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Reading *Cranford* as a ‘cottagecore text’

Czytanie *Cranford* jako „cottagecore text”

Abstract

Internet aesthetics, such as “cottagecore,” are beginning to be discussed in various academic settings. Given its close connection to reading and its love for books, the cottagecore aesthetic seems to be a worthy choice of topic in the course of literary analysis. Using Elizabeth Gaskell’s novel *Cranford* (1853) as a case study, this article opens the discussion on what literary and cultural matters ought to be included in determining a “cottagecore text” (beyond the mere inclusion of its most salient visual motifs). Furthermore, the study introduces the notion of a “cottagecore reading,” speculating on what themes such a reading might selectively include. Among the many examples are materiality, particularly ephemeral creations, or more marginalised activities, such as those of the domestic realm or those which are feminine-themed. The article, therefore, proposes a close-reading analysis of *Cranford*, serving as an example of how such a reading might actually look. Consequently, various unique insights into one of Gaskell’s most popular novels can also be gained. Moreover, some surprising parallels are to be observed between people’s current use of social-media and the motivations behind the practice of certain genteel customs. As a result, this unique reading showcases the applicability of contemporary nostalgia-based aesthetics as versatile frameworks for studying and analysing classic literary works, the study of which may prove useful for future researchers of modern aesthetics in general.

Keywords

Cottagecore, Elizabeth Gaskell, *Cranford*, Internet aesthetics, femininity, domesticity, performativity, gentility

Abstrakt

Estetyki internetowe, takie jak „cottagecore”, zaczynają być omawiane w różnych środowiskach akademickich. Biorąc pod uwagę ścisły związek z czytaniem i zamiłowaniem do książek, estetyka „cottagecore” wydaje się być godnym wyborem tematu w trakcie analizy literackiej. Wykorzystując powieść Elizabeth Gaskell *Cranford* (1853) jako studium przypadku, niniejszy artykuł otwiera dyskusję na temat tego, jakie kwestie literackie i kulturowe powinny zostać uwzględnione przy określaniu „cottagecore text” (poza zwykłym włączeniem jego najistotniejszych motywów wizualnych). Co więcej, badanie wprowadza

pojęcie „cottagecore reading”, spekulując na temat tego, jakie tematy taka lektura może selektywnie uwzględniać. Wśród wielu przykładów znajdują się materialność, zwłaszcza efemeryczne kreacje, lub bardziej zmarginalizowane czynności, takie jak te ze sfery domowej lub te o tematyce kobiecej. W związku z tym artykuł proponuje analizę *Cranford* metodą close-reading, służącą jako przykład tego, jak taka lektura mogłaby wyglądać w rzeczywistości. W rezultacie można również uzyskać różne unikalne spostrzeżenia na temat jednej z najpopularniejszych powieści Gaskell. Co więcej, można zaobserwować pewne zaskakujące podobieństwa między obecnym korzystaniem przez ludzi z mediów społecznościowych a motywacjami stojącymi za praktyką pewnych gentelmeńskich zwyczajów. W rezultacie ta wyjątkowa lektura pokazuje możliwość zastosowania współczesnej estetyki opartej na nostalgii jako wszechstronnych ram do badania i analizowania klasycznych dzieł literackich, których badanie może okazać się przydatne dla przyszłych badaczy współczesnej estetyki w ogóle.

Słowa kluczowe:

cottagecore, Elizabeth Gaskell, *Cranford*, estetyka internetowa, kobiecość, domowość, formatywność, szlachetność

Books and novels: cottagecore readers, readings, and texts

As can be gleaned from reading various sources, namely magazine articles, websites, blogs, or from looking at hashtagged images on social media, a major part of the cottagecore aesthetic is a love for books, whether this be for either their literary content or material qualities. In terms of literature, a contemplative style of reading would befit the cottagecore lifestyle, which, according to Kaitlyn Merriman, is about slow living as well as romanticising and cherishing the little things from day to day (2023). She writes that one of the ways to engage in the cottagecore dream is by reading certain books that help to transport the soul and to “charm the reader into the cottagecore mindset” (2023). One type of book that can put one into this very mood is the novel, especially those that are often referred to as “classics.” In the book *Escape into Cottagecore: Embrace Cosy Countryside Comfort in Your Everyday*, Ramona Jones refers to such classics as “vintage works,” claiming that these texts “provide the backbone to Cottagecore culture” (182). Such fictional works are often likely to have been both set and written within a past for which cottagecore followers hold an historically-nostalgic desire, and, as a result, may act as virtual time-machines

As a way of contributing to a type of cottagecore guidebook, commentators on the trend, such as Jones or Merriman, present their own choices on which literary texts are compatible with the Aesthetic, thus adding to an ever-growing recommended-reading list. Naturally, such lists are also given for films displaying elements of the Aesthetic, wherein adaptations of classic novels are frequently found. Choosing a suitable text appears to

be a fairly rudimentary process of identifying certain recognisable motifs and genres as well as determining whether the text has sufficiently captured the proper moods and tones, which one presumes would be a mostly instinctual and rather subjective process. As a result, the range of books recommended by cottagecore influencers is diverse. Such diversity exists not only because cottagecore is so broadly themed but also because everyone can have their own view of what the Aesthetic's most dominant themes are (or ought to be). Thus, a similar situation applies for the would-be "cottagecore reader," who may only recognise particular aspects of a novel as being distinctly cottagecore, or who may be inclined to focus on some aspects over others. For example, some might consciously or unconsciously pay particular attention to certain historical accuracies, such as details in codes of dress, or some antiquated social customs, or peculiar styles of writing and forms of speech. Alternatively, one may take an interest in certain objects from a particular time. Perhaps a novel's picturesque sketches and its vivid descriptions and general themes of the Pastoral might entice the reader, or be a feature which the reader determines to be of greater importance to their cottagecore reading. Lastly, it might be a novel's overall sense of romance or its quaint style of storytelling that puts one into a more relaxed state and a more 'cottagey' frame of mind.

