner, who invites the ladies to tea.

‘Mrs Jamieson is coming, I think you said?’ asked Miss Matty.

‘Yes. Mrs Jamieson most kindly and condescendingly said she would be happy to come.’ . . .

‘And Miss Pole?’ questioned Miss Matty. . . .

‘I am going to ask Miss Pole. Of course, I could not think of asking her until I had asked you, Madam – the rector’s daughter, Madam. Believe me, I do not forget the situation my father held under yours.’

‘And Mrs Forrester, of course?’

‘And Mrs Forrester. I thought, in fact, of going to her before I went to Miss Pole. Although her circumstances are changed, Madam, she was born a Tyrrell, and we can never forget her alliance to the Bigges, of Bigelow Hall.’ . . .

‘Mrs Fitz-Adam – I suppose’ –

‘No, Madam. I must draw a line somewhere. Mrs Jamieson would not, I think, like to meet Mrs Fitz-Adam. I have the greatest respect for Mrs Fitz-Adam – but I cannot think her fit society for such ladies as Mrs Jamieson and Miss Matilda Jenkyns.’ (76-77)

It is obvious that Mrs Jamieson is at the top of the ladies’ own hierarchy and is prioritized by Miss Betty Barker due to her pedigree. She is “the Honourable” Mrs Jamieson, the daughter of a governor and the daughter-in-law of a baron, which seems to be as close to the aristocracy as Cranford can boast. Mrs Jamieson is the expert on rank, determining who is admissible or “inadmissible to Cranford society” (140). Well aware of her own distinction, she continuously highlights her rank and wealth. Initially she even wants to keep her aristocratic sister-in-law, Lady Glenmire, away from her friends, wishing “to appear to her noble sister-in-law as if she only visited ‘county’ families” (86). We get no information about
the position of Mrs Jamieson´s late husband, which would indicate that husbands are not interesting talking points in Cranford. Judging from Mrs Jamieson´s prestige, however, he must have been well respected in society.

The Jenkyns sisters, Miss Matty and Miss Deborah, also come from a respectable background. They have an aristocratic connection, vaguely “related to Sir Peter Arley…” and all the ladies are aware that Miss Matty used to visit at Arley Hall in her youth (36). Judging from the reaction of Mrs Fitz-Adam, this is a momentous distinction (169). The sisters are the daughters of a deceased rector, a highly-esteemed occupation. Young points out that acceptable work for genteel people in Britain was traditionally associated with government, war, the Church, medicine and the law, in that order (65). Inheriting her father´s rank, Miss Matty would belong to the upper-middle class. However, maintaining this rank can be difficult. She can only employ one maid and has an annual income of £162 (153), which equals the income of the bottom layer of the middle class (Young 54).

Mrs Forrester appears to be in the same financial situation as Miss Matty. She also has one maid and struggles to make ends meet. As an officer´s daughter and the widow of a major, she has the military connection which puts her in the upper-middle class, like Miss Matty. Her rank is also improved by her link to an esteemed family. Why Mrs Forrester is below Miss Matty in rank is, however, not clear, nor is there any information about Miss Pole´s background.

Finally, there is Mrs Fitz-Adam. She is the wealthy widow of a Mr Fitz-Adam, a man whom the ladies, again, have no interest in. “He died and was gathered to his fathers, without our ever having thought about him at all” (78). Mrs Fitz-Adam´s wealth does not give her access to the upper-middle class community she aspires to, as she lacks pedigree. Her late husband had no title and the ladies fail to find any blue-blooded Fitz-relation. Furthermore,
she comes from a farming family and her maiden name was Hoggins, which the ladies consider “coarse” (77).

Even though money is not everything, the opening lines of Cranford reveal that a certain amount of wealth is needed for the ladies to live a middle-class life. We are told that the Amazons are “the holders of houses, above a certain rent. . .” (3). Borislav Knezevic concludes that “membership in the genteel society of Cranford depends on belonging to the rentier class – a class that can afford to live off previously accumulated capital (however small), which enables its dissociation from the realms of both labor and enterprise” (405ff). In other words, wealth should preferably be inherited; wealth through work is generally despised.

In order to maintain or ever improve rank, the ladies must be aware of some important restrictions that apply in Cranford. There are restrictions of association and work, as well as restrictions of conduct, to be discussed in that order. Miss Betty Barker’s refusal to invite Mrs Fitz-Adam indicates that socializing with people of lower rank is unwise. Miss Betty’s rank is not really superior, but there are signs of her desire to climb the social ladder, one step at a time. From being a maid, she advances to shop owner, and in this position she refuses to do business with “anyone without a pedigree”, thereby cultivating the right aristocratic liaisons (75). Further episodes clearly show Miss Betty’s fear of losing rank by associating with “the wrong” people. When inviting the narrator, who happens to be staying with Miss Matty, she worries that Miss Mary’s father “might have engaged in that ‘horrid cotton trade’, and so dragged his family down out of ‘aristocratic society’” (75-76). At the tea party, she is anxious to conceal her close relationship with her maid Peggy. Being intimate with one’s servants does not improve rank, quite the opposite.

A lady is also limited in her choice of spouse. Love alone is not enough as marrying below one’s social class most probably will result in social demotion. Miss Jenkyns’ protégée, Miss
Jessie Brown, is the daughter of a Captain Brown. She is fortunate enough to fall in love with a major, a very suitable match indeed according to Miss Jenkyns. However, Miss Jenkyns´ sister, Miss Matty, is not as lucky. We learn about her past romance with Miss Pole´s cousin, Thomas Holbrook. He is a yeoman, who has “refused to push himself on . . . into the ranks of the squires” (35). Miss Pole suggests that Miss Matty´s father and older sister prevented the marriage as Mr Holbrook “would not have been enough of a gentleman. . .” (36). As a result, Miss Matty remains a spinster for the rest of her life, secretly grieving the lack of a family.

