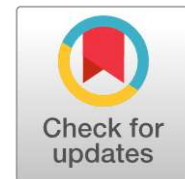


THE SIGNIFICANCE OF VICTORIAN ENGLAND FOR THE COTTAGECORE AESTHETIC

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Abstract

This article contemplates the idyllic imagery of Elizabeth Gaskell's rural texts in relation to the key visual motifs of the Internet aesthetic "cottagecore." Meanwhile, the paper also strives to highlight the importance of both the Victorian era, particularly its literature and art, with regard to this popular Internet aesthetic. With some brief references to influential figures of the age, the cultural timeframe surrounding Gaskell's rural fiction is shown to offer significant historical relevance to the romanticisation of the English country-cottage life. The literary and pictorial texts serve as examples of this cultural process. Considering the author's mostly ornamental use of cottages in *Wives and Daughters* as well as her employment of floral characterisation, the paper also highlights the visual aesthetics of the cottage art of Helen Allingham and Myles Birket Foster as well as rural depictions made by illustrators of Gaskell's provincial works that display the visual after-life of Gaskell's rural texts.

Keywords: cottagecore, cottage art, Helen Allingham, Myles Birket Foster, Elizabeth Gaskell, Gaskell's illustrators, Internet aesthetics, nostalgia

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“Cottagecore” has become one of the internet’s most established and widely-recognised modern aesthetics, seeing a boom in popularity since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Being an aesthetic that celebrates nostalgia, slow-living, home crafts and creature comforts, the timing of its rise in popularity – when people were spending unusual periods of time at home – is unlikely to be a coincidence. Of course, the cottage aesthetic is nothing new, but cottagecore is its latest iteration. Being a relatively recent phenomenon, little has been written in academia concerning this or Internet aesthetics. Nevertheless, some papers have begun to emerge, with cottagecore’s links to “queer culture” being a favoured perspective. Other articles include Alicia Caticha’s study of fashion and race (with a strong focus on the eighteenth century and Marie Antoinette) (2022) as well as Leah Brand’s look at crafting in the digital age (2021). In addition to Brand, a number of articles, such as Angelica Frey’s “Cottagecore Debuted 2,300 Years Ago” on *JSTOR Daily* (2020), or Melissa Kane’s “The Simple History: #Cottagecore, Pastoral Arcadia and Marie Antoinette” in Edinburgh University’s *Retrospect Journal* (2021), tend to stress the importance of the eighteenth century in cottagecore reveries, or state that cottagecore, unlike other Internet aesthetics, does not reference any particular period in time. While this paper does not challenge the idea of cottagecore’s nostalgia for a “fluid past,” (Brand, 2021, p. 8) one of its objectives is to make a stronger case for the influence of the Victorian period, particularly its rural literature, of which Elizabeth Gaskell’s provincial works are an integral part.

Despite the word cottagecore being a broad linguistic container (with the aesthetic being open to the inclusion of almost anything loosely associated with the cottage-life), media marketed or linked to the trend ought to be relatively easy to identify. Cottages, gardens, the countryside as well as forests are among its key visual motifs. Additional motifs include cakes and pies, but also certain fabrics and patterns, such as gingham or lace. Searching for the word “cottagecore” on Google Images will lead one to a consistent set of pictures showing beautiful country cottages and wild gardens with sun-lit flowers in their fullest bloom. Among these images, one is also likely to find a painting or two by the late-Victorian British painter Helen Allingham, whose idyllic rural depictions of England are still in wide circulation. Aesthetically, Allingham’s paintings seem to perfectly encapsulate the overall feel of cottagecore, which could be described as depicting that homely sense of warmth and comfort when enveloped in Nature’s beauty.

In truth, there is neither a simple nor all-encompassing definition of cottagecore. It could mean different things for different people. For some, cottagecore may be a positive, daily-lifestyle choice, engaging with activities that promote the benefits of “wellness” and “mindfulness.” For others, it may represent a sense of novelty, with participants occasionally engaging with its more performative aspects, such as cosplaying or preparing genteel picnics and tea parties. Numerous activities can be specified, including seasonal ones, but the aesthetic can also be enjoyed more passively through various media: most noticeably photography, film, and literature. A major part of the cottagecore aesthetic is a love for books, which includes both the contemplative act of reading them as well as appreciating their visual and tangible beauty. Illustrated novels are particularly revered for their artistic craft as well as their helpfulness in visually transporting the reader to pleasant places of the past. As Jenny Calder visualises in *The Victorian Home*: “It is from the novelists that we get the vivid hints of life.” (1977, p. 101).

