

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder-like Behaviors: The Psychological Defense Mechanism in Cranford

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Abstract

In Elizabeth Gaskell's novel *Cranford*, the behaviors of the residents of Cranford display many characteristics of obsessive-compulsive disorder-like (OCD-like) behaviors. These behaviors serve as a psychological defense mechanism to help them cope with the uncertainties and anxieties of their social environment. Specifically, these behaviors manifest as contamination fears, characterized by self-imposed mental restraints, such as pursuit of cleanliness and preoccupation with chastity; as ordering OCD-like behaviors, marked by conservatism in actions, like adherence to tea party traditions and strict compliance with the social hierarchy; and as intrusive thoughts, driven by emotional anxiety, including fear of intrusion and fear of social judgment. Through these behaviors, the residents of Cranford attempt to maintain a sense of order and control in their lives. These behaviors are psychological defense strategies in the face of gender oppression and the impact of industrial civilization, reflecting the collective mental predicament during the transition of traditional society.

Keywords

Cranford; Obsessive-compulsive Disorder; Psychological Defense Mechanism.

1. Introduction

Cranford is a novel written by 19th-century realist author Elizabeth Gaskell. It is set in the fictional mid-19th-century English town of Cranford, using a series of loosely connected daily scenes to paint a vivid picture of Victorian rural community life. This work does not rely on a tightly woven plot or dramatic conflicts to captivate its readers, but instead focuses on a group of residents in the town, primarily upper-middle-class single women, delicately detailing their daily routines, social etiquette, and emotional fluctuations.

With a gentle and slightly humorous touch, Gaskell depicts the residents' obsession with "decency", their acceptance of the hierarchical order, and their collective response to events such as finance, illness, love, and the intrusion of outsiders. These seemingly trivial daily details conceal anxiety about change and the maintenance of self-identity. And this collective anxiety that breeds between tradition and change has precisely given rise to many obsessive-compulsive behaviors among residents of Cranford, providing vivid examples of the psychological defense mechanisms of individuals during periods of social transition.

Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) is classified as an anxiety disorder and is defined as "the presence of recurrent obsessions or compulsions that are excessively time consuming" (Hollander 3), including persistent thoughts, impulses, or images, repetitive behavior or thought patterns induced in an attempt to prevent anxiety. Although the behaviors of residents in Cranford are not strictly clinical symptoms of obsessive-compulsive disorder, their repetitive, ritualistic features, and sustained consumption of individual energy exhibit significant similarities to OCD-like behaviors. This similarity provides us with a unique analytical framework to delve into the underlying psychological defense logic behind these behaviors.

In Gaskell's *Cranford*, there are multiple medical-related plots, including disease, aging, and death. Although obsessive-compulsive disorder had not yet been formally recognized as a medical condition at her time, the characters in her novels exhibited obsessive-compulsive disorder-like (OCD-like) behaviors and thoughts under various complex pressures, though they were not identified as such disease.

Chen focuses on the phenomenon of the repression of women's desires in 19th-century Britain, taking Gaskell's *Cranford* as the object of analysis, to explore the connection between the repression of desire and hysteria, as well as the psychology of hidden fear, revealing the discipline of women's body and mind by the Victorian society and culture (140). He believes that the female community in Cranford collectively suffers from "androphobia" (142). The long-term repression of desire makes them have a complex psychology of both longing for and fearing men. Actually, this kind of "fear of men" is just an externalization caused by intrusive thoughts. Because they can't control their thoughts, they get anxious and scared. Jin also noticed Gaskell's disease narrative (76), and used it as an entry point to explore the ethical choices in 19th-century British women's novels and their connection with the society and culture, by making comparative studies on the disease narratives of several novels. From the perspective of macro-ethical criticism, she explained the importance of disease narrative as a tool for women to express themselves. However, there is a lack of in-depth research on the single novel *Cranford*. Both of the above papers take the gender power relationship as the core, regarding disease as the product of women's survival predicament in the patriarchal society, focusing on how women's bodies become the battlefield of social discipline, and revealing the gender ethical contradictions through disease narrative.

