CULTURALISTICS: Journal of Cultural, Literary, and Linguistic Studies, **7(2), 2023, [70-76]**

Available online at: http://ejournal.undip.ac.id/index.php/culturalistics

Research Article

Received: 29/10/2023; Accepted: 25/11/2023; Published: 04/12/2023

Aging Yet Independent Women in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* and Charles Dicken's *David Copperfield*

Eta Farmacelia Nurulhady[a]

[a]English Literature Study Program, Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Diponegoro, Jl. Prof. Sudarto No.13, Semarang, 50275, Indonesia

efnurulhady@lecturer.undip.ac.id

Abstract

In the Victorian England whose ideal woman was the Angel in the House, a devoted and submissive wife and mother, it would generally be unfortunate for women to be still unmarried past their reproductive years. Using feminist approach, this study compares the Jenkyns sisters (Deborah and Matty) of Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* (1853) and Betsy Trotwood of Charles Dicken's *David Copperfield* (1850). While aging and single, they are financially independent. Husbandless and childless, the Jenkyns sisters and Betsey could easily fall into the category of redundant women, but they skillfully manage the house and class relations the way the Angels in the House do.

Keywords: Angel in the House; redundant women; aging yet independent

1. Introduction

Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* (1853) depicts the social mores of the small-town Cranford, mainly inhabited by middle-class single and widowed women. At the heart of this community of women are the former rector's daughters, Miss Deborah Jenkyn and Miss Matty Jenkyn. Charles Dickens's bildungsroman *David Copperfield* (1850) follows the life journey of David Copperfield from childhood to adulthood. Born to his young, widowed mother and losing her while still very young, David is sent to work in a factory. He runs away to find his aunt, Betsey Trotwood who becomes his guardian and provides for him to be a gentleman. Similar to the Jenkyns sisters, Betsey Trotwood also lives in her house without a husband, and the three of them are over forty years old, already aging for the nineteenth century's standard.

Aging or growing old is often associated with decline and lack of movement in opposition to the ideal of youth and vitality, but in fact *Cranford* and *David Copperfield* show that old people, particularly older women, actively promote necessary movements in the fictive lives of the novel. Through her study of Victorian novels, Kay Heath (2009) demonstrates the difference in chronological points where women and men are aged into midlife; women are depicted as middle aged in their thirties and forties while men some ten years later. Thus women, unlike men, are considered to have lost their "bloom" and no longer marriageable by the age of thirties. Heath also suggests that all Victorian women are defined with reference to motherhood and that the principal role of spinsters is as "desexualised servants to their families and community" (p. 9). The emphasis on the importance of

family and motherhood for women reflects Victorian ideology of gender that places women in the domestic or private sphere.

The general doctrine of the separation of the spheres defines the ideal woman as residing in domestic sphere, the so-called Angel in the House, described in Coventry Patmore's poem of the same title. It basically refers to a devoted wife and mother who is submissive, powerless, meek, charming, elegant, compassionate, selfless, virtuous, and pure. The Angel in the House stereotype, as Elizabeth Langland (1992) suggests, refers to middle-class women who "cooperated and participated with men in achieving middle-class control through the management of the lower class" (p. 294). Middle-class women who were not married fall into a different stereotype, the redundant women. Nan H. Dreher (1993) explains that redundancy, "the social and economic marginalization of middle-class single women" was considered as a social problem, and the British census in1851 had revealed the existence of over 40,000 "surplus" women, the unmarried ones (p.4). In *Cranford* and *David Copperfield*, the Jenkyns sisters and Betsy Trotwood appear to conform to these debilitating stereotypes of redundant woman. They are over forty and not married; however, both texts depict them as strong, active, independent women, without whom the novel's plot would not exist.

The Jenkyns sisters and Betsy Trotwood may seem to be redundant women but in fact they are not; they are not excess, useless in their stories. On the contrary, they are independent, powerful, and active. Both *Cranford* and *David Copperfield* promote older women's productivity while still touching on the anxiety that they experience on the onset of middle age, showing how the old minds who are often considered to be static and unproductive in fact engender significant movements in the novels while also challenge Victorian gender stereotypes of Angel in the House and redundant woman.

