

# An Analysis of the Role of the Narrator in *Cranford*: The Transition from “I” to “We”

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**Abstract:** Mrs. Gaskell carried an excellent reputation in the Victorian era for her quality works in depicting the many strata of society and social changes <sup>[1]</sup>. Among her classic works, *Cranford* is said to be the only book that she would reread again in her aged years <sup>[2]</sup>. The unique standing of the novel may be ascribed to its careful use of the narrative strategy, specifically the role of the narrator. However, most of the studies on the narrator focus on the feminist point of view, and very few are concerned with the changes of the narrative voice between “I” and “we.” This paper attempts to explain the purpose of this transition by analyzing the role of the narrator and her interactions with other characters. It is concluded that the change of narrative voice is an illustration of the transition of the narrator’s role and emotion, which evokes the readers’ emotional response and helps them better understand one of the themes – feminist utopia. This paper is divided into three sections. The first section looks at the social milieu of the novel. The second section discusses two major roles of the narrator, Mary Smith as a reporter and a mediator, respectively. The third section talks about the narrator’s growth from a minor character to a leading participant, and the implied theme is discussed as well.

**Keywords:** Victorian literature; Gaskell; *Cranford*; Narrative strategy

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## 1. Social milieu of *Cranford*

*Cranford* was published in 1853, by the time the Industrial Revolution ended in England <sup>[3]</sup>. The prototype of the small village of Cranford is Knutsford, a small town in England where Mrs. Gaskell was brought up. In the story, Cranford is the neighbor of a commercial town Drumble, where the narrator Mary Smith lives, and it is modeled on Manchester. The story is told from the first-person point of view of the narrator, Mary Smith. She often oscillates between Cranford and Drumble. From chapter one, it is discovered that the narratees are Londoners, or more generally, middle-class families in the cities <sup>[4]</sup>. The town is made up of women who are either old spinsters or widows of aristocratic rank. There is no evident conflict throughout the story, as the plot is developed around mundane activities, such as holding parties and playing cards among local people <sup>[5]</sup>. Mary Smith “shuttles in and out of Cranford, also interspersed with other major female characters in the narrative voice” <sup>[6]</sup>. Therefore, she is both an insider and outsider to the Cranford community, “a stance that allows her to know firsthand and comment wryly on its residents’ habits and eccentricities” <sup>[7]</sup>. This dictates her two distinct roles. In the following section, past studies concerning the narrative strategy and the role of the narrator will be examined.

## 2. Literature review

Several studies have been devoted to analyzing the narrative strategy in *Cranford*. In 2005, Wei pointed

out that the narrative voice in the story is characterized by femininity, and the plot is a harsh critique of male hegemony. Some of these feminist views come directly from the author's voice, but most of them are expressed through the characters' discourses, such as in the daily dialogues among the female friends. The narrative voice in Mrs. Gaskell's "Cranford Town" reflects not only the speaker's femininity and female authority (including feminine style, tone, and value), but also the interweaving of individual and collective narrative voices <sup>[8]</sup>. The purpose of adopting the perspective of a female narrator is to construct the entire discourse system through the retelling of the letters, stories, dialogues, and small talk of women in Cranford. Through this approach, the narrator compares the town of Cranford to Drumble, explaining the town's "rules and disciplines, the values of the people, as well as the anecdotes and oddities of the town." The authority of a voice expressing a certain value is reinforced through the narrator. Thus, individual narrative voices share the collective sentiments and evaluations of Cranford. In an essay that discusses the narrative dynamics of *Cranford*, Chen pointed out that Mary Smith could not fully agree with the way of life in Cranford <sup>[9]</sup>. In Mary Smith's description, Cranford was like a distant dream, a utopian world for women, where women in this town are pursuing common goals, such as happiness. However, their repression of desires, rejection, and fear of men can be seen as a defense mechanism that conveys the anxiety of Victorian women. In addition, Xia also agreed that Cranford is one of the utopian feminist novels, which intends to reflect feminist ideas with a utopian spirit and displays concerns for the future of women and human beings <sup>[5]</sup>. In any typical utopian narrative, there is always an outsider who acts as a mediator of textual expression; this person stumbles across the community and then becomes its ethnographer and cultural advocate. In *Cranford*, the outsider, documenter, and cultural advocate is Mary Smith – the story's narrator. According to Xia, Mary Smith is like an anthropologist, being invited into a tribe or community, but becomes overwhelmed in writing a dissertation to reveal all the laws of that community and its secrets <sup>[5]</sup>. It is the unique nature of Mary's identity that gives her the unique narrative authority, where she can objectively examine the customs of Cranford from an outsider's point of view. Meanwhile, Mrs. Gaskell's construction of a feminist utopia in her novel enables women who were originally scattered among men to establish their own community in Cranford. When men are absent, women become dependent on each other, thereby creating the narrative voice of "we." In the following section, the dual role of the narrator will be elaborated by analyzing the difference in adopting the voice of "I" and "we."