Regarding novels that are frequently referenced within the cottagecore community, the thematic and historic scope of titles seen on lists of recommended works is extremely broad. Yet, while the aesthetic is not limited to any particular period from history, many of its most endearing qualities, especially those regarding the safe comforts of home, can be found in Victorian literature and art, particularly in stories written either for or about children, or which may stimulate nostalgic memories of childhood. The ever-popular stories of Beatrix Potter present one such example of classic literary works from the period wherein both childhood and pastoral themes are strongly evoked, with various keywords of cottagecore, such as wholesome, warm, gentle, kind, quaint, and cozy being commonly elicited from these classic fictional works. That is not to say that cottagecore media should be exclusive of other themes. For many novels and films tagged by followers of the trend contain distinctly dark elements too. To consider that Ramona Jones (2021) in her book *Escape into Cottagecore: Embrace Cosy Countryside Comfort in Your Everyday* includes *Wuthering Heights* among her suggested cottagecore media demonstrates that there are many other factors that could determine a cottagecore text, such as romance, wild nature and the sublime, or even gothic themes and the spiritual. Needless to say, themes of what is homely, innocent, or good-natured are to be found in texts either with or without a rural setting, but when presented in such a landscape, particularly in the presence of cottages, the text is cottagecore through and through.

Another author who either could or should be included in lists of cottagcore media (though probably not as well-known among today's casual readers as Beatrix Potter or the Brontë sisters), who wrote extensively on the themes and topics of domestic life and the home, on flowers and nature, and on women and children and their experiences and thoughts, whether deemed either simple or complex, is Elizabeth Gaskell (1810-1865). Although mostly referenced by literary scholars of the previous century as being a writer of "social problem novels," she is perhaps better known today as being the author of *Cranford*, a collection of everyday stories nostalgically inspired by the childhood years she spent living with her maternal aunt, Hannah Lumb, in rural Cheshire. It is a novel that Kate Flint describes as presenting "a quaint picture of provincial life," (Flint, 1995, p. 31) and a similar rural and historical escapism can be felt in Gaskell's other literary works, particularly in *Cousin Phillis* and *Wives and Daughters*, which both feature towns and villages based on the same geographical region that inspired and influenced her *Cranford* texts. Despite not having the same recognition in popular culture as works of the Brontë sisters or Beatrix Potter, these three provincial works by Gaskell cover almost every aspect of the cottagcore aesthetic, ranging from its visual motifs to its more abstract values. Furthermore, Gaskell's interest in gardens and horticulture, her keen eye for picturesque landscapes as well as her contributions to ethnographic studies of the English country-life and its fading traditions affords these texts a sense of hyper-relevancy when it comes to the understanding of cottagcore's literary ontology.

Cottagcore as a cultural or artistic movement is partly reactionary. It could be a reaction to the rapid growth of technology, though this is a complex argument due to the fact that cottagcore itself was created and is enjoyed mostly via social media and by the generation that supposedly use it the most. Even more likely is to view it as a reaction to capitalism and hustle-culture, including the effects that such economic systems have on Earth's natural environment (though this would not be completely obvious from a purely visual perspective). Cottagcore's rise in popularity could also have been a reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic (though, it may be better to view it as more of an embracement of the situation). It is through these external conditions where one can find some parallels with Gaskell's works, which were also written at a time of great social and environmental change. Raymond Williams (1984) has stated that novels written around the time of Gaskell's first – *Mary Barton* – and Dickens' *Dombey and Son* (both from 1848), but also the

more rural texts of *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1847) by Charlotte and Anne Brontë, were composed “in response to a new and varied but still common experience,” namely the impact of the Industrial Revolution (Williams, 1984, p. 10).

In further stressing the importance of this historical period in literature, Williams stated:

For it is a critical fact that in and through these transforming experiences English attitudes to the country, and ideas to rural life, persisted with extraordinary power, so that even after the society was predominantly urban its literature, for a generation, was still predominantly rural; and even in the twentieth century, in an urban and industrial land, forms of the older ideas and experiences still remarkably persist. All this gives the English experience and interpretation of the country and the city a permanent though of course not exclusive importance (Williams, 2016, p. 3).