The diseases in the novel also reflect the medical concepts of the Victorian era. Henson put Gaskell's "supernatural stories" in the context of Victorian psychology (255), medicine and social reform. The female community in Cranford is easily influenced by "rumors and superstitious ideas", allowing their imagination to run wild and unable to control their thoughts and emotions. This shows that superstition is not only a kind of idea, but also closely connected with an individual's psychological control ability, revealing that the lack of self-control will make people more likely to fall into the trap of superstition. It reflects the contemporary public's concern about mental health. And this sense of control is also what women strive for. And Lerner explored how headache within the scope of physical health was used as a crisis sign in the context of 19th-century medicine (194-195), reflecting the survival predicament and identity anxiety of women in the industrial revolution period. By studying Gaskell's correspondence, the author found that both Gaskell and her daughter suffered from headaches, and her headache experience influenced her creation. Then he pointed out the plot in *Cranford* where Matilda had a sudden headache after hearing that someone else had suddenly fallen ill, and analyzed the causes of the specific disease "headache" and the common treatment methods in the novel. The author pointed out that headache can be used for the author's metaphorical purpose. Disease is not only a sign of physical crisis, but also a sign of ideological and psychological crisis. The two papers show that Gaskell's creation is closely related to the science, medicine and social issues of the times, but there is no further analysis from a specific disease like OCD.

Milota noticed the connection between medicine and community structure (496). She focused on the diverse images of male medical practitioners in Gaskell's novels, exploring the influence of the British medical system, gender power relations and social class on the doctor-patient relationship in the 19th century. The author believes that the women's choice and rejection of doctors in Cranford reflect the subtle influence of gender roles on medical power. This provides us a better understanding of women's response strategies and behaviors under stress. However, previous studies have mainly focused on hysteria, gender repression, and general disease

narratives, while OCD-like behavioral patterns in *Cranford* remain underexplored. This paper attempts to analyze the underlying meanings contained within these behaviors.

2. Contamination Fears: Self-imposed Mental Restraints

In the clinical manifestations of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), fear of contamination is a typical obsessive thought, often manifesting as irrational anxiety about a potential “contaminant”. This “contaminant” may be physical dirt or abstract moral stains, and individuals often develop a series of repetitive cleaning or avoidance behaviors to alleviate the resulting anxiety.

Victorian society in Britain imposed strict constraints on women’s behavior and moral standards. Within the gender discourse of the time, women were expected to fulfill the role of “angel in the house” with their value deeply tied to traits such as “purity”, “dignity” and “obedience”. Any behavior deviating from this paradigm was likely to be criticized. For example, according to the “Household Guide” of the time, unmarried women had to be accompanied by a guardian or married woman when going out, which greatly undermined women’s autonomy. Under such pressure, women themselves had no choice but to impose heavy restrictions on themselves.

In *Cranford*, the residents’ concerns about “contamination” extend beyond physical dirt to include anything that might disrupt spiritual purity and moral order, such as the purity of women. This seemingly excessive sensitivity is, in essence, a form of mental self-restriction. By preemptively defining the boundaries between “cleanliness” and “impurity”, they seek to construct a controllable spiritual safe zone for themselves in an environment filled with uncertainty.

2.1. The Pursuit of Cleanliness

For the upper-middle-class ladies of *Cranford*, the pursuit of cleanliness is not a simple daily need, but rather an internalized, almost ritualistic way of life that permeates every detail of their homes, social interactions, and even their self-presentation. This obsession with cleanliness echoes the Victorian upper-middle class’s values of decorum and neatness, while also revealing compulsive psychological traits in the novel’s narrative. They counteract potential contamination anxiety through their stringent demands for a spotless physical environment.

“We were very busy, too, one whole morning, before Miss Jenkyns gave her party, in following her directions, and in cutting out and stitching together pieces of newspaper, so as to form little paths to every chair, set for the expected visitors, lest their shoes might dirty or defile the purity of the carpet.”

(Gaskell 17)

The ladies are willing to spend an entire morning using newspaper wrappings to avoid the possible stains that guests’ shoes might bring. This behavior goes beyond the scope of normal cleaning and is full of obsessive-compulsive characteristics. They are not taking action against actual stains, but to ward off a potential risk of contamination that may never actually occur.