2. Methods

This study approaches Gaskell's *Cranford* and Dickens's *David Copperfield* using feminist lens. Part of political feminist movement, the goals of feminist criticism, according to Vincent B. Leitch, et.al (2018), include "exposing masculinist stereotypes, distortions, and omissions in male-dominated literature; studying female creativity, genres, styles, themes, careers, and literary traditions" among many other things (p. 24). This study probes into the stereotypical characterizations of women, the relationships between male and female characters, and the images that represent patriarchal social forces to see how *Cranford* and *David Copperfield* both affirm and challenge traditional views of women.

3. Aging Yet Independent Women in Gaskell's *Cranford* and Dicken's *David Copperfield*

Victorian England's doctrine of separate spheres defines gender roles that place women in the domestic or private sphere and men in the public or social sphere. John Ruskin (2002), a Victorian thinker who is often considered as the proponent of the doctrine, believes that man and woman are essentially different, "The man's power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender.... But the woman's power is for rule, not for battle, - and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision" (p. 77). Thus, the Victorian feminine ideal woman is the one residing in domestic sphere, the Angel in the House. While placing women in the domestic sphere, both *David Copperfield* and *Cranford* exemplify how such positioning can be problematic.

David Copperfield exemplifies the powerless, submissive, and meek women who lack the capabilities for ordering, arrangement, and decision in the character of Clara Copperfield (David's mother) and Dora Copperfield (David's first wife). At the opening of the novel, young Clara Copperfield is pregnant with David and is already widowed. Whenever asked about the household matters, she would reply with answers involving the mentioning of her late husband. For example, being asked whether she knows anything, "About keeping house, for instance," Clara replies, "Not so

much as I could wish. But Mr. Copperfield was teaching me— …. And I hope I should have improved, being very anxious to learn, and he very patient to teach me, if the great misfortune of his death" (Dickens, 1990, p. 17). Clara highlights her dependence on her husband while he was still alive and also after he died; in addition to inheriting her husband's house, Clara lives on the reversion of annuity set up by her late husband. Her being feeble, subservient, and timid is more obvious in her relationship with her second husband, Mr. Murdstone. While her first husband taught her the house management skills, her second husband takes away her rights to managing her own house and give the authority to his sister, disregarding Clara's protest.

> 'It's very hard,' said my mother, 'that in my own house—'
>
> 'My own house?' repeated Mr. Murdstone. 'Clara!'
>
> 'OUR own house, I mean,' faltered my mother, evidently frightened—'I hope you must know what I mean, Edward—it's very hard that in YOUR own house I may not have a word to say about domestic matters (Dickens, 1990, p. 77).

The change of pronoun reference from 'my' to 'OUR' and eventually to 'YOUR' highlights the fact that, legally speaking, Clara loses her rights to her own properties when she imprudently decides to marry Mr. Murdstone. More unfortunately, she is powerless when her second husband does not even let her exercise her entitlements to being an Angel in the House. Later in the novel, a newlywed David is trying to teach his wife to manage the house. Unlike Clara who is willing to learn, the "child wife" Dora does not want to put more efforts in learning. Dora's incapability to manage their house takes its toll on David, "Thus it was that I took upon myself the toils and cares of our life, and had no partner in them. We lived much as before, in reference to our scrambling household arrangements" (Dickens, 1990, p. 962]. David's statement highlights the separation of spheres and the dear consequences when a wife does not perform her prescribed roles.