Working women are generally frowned upon in Cranford society. If work is necessary, certain restrictions apply. Aina Rubenius points out that Gaskell suggests teaching as a suitable profession for a lady in several of her novels (136), and in Cranford Miss Mary writes, “Teaching was, of course, the first thing that suggested itself” as she contemplates how Miss Matty may earn a living (159). Trade, on the other hand, is definitely unsuitable. We have already seen Miss Betty Barker´s disgust with it (completely forgetting her own background as a milliner). Miss Betty´s reaction is preceded by a similar one in the novel. Prior to her fortunate marriage, Miss Jessie Brown finds herself in need of work and turns to Miss Jenkyns for advice. Her own idea of working as a saleswoman is vehemently rejected by Miss Jenkyns, exclaiming that “some people [have] no idea of their rank. . .” (25-26). The ladies´ attitudes to trade reflect their time. By the turn of the nineteenth century, the landed aristocracy in Britain despised labour in general “as a sign of the absence of wealth. . .”, and that included earning a living from trade (Young 71). Miss Jenkyns is clearly guided by old-established aristocratic values. However, merchants were increasingly accepted later on in the nineteenth century (Knezevic 405ff).

We have already seen that choice of work, spouse and company is of the utmost importance when preserving or amending rank. Equally essential are the restrictions of conduct and the knowledge of suitable behaviour, in other words, the mastery of “gentility”.
Young explains “gentility” as “a name for the culture of the middle class...” used for the “values, beliefs and behaviours that united its practitioners...”, sometimes defined as “respectability and refinement” (15). Cranford, however, has its own interpretation. The narrator’s use of quotation marks, when talking about “genteel society” and “vulgarity”, reveals that this is an odd local variant of the concept (Knezevic 405ff).

What then are the rules that the ladies of Cranford are obliged to follow? What is “genteel” and what is “vulgar”? The narrator wryly tells us that it is “considered ‘vulgar’ (a tremendous word in Cranford) to give anything expensive, in the way of eatable or drinkable, at the evening entertainments” (6). The simplest biscuits are quite enough. The ladies have a name for this practice: “elegant economy”. “Elegant economy” appears to be one of the local inventions, as the narrator uses the previously mentioned quotation marks.

What could be the reason for the use of “elegant economy”? It is most probably based on the same foundation as the ladies´ preference for walking instead of using sedan-chairs, in other words, their own lack of money. Most of them come from a background that provided them with rank and money, but things have changed. The ladies´ dresses are now as threadbare as their Assembly Room. Nevertheless, they refuse to acknowledge their poverty, disguising it as best they can. Their “esprit de corps” also makes them support each other in this pretence of a grandeur that does not exist. At Mrs Forrester´s tea party, her maid needs to retrieve a tray from under the sofa of the cramped little room. Miss Mary tells us that “everyone took this novel proceeding as the most natural thing in the world; and talked on about household forms and ceremonies, as if we all believed that our hostess had a regular servants´ hall, second table, with house-keeper and steward...” (5). The mocking tone of her comment is quite obvious.

Furthermore, it is also necessary to choose the right topics of conversation. Miss Pole must think long and hard before finding a topic “befitting the rank” of Lady Glenmire, finally
inquiring whether she has “been to Court, lately” (94). Suitable talking points, in the mid-nineteenth century, should show one’s cultural knowledge and also indicate some acquaintance with “the right people” (Young 140). It is clearly unfitting in Cranford to talk about relations from a lower social class and of money or poverty, the latter as inappropriate as the topic of death (6). Here too, the ladies courageously ignore reality.

Intricate rules for when to socialize also exist in Cranford. The visiting hours are between 12 noon and 3 p.m. and a call must be returned within three days. A more challenging rule is the restriction in length for a visit: one must not stay longer than 15 minutes. As a result, there is no time for anything else but small talk. The Cranford rules on visiting do not differ much from the etiquette books of the time. Young refers to Agogos’ *Hints on Etiquette and the Usages of Society, With a Glance at Bad Habits* from 1838 and claims that visits should take place between two and four o’clock and last 10-15 minutes, being “so short that bonnets and shawls were not taken off. . .” (140).

Gentility also implies self-control, both emotional and physical. Staying calm and concealing strong emotions, whatever the situation, is essential. We see this, for example, in Miss Matty, when she gets “one of her bad headaches” at the news of Mr Holbrook’s severe illness (47). According to Young, “Laughter was as inappropriate as crying. . .” and grief “was correctly managed by recourse to the consolations of religion” (117). After Mr Holbrook’s death, the Bible and Mr Holbrook’s book of poems on her bedside table reveal Miss Matty’s need for religion in her secret mourning.

The control of posture is an example of physical self-control. Dr Hoggins, the local surgeon, is considered vulgar as he crosses his legs when sitting down (188). In the nineteenth century, a “genteel person must stand and sit erect to demonstrate moral backbone as much as a naturally strong spine. . .” (Young 82). Another example of physical self-control is good table manners. The Jenkyns sisters find sucking the juice out of an orange an enjoyable task,
but not a very genteel one, and retreat to their rooms to suck in privacy. Yet another episode shows the importance of table manners, and that is when the ladies are invited to dinner at Mr Holbrook´s. The ladies are utterly perplexed when Mr Holbrook gives them two-pronged forks for eating their peas. “Miss Matty picked up her peas, one by one, on the point of the prongs. . .” while Miss Pole “left them on one side of her plate untasted; for they would drop between the prongs” (41). After long consideration, Miss Mary copies Mr Holbrook´s manner, shovelling up the peas with her fork. However, Miss Matty and Miss Pole “could not muster up courage enough to do an ungenteel thing. . .” (41). Young argues that “eating in public” was actually one of “the severest tests of bodily self-control. . .” (83).