In their opinion, the purity of the carpet symbolizes the order and dignity of the entire environment they belong to. Any factor that might compromise this purity, even the slightest possibility, must be completely eliminated. They used newspapers to build a double barrier, both physical and psychological, to reduce their worries about possible contamination from outsiders and to protect their own idea of cleanliness.

When Martha was working on Miss Matty’s tea shop, she was really serious about keeping the place clean:

“Martha had scoured the boarded floor to a white cleanness, and it was adorned with a brilliant piece of oil-cloth, on which customers were to stand before the table-counter.”

(Gaskell 180)

Martha took this obsession with cleanliness to the extreme. She created a seemingly absolutely safe clean space for themselves in an unpredictable environment by having customers stand on an oil-cloth. This act limited any potential stains to a specific area, and incorporated all possible contamination into a pre-set response plan. This helps ease the ladies’ deep-seated anxiety about being “contaminated”.

From a social perspective, the upper-middle class of the Victorian era closely linked cleanliness with decency and morality, forming a strict system of judgment. In the mindset of the time, a person’s pursuit of cleanliness directly reflected their social status and moral standards. The homes of middle-class should be “invariably clean”, while the working class seems to find dirt “inescapable” (Kanwit 43). For women who lack independent economic status and social influence, maintaining cleanliness has become an important way to prove their worth and reinforce their social identity. By adhering to standards of cleanliness that far exceed basic requirements, the ladies of Cranford declare to the community that they conform to the behavioral norms of the upper-middle class.

2.2. The Preoccupation with Chastity

Although the Victorian era witnessed the rise of many new intellectual currents and the Industrial Revolution was quietly reshaping the social structure, certain deeply rooted traditional notions continued to bind women of the age. Among these, chastity was regarded as the core moral capital of women, serving as the key criterion for measuring their value. This notion was particularly pronounced in the closed rural communities. With her keen insight, Mrs. Gaskell captured these indelible imprints in women’s thinking and skillfully projected them onto the female residents of Cranford, making their conduct and inner struggles a microcosm of women in that era.

Although *Cranford* was a small town dominated by women and relatively independent, it still could not escape the subtle yet pervasive influence of traditional chastity ideals. Women’s words and deeds, their social interactions, and even their choice of dress could all be subjected to scrutiny through the lens of chastity. For instance, any unnecessary contact between an unmarried woman and a man might spark lively discussion within the community. This omnipresent gaze compelled women to remain constantly vigilant, internalizing chastity as a standard of self-surveillance, fearful of violating these implicit rules even inadvertently. Under such circumstances, the ladies’ pursuit of purity took on an almost obsessive, compulsive quality.

One typical example was unmarried Miss Matty, who did not allow her maid to have unnecessary contact with men, fearing that the maid would be seduced by carpenters, butchers, or gardeners. She even suspected on several occasions that her maid Martha was flirting with someone else. On the surface, this behavior appears to be motivated by the employer’s desire to discipline and protect the servant, but in essence, it reflects the excessive concern and obsessive fixation of the women of Cranford on “chastity”. Miss Matty’s tension and suspicion do not stem from Martha’s actual actions, but from an internalized anxiety. She fears that any contact with men will contaminate the purity of the maid, thereby endangering her personal reputation and that of the entire family.

Miss Matty’s behavior, in essence, was the projection of her own stringent demands for chastity onto those around her. This extreme defense against potential risks closely parallels the logic of resisting “contamination” in the pursuit of cleanliness. Both are ways of coping with the mental pressure brought about by traditional concepts through self-imposed strict rules. The

only difference is that the “contaminants” have changed from physical dirt to abstract moral blemishes.

“Oh, goodness me!” she said. ‘Deborah, there’s a gentleman sitting in the drawing-room, with his arm round Miss Jessie’s waist!’ Miss Matty’s eyes looked large with terror.”

(Gaskell 21)

This was not a scene that would cause fear in the eyes of an outsider. It was just an intimate physical gesture. However, in the cultural context of women in Cranford, it was magnified into an unbelievable act.