In contrast to the meek young wives, *David Copperfield* presents an aging yet strong and opinionated lady: Betsey Trotwood. In his first meeting with his aunt, David describes Betsey as "a tall, hard-featured lady" with "an inflexibility in her face, in her voice, in her gait and carriage, … "her features were rather handsome than otherwise, though unbending and austere" (Dickens, 1990, p. 291). When confronting Mr. Murdstone, after Clara and her second son died, Betsey reproaches him: "you were a tyrant to the simple baby, and you broke her heart.…and through the best part of her weakness you gave her the wounds she died of" (Dickens, 1990, p. 321). Betsey takes the responsibility to provide for David to become a gentleman. When the adult David requests her aunt to counsel and advise Dora on household matters, she refuses and instead tells David to love his wife "by the qualities she has, and not by the qualities she may not have" (Dickens, 1990, p. 950). Therefore, even though Betsey is not the major character in the novel – she disappears after her first appearance in chapter 1 and reappears in Chapter 13 – she is an important figure in *David Copperfield.*

The matriarch in *Cranford* is Deborah Jenkyns who is also an elderly, stout, and opinionated woman. She is described as "a strong-minded woman," who "would have despised the modern idea of women being equal to men. Equal, indeed! she knew they were superior" (Gaskell, 2005, p. 120). Her feeling of superiority over men is evident in her argument with Captain Brown regarding literature. She criticizes Captain Brown's delight in reading "The Pickwick Papers" which she considers to be so inferior to Dr. Johnson's writing. When Captain Brown does not succumb, Miss Jenkyns concludes the conversation firmly: "She drew herself up with dignity, and only replied to Captain Brown's last remark by saying with marked emphasis on every syllable, 'I prefer Dr. Johnson to Mr. Boz.'" (Gaskell, 2005, p. 9]. However, even though she is still indifferent to Captain Brown's literary preference, upon his sudden death, Miss Jenkyns steps in to become the masculine protector of Captain Brown's two daughters, Miss Brown and Jessie Brown, making sure they are well taken care of and remain in their present social standing.

As a woman's social position is based on her father's while she is single and her husband after she gets married, marrying a man from the same or better social status is the norm for middle class women. Having lost her father, losing her only sister soon afterwards, and not possessing enough inheritance to support herself, Jessie in *Cranford* finds herself in a compromising situation. She is considering a number of possible jobs to take, to which Miss Jenkyns strongly opposes, saying to herself about "some people having no idea of their rank as a Captain's daughter" (Gaskell, 2005, p. 20). Thus, when Captain Gordon's friend, Major Gordon shows up, Miss Jenkyns encourages his courtship with Jessie Brown. Marrying Major Gordon secures Jessie her middle-class status. With the same reasoning, many years earlier Miss Jenkyns is against Matty's love towards Mr. Holbrook because he is not "enough of a gentleman" for her father and sister. When narrating the love story, Miss Pole explains the objection to a marriage between two people in love: "they did not like Miss Matty to marry below her rank. You know she was the rector's daughter, … Miss Jenkyns thought a deal of that" (Gaskell, 2005, p. 29). The failed romance results in Matty being single the rest of her life, partly because "gentlemen were scarce, and almost unheard of in the 'genteel society' of Cranford" (Gaskell, 2005, p. 33). The scarcity may have led Lady Glenmire to marry a surgeon which results on her losing her title and becomes simply Mrs. Hoggins. Miss Jenkyns chooses to be single. Matty recalls Miss Jenkyns's words on the day of their mother's funeral, "that if she had a hundred offers, she never would marry and leave my father" (Gaskell, 2005, p. 58). Thus, if her sister is single by choice, Matty is single by circumstance. After her sister died, Matty is left with the responsibility of managing their properties. In *David Copperfiled,* David's great aunt, Betsey is separated from her husband under mutual consent, and upon hearing the news of her husband's passing away in India after ten years of separation, she restores her maiden name and retains her social rank.

Being young with the prospect of having a husband and children opens up possibility to be the ideal angel in the house, so moving past youth without marriage and motherhood can create anxiety. Matty is apparently the most anxious about being old and husbandless. She finds it irritating when her maid warns her to be more careful considering her age: "Martha, I'm not yet fifty-two!" said Miss Matty, with grave emphasis; for probably the remembrance of her youth had come very vividly before her this day, and she was annoyed at finding that golden time so far away in the past (Gaskell, 2005, p. 36). Her anxiety takes its toll after her former suitor, Thomas Holbrook suddenly dies. She orders caps similar to those of Mrs Jamieson's, to which the milliner replies, "But she wears widows' caps, ma'am?" (Gaskell, 2005, p. 39). The loss of a second chance to be a wife also marks the beginning of Matty's suffering from tremor. Learning from her experience, Matty eventually lets her servant Martha have followers, "God forbid!" said she in a low voice, "that I should grieve any young hearts" (Gaskell, 2005, p. 40). Betsey separates from her husband because he mistreats her, and it explains her anger towards Clara's second marriage to Mr. Murdstone and her criticism of Clara's maid, Peggotty's decision to get married. Betsey manifests her anxiety in the distrust of men and promoting the abandonment of men.