The ladies´ views on refinement are only fully comprehended through their reactions to vulgar behaviour, and the male gender seems to embody the lack of refinement. Miss Mary ironically remarks that they “had almost persuaded [themselves] that to be a man was to be ‘vulgar’. . .” (10). An unobtrusive voice appears as an indicator of gentility. Both Captain Brown and Mr Holbrook fail in this respect. We learn that Captain Brown “spoke in a voice too large for the room. . .” (7), and that Mr Holbrook “saw no necessity for moderating his voice”, unless someone was ill (36). Dialect and slang should also be avoided. Again, it is Mr Holbrook who misbehaves by speaking “the dialect of the country in perfection. . .” (36). The language of Dr Hoggins is no better (125). His shortcomings are a major source of irritation for the ladies, illustrating a total lack of refinement. We learn that “Mrs Jamieson had tabooed [him] as vulgar, and inadmissible to Cranford society; not merely on account of his name, but because of his voice, his complexion, his boots, smelling of the stable, and himself, smelling of drugs” (140). This also demonstrates that appearance is yet another indicator of gentility.

Why do the ladies dissociate themselves from almost all male behaviour and label it as vulgar? Does it have its roots in a general lack of understanding, sometimes even a fear of the male gender, due to the absence of men in Cranford and in the ladies´ lives? Even though
Miss Pole believes that she knows men pretty well as her “father was a man. . .”, a little more experience might be needed to become an expert (117). Miss Matty reveals her fear of the opposite sex as she rolls a little ball under her bed every night, to make sure that no man is hiding there. Might the ladies´ scorn of men be used to back up their opinion that they can cope very well indeed without them? Patricia Beer compares the ladies´ views on men with that of money, and concludes that “poverty and lack of men are equated as facts of life which can be combated by gentility and proper organisation” (155). The ladies do, however, need to revise their views on men, which will be demonstrated later on in this essay.

Summing up what we have learned in this chapter, hierarchy is constantly at the back of the middle class Cranfordians´ minds. As it is possible to modify rank, either upwards or downwards, it is important to behave in a proper way, adopting the right, genteel, manners. It is also absolutely vital to choose wisely in matters of socializing and marriage. To establish whether people are suitable or not, knowledge of their fathers, husbands and other relations is crucial. An aristocratic connection is hard currency for a position in society. Additionally, the nature of a person´s work is important, for those unfortunate enough to have to work. Manual work is unthinkable, trade is not recommendable, but some kinds of work, especially governmental, military and ecclesiastical, are acceptable or even commendable. For women, teaching is an option.

In the next two chapters we will explore what happens to the ladies´ views on gentility and rank when these views are challenged by people from outside their society or by difficulties within their own community. Will the ladies stay firm or will they adapt to the new situations?
Chapter 2: Gentility Revised

Chapter One demonstrated the strong views on genteel and vulgar behaviour that exist in Cranford. In this chapter, we will ascertain the rigidity of these views. Are the ladies able to revise their opinions, and, if so, what enforces such a change?

We have seen that the ladies´ principle of elegant economy lets them socialize without admitting to their poverty. This principle is tested when the ladies are invited to Miss Betty Barker. Nothing grander than a sponge-cake and some simple biscuits is expected. However, Miss Betty Barker is not an original member of the ladies´ community. She used to belong to a different sphere and is not familiar with the practice of elegant economy, nor does she need it. Having retired from a successful business, she can afford to offer expensive food and drink. She wants to impress the ladies with an abundance of cakes followed by other luxuries, such as oysters, lobsters and macaroons in brandy. Miss Mary is apprehensive: “Oh, gentility!’ thought I, ‘can you endure this last shock?’” (82). And gentility certainly can. The ladies are hungry and accept Miss Betty´s offerings, thinking it is “better to submit graciously, even at the cost of [their] gentility.” (83). This reaction demonstrates that gentility can be overlooked. Good manners and kindness to the hostess may be part of the reason. A more probable explanation is that the ladies are hungry and that basic human needs can be more important than the rules of gentility.

Gentility also implies the choice of suitable topics of conversation, avoiding unpleasantness, such as money, poverty or any links to the lower classes. Captain Brown, a half-pay captain who has recently moved to Cranford, is the violator of many genteel rules. Bringing up his own poverty, without any shame, is his most flagrant offence, and his manners leave much to be desired. The Captain´s youngest daughter, Miss Jessie, resembles her father in this way. Completely lacking tact, she keeps mentioning her uncle, the
shopkeeper, even in the presence of the Honourable Mrs Jamieson! Furthermore, she has other most irritating features, such as her dimples, youthful taste in dress and singing out of tune.

Nevertheless, Captain Brown and Miss Jessie are relatively quickly accepted by most of the ladies in Cranford. Both of them are appreciated for their good humour and friendliness. Furthermore, the Captain’s “excellent masculine common sense. . .” is recognized by the ladies, who previously have only considered men as being “so in the way in the house!” (7, 3). The ladies’ affection intensifies when they see evidence of the Captain´s and Miss Jessie´s self-sacrifice and great kindness in caring for the eldest daughter, Miss Brown. Her terminal illness requires expensive medicine, impoverishing her father. It also causes her great pain which affects her temper and makes her a difficult patient to nurse.