This rural nostalgia sustained through the literature of the Victorian period prevails in Gaskell’s provincial texts. The industrial novels, or “Condition-of-England” novels written by the likes of Gaskell, Dickens, and Disraeli have urban settings, but they are sentimental towards the loss of the rural landscape and traditional modes of life. The industrial terrors in Gaskell’s novels are the huge cotton mills of Manchester (sometimes pejoratively referred to in historical accounts as “Cottonopolis”). The threat in *Dombey and Son* is the destruction and devastation of rural communities, caused by the rapid construction of the railways – a prospect loathed by John Ruskin, the critic of the arts who formed a mutual friendship with Gaskell thanks to their many compatible views on politics, society, and “their shared disquiet at the social cost of industrial capitalism” (Longmuir, 2017, p. 2). The same threat is also present in the background of *Cranford*, but more noticeably so in *Cousin Phillis*.

Strictly regarding the English country cottage, it can be argued that the present or on-going fascination for this humble and picturesque style of home stems largely from the early Victorian period when the railways ameliorated an urbanisation of the British population, which consequently led to a nostalgic romanticisation of rural life and country dwellings. In the year of the Great Exhibition of 1851, the very same year that Gaskell published her first *Cranford* papers, and a year after publishing her Christmas story *The Moorland Cottage*, the census of England and Wales showed for the first time a nation with more urban dwellers than rural (a figure that would increase rapidly during

the Victorian period). In *Life in the English Country Cottage*, Adrian Tinniswood (1995) discusses the immediate distaste many Victorians had for the rapidly growing industrial landscape and the consequence of viewing the countryside as a slowly disappearing paradise henceforth. Also mentioned by Tinniswood are artists such as Helen Allingham and Myles Birket Foster, who, in their nostalgically-framed rural scenes, were able to display certain values associated with Nature, such as tradition, stability, continuity, and calmness, all of which were qualities that had been declining in the name of industrial progress.

Cottages have a long history and it would be hard to claim that their importance had been heightened in novels during the Victorian period. However, there are some connections that can be made to the idealisation of both the English country cottage and its gardens during this age, as evinced also through its literature. Logically, Ramona Jones' partly instructional book on the cottagecore aesthetic starts with a brief history of the cottage, correctly noting that they had once constituted only the most basic of dwelling places (Jones, 2021). As explained, there are various types of country cottage, and its definitions have either changed or been contested across the centuries. The most commonly visualised style in cottagecore is the "English thatch-roofed cottage with painted white or rusticated stone walls, chimneys, and shrubbery in the front" (Cottagecore, n. d.), a style that largely corresponds with those depicted in the paintings of Helen Allingham. This oft-depicted image with its romantic associations may appear as old as time; yet, as Tinniswood explains, this "thatch-and-roses image of cottage life is a relatively recent construct" (Tinniswood, 1995, p. 13). – a romantic vision that results from the effects of the Industrial Revolution. It should also be noted that, as the term 'thatch-and-roses cottage' implies, any complete image of the idyllic cottage life should also include the visual aesthetic of gardens and flowers. Sub-genres of cottagecore that focus more specifically on its floral aspects do also exist, for example, "bloomcore," "honeycore," and "meadowcore" (all of which add to the aesthetic's overall visual schema); however, what is of particular importance in cottagecore is the added presence of people. According to *Aesthetics Wiki*, what makes cottagecore distinctly different to wild aesthetics like "naturecore" are the "signs of human involvement in the rural space (Cottagecore, n.d.)." The encyclopaedia also defends the significance of gardens (particularly those of the classic English style), explaining, with some importance, that

they are “a manifestation of this interaction between nature and human intervention” (Cottagecore, n.d.).