### 3. The dual role of the narrator

"The voice and focus of the narrator shape what we know and care about as the plot unfolds, and they make us feel close to or distant from certain characters <sup>[10]</sup>." In relationship to the readership, a narrator influences both the access to information and the emotion of the readers.

Mary Smith frequently visits Cranford when they need her or when she realizes that they are in need of her help. In this sense, Mary Smith is an outsider. This enables her to stand outside the community. Therefore, in terms of the information readers acquire, the role of the narrator can be equated with an objective reporter – a reporter in introducing the codes of conduct and the eccentricities of each individual in *Cranford*. It is plausible that the impact of industrialization should touch Cranford. However, unlike other cities and towns in Victorian England, Cranford is depicted as a place where people remain living a traditional lifestyle. In addition, everybody has their own ways of economy <sup>[11]</sup>. For example, in chapter five, the narrator mentioned that Miss Matty often does knitting jobs in the dark to save candles. This eccentricity makes Mary Smith suffer from sitting in the room idly and doing nothing. She said, "I remember this candle economy particularly annoyed me. I had been very much tired of my compulsory 'blind man's holiday,' especially as Miss Matty had fallen asleep, and I did not like to stir the fire and run

the risk of awakening her.”<sup>[12]</sup>. From this extract, it can be seen that even if they are friends, there is a contradiction between Mary and Matty as a result of different lifestyles, living in a city and a suburban area. The use of “I” in the narration suggests the distance between them, yet it creates a sense of humor.

In terms of the emotion imparted to the readers, as a reporter, the narrator flaunts a mildly ironic tone toward Cranford as a place. Although the title of chapter one is “Our Society,” the narrative voice is basically “I”; this creates the distance between the narrator and other characters, as well as the events. In some places, the narrator even addresses the readers directly. For example, when describing the local people’s dressing style, the narrator said, “I can testify to a magnificent family red silk umbrella, under which a gentle little spinster, left alone of many brothers and sisters, used to patter to church on rainy days. Have you any red silk umbrellas in London?”. The implied meaning of the extract is that the narrator knows Londoners do not use old-fashioned red silk umbrellas anymore, neither does she. Through the acumen shared by the readers and the narrator, Mary Smith identifies with the readers.

The purpose of such arrangement in narration is to invite the readers to regard the characters and stories in the novel in a condescending way just as the narrator herself does. In this way, the ironic or humorous effect is strengthened. In other words, the tension between tradition and modernity becomes animated. Meanwhile, the narrator’s initial critical attitude toward Cranfordians living in “elegant economy” is transmitted to the readers.

Since Mary Smith visits Cranford so frequently and often participates in their daily routines, she is undeniably an insider to the community as well. Therefore, Mary Smith is also viewed as a mediator of Cranford. Considering that Mary is younger than other women in Cranford, she seems to act like the daughter of her old friends. In the novel, we know that Mary has a father who is busy with business, yet we know nothing of her mother. In this sense, Cranford merely transcends the function of a visiting place and is tinged with the sense of being her hometown as well. This is in accordance with Gillooly’s view, in which she thinks that Mary is a “helpful and silent companion to the old women she visits<sup>[13]</sup>”. She is always ready to assist in their chores or bring mental support and comfort to them, especially to Miss Matty. For example, in chapter four, after Mary Smith and Miss Matty visited Mr. Holbrook together, she asks Martha to look after Matty. This implies that Mary feels responsible to visit Matilda and look after her if she is not well. This scene happens after Mary Smith comes to know of her love affair. She is full of compassion for Miss Matty, yet she knows the importance of pretending not knowing anything about it. The purpose is to keep her friend’s dignity and protect her vulnerable heart. Only when the narrator is an insider, can the compassionate feeling be perceived so strongly and be transmitted to the readers.

