Research-Based Extension:
Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Our Society at Cranford*

**Quick Review of the Interpretive Problem**
- Does it seem odd that Miss Jenkyns continually attacks the convictions and literary preferences of Captain Brown, a dead man?
- The fact is, the reader is never explicitly provided with an explanation as to why Miss Jenkyns acts the way she does.
- Therefore, Gaskell leaves the reader scratching his/her head while surrounded with interpretive possibilities.

**Generating Research Topics from Gaskell’s *Our Society at Cranford***
- Consider the time period in which the story was written (Romantic, Victorian, 20th Century), the essence of the interpretive problem, and your own critical response to the text. For example, the conflict between Captain Brown and Miss Jenkyns allows for numerous extension topics. Following the three aforementioned suggestions, I came up with:
  - Victorian gender issues
  - Victorian class issues
  - Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers*
  - Johnson, *Rasselas*

**Victorian Gender Issues**


In this review the author discusses a book which explores the lives of Victorian women on a multitude of levels. She clearly sheds light on numerous social components that were prevalent in shaping Victorian female life. Although this article is a review of a larger book (like most other articles in this bibliography) it still provides interesting information. For example, this article touches on the lives of unmarried Victorian women; this directly pertains to *Our Society at Cranford*.

**Textual Evidence Supporting Research Extension**
- “The Cranford ladies have only an occasional little quarrel, spirited out in a few peppery words and angry jerks of the head; just enough to prevent the even tenor of their lives from becoming too flat” (1523).
- “We had often rejoiced, in former days, that there was no gentleman to be attended to, and to find conversation for, at the card-parties” (1526).
In Addition…

- A more in-depth look at Victorian women may accomplish two things in this case. First of all, it may shed light on Elizabeth Gaskell’s motives and influences in writing her short story. Second of all, this resource can be used to possibly explain the interpretive problem. Why does Miss Jenkyns act the way she does? More information on female societal position might help to clear a few things up.

- If this source were to be used as secondary material, I would implement it to solidify claims about Victorian female attitudes, which are ostensible in Gaskell’s short story.


In this review Dror explores Victorian attitudes that pertain to body, mind, authority, social structure, gender, and science. The author continues to explore Victorian psychology under the scope of the ideal image of the Victorian body and makes clear that all of this occurred during a period of contested authority. Such a review would be beneficial to an extension because the specific focus of male/female conflict would be sufficiently broadened for a more in-depth study with regard to what may have been influences on Elizabeth Gaskell’s writing.

In Addition…

- As mentioned in the abstract, this review maintains an interesting focus on Victorian psychology, especially dealing with matters of the body and the mind.

- Using this as a secondary source would be helpful in an in-depth analysis on the actual relationship between Captain Brown and Miss Jenkyns. This source would aid in answering complex question (such as the interpretive problem).

Victorian Class Issues


This review presents information that may provide for an interesting research angle. The review defines the word “sage” which is essentially anyone who utilizes discourse for hegemonic purposes. The author expands on the critical study of gender politics in Victorian literature by emphasizing a patriarchal voice in the narrator, often exhibiting power. This would be an interesting approach in that it may be used to shed light on
Gaskell’s literary approach for *Our Society at Cranford*. For example, is Gaskell aware of this power struggle? Does her “society” serve to counter discursive hegemony?

**Textual Evidence Supporting Research Extension**
- “There were one or two consequences arising from this general but unacknowledged poverty, and this very much acknowledged gentility, which were not amiss, and which might be introduced into many circles of society to their great improvement” (1524).
- “We none of us spoke of money, because that subject savoured of commerce and trade, and though some might be poor, we were all aristocratic” (1524).

**In Addition…**
- This review presents a good opportunity to explore the role of language into the actual story. Since the review provides an explanation for more of a critical approach, it may be interesting to adopt the critical review and apply it for an extension.
- A specific extension based off of this review may include a focus on hegemony, narrative voice, narrative manipulation through linguistic means, etc. Another interesting extension would include an exploration of whether or not Gaskell was aware of discursive hegemony; authorial intention may also be an option. This would be a good critical/ literary theory source.


This review explores the issue between the Victorian middle class and the rise of the Victorian novel. The reviewer comments on the original author’s exploration of the term “gentleman,” suggesting that its meaning incurred a serious transformation during the changing times of the middle class. This specific article may shed light on the character relations found in *Our Society at Cranford*, but even more specifically, Gaskell’s characterization of Captain Brown.

**In Addition…**
- The citizens of Cranford are not very open about their finances. Economics played a great role in distinguishing the classes, but did you ever think it would have anything to do with the Victorian gentleman?
- This review provides information that may lead to an uncanny extension. For example, one may be able to track Victorian societal progression, in general, and place it next to Captain Brown by reinforcing it by points made in the article.

*The Pickwick Papers*


This article by Philip Rogers presents information for an interesting and comparative approach to an extension. The article essentially centers on investigating Mr. Pickwick’s innocence. However, much attention is focused on whether or not Dickens’s character was changed by his life experiences. This may provide for an interesting extension outside of Gaskell’s work, but might be more interesting if it is somehow connected with the effect (if he had one) Mr. Brown had on the Cranford ladies.