In addition to using the invented term "the cottagecore reader," its hypothetical nature suggests that such a concept as a "cottagecore reading" might also be proposed — a reading which would focus on any or all of the aforementioned aspects of the Aesthetic, whether those constitute its ethical or more cosmetic components. Such a reading would involve seeking texts that possess certain qualities that befit a generally agreed cottagecore ethos. The reading might involve looking at diminutive matters or more marginalised activities, such as those of the domestic realm or those which are feminine-themed. Furthermore, it could highlight the importance of expressing emotionally positive themes in literature or try to reassess the value of topics that might sometimes seem slightly childish, frivolous, or trivial. However, its main purpose does not necessarily have to be aimed at providing more publicity to such topics and themes (at least, not for the benefit of the online community), for that motive might seem rather counter-intuitive given that one of the joys of these modern Internet aesthetics appears to lie in a person or one's group of friends practising a niche style or hobby, which they can enjoy for the very fact that it might be conceived as being something different. More appropriate for such a reading might be to highlight the aesthetic beauty of a text's cottagecore-themed aspects, adding some description of its purpose in the novel or how it affects the reader. Finally, there should be some attempt made to extract the cottagecore essence from a text or a given scene, particularly where aspects of the Aesthetic are less conspicuous. By choosing some less obvious elements to highlight, such as the appreciation of

letter-writing crafts, one can show that a “cottagecore text” might not always be dependent on containing the most salient features of cottagecore, those being, primarily, cottages and the (English-style) countryside. It is this observation that makes Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Cranford* (1853) a worthy choice for proposing such an analysis.

Cottagecore aesthetics: portraying the Cranford life

Naturally, Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Cranford* is among a host of novels from the Victorian period that could be analysed from a cottagecore perspective. Overall, the text has a distinctly cottagey feel, despite its apparent lack of referencing to actual cottages or to cottage life. What produces this effect is partly its domestic and rural setting as well as its distinctly feminine themes. The attention given to every-day matters as well as objects of art and nature may also contribute to its creating the cottagecore effect. Additionally, the novel includes a sense of the romantic and the sentimental, with the inclusion of much humour and many light-hearted moments. There are also some nostalgic undertones, not only in the sense of Gaskell’s own personal memories of pre-Victorian times but in the more general sense of childhood innocence or the contemplation of older ways of living.

Containing only the thinnest of plots, *Cranford* is not typical for a novel of its time. More definable it is as a collection of little stories and anecdotes about daily-life in the fictional Cranford village. Though the present action is set *circa* 1850, there are frequent recollections referring to the late Georgian era (immediately prior to the Victorian period), with several direct references being made to the reign of King William and Queen Adelaide. The novel is narrated by a fictional character — Mary Smith — whose relationship to Cranford is similar to that of Gaskell’s to Knutsford. Mary acts as a keen observer, narrating the local stories, both past and present. Essentially, she is an ethnographic reporter describing to a more urbanised readership a mostly female community possessing distinctly outmoded customs (as Gaskell herself does in “The Last Generation in England”). Sojourning in Cranford mostly at the residence of the late rector’s daughters Miss Matty and Miss Deborah Jenkyns,¹ Mary makes occasional trips to the village from the industrial city of Drumble, via train.² Essentially, she is an outsider, yet she is already accustomed to the local way of life, having formerly spent many days of her childhood in the

¹ The narrator refers to Miss Deborah Jenkyns as ‘Miss Jenkyns’ and to her sister Miss Mathilda Jenkyns as ‘Miss Matty.’

² Although the railways had been reaching out to more rural areas, the real Cranford — Knutsford — did not have its own station until 1862.

peaceful village.³ As a result, her experience invokes frequent nostalgic recollections. She does more than just observe, however: she also instigates the novel's main plot thread and its denouement by helping to facilitate the eventual return of Miss Matty's brother Peter. Though narrated with a light-hearted spirit, with its numerous tragic episodes (a common feature of Gaskell's stories), the novel does not shy away from life's harsh realities, making its episodic sketches appear both humorous and serious at the same time.

Homely activities and letters as a craft

Surely, one of the most endearing aspects of *Cranford* has to be its caring attention to diminutive matters and domestic craft. This attribute is also retained in the televised series, where one of the opening scenes, adapted from Chapter Three of the novel, shows Miss Jenkyns, Miss Matty, and Mary seated at a modestly-laid dining table approaching the dilemma of what should be the most seemly way of eating an orange, especially when eaten in the company of others (*Cranford*, 2007). The scene — in both formats — is intentionally funny, but it also reveals traits of character. It may translate to a modern audience as being altogether rather sweet and innocent (considering that both the possession and eating of oranges is not likely to be something of a novelty anymore). Thus, while such scenes as this appear to have retained their original charm and humour, the audience of today's digital age might find an additional level of wonder, an effect that the novel's author would little have anticipated.

On the surface, *Cranford* provides a detailed ethnography of Victorian and pre-Victorian life. Emma Karin Brandin discusses Gaskell's skill at depicting the domestic space of the times, saying that the initial purpose of doing so was simply to provide "as faithful a portrait of women's life in the home as possible" (30). One is, therefore, reminded of the fact that the stories began as serialised, episodic publications in Dickens' weekly magazine *Household Words*, which sought "to bring to innumerable homes, from the stirring world around us, the knowledge of many social wonders" (1). As previously hinted, many of the more mundane or ordinary tasks performed by the ladies of *Cranford* may feel like novelties for today's reader. So, whereas knitting in the dark, as Miss Matty was wont to do in order to save money on candles, may have been slightly amusing to some urbanised

³ Not much is known about the fictional narrator; however, it would seem that her background story is similar to Gaskell's: having lost her mother, the young lady is regularly sent by her busy father to stay with these old acquaintances of her youth, the surrounding of which are likely to be more comforting than in the city.

Victorian readers,⁴ this homely image might retain a certain charm, irrespective of any comical intentions. Although these depictions of quotidian occupations may have served other, more elaborate literary functions, they provide historically useful portrayals of domestic life in the first half of the nineteenth century. In addition to knitting, which features quite regularly in Gaskell's novels, other homely activities mentioned in *Cranford* are gardening, pudding-making, potpourri, sewing, crochet, card-playing, sitting and talking by the fire, and reading. While these homely activities could all be related to the cottagecore aesthetic, some of them will also relate to the sub-genres of "grandmacore," and "craftcore." In addition to these pastimes from the novel, *Cranford*'s televised adaptation includes other activities not seen in the *Cranford* novel that further help create the cottage-life aesthetic, with a romantically-charged scene of cherry-picking being one such example (2007). Needless to say, there is a plenitude of cottagecore activity present in the *Cranford* stories.