Miss Jenkyns, however, is unable to forgive Captain Brown because of their literary dispute over the merits of Dickens versus Dr Johnson. Captain Brown appreciates Dickens´ earthy and humorous style, while Miss Jenkyns favours Dr Johnson´s sharp rationality. (In reality Miss Jenkyns has not even read Dickens, but does not wish to reveal her ignorance.) Miss Jenkyns is the group leader of the ladies´ community and an expert on gentility. John Gross describes her as “a formidable upholder of dignity and decorum, with the heavy manner and decided views of an eighteenth-century bluestocking” (225). Thus the other ladies find it hard to approve where she disapproves.

In spite of her initial disapproval, Miss Jenkyns´ attitude to Captain Brown changes dramatically when she receives the news of his heroic death, rescuing a little girl from being crushed by a train. She realizes the narrowness of her previous judgements and exclaims, “Matilda, bring me my bonnet. I must go to those girls. God pardon me if ever I have spoken contemptuously to the Captain!” (22). A dormant goodness is triggered in Miss Jenkyns. From then on she makes it her mission to help Miss Jessie care for her dying sister and to
support her in her grief. She accompanies Miss Jessie to her father’s funeral with the comment, “It is not fit for you to go alone. It would be against both propriety and humanity were I to allow it” (23). Even though Miss Jenkyns values self-control, she lets Miss Jessie “weep her passionate fill” at the funeral (23). Eventually, she even assumes the role of matchmaker, uniting Miss Jessie with Major Gordon. She does not even object as Major Gordon embraces Miss Jessie in her own house. Instead it is poor Miss Matty who is reprimanded for questioning the act.

Miss Jenkyns’ reaction is the first indication that there is more to the ladies of Cranford than what initially meets the eye. In this time of crisis, Miss Jenkyns discovers that gentleness is far more important than gentility, and she abandons her trivial views on propriety for the higher purpose of humanity. In the words of Pollard, Miss Jenkyns “shows us how, rigid though she may be in observance of the correct conventions, these latter must nevertheless give way to human values” (76). Later on, the ladies’ urge to help fellow humans in need is repeated in their care for Signor Brunoni, a visiting conjurer who has been seriously hurt in an accident.

The ladies seem to come alive when they take on the task of helping others. As Miss Jenkyns volunteers to nurse Miss Jessie’s dying sister single-handedly, the narrator describes her as being “in a state of great friendly excitement. . .” (24). Miss Matty and Miss Mary react in a similar way, when Miss Pole comes to inform them of the plans to care for Signor Brunoni. Miss Mary writes, “Before Miss Pole left us, Miss Matty and I were as full of the morning’s adventure as she was” (125). In this way Gaskell seems to show us that humanitarian actions are not only beneficial to the recipient of those actions, but that helping a person in need also brings happiness to the helper.

Keeping to the strict visiting hours is another indicator of gentility. As we have seen, calls must be paid between 12 and 3 o´clock and dress is changed in the expectation of a guest.
However, the ladies break these rules on at least three occasions. The following examples illustrate that the reasons can be trivial as well as serious. Miss Pole, in her capacity as the town gossip, receives an extraordinary piece of news, and no visiting hours can prevent her from sharing her information at once. “Don’t go – I can’t wait – it is not twelve, I know – but never mind your dress – I must speak to you” (138). Miss Mary and Miss Matty throw their “gentility with double force into [their] manners. . .” (138) and Miss Pole informs them of the impending marriage between Dr Hoggins and Lady Glenmire, Mrs Jamieson’s sister-in-law.

The next time Miss Pole breaks the visiting rules, there is, however, a more serious cause. Miss Matty is destitute after the failure of her bank and Miss Pole summons the ladies to a secret emergency meeting, one day at eleven o’clock, in order to discuss what they can do to help their friend.

Miss Matty herself is a rule-breaker one morning, as she goes to get a glimpse of the new fashion before 12 o’clock. She defends this lesser offence as an effort to avoid a greater evil as she tells Miss Mary that “it is not etiquette to go till after twelve, but then, you see, all Cranford will be there, and one does not like to be too curious about dress and trimmings and caps, with all the world looking on. It is never genteel to be over-curious on these occasions” (146-147). Yet, in reality, is it not her curiosity that creates the offence? From these examples, we may conclude that if something is exciting or important enough, gentility may be temporarily set aside.

Physical self-control is essential to genteel behaviour. The male species appears to fail in this respect. Dr Hoggins is condemned for vulgarity by Mrs Jamieson, just for crossing his legs as he is sitting on a chair. However, when Peter Jenkyns is guilty of an even more ungenteel posture, namely sitting cross-legged on the floor, Mrs Jamieson seems to have forgotten her views completely, commenting “on the elegance and convenience of the attitude. . .” (188). Peter Jenkyns is Miss Matty’s long lost brother, who returns from India.
right at the end of the novel. He is a wealthy man, having sold his indigo plantation and all his possessions, and he brings with him fascinating, if not completely genuine, tales of his exotic life. The ladies are mesmerized by him and Mrs Jamieson is his greatest conquest.

Furthermore, nobody has any objections to the origin of Peter Jenkyns’ fortune. Normally, wealth earned through labour and trade would be despised, as seen in Chapter One. However, there seems to be a big difference here: Peter’s money was not made in England. Knezevic argues that Peter is “a colonial version of the territorial aristocrat . . .” and that his fortune “is very genteelly disconnected from its source” (405ff). One cannot help wondering whether this really is relevant to Mrs Jamieson, or if she simply yields to his charm.