Mrs. Gaskell uses exaggerated descriptions to reveal the overly restrained and anxious psychological state of the women in Cranford. In an environment lacking material protection and economic security, they regard chastity as the only capital they can firmly control, so any potential breach of boundaries is perceived as a major crisis. This obsession with chastity is actually a defensive mechanism they employ to cope with social uncertainty. By adhering to strict moral standards, they seek to gain a sense of security and control.

3. Ordering Behaviors: Conservatism in Actions

The need for order in obsessive-compulsive disorder manifests as an individual’s relentless pursuit of absolute regularity and predictability in their environment, behavior, or thought patterns. This need is often accompanied by a strong desire for control, leading patients to engage in ritualized behaviors such as repeatedly arranging, categorizing, and calibrating objects to fit into a predefined logical framework. This serves as a defense mechanism against anxiety triggered by chaos or uncertainty. For them, the disruption of order is not merely a physical disorder but also signifies the collapse of psychological defenses. Therefore, even minor deviations, such as a slight misplacement of an object, can trigger intense discomfort and an urge to repeatedly correct the situation.

The community life in Cranford also adheres strictly to order. This order has been passed down through unwritten traditional norms and has become an implicit rule governing the town. There were fixed patterns for daily meal arrangements, the use of tableware, time agreements and etiquette in social interactions, and even the ways in which neighbors interact with each other. Mrs. Gaskell demonstrated the complex mentality of traditional communities in the face of change during the social transformation of the Victorian era. She did not simply criticize the rigidity of this order, but rather used the townspeople’s adherence to it to reveal the deep-seated longing for stability and security felt by individuals, especially the women, in the face of the tidal wave of change sweeping through the era. This insistence on order was both a survival strategy for dealing with the uncertainties of the external world and a reflection of the fragility of traditional social structures under the impact of emerging forces.

3.1. The Adherence to Tea Party Traditions

In the past, the ladies of Cranford loved tea parties and visiting others. During these activities, they strictly adhered to the rules and order of visiting, with an abnormal, almost obsessive sensitivity to the order of things.

It is particularly evident that there are unwritten rules regarding the timing of visits. There are specific days and hours that are considered appropriate for paying a visit. One cannot drop in at any time or on any day. For example, if the second day after arrival is a rest day, no one will come to disturb. However, on the third day, there will surely be visitors. During the day, the early morning and late afternoon are usually not considered suitable visiting hours. The period from 12 o’clock to 3 p.m. is generally recognized as the appropriate time to visit friends. There was a conversation about the rules and regulations for visiting and calls:

“It is the third day; I dare say your mamma has told you, my dear, never to let more than three days elapse between receiving a call and returning it; and also, that you are never to stay longer than a quarter of an hour.’

‘But am I to look at my watch? How am I to find out when a quarter of an hour has passed?’

‘You must keep thinking about the time, my dear, and not allow yourself to forget it in conversation.’”

(Gaskell 3)

This kind of quantified restriction far exceeds the flexibility of general social etiquette. The women in Cranford have internalized the external time rules as individual psychological shackles. This mandatory requirement for invisible timing essentially implants the community’s obsession with order into an individual’s thinking mode, making them unconsciously become the enforcers and maintainers of the rules.

When Miss Matty, Miss Pole and “I” (Mary Smith) went to visit Mr. Holbrook, they expressed their admiration for old customs. They also followed a fixed order when eating. Although everyone loved meatballs, they had to be served after the soup. Beef was only served after the soup and meatballs had been eaten. Miss Matty even “picked up her peas, one by one, on the point of the prongs, much as Aminé ate her grains of rice after her previous feast with the Ghoul” (Gaskell 42), which showed she was unwilling to break any possible dining order.

Just as people with obsessive-compulsive disorder feel extremely uncomfortable when the order of their belongings is disrupted, Miss Matty and her friends also felt anxious when the order of their meal was disrupted. For them, the order of the meal was not simply a dietary habit, but a microcosm of social order. The sequence in which each dish was served and the manner in which they ate reinforced the collective belief that everything has its proper order. Mrs. Gaskell’s detailed portrayal of the rules and orders serves to highlight the strong dependence of women in the closed communities of the Victorian era on a controllable order, as well as the implicit resistance to change in the outside world that underlies this dependence.