Mary Smith is more than an objective and reliable reporter. Another advantage of the narrator as an insider is that she could fleet across different time spans. Through memory or by accident, she can connect the past with the present, thus presenting additional background experience of the main characters. For example, in the scenario of burning letters, the painful past of Matty’s parents and the reason she failed to get married are revealed through Mary Smith’s eyes. The narrator invites the readers to explore what had happened before alongside her, thereby creating a sense of suspense and making the plot more appealing to the readers. On the other hand, the readers also develop a sense of connection with Miss Matty throughout the unfolding of the entire narration.

The narrative voice “we” appears more frequently as the plot unfolds. In chapter 10, even when Miss Matty, Mary Smith, and Miss Pole are afraid of being robbed at night, they accepted the invitation to Mrs. Forrester’s gathering. In that situation, the narrator said, “We could all much better have declined this invitation, but we felt that it would not be quite kind to Mrs. Forrester, who would otherwise be left to a solitary retrospect of her not very happy or fortunate life.” Even being aware of the potential threat, they

still choose to accept the invitation. Although in previous chapters, Miss Pole is depicted as a lady who loves to gossip and brag about what she knows, the innate kindness of humanity is vividly displayed to readers through this scene. The use of “we” is distinct from the previous “I” not only in terms of narrative voice, but it carries a deeper meaning. As Susan Lanser contended, “Unlike authorial and personal voices, the communal mode seemed to be primarily a phenomenon of marginal or suppressed communities” [14]. The quotation suggests that the purpose of using “we” is to narrow the distance between Mary Smith and the other characters, thus she can identify with them and relate her compassion to readers. Meanwhile, in a novel that is full of characters trying to overthrow the traditional 19th century masculinity [15], Mary Smith is a surrogate of the Cranfordians, as she represents this underdeveloped community to articulate their beliefs and sense of values.

#### **4. The narrator as a leading participant**

Although Mary Smith stands behind the limelight and only observes their behavior from a distance, as the plot unfolds, she begins to conceive herself as part of the community, which has been elaborated on in previous chapters. The transition of the narrative voice from “I” to “we” reflects her change of attitude from criticism to tolerance and acceptance; yet her identification with the Cranfordians is not only embodied in her attitude, but also her actions. Especially in the last three chapters “Friends in Need,” “A Happy Return,” and “Peace to Cranford,” Mary Smith is seen to become a leading participant [16]. Her affection for Cranford reached its climax when she proposed the idea of managing a tea business to make a living and help Miss Matty resurface from bankruptcy. In addition, all the other women like Miss Pole and Mrs. Forrester donated their savings to help Miss Matty go through the hardship. Furthermore, Mary Smith makes a great contribution to the development of the plot, in that she writes a secret letter to the man whom she suspects might be Miss Matty’s lost brother, Peter. It is on account of the narrator’s actions that the ending leaves a pleasant tone. In the end, it is written, “Even since that day, there has been the old friendly sociability in Cranford society, which I am thankful for, because of my dear Miss Matty’s love of peace and kindness..., and I somehow think we are all of us better when she is near us” [12]. Binding these scenarios together, it is an agreement that Mary Smith has assimilated herself to Cranford and shows a growing loyalty to their doctrines of life.

#### **5. Conclusion**

Mary Smith is both a reporter and a mediator in the story. Throughout the novel, she develops from a minor character into a leading participant. The dual role of Mary Smith imparts various information and conveys different emotions to the readers, which help them better understand the theme of feminist utopia. That is to say, even if Cranford is subjected to the influence of industrialization, it remains an ideal region of peace and harmony for its inhabitants [17]. In this place, it is not polluted by the materialism prevailing in big cities, the turmoil caused by the pursuit of wealth is waning, people are more concerned with solidarity, and women would help each other when they are in trouble. In a nutshell, through the careful use of the narrative voice from “I” to “we,” the role of the narrator also changes, and it presents the author’s hope for an idealized society like Cranford in the Victorian era.

#### **Disclosure statement**

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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