Yet another proof of gentility is refined manners, something that Dr Hoggins sadly lacks in all respects. We have already seen the ladies´ outrage at his language, voice, complexion, boots and smell (125, 140). He has also been blessed with a name that cannot be considered noble. However, changing “it to Piggins . . . would not be much better”, says Miss Jenkyns (77). The ladies do appreciate him for his skills as a doctor, even considering him fit to treat the Royal Family, but this is not enough: “As a surgeon we were proud of him; but as a man – or rather, I should say, as a gentleman – we could only shake our heads over his name and himself, and wished that he had read Lord Chesterfield´s Letters in the days when his manners were susceptible of improvement” (125). Wolfgang Mieder has done research on the eighteenth-century aristocrat Lord Chesterfield, who gave advice on manners and language in a collection of letters, later published and still used as an etiquette book in the nineteenth century. One opinion that Lord Chesterfield nursed was that “a gentleman´s language must not reflect the speech patterns of the lower classes” (26-28). This is one of the flaws of Dr Hoggins.

Nevertheless, Dr Hoggins proves his usefulness on several occasions. He is the most important factor in Signor Brunoni´s recovery, which is recognized by the ladies. Miss Mary
writes that “everybody did as much as if there was great cause for anxiety – as indeed there was, until Mr Hoggins took charge of him” (126). Apart from his medical skills, Dr Hoggins’ usefulness also lies in the basic fact that he is a man. The ladies have persuaded themselves that men are unnecessary. However, when “the Panic” settles in Cranford and the ladies imagine non-existing robbers, it is Dr Hoggins’ hat that is hung in Miss Pole’s hall to scare away any possible intruders. Beer takes Dr Hoggins’ impact on the ladies one step further, claiming that he “stands for a virility alien to Cranford, a sort of farmyard quality” (156). Perhaps this virility is the reason why Lady Glenmire is drawn to Dr Hoggins during their joint efforts to nurse Signor Brunoni and as Dr Hoggins visits a sick servant at Mrs Jamieson’s.

However, it is Miss Matty’s description of Dr Hoggins that sums up his nature in the best way: “Mr Hoggins is really a very personable man; and as for his manners – why, if they are not very polished, I have known people with very good hearts and very clever minds too, who were not what some people reckoned refined, but who were both true and tender” (154). Her words demonstrate that gentility has to give way to intelligence and kindness.

In Cranford, Gaskell shows us that single women are able to manage without men, if they have the support of each other, something which will become even more evident in Chapter Three. However, despite all the imperfections of men, the women manage even better with them. Uglow concludes that Gaskell’s model society benefits “from both ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ virtues. It is a model of partnership based not on marriage but on a bond where the balance of power is less unequal, that of brother and sister…” (288). Indirectly, the men of Cranford also teach the ladies to become better persons. Even though they might not be genteel men, they certainly are gentle men and sounder than the ladies in many ways. Uglow points out that “the men who actually enter Cranford’s life… have a beneficial effect in
prompting the women to modify those rules which have bound as well as supported them” (288).

To summarize this chapter, we can establish that the ladies are indeed able to revise their seemingly rigid views on gentility. In some cases, the reasons for this are based on simple human needs, such as hunger or the need for entertainment. However, higher motives can also be discerned. Men may lack genteel manners but could possess other more important qualities. Kindness in a person weighs more than refinement, and in times of crisis, humanity is far more important than acting according to any codes of gentility. The next chapter will test whether hierarchy, too, can be disregarded in favour of humanity.
Chapter 3: Hierarchy Overruled

Chapter One showed that hierarchy is crucial in matters of socializing, marriage and work. In this chapter we will explore what happens to the ladies’ views on rank, when it is challenged by outsiders entering Cranford society or by difficulties within their own community. Can hierarchy resist every challenge, or does humanity win in the long run?

It is the female population of Cranford that is the most particular about socializing with the right people. The men do not seem to care so much about the company they keep, which mirrors their permissive views on gentility. Captain Brown distinctly illustrates this fact by helping a poor woman carrying home her dinner, without caring about any restrictions on suitable company. Initially the ladies interpret his manners as “eccentric” and expect an apology from the Captain (14). No apology is given, but the ladies bear with him, nevertheless, as his conduct shows “great goodness of heart” (15). As Uglow sees it, his way of “being courteous to all, regardless of class”, is an indication that Cranford is on the brink of a change. “The small social group begins to encompass those hitherto banned on grounds of class” and old values “start to give way to the more flexible ethos of the nineteenth century. . .” (286).

As a matter of fact, the ladies, too, show that they can disregard class if a person is in distress. Whether this is evoked by Captain Brown’s good example, we cannot say. In this case, it is Signor Brunoni, the conjurer, who needs their help. Initially they are skeptical of him, imagining all sorts of things. Could he be a French spy in disguise? Could he be a travelling charlatan? But the ladies relent as they witness his polite manners and devotion to his wife and their little daughter. Plans for the nursing of Signor Brunoni (or Samuel Brown, which is his real name) are quickly made. They find suitable lodgings, prepare the sedan-chair for the transport of the patient and later check up on his progress. Mrs Forrester even makes
her famous bread-jelly for him. Miss Mary ironically, as well as affectionately, comments on this act:

Who says that the aristocracy are proud? Here was a lady, by birth a Tyrrell, and descended from the great Sir Walter that shot King Rufus, and in whose veins ran the blood of him who murdered the little Princes in the Tower, going every day to see what dainty dishes she could prepare for Samuel Brown, a mountebank! (126)

During the convalescence, the ladies’ attention expands to the whole Brunoni family and Miss Matty takes pleasure in coming to play with the little Brunoni girl.