Not the traditional angels in the house - not married and not having children - Betsey and Matty do manage the house and class relation in the way that Langland suggests Angels in the House do. Managing a house with a garden and maid-servants is part of the distinctive characteristic of the middle-class Angel in the House. Description of Cranford society includes the observation of the sufficiency of this community of old ladies and represents the life of middle-class women: "For keeping the trim gardens … for frightening away little boys who look wistfully at the said flowers through the railings; for rushing out at the geese that occasionally venture into the gardens if the gates are left open…. for keeping their neat maidservants in admirable order; for kindness (somewhat dictatorial) to the poor, … the ladies of Cranford are quite sufficient" (Gaskell, 2005, p. 1). Cranford ladies do not need men to perform their day to day lives. David's first meeting with Betsey is while she is taking care of her garden. Without looking, Betsey tells David to go away, the same action that Cranford ladies would do to keep boys and geese away – donkeys in Betsey's case – from their garden. Betsey's usual exclamation is "Janet! Donkeys!" to which Janet would drop whatever she is doing and immediately runs towards the garden to leap out the said animals. Betsey employs Janet, "a

pretty blooming girl, of about nineteen or twenty" (Dickens, 1990, p. 292] as her handmaid while Matty hires Martha, a twenty-two-year-old girl. Betsey's management of her servants is exemplified in Janet who is "a perfect picture of neatness" (Dickens, 1990, p. 292]. While Martha is described as "a brisk, well-meaning, but very ignorant girl" (Gaskell, 2005, p. 28) on her first day being hired by Matty, but within weeks, she has improved and "attended very well to our directions" (Gaskell, 2005, p. 28). Martha's improvement proves that Matty succeeds in managing her servant and her household.

Cranford ladies do not have to be wives to perform their responsibility to the poor. Miss Jenkyns's philanthropy is also her chance to exercise her power upon the lower class. For example, she performs her ceremony of giving dinner and some money to the postman when he comes to deliver letters on Christmas day.

> Miss Jenkyns standing over him like a bold dragoon, questioning him as to his children - what they were doing - what school they went to; upbraiding him if another was likely to make its appearance, but sending even the little babies the shilling and the mince-pie which was her gift to all the children was, with half-a-crown in addition for both father and mother (Gaskell, 2005, p. 119).

Miss Jenkyns performs her charity authoritatively – somewhat intimidating – but also kindly. Although Matty continues what Miss Jenkyns did after her sister died, Matty does not find it comfortable to follow the details of such ceremony, which Miss Jenkyns regards as "a glorious opportunity for giving advice and benefiting her fellow-creatures" (Gaskell, 2005, p. 119). Instead of giving "each individual coin separate, with a "There! that's for yourself; that's for Jenny," etc." (Gaskell, 2005, p. 119), Matty gives the money all at once. She performs her duties to the poor, nonetheless.

In *David Copperfield*, Betsey's philanthropy extends beyond her relatives. Betsey first appears in the novel when visiting Clara for the first and last time, and she is pictured as an eccentric and authoritative woman. Betsey disapproves her nephew's marriage to Clara, and her inquiries on Clara agitates the young widow into labor. Disappointed by the fact that Clara's newborn is a boy, Betsey leaves without a word, and she appears twelve years later to accommodate the boy, David. Not only does Betsey accommodate David, but she also provides him with education that advances him to be a gentleman. Before taking care of David, Betsey has already taken care of Mr. Dick, a man whose own relatives regarded him as a lunatic and confined him in an asylum. Betsey is determined, "to take care of him, and shall not ill-treat him as some people (besides the asylum folks) have done" (Dickens, 1990, p. 308). Acknowledging his eccentricity, Betsey considers Mr. Dick "the most friendly and amenable creature in existence" (Dickens, 1990, p. 308). Mr. Dick is also crucial in Betsey's decision to take care of David. When asked by Betsey what to do with David when he first comes to her house, Mr. Dick's advice turn out to be favorable for David: 'I should wash him!' (Dickens, 1990, p. 291); 'I should put him to bed.' (Dickens, 1990, p. 298); and 'Have him measured for a suit of clothes directly' (Dickens, 1990, p. 319). Betsey follows all of Mr. Dick's suggestions to David's advantage.