3.2. The Adherence to Social Hierarchy

The ladies of Cranford adhere to class hierarchy in both speech and behavior. Young women must follow the rules set by their elders and express their opinions or show their vitality with extreme caution, for fear of being seen as frivolous, reckless, or disrespectful. Older ladies, on the other hand, accepted this obedience with an almost natural air of authority, and their attitudes influenced the younger ladies’ choices in speech and behavior. This invisible constraint confined the younger ladies’ speech and behavior within the bounds permitted by the hierarchy, gradually internalizing this obedience into instinct through self-discipline.

Before Miss Jenkyns passed away, Miss Matty followed all the rules her sister had set for her. Even after her sister’s death, she continued to follow those habits. Those behaviors that had become ritualized were actually Miss Matty’s way of protecting herself. Mrs. Gaskell portrayed how women without independent financial resources, during the period of social transformation, tried their best to prevent a decline in their living standards by adopting a conservative approach.

Miss Jenkyns did not want Miss Jessie, who was new to Cranford and unfamiliar with the town’s social hierarchy, to say that her uncle was a shopkeeper in Edinburgh, for fear of losing her status:

“Miss Jenkyns tried to drown this confession by a terrible cough — for the Honourable Mrs Jamieson was sitting at the card-table nearest Miss Jessie, and what would she say or think, if she found out she was in the same room with a shopkeeper’s niece!”

(Gaskell 9)

Her severe coughing was both an urgent remedy for Miss Jessie's "slip of the tongue" and an instinctive rejection of information that could break down class barriers. She was afraid that such class confusion would damage her own dignity and status in the hierarchical order, as well as that of her community.

Mrs. Jamieson's behavior also reflected her adherence to the hierarchical order. When her sister-in-law arrived:

"Mrs Jamieson came now to insinuate pretty plainly that she did not particularly wish that the Cranford ladies should call upon her sister-in-law... Mrs Jamieson wish to appear to her noble sister-in-law as if she only visited 'county' families."

(Gaskell 88)

This strict screening of social circles was an important way for her to maintain her social status. This adherence to class hierarchy in both speech and behavior forms the foundation of Cranford's stable social order. The caution of the young, the authority of the elderly, and the clear boundaries in cross-class interactions collectively uphold this hierarchical system. The women are well aware that if these rules are broken, the current stable state could be disrupted, and their own lives and status would also face uncertain changes. Therefore, they voluntarily adhere to these rules, ensuring that the class order in Cranford continues to be maintained.

4. Intrusive Thoughts: Emotional Anxiety

Mrs. Gaskell lived in an era of change. "Change" seemed to be the keyword of the times. The Industrial Revolution was in full swing, with smoke-belching factories taking over farmland and rumbling trains connecting cities. New ideas challenged people's worldviews and values. Change meant uncertainty. People hoped for the better, but they also feared the unexpected and the upheavals that change could bring.

In particular, women who are excluded from the forefront of technological development are unable to predict the future trends of science and technology or the direction of future intellectual trends. As a result, they lack control over their own lives, are more prone to anxiety, and tend to protect themselves by withdrawing into themselves to avoid exposure to new developments.

The intrusive thoughts is an unwelcome, involuntary, and disturbing, frustrating, or painful thought that often occurs without warning and can be difficult to manage or eliminate. People who are troubled by intrusive thoughts often find it difficult to tolerate uncertainty. Intolerance of uncertainty refers to "cognitive biases triggered when individuals encounter uncertain events in complex and ever-changing social life" (Li et al. 195). Obsessive-compulsive disorder patients are unable to tolerate the uncertainty caused by obsessive thoughts, which leads to suffering and compulsive behaviors to alleviate that suffering. They tend to exaggerate threats and become overly anxious and fearful about uncertain situations. They may choose a safe self-protection mode, attempting to avoid uncertainty by controlling their surroundings.