Perhaps a less obvious activity associated with the cottagecore aesthetic, but which was also practised regularly by middle-class women in the Victorian times, is the craft of letter-writing. It is another example of a necessary and regular task performed in Victorian times (yet no less artistic),⁵ which has now become either an occasional novelty or an enjoyable artistic pastime for people born in the digital age. There are a number of YouTube videos, such as "Writing an autumn cottagecore letter: penpal with me," by the channel The Little Warm Light,⁶ that show how to write beautifully authentic-looking, fountain-pen scribed letters, with wax seals and other ephemera. In fact, the video is a combination of two major online aesthetics: cottagecore and "Academia," of which the latter is related to the themes of higher education and study, and can be termed as "Dark" or "Light" Academia depending on the general mood, style or colour-scheme. The former of the two styles is synonymous with gothic themes.⁷ This popular fusion of cottagecore and Academia can be therapeutic – either to do as an activity, or just to watch or even to listen to.⁸ Given that postal letters contributed heavily to the content of novels in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with some being composed of them entirely (epistolary fiction), it is hardly surprising that letters are

⁴ The anecdotal scene of Miss Matty knitting in the dark comes in Chapter Five – "Old Letters": "In the winter afternoons she [Miss Matty] would sit knitting for two or three hours – she could do this in the dark, or by firelight" (Gaskell 52).

⁵ Citing Miss Jenkyns' artistry in the epistolary craft, Maria A. Fitzwilliam states that many women at the time restricted their literary talents to the field of letter-writing in order "to avoid controversy and stay within safe boundaries" (7).

⁶ www.youtube.com/watch?v=E2jTT82vwAk.

⁷ Dark Academia is inclusive of gothic themes.

⁸ There are some channels dedicated to just creating aesthetically-pleasing background sounds and images known as ASMR channels (Autonomic Sensory Meridian Response).

also to be found in *Cranford*. In Gaskell's novel, however, letters function as more than just a tool for general plot-conveyance. She is able to draw on the sentimental, historical, and material aspects of letters and letter-writing, all of which are important aspects in creating the cottagecore aesthetic. In Chapter Five — "Old Letters," with Mary's help, Miss Matty sets about burning stacks of old letters from the 1770s (when Miss Matty's parents had begun their courtship). Reading the letters before finally committing them to the flames, Mary relates snippets to Miss Matty (as well as to us, the reader), rendering an occasional quote, relating historical context, and providing some commentary on the artistic quality of the work. Miss Matty, meanwhile, shares with Mary her memories of the people to whom the letters refer as well as the customs of the preceding century.

Indeed, this scene of Mary and Miss Matty sitting by the fire, carefully opening the letters from yesteryear, makes a delightfully suitable cottagecore moment:

Sometimes the whole letter was contained on a mere scrap of paper. The paper was very yellow, and the ink very brown; some of the sheets were (as Miss Matty made me observe) the old original post, with the stamp in the corner representing a post-boy riding for life and twanging his horn. The letters of Mrs Jenkyns and her mother were fastened with a great round red wafer; for it was before Miss Edgeworth's "patronage" had banished wafers from polite society. It was evident, from the tenor of what was said, that franks were in great request, and were even used as a means of paying debts by needy members of Parliament. The rector sealed his epistles with an immense coat of arms, and showed by the care with which he had performed this ceremony that he expected they should be cut open, not broken by any thoughtless or impatient hand. (Gaskell 58)

The chapter is vividly descriptive, showing the careful artistry once employed in the letter-writing craft. In fact, the physical properties of the letters are described so well that even a description of their smell is given earlier in the chapter by Mary (as being like tonka beans). The passage also presents another example of how Gaskell cleverly reveals people's character traits through indirect observations. For example, Miss Jenkyns' frugal delight at "crossing" is described, which was a clever way to save on paper and postal costs by writing along the sides of the page after having reached the base in the regular fashion. Additionally, Miss Matty uses the rector's letters to indicate to Mary a sense of pride, or perhaps his assiduity, as well as a propensity for ritual (at least when it comes to the prizing open of letters). From a modern perspective, Gaskell's attention to detail shows that letter-writing can be a powerful medium for self-expression as characters of the past are figuratively and momentarily brought back to life. The passage is also filled with numerous historical notes, including its reference to wafers, which is one of the many social conventions

mentioned in Maria Edgeworth's novel *Patronage*,⁹ from 1814.¹⁰ With all these historical details to comprehend, Mary — observing and experiencing letters from well before her time — is placed in a similar position to the cottagecore reader; being curious about both the craft and the history on display there appears to be a sense of wonder in the way she narrates these old-fashioned customs of a previous age.

Talia Schaffer has also noted that when Mary and Miss Matty are looking through the letters together there are different types of nostalgia being experienced by either subject (77). For Miss Matty the whole scene is a moment of personal nostalgia, whereas for Mary the activity, though in some ways also a similar experience (with the smell of the letters having been a moment of personal recollection), is largely a moment of historical nostalgia. Perhaps a shared element of personal nostalgia would be the telling of stories sitting by the fire. The fireplace or hearth is commonly linked with nostalgic story-telling and togetherness. Naturally, it is also a crucial part of cottagecore's visual schema, with the hearth being the literal centre of the cottage itself, offering warmth, light, comfort, and safety.¹¹ Aesthetically, it is also worth stating that whereas the autumnal letter-writing video by the channel The Little Warm Light presents letters in the style of Light Academia (perhaps also indicated in the channel's name), the fire in Gaskell's fifth chapter might be closer, both visually and emotionally, to the Dark Academia aesthetic owing to the scene's sombre and slightly mystical tones. In her analysis of this scene, Schaffer has described the burning of the letters as hypnotic and calming, but she also assesses it as being cathartic (at least from Miss Matty's point of view), referring to the burning as an "epistolary holocaust" — with Miss Matty being finally ready to let go of some ghosts of her childhood past (79). Thus, overall, the scene is a mixture of contrasting moods and feelings along with the emotional complexities of nostalgia. What is more, it presents letters as material objects of deeply sentimental value, reminding readers of the digital age how one's personal letters can have similar properties to that of other keepsakes or gifts.

⁹ Maria Edgeworth (1768–1849), one of the pioneers of realist children's literature, is also among Jenny Uglow's short list of possible influences for Gaskell's nostalgic prose style (292).

¹⁰ Widely used in the eighteenth century, wafers were thin, baked, dry adhesive disks used for sealing envelopes. The alternative method was to use sealing wax.

¹¹ More in-depth analysis of Gaskell's use of the fireplace can be found in Richard Leahy's article "Fire and Reverie: Domestic Light and the Individual in 'Cranford' and 'Mary Barton,'" wherein he confirms the importance of the hearth to the country cottage, calling it "a place of safety, of repose, and of contemplation" (75).