Although flowers are one of the most noticeable features of Gaskell’s fiction, the presence of cottages is mostly peripheral. In fact, collectively, the words “cottage/s” or “cottager/s” only features thrice in Gaskell’s *Cranford*, appearing the same number of times in *Cousin Phillis*. In *Wives and Daughters*, it also appears at a similarly infrequent rate, in proportion to the length of the book. This peripheral nature seems to be mostly due to its focus on gentility. In *Cranford*, particularly, it is probable that cottages are less vital for its middle-class setting because, in the nineteenth century, the term ‘cottager’ was mostly associated with the poorer, working class. Historically, the term had initially applied to farmers, craftsmen, or artisans, who owned the land on which their cottages stood, but by the seventeenth century it had come to include farm labourers as well (Clarke, 1994). Traditionally, the cottage was supposed to refer to a dwelling of modest proportions, thus being associated, for the most part, with those less well off. Yet, plenty of examples can be found of much larger cottages existing before and during Gaskell’s life, a fact which can also be cited in the form of literary references, such as the Devon cottage of the Dashwoods in Jane Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility* as well as in Gaskell’s own short fiction “*The Squire’s Story*” (1855), where Mr. John Dudgeon’s house on Wildbury Heath is self-described in humble terms as being “a mere cottage,” despite it having two floors and spreading outwards “far and wide” (Gaskell, 1996, p. 223). Aside from the exceptions that were the numerous types of genteel cottage being built for the landed gentry from the late eighteenth century onwards, including the relatively brief fashion for *cottage ornée* (the ornamental cottage), the cottage, by regular standards, has according to Pamela Gerrish Nunn “always conveyed limited size and luxuries, and as such, implies a taxonomy of class” (Nunn, 2010, p. 190). This ‘taxonomy of class,’ can be found when analysing Gaskell’s limited use of the term ‘cottage’ in *Cranford*, wherein the word appears to be used only in reference to folk of a lower social stratum than that of her main characters who represent the middle-class genteel.

While the *Cranford* cottages are peripheral to its middle-class setting – in contrast to its obvious centrality in *Cousin Phillis* (if we are to regard the main setting of the Holman’s home at Hope Farm as a cottage) – in *Wives and Daughters* the cottages can be described, visually, as ornamental (in an aesthetically or picturesque sense). An

immediate example of this ornamental nature can be found in the opening chapter of *Wives and Daughters* where the young protagonist Molly Gibson looks out from her bedroom window early one morning:

Then to the window, and after some tugging she opened the casement, and let in the sweet morning air. The dew was already off the flowers in the garden below, but still rising from the long hay-grass in the meadows directly beyond. At one side lay the little town of Hollingford, into a street of which Mr. Gibson's front door opened; and delicate columns, and little puffs of smoke were already beginning to rise from many a cottage chimney where some housewife was already up, and preparing breakfast for the bread-winner of the family (Gaskell, 2002, pp. 3-4).

Markedly similar to a scene later in the novel from the same bedroom window, here Gaskell draws our attention to an idyllic view of Hollingford showing its quaint cottages and their little puffs of smoke, reminiscent of a classic feature of Allingham's paintings that presents a very homely image of quotidian action from afar. In Gaskell's text, the smoke puffs are significant to the ornamentation of cottages because they directly indicate warmth and life. The same window scene repeats in Chapter Thirty-Four when Molly runs upstairs to her bedroom after learning of Roger's marriage proposal to Cynthia. Soothed by the view outside, an older Molly once more surveys the cottages below that are teeming with life in the form of autumnal garden flowers, lazy, cud-chewing cows, home-coming husbands and school-free children, and "soft curls of blue smoke" being sent up from the evening fires of cottages (Gaskell, 2002, p. 374), which, incidentally, is more or less the same panoramic image depicted in the animated opening sequence to the BBC's serialised adaptation of *Cranford* from 2007 (Harwood & Eaton, 2007).

Another scene presented in this romanticised style is when Molly returns home partially on foot:

To get to Croston Heath, Molly had to go down a narrow lane overshadowed by trees, with picturesque old cottages dotted here and there on the steep sandy banks; and then there came a small wood, and then there was a brook to be crossed on a plank-bridge, and up the steeper fields on the opposite side were cut steps in the turfy path; these ended, she was on Croston Heath, a wide-stretching common skirted by labourers' dwellings, past which a near road to Hollingford lay (Gaskell, 2002, p. 461).

One can assume that these labourers' dwellings were also types of cottages – probably a cruder form closer to huts, such as those described in great detail by William Howitt in his first-hand accounts from the 1820s in *The Rural Life of England* (1838). In fact, Gaskell's first stories were published in *Howitt's Journal of Literature and Popular Progress* (1847-1848), which both William Howitt and his wife Mary were its founders and editors. She was also well aware of Howitt's publication, contributing both a detailed description of Clopton Hall for the first edition, wherein she is referenced as a correspondent, including some information and corrections for the second edition in 1840 (Martin, 1985). Some of Howitt's descriptions of cottages from an outward view are somewhat comparable with Gaskell's passage about Molly's arrival at Croston Heath: "Where they [the cottages] happen to stand separate, on open heaths, and in glens of the hills, nature throws around them so much of wild freedom and picturesqueness as makes them very agreeable" (Howitt, 1840, p. 121). In Howitt's description, it is almost as though the cottage was being personified by possessing 'wild freedom' whilst also becoming more 'agreeable' to the wandering onlooker. Such an animated appearance of the cottage in its natural landscape was a highly-prized feature among landed gentry during the period of Romanticism in the late eighteenth century, with there being a particular concern for creating or maintaining "the charms of ruggedness and rusticity" (Woodforde, 1980, p. 29).