The women in Cranford set were also affected by the changes of the times, and their lives were disrupted by sudden events. These ladies were anxious about being harmed and feared that everything they possessed, including their material possessions and status, would be damaged by intrusions. This fear is not simply a rejection of foreign things, but is rooted in the small-town residents' extreme desire for stability in their existing way of life. Intrusive thoughts are actually a reaction to anxiety within them. OCD-like symptoms, especially intrusive thoughts, appear frequently in the novel.

4.1. The Fear of Intrusion

The 1850s, when Mrs. Gaskell wrote *Cranford*, was a period marked the peak of railway construction in Britain. The element of "train" also appears frequently in the novel, playing a

role in promoting the development of the plot. The railways not only reshaped the way geographical spaces were connected, but also had a profound impact on the previously isolated communities. The advent of the train also disrupted the tranquility of the isolated town of Cranford. The extension of the railway broke the town's original isolation, and this physical connection made the female residents of Cranford feel the approach of outside forces, causing psychological resistance. Disturbed by intrusive thoughts, ladies in Cranford experienced anxiety about these sudden occurrences, and are unable to control their negative thoughts.

From the very beginning of the train's construction, it faced strong opposition from the residents of the small town. Ladies in Cranford considered the railway as "obnoxious railroad" (Gaskell 4), and psychologically dislike and reject people associated with railway work. Captain Brown, who had just arrived in town, was the object of everyone's rejection. He represents two forms of intrusion, one for outsiders and one for railways.

The women's exclusionary attitude toward him was not merely because he was a man, but also because his arrival disrupted the town's established customs and traditions. He disregarded the tradition of visiting hours established by the women, openly complained about his poverty without any hesitation, and never seemed concerned about maintaining his dignity. This sudden "intruder" disrupted the sense of security the ladies had built up in the town. He was like an unstable factor, making everyone unsure whether he would negatively impact their peaceful lives, thereby triggering anxiety. And more than one lady in Cranford expressed her dislike for him.

However, Captain Brown did not care about the coolness of the townspeople towards him, but instead interacted with others in a warm and friendly manner. The people of Cranford were not rigid and closed-minded; when they felt Captain Brown's sincerity and simplicity, they gradually changed their attitude towards him. Over time, he became a beloved figure in the town, gaining him an extraordinary place as an authority among the Cranford ladies (Gaskell 5).

Another figure who "intruded" into Cranford was magician Signor Brunoni. After he arrived, he used his amazing magic tricks to make many ladies think he could do magic. And panic arrived, too. The ladies believed that he was involved in the thefts that had occurred in the town, and when they heard rumors of attacks by bandits from outside the town, the entire town was thrown into a state of panic. This association, which lacks any solid evidence, was a projection of their instinctive rejection and fear of outsiders, a concrete manifestation of their deep-seated anxiety that outsiders would disrupt the order of the town.

The ladies felt that their personal safety was seriously threatened, and their vigilance toward their surroundings became unusually high. They even exhibited compulsive behaviors such as repeatedly checking whether the doors and windows were locked and being overly sensitive to any movements made by strangers. These reactions were essentially psychological defense strategies they adopted to cope with their inner anxiety and sense of loss of control when faced with external intrusion. They attempted to regain control of their lives by strengthening their perception of and guard against external threats.

When the truth came out, the ladies broke the misunderstanding with the magician, and everyone was in harmony with each other. When the magician was injured and needed help, the ladies reached out to help him.

The acceptance of Captain Brown and the magician Brunoni reflects this panic over "invasion", which is not directed at people or objects, but rather a fear that one's stable state is being disrupted. This fear of external intrusion gives rise to intrusive thoughts, which are precisely the externalization of the anxiety that they cannot suppress deep within their hearts. Unable to prevent external changes, they attempt to construct a psychological defense mechanism through these recurring worries about the disruption of their stable state, in order to cope with

the uncertainties that leave them feeling helpless. This is another clear manifestation of compulsive behavior as a psychological defense mechanism.