When confronting Mr. and Miss Murdstone, Betsey acts as a social critic who criticizes Mr. Murdstone on his ill-treatment of his wife and step-son. After his mother's death, Mr. Murdstone robs all of David's opportunities necessary to prepare him to be a gentleman. Betsey reproaches Mr. Murdstone for his ill conduct.

> 'If he had been your own boy, you would have put him to it, just the same, I suppose?'…'Or if the poor child, his mother, had been alive, he would still have gone into the respectable business, would he?' …'The poor child's annuity died with her?'…'And there was no settlement of the little property—the house and garden—…upon her boy?' …. when she took that most disastrous step of marrying you, in short,' said my aunt, 'to be plain—did no one put in a word for the boy at that time?' (Dickens, 1990, p. 316-7).

Betsey's criticism summarizes the vulnerable position of women and children in Victorian household. David Copperfield Sr. left annual annuity of a hundred and five pounds for Clara, and she also inherits the house, all of which fall into the possession of her second husband, leaving David with no right to

whatever her mother used to own. While criticizing Mr. Murdstone, Betsey also can also be said as voicing public policies which do not acknowledge property rights for women.

By not providing David with proper education, Mr. Murdstone strips David's chances to better his life. A renowned Victorian writer, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, specifies that the one and mainly important criterion for an individual's success in social elevation in Victorian England is the acquisition of wealth, "everybody seemed to be aspiring to be on the move--upwards; and each stage of the advance was associated with the acquisition of money" (Newsome, 1999, p. 63]. In David's case, education is the first key before he can work on the acquisition of wealth. Therefore, he is so upset when his stepfather decides to make him work for Grinby and Murdstone's warehouse instead of sending him to school. The kind of work that he does at the warehouse puts him in a lower-class position, and lack of education is a great obstacle for him to climb up the ladder of class mobility. His great-aunt intervention assures his proper education that will secure him a middle-class profession.

While men can strive climbing up the ladder of class mobility by acquiring wealth, women can only do that through marriage, which unfortunately can also lead to downward movement of social mobility. Middle-class women are also prone to downward movement when they are involved in trade. The Cranford ladies challenges it when it comes to Matty. Although acknowledging the downward movement of Lady Glenmire to become Mrs Hoggins, they agree that such decline does not affect Matty when she opens a tea shop after being bankrupt. They maintain Matty's right to retain her status as a Cranford gentlewoman: "whereas a married woman takes her husband's rank by the strict laws of precedence, an unmarried woman retains the station her father occupied" (Gaskell, 2005, p. 143). In other words, not being married becomes an advantage for a woman to retain her social status in spite of the necessity to work to earn money. Matty is still entitled to keep her gentility as the daughter of the Rector of Cranford.

Both Dickens' *David Copperfield* and Gaskell's *Cranford* seem to suggest that despite their independence, Betsey and Matty would have chosen to be wives and mothers had circumstances allowed. Matty tries hard to conceal her feelings of loss that she never mentions Holbrook again but Mary notices that "the book he gave her lies with her Bible on the little table by her bedside" (Gaskell, 2005, p. 39). Despite the pain and trouble that her husband has given her, Betsey mourns his death. In spite of her masculine appearance and behavior, Betsey is feminine at heart. Not having a husband and children, both Betsey and Matty are not completely stripped of motherhood. Betsey becomes the mother for David. Miss Jenkyns, who promotes the marriage between Jessie and Mr. Gordon, becomes the godmother for their daughter, Flora Gordon. Matty becomes the godmother for Martha's daughter, whom Martha names Matilda so that Matty can achieve pseudo-motherhood.