Home interiors and collecting

In terms of homely practices in *Cranford*, it is also worth mentioning the aesthetic appeal of household clutter. In addition to grandmacore, and craft-core, cottagecore also has some connection to “cluttercore” and “goblincore,” the latter of which includes “the desire to collect and hoard small, often shiny objects” (aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Goblincore).¹² In her chapter titled “Home,” Ramona Jones states that, when it comes to cottage interiors, “we think of an eclectic mix of vintage and antique furniture, a happy clutter where every item has a story to tell” (36). Part of the charm of an old cottage should be that the house looks relatively lived-in; it is not supposed to be a permanent showroom. Mary’s narration expresses this sentiment for a home’s authenticity during her occasional excursions from the village.

A scene with some relevance to cluttering — at least, in the case of books — can be found in Chapter Four — “A Visit to an Old Bachelor,” where Mary, Miss Matty, and Miss Pole are invited “for a long June day” to the country residence of the bachelor Mr Holbrook (Gaskell 42). There the three ladies favourably remark upon a “pretty sitting-room — looking into the orchard, and all covered over with dancing tree-shadows” (42). Attractive as the scenery already is, what creates an effect of further invitation to the ladies is a noticeable preponderance of books: “They lay on the ground, they covered the walls, they strewed the table” (42). The scene actually typifies the cottagecore aesthetic on a number of levels. Firstly, the content of the books themselves and the randomness of their arrangement are of a romantic nature: “They were of all kinds — poetry and wild weird tales prevailing” (42). Secondly, the ladies are naturally drawn to the area of the room that is closer to the beautiful landscape outside. In terms of its furnishings, the room also feels cosier and more sociable than the parlour wherein they were originally expected to sit, which Mary describes as a “stiffly-furnished, ugly apartment” (42). This contrast shows that the ladies feel more comfortable or more ‘at home’ with rusticity than they do with stately formality, a sentiment that cottagecore aesthetes would very likely share.

Mary’s ethnographic interior descriptions only seem to be offered for the places that differ markedly from those in the village with which she is already familiar. Perhaps it is simply the case that in those more familiar interiors there is little to be found that is worthy of description. This can be supported by the fact that the fashion amongst the middle-class for ornamentation over utility only started around the time of the Great Exhibition (Calder 91–93). Thus, the televised adaptation, which is actually set in cottages in the Cotswolds region of England, appears to be accurate, at least, in its choice of

¹² Referring to practitioners of goblincore as “Goblins,” *Aesthetics Wiki* states that “Many Goblins are closely involved in adjacent movements such as Cottagecore, and Vulture Culture” (aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Goblincore).

showing sparsely decorated, simpler-looking, rustic homes. These less cluttered interiors in the adaptation align with those of the genteel cottage designs of the first half of the century. Calder also stresses that home interiors in the early part of the period were “still relatively light and unburdened” (33). That is not to say that the homes in the village are kept as empty shells either. It is simply that Mary seems to be interested in describing things that are atypical or different to her usual, humble surroundings. These differences are determined by societal factors, such as gender or wealth.

An example of the latter cause can be observed in Chapter Eight, when the same trio who visited Woodley (plus Mrs Forrester) are invited to Mrs Jamieson’s tea party:

There was a japanned table devoted to literature, on which lay a Bible, a Peerage, and a Prayer-Book. There was another square Pembroke table dedicated to the Fine Arts, on which were a kaleidoscope, conversation-cards, puzzle-cards (tied together to an interminable length with faded pink satin ribbon), and a box painted in fond imitation of the drawings which decorate tea-chests. (Gaskell 91)

As usual, Mary diligently describes the whole room in the chapter with sufficient detail of the objects on show. The arrangement of furniture and items displayed is certainly pretty, and this time they show a more feminine style of careful and purposeful arrangement. The drawing-room as a whole is expressed respectfully by the narrator with the use of a single word – “cheerful” (Gaskell 91). Despite this politeness of approval, Lorna Huett explains in “‘Cranford’ in the Context of ‘Household Words,’” that Mrs Jamieson’s inert *objets de vertu* are intended by Gaskell to contrast with the far more emotionally charged items of Miss Matty and the other villagers (47). The lack of personal authenticity linked to the items in the room also contrasts with the books in Mr Holbrook’s counting-house. Thus, one is shown, or is meant to be shown, that showcasing a room full of pretty objects is not enough to create a homely effect.

Collecting beautiful objects is also a part of cottageware (for there is not one definitive rule or style to follow). Considering Jeni Calder’s claim that household ornaments in the Victorian period “could protect as well as enhance and reassure” (33), it seems hardly surprising, therefore, that collecting items to clutter the house should also be part of this Aesthetic. However, the main idea should be to create a “safe and cosy” environment within (36). It seems that Mary’s perspective mostly aligns with this aesthetic choice. Mrs Jamieson’s drawing-room is a delightful curiosity to her, but the narrator can also sense its museum-like inertia. In reference to museums, Huett also argues that Mrs Jamieson’s collection is evidence that the novel participated in a topical debate at the time regarding the commodifying effect of the Great Exhibition and “the spiritual emptiness of mass-produced goods” (48). It is an interesting historic detail that, though likely to be missed by the casual reader, shows how *Cranford* sought

to address similar topics to those discussed in cottagecore, namely views on commodity culture and commercial capitalism. On reflection, reading the novel is in many ways like walking around a living museum, as though one were visiting Beamish in Durham, England, or Kulturen in Lund, Sweden. Huett argues, similarly, that the very form of *Cranford*, like *Household Words*, echoes that of the Exhibition, highlighting how the novel “is dominated by possessions and collections” (37).