4.2. The Fear of Social Judgment

This fear of disruption to a stable state permeates the daily behaviors of women in Cranford. They are often consumed by anxiety that their own changes might spark gossip among others, leading them to overthink and overanalyze every action, fearing that their behavior might be perceived as unsociable or inappropriate by others. This excessive deliberation is, in essence, a defense mechanism against the soft intrusion of potential negative evaluations from the outside world.

The ladies in Cranford liked to chat, so rumors spread quickly in this relatively closed town. This invisibly increases the pressure on residents, especially young women, to live under the eyes of others.

“She was in the habit of spending the morning in rambling from shop to shop; not to purchase anything (except an occasional reel of cotton, or a piece of tape), but to see the new articles and report upon them, and to collect all the stray pieces of intelligence in the town.”

(Gaskell 103)

Miss Pole repeatedly entered and left the shop, gathering information, which accelerated the spread of news in the small town and also alleviated her own anxiety about public opinion.

The ladies of Cranford, even when in economic hardship, would perform many acts to maintain their dignity. For example, even though they had prepared the food themselves with their maids, they would deliberately have their maids serve the guests according to protocol, while they themselves would act like the hosts, as if all this was in accordance with established class norms. Only in this way could they appear “polite” to the outside world. Even if the guests saw through this deliberate facade, they would pretend to be unaware out of consideration for her dignity and public pressure, continuing to play along with this charade to maintain appearances. This collective “performance” stemmed from their excessive concern with others’ opinions, leading them to constantly imagine others’ negative views of them.

They may repeatedly wonder whether being discovered to be in financial distress would lead to being looked down upon, or whether such actions might be seen as beneath their dignity. These intrusive thoughts linger like shadows that refuse to fade. To dispel these negative thoughts, they built a programmed performance to create an image that met the community’s expectations. Through this obsessive-compulsive like behavior, they defend themselves against the risk of being “devalued” or “excluded” in order to maintain their inner sense of security. This is also a psychological defense mechanism they adopt when driven by anxiety.

5. Conclusion

Illness is an element that frequently appears in Mrs. Gaskell’s novels. In *Cranford*, the portrayal of illness-related elements is particularly unique. The OCD-like behaviors commonly exhibited by the townspeople resonate with Gaskell’s profound insights into human nature and society, which ultimately reflect a collective attempt to cope with anxiety and maintain a sense of control in a rapidly changing society.

The pursuit of cleanliness among upper-middle-class women in Cranford has transcended basic hygiene needs, evolving into a ritualistic, obsessive-compulsive behavior. Whether it is laying newspapers to create a path in social settings or Martha’s extreme cleanliness and use of oil-cloth in commercial settings, these are concrete manifestations of their response to contamination anxiety. This behavior is influenced by the Victorian-era notion that cleanliness is tied to social class and morality. It also serves as a psychological defense mechanism for

maintaining a sense of belonging within a closed community and coping with the uncertainty of external change, deeply reflecting their longing for stability and security in the Victorian era. Similarly, compulsive adherence to traditional customs, strict observance of social hierarchy, and other such behaviors are examples of order-oriented OCD-like behavior. These behaviors aimed to maintain a stable social framework and provide people with a sense of security amid the social norms brought about by industrialization.

The ladies in Cranford were also influenced by intrusive thoughts, which led to unfounded speculation that satisfied their need to find answers. They are not deliberately distorting the truth, but rather seeking an outlet to alleviate their anxiety in the absence of the ability to protect themselves. They attempt to construct a protective wall around themselves through repetitive imagination to relieve their anxiety about being in a passive state. Whether it's a train that suddenly invades their living space or a thief who invades the small town, there was nothing the ladies could do to stop or resist them.

Mrs. Gaskell depicts the helplessness of the ladies of Cranford in the tide of the times. The various reactions triggered by intrusive thoughts are not simply individual psychological problems, but a collective microcosm of women in traditional Victorian society facing external shocks. The social environment in which they live not only limits their ability to resist external threats, but also invisibly places the burden of maintaining community order and their own dignity on them. This reflects the deep-seated desire of women to seek order amid chaos and strive for control despite their powerlessness, under the dual pressures of industrial civilization and traditional gender constraints. It also imbues the portrayal of this group in Cranford with a sense of historical depth and the complexity of human nature.

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