Despite Howitt and Gaskell's welcoming images of cottages from the outside, the reality was that many cottages, especially in the North of England, were harsh places in which to live, with reports of over-crowded and squalid conditions leading to general condemnation. In *The Truth about Cottages*, John Woodforde details reports from the first half of the nineteenth century of inhabitants sharing roof space with swine and poultry, of soot and smoke-filled rooms (from having the fire set in the middle of the floor), and the threat of certain types of cottages falling apart due to inclement weather and poor building conditions (pp. 36, 39). In Gaskell's *My Lady Ludlow*, originally serialised in *Household Words* in 1858, a particular scene where the Lady Ludlow has reason to inspect such a cottage is reminiscent of descriptions by Howitt as well as some parliamentary reports of the time:

My lady went on to a cluster of rude mud houses at the higher end of the Common; cottages built, as they were occasionally at that day, of wattles and clay, and thatched with sods. As far as we could make out from dumb show, Lady Ludlow saw enough of the interiors of these places to make her hesitate before entering, or even speaking to any of the children who were playing about in the puddles. After a pause, she disappeared into one of the cottages. It seemed to us a long time before she came out; but I dare say it was not more than eight or ten minutes. She came back with her head hanging down, as if to choose her way, — but we saw it was more in thought and bewilderment than for any such purpose (Gaskell, 2013, pp. 43-44).

This highly descriptive scene from the novel's second chapter, which is also reminiscent of those written by Howitt, is also depicted briefly in the 2007 televised adaptation of *Cranford* (Harwood & Eaton, 2007), the series of which makes use of some elements and episodes from *My Lady Ludlow*. Though filling only the briefest of moments both on screen and in the novel, it is a section that presents the viewer with a welcome moment of historical realism, showing the grim environment of a family of cottagers. While clearly at odds with the escapist fantasies of modern cottage-life aesthetics, at least by way of contrast, such a scene may have the effect of enhancing the more comforting and genteel atmosphere more commonly seen in other interiors of the Knutsford village.

Though direct references to cottages in Gaskell's texts are in relatively short supply, the same can hardly be said in regards to her referencing of gardens and horticulture, with Shirley Foster stating that "Gaskell's texts abound with descriptions of plants and flowers" (Foster, 2009, p. 2). Notably, it is a topic that Gaskell had a fascination with from an early age. In "*The Floral and Horticultural in Elizabeth Gaskell's Novels*," Jeanette Eve (1993) states that Gaskell names over fifty different types of herb, wild flower, or garden flower in her novels, providing as many as fourteen descriptions of specific gardens too, also stating that Gaskell, though writing at a time when horticulture was in vogue, with dozens of flower-language dictionaries being published during her lifetime, utilised the fashionable topic to create a unique style of prose, with gardens and flowers frequently interacting with both character and plot. While *Cousin Phillis* may be the most pastoral of Gaskell's novels, *Wives and Daughters* is arguably her most floral. On the surface, the text is littered with flowers. They are everywhere both indoors and out, appearing in pots and vases and in potpourri, on dinner trays and dining tables, in

furniture patterns, in bonnets, in hair, and embroidery. As in Gaskell's other novels, flowers are also offered as gifts or for the purposes of remembrance.

The Royal Horticultural Society's (RHS) first Great Spring Show in 1862, which later became the Chelsea Flower Show, may be a testament to the appetite that there was for botany and horticulture at the time when Gaskell was writing *Wives and Daughters*. Though serialised between 1864 and 1866, the novel is set during Gaskell's late teenage years, prior to her marriage in the summer of 1832. It is around the same period when the RHS first began to hold flower shows (since 1833), which points to an increasing rate of interest in the study of flowers during Gaskell's adult life. In addition to such societies being established, various topically relevant magazines and journals also sprang up. Among them were John Claudius Loudon's *Gardener's Magazine* in 1826 and George W. Johnson's *Cottage Gardener* in 1848. As suggested by Ethne Clarke in "The English Cottage Garden," these publications appear to have had a strong influence upon the general population, helping to return English gardens to more ancient styles based on geometric formations, a style which became commonly-known as 'carpet bedding' (Clarke, 1994, p. 8). This high-Victorian garden style is frequently referred to in *Wives and Daughters*, thus accurately befitting the novel's temporal and domestic setting.