**Textual Evidence Supporting Research Extension**

- “Matilda, bring me my bonnet. I must go to those girls. God pardon me, if ever I have spoken contemptuously to the Captain!” (1533).
- “better than that strange old book, with the queer name, poor Captain Brown was killed for reading—that book by Mr Boz, you know…” (1537).

**In Addition…**

- Dickens’s *The Pickwick Papers* do not seem as pertinent as do explorations of gender and class, but this piece of literature is the counterpart to a vexing interpretive problem. A creative extension would explore obscure external evidence that could be connected to the text under study (i.e., *Our Society at Cranford*).

- For example, what if one were to connect the character of Mr. Pickwick to that of Captain Brown, maintaining a focus on life experience and innocence? Is Captain Brown an innocent character? As far as experience is concerned, what does the reader learn from him?


Axton explores the concepts of unity and organized ideas in Dickens’s novel. Here, he argues and cites from other scholars explanations for such a fragmented novel. He attributes issues that challenge the boundaries of reality, along with focusing on Dickens’s consciousness as explanations for the style in which *The Pickwick Papers* is written. It may be interesting to adopt such a theory in reading Gaskell’s short story by highlighting the circuitousness of the story, in general, and then moving into more complicated forces, such as those introduced in this article.

**In Addition…**
This source may be used in another critical research extension. Similar to the aforementioned suggestion pertaining to linguistic manipulation and influence, this source may contribute to the circuitous style of Gaskell’s short story.

Although this source refers to Dickens’s fragmented style, I would attempt to adopt those ideas and apply them to Our Society at Cranford, maintaining a focus on the indeterminacy of my interpretive problem.

**Rasselas**


The author contends that the tone of Johnson’s *Rasselas* will be quite misunderstood if its artistic forms in neglected. The author goes on to say that much too often, *Rasselas* is read superficially as a philosophical doctrine which displays a dry pessimism. Jones says readers often read it in such a way attribute some kind of unity to the piece that may not be ostensible on its surface. It may be interesting to stand this piece next to Cranford as a society and use the study of critical discourse to possibly unravel Victorian societal complexities.

**In Addition…**

- Is *Our Society at Cranford* a philosophical story? Is there any touch of philosophy in characters, plot, etc.? In addition to the actual interpretive problem, the internal literature (i.e., *Rasselas*) has definitely raised some eye brows. Adopting a philosophical approach and making specific and general reference to Johnson’s work may open some windows with regard to philosophy found in Gaskell’s work.
- In taking this approach, I would probably explore ways of life in a philosophical manner, diluting societal importance of class and gender.


Here, Whitley reads *Rasselas* satirically, paying close attention to what he views as philosophical error on the part of Johnson. Such an approach to a piece of work that is traditionally deemed to be quite serious may open new windows of interpretation for Gaskell’s work, in general. Further, such an interesting approach may also aid one in combating Gaskell’s choice to have her male character read the *Pickwick Papers*. In any case, such an uncanny reading of a superficially morbid and philosophical work is bound to generate multiple possibilities for an extension.

**Textual Evidence Supporting Research Extension**
“‘I consider it vulgar, and below the dignity of literature, to publish in numbers’” (1528).
“‘How was the Rambler published, ma’am?’” (1528).

**In Addition…**

- The relationship between Captain Brown and Miss Jenkyns is viewed quite seriously; and once again, the literature each character supports seems to represents something about that character. If *Rasselas* can be read a satire or a comedic error, are readers supposed to alter their perception about Miss Jenkyns? Or perhaps view her entire relationship with Captain Brown as an entertaining, episodic, quarrel?
- This can be applied quite generally to reach a solution. What exactly might this work by Johnson represent? Is it a comedic reflection of Cranford as a society? Is this humor heightened by Dickens’s more modern *The Pickwick Papers*?

**Evaluation of Sources**

- How do I know my sources are credible?
- Sources available for research are available through many different mediums, not the least of which is electronic. However, because technology has made so much material readily available it is important to evaluate sources to ensure legitimacy and authority.
- As far as websites are concerned, most sites ending in “edu” are usually credible sources for information. “Edu,” of course, stands for education, which means the material drawn from these sites is more than likely reviewed and approved by an educational institution (i.e., a university).
- However, the most credible electronic sources can be found via library websites. The University of Cincinnati library system contains a plethora of resources, which are written and reviewed by scholars specialized in certain areas of research.

**Technical Direction**

- [Langsam Library QuickLINKS](#)
- Through this page, students are able to access sources on a multitude of levels:
  - Articles
  - Library Catalog
  - Subject Guide
  - Reserves
- I have had great success in using the online “Articles: List of A-Z Databases.” Located through the QuickLINKS menu, this search tool provides access to search engines such as JSTOR, and other online sources like the “Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory & Criticism.” These are just a few of many helpful tools that can aid in research.