In Chapter Two, we saw that good deeds can be rewarded by a feeling of contentment. The incident with Signor Brunoni is another indication that goodness pays off. Miss Matty’s brother Peter would never have been found if she and the other ladies had not cared for the injured conjurer. As Miss Mary listens to Signora Brunoni’s account of their previous life and hardships in India, she realizes that the Aga Jenkyns who has helped the family could in fact be Miss Matty’s brother. Miss Mary’s attempt to contact Peter is a success and Peter returns to his sister, who has dreamt of this reunion for most of her life.

However, Cranford will not change and become more tolerant about socializing, unless Mrs Jamieson relinquishes her rigid position on hierarchy. As seen earlier, Mrs Jamieson refuses to socialize with people of lower rank, such as Mrs Fitz-Adam. The other ladies have decided to accept Mrs Fitz-Adam, and Miss Pole aptly comments that if they “did not relax a little, and become less exclusive, by-and-by [they] should have no society at all”, but Mrs Jamieson is adamant (78). At parties, she upholds her principles by pretending not to see Mrs Fitz-Adam, even though the large Mrs Fitz-Adam uses every opportunity to curtsy low to her. Mrs Jamieson seems to falter in her restrictions on socializing, however, as she accepts the invitation to Miss Betty Barker’s tea party. Uglow sees this as an indication of “the narrow circle . . . giving way to pressure from below. . .” (286).
Apart from socializing with suitable people, marrying according to rank is also required, as seen in Chapter One. We are told that Miss Matty could not marry Thomas Holbrook in her youth, as he was only a simple yeoman in her father’s and older sister’s eyes. Miss Matty defies her sister’s view on rank, however, when she accepts an invitation to dine with Mr Holbrook after Miss Jenkyns’ death. As a reader, one cannot help wishing that Miss Matty would get a second chance in love. Unfortunately, she has waited too long and Mr Holbrook dies shortly after their reunion. The incident nevertheless brings about a change in Miss Matty’s attitude to her maid’s wish for a suitor. She will not object anymore, provided that the young man is respectable. “‘God forbid!’ said she, in a low voice, ‘that I should grieve any young hearts’” (49). Miss Matty’s change of heart again shows that kindness and tolerance is beginning to conquer views on propriety. We shall also see that it will bring benefits to Miss Matty herself.

The most striking example of the collision between marriage and class in Cranford is the story of Lady Glenmire. Lady Glenmire is not an original Cranfordian but comes for an extended visit with her sister-in-law, Mrs Jamieson, after the death of her husband. Despite being a baron’s widow, Lady Glenmire is quite poor, which somehow comforts the equally poor ladies. Additionally, she is good company and a skilled card player, and the ladies immediately make her a member of their little circle of friends. However, peace is interrupted when the marriage between the aristocratic Lady Glenmire and the coarse Dr Hoggins is announced:

‘Marry!’ said we. ‘Marry! Madness!’

‘Marry!’ said Miss Pole. . . .‘What a fool my lady is going to make of herself!’ (138) Marrying below rank, to a man with no title, and not even an impressive name, is against all rules of propriety. In addition, there is Dr Hoggins´ embarrassing lack of refinement.
What could be the reason for Lady Glenmire’s sacrifice of social status? Miss Pole believes that her reason for marriage must be the need for capital. Miss Mary Smith, on the other hand, sees signs of change in both Lady Glenmire and Dr Hoggins, which indicate real love. If Mrs Jamieson has any thoughts on this, we are not told. Nevertheless, what is crystal clear is her disgust with the connection, and she quickly evicts Lady Glenmire from her house. When she hears that Lady Glenmire has even given up her title to become Mrs Hoggins, she reacts by saying that “it only convinced her of what she had known from the first, that the creature had a low taste” (174). To stress her low opinions of “the creature”, she keeps her veil down on one side of her bonnet when encountering her sister-in-law, just as she previously had refused to take notice of poor Mrs Fitz-Adam. Mrs Jamieson is further outraged by the fact that the aristocratic St. James’s Chronicle writes about the marriage. Knezevic comments that the notice in the Chronicle “implies that even a national ‘aristocratic’ system of rank is capable of adaptation, and of incorporating new social groups (such as the medical profession)” (405ff).

Miss Mary Smith describes how Lady Glenmire’s marriage causes a conflict within their community. The ladies are torn between loyalty and affection: loyalty to their “liege lady”, the “dull, and inert, and pompous, and tiresome” Mrs Jamieson, and affection for their “bright, and kind, and sociable, and agreeable. . .” new friend, Lady Glenmire (142, 140). Finally, they decide that they will visit their friend, “whether allowed or not. . .” by Mrs Jamieson (174). “Human values again triumph over social conventions”, and we are shown that kindness in a person is more valued than rank and titles (Pollard 79). This could also be another indication that Cranford is becoming more tolerant on the whole, and that Mrs Jamieson´s power is in decline.

In the end, Mrs Jamieson is made to accept Lady Glenmire, now Mrs Hoggins, but not on account of any latent humanity, which was the case with Miss Jenkyns and her care for Miss
Jessie Brown. No, Mrs Jamieson is in fact tricked into acceptance by Peter Jenkyns, her favourite, owing to his entertaining and exotic stories. Peter bribes Mrs Jamieson into attending a dinner given by Major and Jessie Gordon, by making her the patroness of a performance by Signor Brunoni. There he reconciles the sisters-in-law, thus pleasing Miss Matty who has been much upset by their quarrel. Peace is restored in Cranford.

Prior to the conclusion of the novel, the ladies´ sense of hierarchy in relation to suitable work is also challenged. We have seen that a lady preferably should not work at all and definitely not work with trade. What happens then, when a person within the Cranford ladies´ own society faces grave economic difficulties, forcing her to work for a living? Does she lose her social position?

