

The pace of change  
as established early  
in gaskell's 'cranford'  
narrative



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

In Elizabeth Gaskell's "Our Society at Cranford," the residing women are a group heavily opposed to change. The men in this story exist as instigators of change, and as such, rarely last long in Cranford. The most adamant opposition to these figures of change is Miss Jenkyns. But, through the presence and subsequent death of Captain Brown, Miss Jenkyns becomes the character that undergoes the most significant change throughout the story.

In Miss Jenkyns' first extended interaction with Captain Brown, she immediately writes him off as a foolish man due to his enjoyment of Dickens' works. She argues that, "Still, perhaps, the author is young. Let him persevere, and who knows what he may become if he will take the great Doctor as his model?" (Longman 1438). Saying this highlights Miss Jenkyns' reverence for the past and the old way of doing things. She seems to believe progress is rooted in the replication of the great works of the past, almost emphasizing the type of slow pace she wants progress to take. If artists must always look to the past and base their works on the greatness that came before them, progress will be slow, if existent. But this is what Miss Jenkyns seems to want from her society. She likes the way life is in Cranford and does not want to see it turn into something less proper and refined. Change can be scary, especially for someone entrenched in their way of life. It should also be noted that the footnotes describe Mr. Johnson's *Rasselas* as "a serious and slow-paced philosophical work" while *Pickwick* is called "lively" (Longman 1438). This note acknowledges that popular opinion disagrees with Miss Jenkyns, but also highlights that different audiences may prefer different storytelling techniques. Miss Jenkyns apparently enjoys the slowness and possibly views it as an indicator of high society. Because

Dickens' work was more recent and more easily accessible for a less educated readership, Miss Jenkyns could simply be exercising an aristocratic perspective on the work. She very well may enjoy the liveliness of the *Pickwick Papers*, but feels it is too below her social standing to participate in. In this period where the aristocracy is falling away in the face of capitalism, it is clear that Miss Jenkyns views these technological and social advances as detrimental to society and her clinging to the literature of the past just exemplifies her inability to move forward.

This dislike of the new also extends into Miss Jenkyns' feelings about men. In this time, men were the primary ignition of change. Women could not vote or have particularly influential careers in England, whereas men had easier access to positions where they could enact change. This is also true on a smaller scale within Cranford. Captain Brown certainly has an impact on life in Cranford once he moves there, and the arrival of Major Gordon has a similar kind of upheaval within the community. Though Captain Brown becomes beloved by everyone else in Cranford, Miss Jenkyns "never got over what she called Captain Brown's disparaging remarks upon Dr. Johnson as a writer of light and agreeable fiction" (Longman 1439). The way she holds on to this grudge mirrors the way she holds onto the past: stubbornly, even when it becomes unreasonable. Her opinion of Captain Brown only changes with his death. Upon hearing the news of his death, she exclaimed, "I must go to those girls. God pardon me, if ever I have spoken contemptuously to the Captain!" which is another adverse reaction to change (Longman 1443). She feels something akin to regret or guilt, as though her stubbornness slowed down the process of her eventual

forgiveness of him. Because she was so unhurried in the progression of their relationship from bad to better, she was unable to make that progress at all. But conversely, the fact that Captain Brown was killed by a speeding train seems to point to the ideal that there is a danger to progressing too quickly. Their relationship emphasizes the need for a compromise or a happy medium. Progress must be made at a reasonable pace, so that things can still be accomplished, but not with the danger associated with breakneck speed.

With this compromise in mind, Miss Jenkyns takes a huge step in the name of change. In inviting Major Gordon to Cranford to see Miss Jessie, she breaks two of the larger unspoken rules in Cranford society. The first is having a man in Cranford at all and the second is having him come with the intention of marrying one of the women. Because all the residents of Cranford are unmarried women, this event is one of the more scandalous ones. As Miss Matty exclaims, "Deborah, there's a gentleman sitting in the drawing-room with his arm round Miss Jessie's waist!" Miss Jenkyns replies, "The most proper place in the world for his arm to be in. Go away, Matilda, and mind your own business" (Longman 1446-1447). Miss Matty's reaction represents that of the majority of the town, where they are still concerned with the sense of propriety and still have some shock when confronted with the presence of a man. The remarkable aspect is that Miss Jenkyns is taking the progressive position here. Earlier in the story, she could have easily been described as the anti-progress pillar in the community, but now she is not only allowing change, but inciting it. Only through empathy for personal loss was she able to make this progressive step. She knew that Miss Jessie was

distraught after the death of her father and sister and she wanted her to be happy. In spite of the fact that she believes progress happens too quickly and society should not be so fast to forget the benefits of the past, she orchestrates a progressive situation to brighten a friend's life. Miss Jenkyns allows progress when it is for the emotional betterment of someone she cares about.

At the end of the story, the reader sees that Miss Jenkyns has not made much further progress, at least in relation to her years-old literary dispute with Captain Brown. She is still reading Dr. Johnson and claiming it to be far superior to Dickens' works, but she has moved on to the Rambler. The Rambler was a periodical, which counters her previous argument against Captain Brown that she "consider[s] it vulgar, and below the dignity of literature, to publish in numbers" (Longman 1438). So while this progress is not groundbreaking by any means, it is nonetheless progress. This supports the idea that Miss Jenkyns is not opposed to progress as a whole, just the speed at which it occurs and changes her life. She makes changes and grows, albeit slowly, but she is still making progress.

Change is inevitable, but during the Industrial Revolution change was happening very quickly, which tended to upset the aristocracy. Miss Jenkyns is a symbol of this determined aristocracy. With her fight to preserve the old, she highlights the necessity of progress by seeming almost juvenile in her refusal to try new things. Her argument with Captain Brown paints her as a kind of silly older woman who is resistant to change simply because she is scared. But the progress she makes throughout the short story is

remarkable, especially when one considers just how adverse she is to <https://assignbuster.com/the-pace-of-change-as-established-early-in-gaskells-cranford-narrative/>

altering her world. The fact that she sets aside her personal fear and distress to help the daughter of a man she disliked a fair amount demonstrates that she is truly a kind person. The selfless act of inviting Major Gordon to her home exemplifies the idea that progress should be made for a reason. If a change will help a person live a better life, then Miss Jenkyns can appreciate it, but the concept of progress just for progress upsets her. While technological advances make certain aspects of life easier, one could also argue that without progress, Captain Brown may have lived longer. Ultimately, it appears that if progress is well thought out and purposefully intended to benefit someone, Miss Jenkyns supports it, while change just for change is not something that she deems necessary. It almost follows the proverbial wisdom of "If it's not broken, don't fix it," and situates Miss Jenkyns in a more progressive location than where she was at the beginning of the story.