Also noting the influence of the Great Exhibition on *Cranford*, Tim Dolin’s essay “‘Cranford’ and the Victorian Collection,” inquires whether collecting differed between the sexes as it did with classes and races, and discusses the distinction in Victorian middle-class culture “between the amateur naturalist and the amateur collector” (186). Dolin states that the main distinction was gendered, with women’s collecting signifying their domesticity and general lack of employment, compared with men’s collecting, to which a more professional and more purposeful significance was traditionally ascribed (188).¹³ His example of the Victorian fashion for collecting natural items such as sea shells or ferns, along with his assessment of the female collection as being virtually invisible as a cultural pursuit (186, 188), has become somewhat evocative of a film from 2020 — *Ammonite*, directed by Francis Lee, a production which corresponds on a number of levels with the cottagecore aesthetic. The film, set in the 1840s on the Dorset coast, which is based on the life of British palaeontologist Mary Anning, rather illustrates Dolin’s point that women’s collecting was not taken particularly seriously, with even her finding of the *Ichthyosaurus* fossil displayed in the British Museum being left completely un-credited by the scientific community.¹⁴ Apart from citing instances of the female collection in *Cranford*, such as clothes, letters, and flowers, Dolin argues that the novel is itself arranged like a collection of cards, such as those found on Mrs Jamieson’s table (193). In other words, according to Dolin, both the novel and its structure are like the female collection: insular, gender-exclusive (mostly), non-linear, and object-oriented.¹⁵

On this very topic of objects shaping literary form, an additional comparison to the Victorian phenomenon of collecting can be made with the recent trend of “mood boards,” a virtual form of collecting and arranging objects, which is popular among cottagecore followers on Instagram. Mood boards are digital collages, which usually combine thematically-oriented images, text and design patterns, and other miscellany. The Instagram user lost.

¹³ Roger Hamley, one of the main characters of Gaskell’s final novel *Wives and Daughters*, is an example of the male naturalist collector. It is said that the character was based on Charles Darwin, to whom Gaskell was a cousin (Debrabant 15; Litvack 729).

¹⁴ This sombre moment set in the British Museum is the film’s final scene (2020).

¹⁵ Also echoing the view of Talia Shaffer, Julia Clarke posits a similar argument to Dolin’s, describing the novel “as a kind of patchwork artefact” (49).

art.of creates mood boards with literary allusions, often seasonal and thematic, with possible anachronisms (see Figure 3). In similarity to Dolin's theory on Gaskell's arrangement of the Cranford stories, the Instagrammer also uses the boards to experiment with episodes of their own literary fiction (see Figures 4 and 5). The creator uses a number of hashtags on their posts, notably #cottagecoremoodboard. Mood boards show how cottagecore functions in the digital world, showing also how the Aesthetic differentiates itself from similarly nostalgic movements of the past. While mood boards could be compared to Victorian scrapbooks with its snippets, pressed flowers, or other keepsakes,¹⁶ the collection of images on a content creator's page could also be compared to such Victorian magazines as *Harper's Bazaar*, as cited by Dolin (190). Thus, in view of Dolin's suggestion that the female collection had been marginalised to the private space, and, as a result, was rendered valueless and trifling, mood boards, and social media in general, appear to have modernised the female collection, bringing a once private sphere into the global, public domain, where its value can be more fully appreciated.^{17,18}

Cottagecore ethics: pretence, performance, and playfulness in *Cranford*

Other ways in which *Cranford* embodies the cottagecore aesthetic can be found in the ongoing pretence and performance of its characters and the overall sense of playfulness in its stories. What is noticeable, even from the start of the novel, is that many characters are pretending to a different set of domestic circumstances, imagining themselves to be better off financially than they actually are (or *vice versa* even). The Cranfordian characters may also be masquerading in other ways. Firstly, as suggested by Emma Karin Brandin in "Domestic Performance and Comedy in 'Cranford' and 'Wives and Daughters'," some female characters may only be acting as the feminine type in order to accord with the dictates of society (30–31).

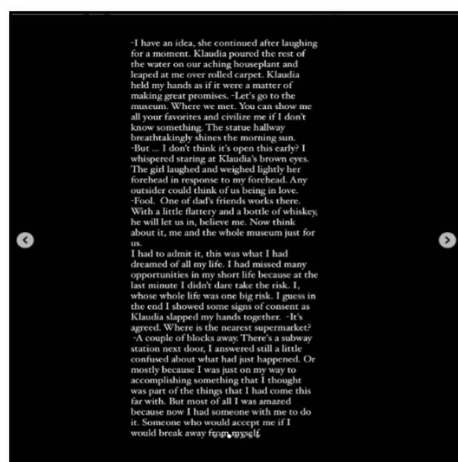
¹⁶ In *Cranford* there are a couple of references to the practice of pressing flowers into books for preservation, which, as Mary informs us at the beginning of Chapter Three, is known as "Hortus Siccus" when the flowers are presented as a collection (Gaskell 31). Miss Matty can also be seen pressing flowers into her family Bible in the third episode of the televised series (2007).

¹⁷ Mood boards can be used in professional design to help pitch an idea to clients and to convey an overall idea to a designer.

¹⁸ In the accompanying description on the original Instagram post from Winter 2021, the user lost.art.of added the epigrammatic title "'tis the damn season" (in lower case), which is a song from the 2020 album *Evermore* by the American singer-songwriter Taylor Swift. The album, written in quarantine during the COVID-19 pandemic, was actually inspired by escapist, cottagecore themes. The intertextual reference to this song in the title of the Instagram post is an example of cottagecore's compatibility with anachronistic styles of pastiche.



Figure 3. Instagram mood board image by lost.art.of – “’tis the damn season,” showing a Victorian, Christmas-themed mood board ([instagram.com/lost.art.of/](https://www.instagram.com/lost.art.of/))



Figures 4 and 5. Instagram mood board image with quotation (4) and textual image (5) (screenshots) by lost.art.of – “Museum Date with Klaudia,” showing photographic objects complementing literary experimentation ([instagram.com/p/CRdk-HWHRUi/?hl=en](https://www.instagram.com/p/CRdk-HWHRUi/?hl=en))

Cottagecore ethics: pretence, performance, and playfulness in *Cranford*

Other ways in which *Cranford* embodies the cottagecore aesthetic can be found in the ongoing pretence and performance of its characters and the overall sense of playfulness in its stories. What is noticeable, even from the start of the novel, is that many characters are pretending to a different set of domestic circumstances, imagining themselves to be better off financially than they actually are (or *vice versa* even). The Cranfordian characters may also be masquerading in other ways. Firstly, as suggested by Emma Karin Brandin in “Domestic Performance and Comedy in ‘Cranford’ and ‘Wives and Daughters,’” some female characters may only be acting as the feminine type in order to accord with the dictates of society (30–31). Secondly, they are not only imitating aristocracy by virtue of being so genteel but are, as Boris Knezevic states, “emulating the national paradigm of gentility” (412), which means that they are copying a cultural model set by the Victorian middle-class. Thirdly, it could also be said that they are pretending to an older lifestyle of an age since passed, where sedan chairs or strict rules on visiting times would once have seen more common usage. Therefore, the village of Cranford itself may also be comparable to a living museum as outside visitors like Mary and Dr Frank Harrison (as featured in the televised series) must adjust immediately on arrival to the somewhat arcane and dated Cranfordian codes.¹⁹