The striking similarity between Betsey and Matty is their financial independence although in a slightly different term. Both earn from their investments though Matty is struggling in making both ends meet while Betsey has all the leisure to use her money as she wishes. Both experience bankruptcy and have to let their maids go even though Martha decides to stay with Matty. While Matty turns to trade, Betsey turns out to have enough savings that enables her to stay in her present position.

The world of *Cranford* is a feminine one. Although the ladies of Cranford manage to live their genteel lives independent of men, there are crucial moments where they turn to men as their last resort. As mentioned earlier, Major Gordon comes to rescue Jessie. One afternoon, Matty who has been out the whole morning is shocked seeing a gentleman put his arm around Jessie's waist in the drawing room. When she tells Miss Jenkyns, the reply astonishes her, "The most proper place in the world for his arm to be in" (Gaskell, 2005, p. 22]. Miss Jenkyns tells Matty not to mind it, leaving Matty dumbfounded: "This from her sister, who had hitherto been a model of feminine decorum, was a blow for poor Matty, and with a double shock she left the room" (Gaskell, 2005, p. 22). Later in the novel, although all is well with Matty running her teashop, she is also eventually saved from her "degrading" state by her brother, Peter Jenkyns who comes back from India to reunite with his sister.

David Copperfield on the other hand presents a masculine world where what men think and do matters the most, yet Betsey Trotwood remains independent throughout. A number of female

characters in the novel survive with the help of men. Once Clara remarries, she loses her rights and voices as the mistress of her own house to Mr. Murdstone. Emily ruins her life in the hands of Steerforth, and is saved only because of the love of Mr. Peggotty. Dora stays secured in her incapability of managing household because David agrees to accept her as a child-wife and bears the consequence of "the first mistaken impulse of my undisciplined heart" (Dickens, 1990, p. 988). Agnes, the perfect angel in the house finally finds her true happiness only after marrying David. However, it is Betsey Trotwood with her good intentions and deeds who provides the opportunities for David to be a real gentleman. Considering the other female characters in the novel, it seems justifiable that Betsey should depend on David for the rest of her life, yet she proves to be the superior independent woman. She is not totally ruined as she tells David. She has kept two thousand pounds, "to keep it secretly for a rainy day" (Dickens, 1990, p. 1156). Not only has she been capable of managing her finance well, she also has created a safety net that prevents her for being totally ruined. More importantly, she uses it as a device to test David and prove his worth as a gentleman.

4. Conclusions

The aging Betsey Trotwood and the Jenkyns sisters may not be the ideal Angel in the House for the lack of a husband and children, yet they possess the most important trait of the Victorian ideal woman: the ability to manage the middle-class household. They trigger movement in the novel with their management capability coupled with their financial independence. Interestingly, the feminine world of Cranford seems to be dubious to maintain the independent status of a middle-class woman, such as Matty who needs to be saved by her wealthy long lost brother. The masculine world of David Copperfield on the other hand presents Betsey as an independent from the very beginning to the end. Aging women do not necessarily fall into redundancy.

References

Dickens, C. (1990). *David Copperfield*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

Dreher, N. H. (1993). "Redundancy and emigration: the 'woman question' in Mid-Victorian Britain" *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 26(1), 3-7.

Gaskell, E. (2005). *Cranford*. London: Penguin Books.

Heath, K. (2009). *Aging by the book: the emergence of midlife in Victorian Britain*. New York: SUNY Press,

Langland, E. (1992). "Nobody's angel: domestic ideology and middle-class women in the Victorian novel." *PMLA*, 107, 290-304.

Leitch, V. B. et.al (2018). *The Norton anthology of theory and criticism third edition*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

Newsome, D. (1999). *The Victorian world picture: perceptions and introspections in an Age of Change.* New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Ruskin, J. (2002). *Sesame and lilies*. Ed. Deborah Epstein Nord. New Haven: Yale University Press.