The lady in question is Miss Matty. Initially she is portrayed as insecure and indecisive, always in the shadow of her strong-willed older sister. Even after her death, Miss Jenkyns controls Miss Matty´s views. Miss Mary writes, “Miss Jenkyns´s rules were made more stringent than ever, because the framer of them was gone where there could be no appeal. In all things else Miss Matilda was meek and undecided to a fault” (33). However, the reader soon realizes that Miss Matty is the heroine of the novel and by far the most lovable. The opposite can be said about her sister, as one flaw after the other is revealed after her death. Not only has she prevented Miss Matty from marrying the man she loved, she has also made the fatal decision to invest their money in an unsafe bank, the Town and County Bank, against the advice from a well-informed friend.

Miss Matty´s true stature as a heroine is revealed after the collapse of the bank, in which she is a shareholder. She is in a shop, choosing material for her first new dress in years, when she hears unfavourable rumours about her bank. A poor customer is denied buying a shawl for his wife, as his Town and County bank-note has become worthless. Despite slowly realizing that she is on the brink of destitution, Miss Matty unselfishly exchanges the worthless bank-
note for her sovereigns, “her single decisive act in the whole work. . .” (Pollard 78). Easson finds this episode significant for the whole novel. “The seriousness of Cranford lies above all in the episode of Miss Matty’s great heroism, her insistence that as a shareholder she is responsible for the Town and [County] Bank’s integrity” (107). Pollard concludes, “By changing the bad note she both shows that money does matter and yet ignores the fact that it does. Humanity matters more than money” (82).

Miss Matty increasingly appears as goodness personified. She also has the naïve belief that other people must share her selflessness and sense of responsibility. Instead of pitying herself when the bank crashes, she pities the directors. If she suffers so much as a shareholder, how much must the directors then suffer? Miss Mary comments, without any irony directed at Miss Matty, “Indeed, of the two, she seemed to think poverty a lighter burden than self-reproach; but I privately doubted if the directors would agree with her” (170). The realistic reader probably agrees with Miss Mary in her lack of sympathy for the directors.

A further example of Miss Matty’s magnanimity is the relief she feels that her sister is no longer alive, thus escaping the experience of shame and destitution. “I hope it’s not wrong – not wicked – but oh! I am so glad poor Deborah is spared this. She could not have borne to come down in the world, – she had such a noble, lofty spirit” (153-154). It never seems to occur to Miss Matty’s generous spirit that her sister is in any way to blame for the catastrophe.

At the time of the Town and County Bank collapse, Miss Matty is without any known relations to help her through the crisis. Miss Mary undertakes the mission to find her some work to support herself. It is not an easy task, as Miss Matty has no obvious skills. However, Miss Mary gets the idea that Miss Matty could sell tea for a living, in other words, work in trade. Miss Matty does not object, as her only wish is being able to settle her debts. “I’m willing to do anything that’s right and honest; and I don’t think, if Deborah knows where she
is, she’ll care so very much if I’m not genteel. . .” (171-172). To Miss Matty, a clear conscience is far more important than gentility.

In her new situation, Miss Matty would seem to be in danger of losing her rank and being ignored like Mrs Fitz-Adam and Lady Glenmire. Cranford reacts completely differently, however, and the whole community team up to help her instead. One of Miss Matty’s most devoted friends is actually her maid, Martha. The relationship between her and Miss Matty is based on mutual affection. Martha treats her mistress with the same consideration, as if she were a beloved child. Uglow argues that this is a common theme in Gaskell’s novels. “Indeed the mistress often seems more like a child, while the servant is a source of strength” (264). She also establishes that the “importance of servants in [Gaskell’s own] life is reflected in her fiction. . .” (264). Gaskell relied on her servant and friend Ann Hearn, who stayed with the Gaskell family for more than 50 years (150). Could her choice of giving Martha the same surname, Hearn, be a tribute to her beloved maid?

The failure of the bank forces Miss Matty to cut down on her expenses. Martha is utterly devastated but shows her devotion by refusing to leave her mistress, even though she may not be paid. Furthermore, she tries to comfort Miss Matty in the best way she can think of and treats her to a pudding, paid for from her own pocket. Miss Matty is thoroughly moved by the gesture and tells Martha, “I should like to keep this pudding under a glass shade, my dear!” (161). In the end it is decided that Martha is to marry her suitor, Jem. With contributions secretly and selflessly given by all the ladies (except Mrs Jamieson), the couple rents Miss Matty’s house with Miss Matty as their lodger. In this way she will always be taken care of. Thus, Miss Matty is rewarded for her kindness in accepting Martha’s suitor. Pollard points out that “Martha and Jem Hearn show that humanity matters more than class. They show, too, that it matters more than money” (82).
Miss Matty’s conscience prevents her from setting up her tea shop until she has spoken to Mr Johnson, the Cranford shopkeeper, lest his business be injured by the competition. Miss Mary’s father regards her conduct as “great nonsense”, but he is wrong (176). Mr Johnson reacts by sending her customers, telling them that Miss Matty has a greater selection of teas than he can offer. In reality, this is probably only partly true. The real reason could be epitomized by an earlier comment from Miss Mary’s father. “See, Mary, how a good innocent life makes friends all around” (171). This is probably also the reason, why the whole of Cranford is suddenly in need of tea. Gross argues, “Miss Matty’s triumph is Cranford’s; her unselfishness and good faith bring out the same qualities in others” (226).