Politeness and cordiality at home

If the genteel life that *Cranford* critiques is socially constructed, then a rather unnatural one it probably is. What lends the novel its comedic charm is the way the characters try to navigate these codes of conformity (Brandin 31), but there is also the way in which they try to maintain what Natalie Meir refers to as “the *fiction* of gentility” (2). Comparing *Cranford*, in part, to women’s instructional handbooks, Meir hypothesises that this genre of publication forms a model text wherefrom the novel transgresses, observing that “the rules for social behavior are constantly on the verge of being broken” (6). Thus, Meir pays credit to the subtle humour that underlies Gaskell’s narrative. Among some oft-quoted and memorable passages from the novel, there is a rather simple intervention of the televised series

¹⁹ The five-part BBC television adaptation of *Cranford* from 2007 included some episodes and characters from Gaskell’s *Mr. Harrison’s Confessions* (1851), *My Lady Ludlow* (1859), and “The Last Generation in England” (1849). In 2009, the BBC released a Christmas special – *Return to Cranford*, which included additional elements adapted from *The Moorland Cottage* (1850) as well as her very short follow-up episode to the Cranford stories – *The Cage at Cranford*, which was published in Dickens’ periodical *All Year Round* in 1863.

that perfectly displays this transgressive style of humour, the example of which is when the servant Martha repeatedly forgets to add the word 'Madam' to the end of her sentences when making official announcements to Miss Jenkyns. The humour is drawn from the repeated corrections of the frustrated mistress, who is desperately trying to uphold the conventions that would typically be observed in a proper genteel household (Cranford, 2007). In this example, Martha is literally forgetting her lines on entering the scene as though it were a staged performance or a dress rehearsal.²⁰ In a role similar to Doctor Harrison's, she is effectively doubling for the modern audience in the sense that she is quickly trying to grapple with an unfamiliar or an unnatural set of rules. On reflection, it is this very struggle of conformity for certain characters that can make the novel more relatable for the modern cottagecore reader, a proposed readership of whom may be wishing to emulate or reproduce, or simply experience or educate themselves on certain aspects of a past culture.

Of course, in cottagecore, there is no such need to conform to any normative or gendered conventions of a past or present age. Yet, people might simply wish to pretend to a more genteel lifestyle, nonetheless, either for performative reasons, such as play-acting, or perhaps for the purposes of simply creating a more cordial ambience within the home. Because gentility was an imitation of aristocratic behavioural codes, the culture included a strict code of etiquette (a system of manners). On first impressions, pretending to appear more aristocratic might not seem particularly relevant to the humble and cosy cottagecore fantasy, but employing some good manners and decorum does fit with the gentle and friendly image that has become synonymous with the idyllic, English country-cottage lifestyle. Indeed, it might be one of the reasons why Regency novels are also sometimes recommended in lists of cottagecore media.²¹ After all, when one thinks today of quaint cottage communities, one might also picture the rural texts of Gaskell or Jane Austen, where aspects of politeness and propriety seem to be inextricably linked.

Domestic performance

At its heart, *Cranford* is a playful novel. As Jenny Uglow says: "We are not asked, as we are with Gaskell's serious novels, to think as we read" (288). In this sense, the novel befits cottagecore's escapist mood. Considering that the cottage ideal is "a bit of a fantasy for most of us" (Jones 200),

²⁰ In "Domestic Performance and Comedy in 'Cranford' and 'Wives and Daughters,'" Emma Brandin provides an example from the novel of what she refers to as "theatrical interconnections between novelistic domestic comedy and stage comedy" (36).

²¹ A few possible reasons to explain why Regency novels are popularised in the cottagecore community are presented in my article "Gentleness and Gentility in Cottagecore and 'Cranford!'"

many cottagecore followers will gravitate more to the fairytale side of the Aesthetic, adding elements of fairycore or Dark Academia (Hatrick 2020) to their cottage-themed reveries (see Figure 6). Alternatively, playing with the Aesthetic can simply be about making one's life appear more salubrious (see Figure 7). This aspect helps to demonstrate the role played by social media, wherein people prefer to present a particular version of themselves, a practice which, on platforms such as Instagram, could be framed around a chosen Aesthetic, for example, cottagecore or Academia.

A similar form of pretence that is commonly referred to as 'keeping up appearances' becomes commonplace in *Cranford* (albeit undertaken in the name of gentility rather than social media). An oft-referenced example of this can be found in the novel's opening chapter, in a light-hearted scene where Mrs Forrester hosts a respectable tea-party at her home:

When Mrs Forrester, for instance, gave a party in her baby-house of a dwelling, and the little maiden disturbed the ladies on the sofa by a request that she might get the tea-tray out from underneath, 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 housekeeper and steward, instead of the one little charity-school maiden, whose short ruddy arms could never have been strong enough to carry the tray upstairs, if she had not been assisted in private by her mistress, who now sat in state, pretending not to know what cakes were sent up, though she knew, and we knew, and she knew that we knew, and we knew that she knew that we knew, she had been busy all the morning making tea-bread and sponge-cakes. (Gaskell 7)



Figure 6. Instagram image (screenshot) captured from cottage.fairy.core, showing a mixture of cottagecore and fairycore elements ([instagram.com/p/CNaIa5WLlou/](https://www.instagram.com/p/CNaIa5WLlou/))



Figure 7. Tumblr image shared by Heidi's Cottage (@happyheidi), showing a mixture of cosiness and salubrity in the cottagecore aesthetic (happyheidi.tumblr.com/page/12)

Apart from just being a classic example of keeping up appearances, part of the comedy is that the ladies are united in this playful deception. Naturally, they revel in their perceived salubrity, but this collective concealment of Mrs Forrester's relative poverty is done as a charitable act, with the aim to make the host feel better about her domestic circumstances. The scene illustrates a statement made earlier by Mary that "though some might be poor, we were all aristocratic," adding that "Cranfordians had that kindly *esprit de corps* which made them overlook all deficiencies in success when some among them tried to conceal their poverty" (Gaskell 7). In addition to the basic pretence — presenting to others a more blissful image of social and domestic life — the Cranford community's eleemosynary acts and their general ethos of kindness are closely aligned with cottagecore's idealised image of the closely-knit country village.