Despite this gardening and floral connection to cottagecore, the style that is more synonymous with the cottagecore movement, however, is the 'olde worlde' type of cottage garden. In simple terms, this is a more wild, less symmetrical-looking style of English garden. Clarke explains that the romantic ideal of old-fashioned gardens from later in the century was embraced by the Arts and Crafts movement, which had been "established as a reaction against the industrialisation of Victorian/Edwardian England" (Clarke, 1994, p. 8). In view of any direct comparisons made to cottagecore, Gaskell's texts were written and set too early in time to align in a synchronistic fashion with the classic-garden style of the cottagecore aesthetic, which is a style of gardening more synonymous with either Allingham's paintings or Francis Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden*. All the same, the rapidly growing interest in horticulture during Gaskell's life and its subsequent application to literature lends further evidence to the argument that recent fascinations with cottages and the idyllic cottage life – as seen in cottagecore – mostly stem from a Victorian period whose literature remained rural even while its society became rapidly more urbanised. This application of horticultural interests in literature can be

demonstrated in Gaskell's fictional works, especially when it comes to her method of characterisation (rather than being a theme used merely for aesthetics or historical indexing). Select examples of this method of floral association have been given in Jeanette Eve's article, with Eve selecting, for *Wives and Daughters*, the scene of the Gibson stepsisters tying carnations together in different styles as being exemplary of Gaskell's skill in this regard.

Gaskell's artistic use of certain motifs, such as flowers and gardens, also helps to elucidate cottagework's emotional, sentimental, and teleological nuances. More simply, central characters, like Molly, seem to articulate and embody the cottagework ethos through Gaskell's techniques of metaphorisation. In *Wives and Daughters*, Gaskell uses her own 'language of flowers' to build, shape, and frame her characters. As with Dickens' *Great Expectations* and – more biographically – *David Copperfield*, the novel is presented in the form of a *Bildungsroman*. Yet, Lynn Voskuil, in "The Victorian Novel and Horticulture," also suggests using a more specific term *Bildungsgarten* for novels that connect the shared ethos of self-improvement between novelists and horticulturalists. Voskuil informs how "horticulture and *Bildung* often occur together in Victorian novels, especially novels that feature girls as protagonists" (Voskuil, 2013, p. 559), and such a protagonist can surely be found in Molly Gibson. Molly's floral associations are fairly explicit and her role as the subject of Voskuil's *Bildungsgarten* is evident from as early as the second chapter where a clear link is made between the young Molly and the pursuit of social cultivation. The chapter begins with Molly being suitably prepared by the Miss Brownings for her first visit to the Cumnor Towers, with some added reference and allusion to some classic fairytale female protagonists: "Her face had been soaped, scrubbed, and shone brilliantly clean; her frills, her frock, her ribbons were all snow-white" (Gaskell, 2002, p. 11). Essentially, the trip to the Towers is a walking tour around its extensive gardens, greenhouses, and hothouses, the experience of which becomes instantly mesmerising for Molly: "But she lost all consciousness of herself by-and-by when the party strolled out into the beautiful grounds, the like of which she had never even imagined" (p. 12). It is a vital chapter in the story that establishes various recurring themes of the novel. As it is throughout the text, Molly's character is given both floral and fairytale comparisons by characters (as well as the narrator), with Molly being likened to that of a wild, uncultivated flower.

Through her floral imagery, Gaskell continues to show Molly as a humble and down-to-earth character, which are typical characteristics associated with the cottage life. These traits are revealed in the same chapter in Molly's preference for less cultivated flowers:

Molly did not care for this half so much as for the flowers in the open air; but Lady Agnes had a more scientific taste, she expatiated on the rarity of this plant, and the mode of cultivation required by that, till Molly began to feel very tired, and then very faint (Gaskell, 2002, p. 13).