Consequently, Miss Matty’s business thrives and so does she. Her work makes her more self-confident, a process that started shortly after her sister’s death. When her brother Peter turns up, rich enough to support his sister financially, Miss Matty has already shown that she can take care of herself. Easson concludes, “Peter’s return . . . is a kind of reward, but not a melodramatic release from misery by a deus ex machina”. It “does not artificially rescue Miss Matty from the consequences of her action; she has already rescued herself . . . and Peter’s return is an emotional rather than material completion. . .” (108).

Then there is the question of Miss Matty’s rank. Is she able to maintain it, or does her work force her to step down in the Cranford hierarchy? The verdict is in the hands of Mrs Jamieson. After a few days’ consideration, Mrs Jamieson establishes that a married woman must take her husband’s rank, while an unmarried woman keeps the rank of her father. The narrator believes that Mrs Jamieson’s intention is to humiliate her sister-in-law. Miss Matty is nevertheless able to retain her position in the ladies’ society.

Gaskell clarifies the importance of humanity by contrasting Miss Matty with the other characters in the novel. As Pollard puts it, “Miss Matty has the nobility which all the other characters lack. They may have rank, social graces and personal qualities . . . but they are
essentially lesser characters, serving amongst other purposes to emphasize the worth of this apparently insignificant spinster” (79). On paper Mrs Jamieson might be the noblest of the ladies, with her aristocratic connections, her wealth and her grand house. However, there is no real nobleness in her behaviour. She is tight-fisted, even though she has the means to be generous. She is more interested in her dog’s welfare than that of her friends. She shows her insensitivity to their economic difficulties by comments such as, “Don’t you find it very unpleasant, walking?” (97). Miss Matty, on the other hand, may not seem noble at first glance. She is not rich as she enters the plot and becomes destitute with time. Her aristocratic links are quite obscure and she even has to work for a living, in trade! Yet she is nobility incarnate. Her hardship does not change the fact that she possesses the most generous of hearts. She thinks well of everyone and little of herself. Her unselfishness, generosity and sense of responsibility extend not only to her friends, but to all fellow humans.

In this chapter, Miss Matty, her lady friends, Martha and the people of Cranford have shown us that humanity can indeed overrule hierarchy. They have also demonstrated that even if money does matter, humanity matters more, and that good deeds pay off and inspire selfless actions.
Conclusion

The purpose of this essay was to show how the strong views on hierarchy and gentility in Cranford are affected, when the main characters, that is “the Amazons”, face outsiders, unaccustomed to their norms of propriety, or encounter fellow humans in need. The argument was that even though hierarchy and gentility rule in Cranford, humanity overrules and that selflessness and goodness bring goodness in return, as well as happiness.

Before putting the argument to the test, the hierarchy and gentility of Cranford was clarified in Chapter One. It was shown that a woman’s rank was primarily determined by the rank of her husband or father. Furthermore, it established that gentility was vital for the preservation of rank, even for the possibility to improve it. Gentility implied good knowledge of visiting and entertaining rules, of proper topics for conversation, emotional and physical self-control, a clean and tidy appearance and the use of superior language. Lack of gentility or an unwise choice concerning association, marriage or work could impair rank. It was also discovered that, apart from manual labour, trade was particularly despised by the upper-middle class.

Chapter Two demonstrated that gentility could be disregarded in favour of simple human needs, and, more importantly, that it can never stand in the way of kindness to a human in distress. At times this disregard was prompted by people outside the ladies’ society, not familiar with its ways, such as Miss Betty Barker or Captain Brown. Men on the whole, also exemplified by Dr Hoggins and Thomas Holbrook, actually proved sounder than the ladies, even though they lacked gentility. Chapter Two also demonstrated that good deeds could be rewarded with a sense of well-being. The ladies were never more alive than when they were busy caring for someone else.
Chapter Three confirmed that rank, as well as money, is subordinate to kindness and selflessness. Lady Glenmire is accepted by most of the Cranford ladies, in spite of her marriage to Dr Hoggins. Despite belonging to a lower social class, his capability and kindness, like that of his wife, prove more important. However, the most apt illustration that humanity overrules hierarchy is Miss Matty. Her destitution forces her to neglect restrictions on work, socializing and etiquette, but she is nevertheless treasured. She turns out to be the heroine of the novel due to her noble characteristics, and the aristocratic but arrogant Mrs Jamieson is put to shame. Additionally, Miss Matty shows us that kind and unselfish deeds bring out kindness and unselfishness in others, as the whole of Cranford support her wholeheartedly in her distress.

In *Cranford*, Gaskell depicts a female community which works. Its strengths and weaknesses are explored by the narrator, whose tone of affection and amusement contributes to the charm of the novel. In spite of its feminine focus, however, *Cranford* cannot be seen as a feminist novel. The women are in control of Cranford and there is no indication of any male oppression. On the contrary, the few men that Cranford can boast are kind and comparatively sensitive, and they are increasingly accepted as their value becomes more and more apparent to the ladies. Gaskell’s model society does not consist solely of women, but of men and women in fruitful cooperation with each other.

There is also an increasing acceptance of people and customs, an increasing tolerance of the transgression of rules in *Cranford*. This is a reflection of the new social mobility of nineteenth-century Britain, which is seen in the enhanced status and influence of, for example, doctors and tradesmen, as argued by Knezevic. This makes *Cranford* a social novel, though not as focused on social ills as Gaskell’s industrial novels.

The main impact of the novel, however, is a wider, more universal one. Even though the underlying altruistic message in *Cranford* reflects Gaskell’s Christian background, it is not an
overtly religious novel, but rather a moral one. Gaskell’s message to the reader is epitomized in Miss Matty: humanity, tolerance, conscientiousness and selflessness are the most important characteristics in a person. Christian or not, “the golden rule” of treating others as one would like to be treated oneself is as topical as ever.
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