Further to the scene above, what might also appeal to cottagecore followers is simply the innocent and child-like charm of make-believe, which sits ever on the surface of Gaskell's text, often hiding what could be seen as a succession of rather dour circumstances. The tea-party scene at Mrs Forrester's, as portrayed by Mary, could be read in a similar light to moments from Frances Hodgson Burnett's novels, such as when Becky the scullery maid, in *A Little Princess*, uses a mug from the washstand as a substitute for what she would prefer to imagine as a proper teacup (152). In the Cranford scene, all the ladies at the tea party know that Mrs Forrester has assisted in the making and preparing of the cakes *et cetera*, but they, including the host, would like to imagine that it was all prepared in secret, as though they were dining at an event of grander proportions, such as the one depicted later in the novel when they are invited to the house of Mrs Jamieson for more or less the same purpose.²² The pretence is not only a result of genteel practice and sororal charity, but also results from one's imagination to make a more positive version of daily life in what can often seem to be a cruel and unforgiving world. A similar assessment is reached by Caroline Huber while discussing the somewhat uncommon levels of kindness in the Cranford village, stating that, in a community such as this, "imagination and feeling are recognized for their power to transcend daily life" (42).

Naturally, when it comes to episodes of tea-making as a momentary centrepiece of the narrative almost any classic novel is going to befit the cottagecore mood (at least briefly), whether or not the setting is specifically rural or 'cottagey.' Indeed, the above scene could evoke any number of other literary domestic scenes, ranging from the absurdity of the mad tea party in *Alice in Wonderland* to the post-marital, domestic chaos witnessed in *David Copperfield*. As made clear by his magazine *Household*

²² Mrs Jamieson's tea party, to which the ladies of Cranford are invited, is the main event of Chapter Eight — "Your Ladyship."

Words, Dickens (the author of the latter of these two texts), clearly took interest in the domestic space, with the character of Dora Spenlow, the wife of David Copperfield, being duly expected to fulfil the role of the “angel of the house,” simply by virtue of being a woman.²³ Rather comically, however, the reality that unfolds becomes something else entirely.²⁴ Dickens was making fun of the fact that not all women are actually suited to the domestic space, which is a matter of fact that Emma Brandin says was also highlighted by Gaskell in *Cranford*, albeit with the employment of a more “subtle comedic strategy” (33). Brandin argues that the female characters in *Cranford* are merely acting out their normative feminine domestic roles, which, inevitably, due to the impossible constraints on the Victorian feminine ideal, results in repeated comic failure (32). In this light, the novel develops a surprisingly modern characteristic as it recognises the domestic realm as a space wherein one tends to perform traditionally gendered roles in semi-ritualistic fashion.

This is a feature of the novel that might also correlate with Wodzińska’s view on the topic of space and gender in cottagecore, which she conceives as “a space where women and gender-nonconforming people can experiment with signifiers of traditional femininity with no strings attached and no consequences” (2021). While the industrial city of Drumble signifies masculinity and the male domain, *Cranford* signifies femininity and the female domain (due in no small part to its preponderance of the female sex). It is very much a domestic novel, and thus, a novel of intimacy and privacy within certain groups and social circles. Further to the topic of gendered roles, it should also be noted that *Cranford* is not limited to female domestic performers, for there is the backstory of Peter Jenkyns, the brother of Miss Matty, who, after mocking his other sister’s purity through cross-dressing and impersonation, runs away from home for fear of castigation.²⁵ There is also Captain Brown who, by performing in an unexpectedly courteous manner at Miss Jenkyns’ party “by waiting on empty cups and bread-and-butterless ladies” (Gaskell 12), assumes a more genteel and subservient role than would be anticipated for his character outside the present space. These examples show a range of roles being performed theatrically, where normative, gender stereotypes and the performative nature of domesticity are further highlighted and transgressed.

²³ A more thorough examination of the Victorian domestic angel – as represented in *David Copperfield* as well as in *Cranford* – can be found in the second part of the essay “Nobody’s Angels: Domestic Ideology and Middle-Class Women in the Victorian Novel” by Elizabeth Langland (298–301).

²⁴ The passage displaying Dora’s lack of skill in female domestic affairs comes in Chapter Forty-four – “Our Housekeeping”: “By and by she made tea for us; which it was so pretty to see her do, as if she was busying herself with a set of doll’s tea-things, that I was not particular about the quality of the beverage” (Dickens 626).

²⁵ Peter’s back-story is the topic of Chapter Six – “Poor Peter.”

By appearing in what is established in the novel as the female, domestic space, male subjects present the author with further opportunities for exploring the relation between the private space and gendered performativity. Taking an example from another text already established as a cottagecore novel, a similar dynamic operates in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* when Laurie becomes an honorary member of The Pickwick Club, albeit in spite of protestations from Meg and Amy, who wish for their "ladies' club" to remain "private and proper" (99).²⁶ One irony of that particular scene is that, although Amy refers to the club as being strictly for ladies (despite the fact that they are mostly too young to qualify as even that), the March sisters are role-playing as gentlemen and have chosen to name themselves after characters from Dickens' *The Pickwick Papers*, which, as an additional irony (for this thesis), is the very same novel cited in *Cranford* that Captain Brown presents at Miss Jenkyns' tea party. These examples from *Cranford* and other texts from the period suggest that there is a natural quality of the domestic and private space that lends itself to this form of role-playing experimentation (whether or not the performance is then recognised as being distinctly feminine). Thus, Gaskell's utilisation of both the provincial town's geographical isolation and the privacy afforded by the cottage space not only raises questions of gender normativity in a manner suitably subtle for its time but creates a realistic picture of domesticity that further aligns with the modern principles of the cottagecore movement.

"Elegant economy" in cottagecore and *Cranford*

With thriftiness and sustainability being recognisable parts of the traditional cottage life, many cottagecore followers are interested in saving materials for re-using or re-purposing. These practices may not be essential parts of living the cottagecore dream but they do form part of its ethic, nonetheless. As mentioned previously, collecting or refashioning objects to use for home décor is also part of the cottagecore trend. The YouTuber *Dress Me Up Scotty*, whose channel has a noticeable bias towards cottagecore, has a number of videos on "thrifting," the hobby of which is to visit "thrift stores" with the aim of purchasing second-hand items with which to adorn the home (or even oneself).²⁷ Although a large proportion of the items collected and displayed in the user's videos is basically historic-looking clutter, the content creator also proposes converting old, second-hand objects into something useful and new.

²⁶ The numerous film adaptations of *Little Women*, including the most recent from 2019, are recommended by Ramona Jones in her chapter on cottagecore culture (177).