Molly tends to her own flower-garden later in the novel and, unlike Cynthia, is keen to learn about the natural world from Roger, the two of whom share a similar friendship to that of Mary Lennox and Dickon in *The Secret Garden*. Assessing the story as a whole, Molly clearly represents the typical kind-hearted, good-natured character of Gaskell's mid-Victorian fiction, some similar traits of which can also be found in the characters of Paul Manning and Phillis Holman in *Cousin Phillis* or, indeed, Mary Smith and Miss Matty in *Cranford* (though, the lengthy *Bildungsroman* narration of Molly's character affords her much greater scope for characterisation). Molly's distinctly wholesome profile is further illustrated when placed in direct contrast to other major characters like Cynthia, whose more upper-middle-class cultivation under the careful tutelage of her mother and Madame Lefevre has made her more an ornamental female figure than Molly's practical type. Overall, Molly could be seen as being rather antithetical to the genteel world she is regularly thrown into, her main difference being her overall genuineness of character as opposed to the more artificial nature of others. Although this central theme of the novel is indicated in various ways throughout, with the theme of interior design also being applied in a similar way to horticulture – for example, Miss Clare's insensitive redecorating of Molly's bedroom – Gaskell is more persistent in her use of flowers and gardens as a tool for expressing this important contrast between the genuine and the fake. Thus, Gaskell's texts not only evoke cottagecore's moral and humanistic values but also tend to use the same visual motifs (as those associated with the cottagecore aesthetic) as literary devices for characterisation as well as plot.

As mentioned previously, illustrated editions of classic novels are an important reason why such literary works are so revered in cottagecore. Furthermore, Victorian novels are renowned for their captivating depictions of daily life. The images are often pleasing to the eye, thus further improving the book's aesthetic quality. They can also

accentuate certain background features as well as the general setting of a scene, the importance or the beauty of which can be lost when focusing more on the textual narrative of the story and its dialogic passages. Essentially, illustrations in classic novels can help the reader to better visualise some of the key visual motifs of a given aesthetic. However, not all illustrators will either choose to highlight such scenic elements nor are they always subject to follow the same visual schema set by the original author. An illustrator has the power to adapt a novel's themes and moods, its setting (whether spatial, geographical, historical, or other), or its overall aesthetics to suit either a personal preference or, perhaps, a specific cultural need. Indeed, such illustrated adaptations can also be used to reach a particular audience for marketing purposes in what Roxanne Gentry refers to in her article on illustrations of *North and South* as "a mass market of diverse media that makes and sells culture as a commodity" (Gentry, 2019, p. 23). Strictly in regard to illustrating Gaskell's provincial texts, it should not be of any particular difficulty, in the present day, for a publisher to market them, intentionally, with cottagecore themes.

Regarding previous editions of Gaskell's provincial works, *Cranford* has been by far the most illustrated. However, its publishing history is quite a complicated one, with numerous illustrated editions having been produced since George du Maurier made the first attempt with four wood-engravings (including title-page) for George Smith's *The Cornhill Magazine* in 1864. As described at length by Simon Cooke, du Maurier proved to be a highly favourable match as the illustrator for Gaskell, being "employed, first and foremost, to increase the appeal of the writer's work by offering the reader the added attraction of his designs." (Cooke, 2017) Gaskell's only other contemporary illustrator was Myles Birket Foster, whose line-drawings for *The Moorland Cottage* in December 1850 for Chapman and Hall may present one of the most appealing sets for today's cottagecore audience. George du Maurier worked on a number of other Gaskell texts, including both *Cousin Phillis* and *Wives and Daughters*. The only other notable illustrated editions of these two later stories are, firstly, Mary Wheelhouse's slightly children's-book styled colour prints (having also illustrated *Cranford* and *Sylvia's Lovers* during the same Edwardian period) and, secondly, Alexy Pendle's 2002 Folio Society edition of the latter text, which, as Emma Marigliano has indicated, marks a return to the line-drawing styles of George du Maurier (Marigliano, 2012). In her brief article on the many illustrated

editions of Gaskell's works, Marigliano pays credit to Pendle's distinctly romantic style, with a direct comparison being made to du Maurier's "Væ Victis!" drawing from the original serialised edition – from Chapter Eight of *Wives and Daughters* – 'Drifting into Danger' (Figure 1). Though hard to improve on du Maurier's original work, Pendle creates a satisfying balance between the high-society drawing-room scenes and her many out-of-doors rustic and rural portraits, the latter of which fit with both the overall mood of cottagecore and the aesthetic's main visual motifs, with the notable inclusion of modestly-sized country cottages (Figure 2).

Figure 1

Væ Victis! (1864) – by George du Maurier.



Note. [Wood engraving by Joseph Swain] by Cooke, S. 2017, Victorian Web.

Figure 2

The Storm Bursts



Note. From *Wives and Daughters* [Illustration], by Alexy Pendle, 2002.

Perhaps surprisingly, there is relatively little to say on the illustrated editions of *Cousin Phillis*: du Maurier's two drawings for *The Cornhill Magazine* focuses on two scenes of Holdsworth and Phillis but capture the rustic wooden interiors of the farm house in a realistically unglamorous fashion; meanwhile, Wheelhouse's 1908 edition for George Bell and Sons offers both black and white and coloured illustrations, and, as one would expect for its idyllic setting, shows a number of rural scenes, with Phillis placed at the centre of most. The title page depicting Phillis feeding the chickens using her apron to hold the feed

looks the most iconic, and a similar scene is later recalled at the end of Part One with Phillis captured in a graceful kneeling position, as was described by Gaskell in the original text (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

One of Mary Wheelhouse's illustrations for *Cousin Phillis*.



Note. One of Mary Wheelhouse's illustration for *Cousin Phillis* (Gaskell, 1908, p. 37).

For *Cranford*, it appears that there have been at least fifteen fully illustrated editions produced covering a range of artistic styles; though, to list all would be excessive. Determining which ones are the most in harmony with cottagecore is largely subjective, and to do so would largely depend on which elements one sees as being the more important. In the case of some editions, one might not see any obvious resemblance to cottagecore's visual aesthetics, which is to be expected when considering how much of its alignment with *Cranford* is due mostly to the novel's inclusion of certain ethical principles or its expressions of femininity made partly through its conveyance of innocence, humour, and sentimentalism that are less easily captured in pictorial form. Nevertheless, some editions do stand out in the light of this aesthetic. In terms of houses and interiors, Edmund Hort New's 1914 Methuen edition, described by Marigliano as a "pedestrian guide book" (Marigliano, 2012, p. 28), is an interesting find for those curious about how the original streets, buildings, and interiors looked, thus offering the reader a type of open-museum-Knutsford-tour-guide effect. Further adding to this travel-guide effect are the unusually lengthy descriptions of the illustrations spanning eight pages in total. There is also a well-illustrated 1891 edition by Joseph Knight Company that pays similar attention to locations, including *Cranford*'s rural scenery; yet, unlike E. H. New's edition, actual storied scenes are included as well.

One could say that *Cranford* is very much stuck in a certain time, and the same could also be said for many of its later illustrated editions, which bear strong hallmarks of the eras wherein they were published. However, perhaps the most timeless set of illustrations and arguably the most exquisite is Joan Hassall's 1940 Folio Society edition, the artist who Marigliano states was recognised for her "inimitable and fresh approach to the line and style" of her designs (Marigliano, 2012, p. 29). Hassall (n.d.a, n.d.b), who also illustrated other works of Gaskell, which includes *The Brontë Story: A Reconsideration of Mrs Gaskell's Life of Charlotte Brontë* by Margaret Lane (1953) and some sumptuously illustrated editions of Jane Austen's novels, in effect, created a caricature of the rural landscape, thus producing an almost dreamlike effect. This effect can be observed in two images (Hassall, 1940a; 1940b) the first being a depiction of Cranford, and the second depicting a scene from Woodley of Mr Holbrook and Mary Smith. Crucially, Hassall's charming rural scenes capture the escapist element of cottagecore, and for all the beauty and clarity of du Maurier's work, one wonders if part of the cottagecore literary dream might not be better suited to Hassall's illustrations of a slightly more dreamlike and imaginary nature.

Such depictions of the Victorian English rural landscape still thrive in today's popular culture, circulating in the form of cottagecore and other similarly-themed Internet aesthetics. In fact, cottagecore's *Wikipedia* page uses one of Helen Allingham's most iconic cottage paintings for its primary thumbnail image. In many ways, Allingham, whose art continued well into the twentieth century, can be seen as bridging an historical gap between Gaskell's novels and today's cottage aesthetics. Not only was Allingham born in the same year when Gaskell's first novel was published (*Mary Barton* 1848) but the two were also distantly related through the Herford family line - Helen Allingham's maternal grandmother, Sarah Smith Herford, was an artist who painted country landscapes. Also, her Aunt Laura was a professional artist, and was among the first group of women to be accepted into the Royal Academy. Of further connection to Gaskell is that Allingham studied with Birket Foster (Gaskell's first illustrator), both artists having belonged to the Idyllist school - a group of watercolourists influenced by the social realist paintings of Frederick Walker that specialised in picturesque landscapes. Such idealisation of the cottage-art movement continued in various forms throughout the twentieth century, with reactions to certain transformative moments in history being one of the likely causes for periodic increases in the popularity of this nostalgic art.

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