²⁷ www.youtube.com/@DressMeUpScotty/videos.

In *Cranford*, the actual word ‘thrift’ does not appear,²⁸ but such practices as saving and re-purposing are also central to the local Cranfordian ethic. The memorable term that Mary uses in the opening chapter is “elegant economy,” with her definition of the term being thus: “There [in Cranford], economy was always ‘elegant,’ and money-spending always ‘vulgar and ostentatious’; a sort of sour-grapeism which made us very peaceful and satisfied” (8). To clarify, the concept that spending money or discussing one’s financial affairs or any other pecuniary matters was to be considered vulgar was all part of the genteel code (as well as being, traditionally, a rather taboo topic for the British). Yet, this aspect of gentility still aligns with cottagecore’s main principles, even if the ethical principles behind this cottage-style economy in today’s world are likely to gravitate more around environmental issues and the push for a “green economy.” Further regarding the topic of economy, James Mulvihill, in the essay “Economies of Living in Mrs. Gaskell’s ‘Cranford,’” explains that the word originally referred merely to household management, before gradually broadening the scope of its meaning to reference larger communities and thence to ever wider, global affairs of industry and production (337-338). Terence Wright explains that this home management or “*domestic economy*” concerns the running of a home and how it “governs itself as a social unit,” but also identifies a third type of economy in *Cranford* — ‘thrift,’ which he claims is what is being expressed in the use of the term ‘elegant economy’ (129). There are various moments in the novel that reference or depict such practices, with one of the many humorous examples coming from Mary’s second visit to Cranford in Chapter Two:

Everybody lived in the same house, and wore pretty nearly the same well-preserved, old-fashioned clothes. The greatest event was, that Miss Jenkyns had purchased a new carpet for the drawing-room. Oh, the busy work Miss Matty and I had in chasing the sunbeams, as they fell in an afternoon right down on this carpet through the blindless window! We spread newspapers over the places and sat down to our book or our work; and, lo! in a quarter of an hour the sun had moved, and was blazing away on a fresh spot; and down again we went on our knees to alter the position of the newspapers. (Gaskell 20)

Preservation is a key theme in this passage. It is not necessarily understood that they are unable to afford new clothes, but simply that they do well in preserving the ones that they already have. The same philosophy seems to also have been imparted on the new carpet. In one sense, this is another example of keeping up appearances, but it is also a case of employing basic household economics.

²⁸ The word ‘thrifty’ does appear in the novel *Wives and Daughters*, however.

Wax candles, an item synonymous with many online aesthetics (not least those associated with old cottages), lends a second example of thrift economy being driven by the need to maintain genteel appearances. In Chapter Five — “Old Letters,” Mary explains that Miss Matty is reluctant to keep her candles lit (when there are no visitors that is), even to the point where Mary is encouraged to finish stitching her wristbands in the dark. Miss Matty’s attempts to ever keep two candles at even-lengths in the event of any unexpected guests is further evidence of the awkward balance between economy and social performance. For if a guest were to notice the candles being uneven, it would be a clear sign that the host had been burning only one candle at a time, thus unintentionally revealing their apparent poverty. While this example of maintaining elegance in economy is deliberately absurd, it shows a genteel form of cottage-style economy being conveyed by Gaskell in a humorously clever manner that can be enjoyable for modern readers who are interested in such historical peculiarities.

On reflection, the concept of elegant economy almost manages to encapsulate this entire cottagecore reading of *Cranford*. Similarities between the use of this term in the novel and the movement’s anti-capitalist values and its general appreciation for politeness are rather self-evident, even in the very wording of the phrase itself. The connection this notion has to home-made crafts and to the aesthetics of interior design is also fairly noticeable. As shown (at least, in the novel), the practice of elegant economy can lead to semi-ritualistic domestic performances, make-believe, and the ongoing act of keeping-up appearances, which, though enacted in cottagecore fantasies for different reasons, still form parts of the online community’s general ethos. To a certain degree, the term also seems to be epitomised by the childlike innocence displayed by Miss Matty in her attitudes towards money, which is not to say blindly that she is altogether foolish with her finances either, for her innocence is mostly one of probity. She also retains a steadfast belief in communal charity, which is generously returned to her close to the novel’s end. Needless to say, for better or worse, these character traits will almost certainly be relatable qualities to those willing to identify themselves as participant members of the cottagecore community.²⁹

²⁹ In Chapter Thirteen — “Stopped Payment,” Miss Matty loses her income of shares when the Town and Country bank crashes, causing her to sell her possessions. In Chapter Fourteen — “Friends in Need,” Mary Smith comes to her aid by suggesting the idea of selling tea to earn a living. A charitable agreement is then made amongst her friends to pay a proportion of Miss Matty’s annual rent, who is now to live as a tenant in the same house that her servant Martha and newly-wedded husband Jem have since purchased.

Conclusion

While *Cranford* may not be the most salient novel for using as an example of a proposed ‘cottagecore text,’ the more subtle themes it plays with, such as letter-writing craft or domestic performativity, allows for a more in-depth analysis of the overall cottage life aesthetic. Thus, this ‘cottagecore reading’ showcases the applicability of contemporary nostalgia-based aesthetics as versatile frameworks for studying and analysing classic literary works. Such an approach includes the study of both broad and nuanced themes, fostering modern interests in historically-diminutive topics with particular foci on materiality.

In highlighting cultural differences between past and present, a number of parallels can be noted, such as the similarity in people’s use of social-media and the motivations behind the practice of certain genteel customs, both of which can be seen as tools for the improvement of social mobility. This also draws attention to the iInternet’s role within the cottagecore aesthetic (another one of its apparent contradictions). Connections to the past have also been found regarding issues of gender, having shown that, partly thanks to cottagecore and internet culture, crafts once regarded as strictly feminine and female, have become less marginalised, and thus, more recognised, and more valued.

By using this rural text as a basis for a systematic study of the Aesthetic, the thesis has also confronted the question of how to determine when a cultural or literary text can be labelled as “cottagecore,” which may be useful for future researchers of modern aesthetics. Moreover, this close reading analysis has sought to determine whether a text can be classified as cottagecore without having the cottage as its central theme. This cottagecore reading of *Cranford* concludes that abstract concepts such as politeness, cordiality, humour, attentions to craft, and other homely values like thrift can be just as indicative of the overall Aesthetic as the more concrete visual motifs of cottages and gardens, and picturesque rural landscapes.

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