

Beyond Bessie Lee: Mid-Nineteenth Century Nursing and *Jane Eyre*

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Every woman, or at least almost every woman, in England has, at one time or another of her life, charge of the personal health of somebody, whether child or invalid, — in other words, every woman is a nurse.

Florence Nightingale, Preface to *Notes on Nursing*¹

1 *Jane Eyre* as a Successful Female *Bildungsroman*

The purpose of this essay is to view Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* in the contemporary discourse of nursing and read it as the story of a middle-class motherless girl's formation into a woman who finally achieves an idealised realisation of what the term 'nurse' ultimately represented in the mid-nineteenth century. Among other generic patterns critics have found in *Jane Eyre*, pilgrimage and *Bildungsroman* provide helpful frameworks to trace the heroine's progress. Helene Moglen compares Jane to a 'dispossessed princess' in a romance as well as to a protagonist in a pilgrimage,² while Pauline Nestor defines the story as a fable-like personal pilgrimage.³ Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar see *Jane Eyre* as structured like *Pilgrim's Progress* as well as a fairy tale and a *Bildungsroman*, in which Jane's pilgrimage towards maturity, selfhood and equality is dramatised.⁴ Barry V. Qualls regards *Jane Eyre* as one of the most striking examples of Victorian novels which develop through a pilgrimage plot and in which Brontë asserts that a woman has a *Bildung* of her own.⁵ Franco Moretti views the novel as a *Bildungsroman* with fairy-tale colouring and places it in the generic tradition of *Bildungsroman* widespread in Europe.⁶

The definition of *Bildungsroman*, or the novel of formation or development, varies according to country, gender and era. Most critics who attempt to define it admit that no single novel precisely follows the theoretical structure. It can be said, however, that most *Bildungsromane* overall depict the protagonists' learning process before their final artistic, intellectual, spiritual, or social achievement. *Jane Eyre* indeed dramatises not only the heroine's completion of the school curriculum but also her acquisition of social skills such as self-control and self-defence under the tutelage of Helen Burns and Miss Temple, before she reaches a place which safely accommodates her as a central family member. The characteristics of the Goethean *Bildungsroman*, in other words, the male German *Bildungsroman* which Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch and Elizabeth Langland describe are also at an abstract level found in the story of a female protagonist by a female author, *Jane Eyre*: a model of cumulative, gradual and total organic growth; individual achievement and social integration; a young person's movement from ignorance and innocence to wisdom and maturity.⁷ Jerome Buckley's definition of the male

English *Bildungsroman* is also relatively applicable to the paradigm of *Jane Eyre*: a child of some sensibility grows up in the country in a hostile relationship to his family, especially his father; his first schooling being frustrating, he goes to the city where his real education begins which includes at least two love affairs; after painful soul-searching, he enters his maturity and demonstrates the degree of his success or the wisdom of his choice back home.⁸

Some female critics maintain that the female *Bildungsroman* shows a different pattern from the male version: while the male *Bildungsroman* displays variations on a basic success story, the female version reveals the difficulty of attaining such success as the final result of the heroine's development and progress. Although *Jane Eyre* shares many of the characteristics of the male German *Bildungsroman* Abel, Hirsch and Langland find, it simultaneously shows parallels with what they define as the typical female *Bildungsroman* in structure. They argue that, because women's sphere is defined in the home, in the female novel of formation, the heroine merely exchanges one domestic sphere for another and her object is not to learn how to take care of herself but to find a place where she can be protected, often in return for taking care of others.⁹ The framework of the female novel of development in fact faithfully reflects the socio-historical context of mid-nineteenth century women: they were socially defined as figures in a household and literally confined in the home of men such as their father, husband or master-employer. Susan Fraiman also observes the boundaries of the female *Bildungsroman* as a success story with a true happy-ending. The heroine has trouble with mentors or mothers, either dead or deficient, as models, and if she has a mentor, it is often her future husband who schools her in order to wed her; consequently, her marriage to him reduces apprenticeship to a process of marital binding and it never leads the heroine to mastery but only to a lifetime as perennial novice.¹⁰ She then never overcomes her 'maternal loss', but remains as a child under the patronage of her husband. Indeed, Jane basically stays in the home, if she moves around, and engages herself in taking care of others as teacher, governess and nurse. She is a motherless child who has trouble with her surrogate mothers, Bessie and Mrs Reed.

My contention is that, despite these social limitations on female development and achievement, *Jane Eyre* can be read as a personal pilgrimage and *Bildungsroman* in which the heroine achieves a successful ending within the domestic sphere.¹¹ It is 'nursing' with its extensive meanings which first disappoints and afflicts the heroine but finally gives her a sense of settlement and solution. This essay basically shares Adrienne Rich's interpretation of the novel as the story of a motherless girl's success and survival in collaboration with other female characters,¹² but it at the same time attempts to show how Jane, as Fraiman argues, fails in seeing them as ideal developmental models. Fraiman views Bessie as a key figure in the heroine's development because Jane's objective is to claim and reconceive the place of Bessie, and of the working woman refigured by Adèle, Céline, Grace Poole and Rochester's servant, Mary.¹³ This essay contends rather that Jane tries to overcome her emotional frustration and physical weakness in her childhood by becoming a better nursing agent than Bessie whose paid-nursing intensifies her misery as an isolated orphan at Gateshead. It traces the process in which she experiences several cases of unsuccessful or imperfect nursing, while she becomes reconciled with her former child-nurse, before finally achieving the position of an ideal 'nurse' herself.

2 Mid-Nineteenth Century 'Nursing' as Mothering

The mid-nineteenth century term 'nursing' covered a much wider range of jobs related to looking after somebody than just medical nursing with which the term is most commonly associated today. The job of looking after somebody was not as clearly divided into identifiable professions as today but was performed flexibly by those who were available in the household. Nursing agents discussed in this essay therefore include sick-nurses, child-nurses, domestic servants, governesses and even teachers.¹⁴

In the mid-nineteenth century where there was virtually no generally accepted body of medical knowledge, the notions of a nurse, a doctor or a hospital were vague. It is generally considered that medical nursing first emerged as a distinct and secular profession during the 1860s, around when Florence Nightingale introduced modern nursing training, to 1930 period.¹⁵ Although the Royal Colleges of Physicians and Surgeons and the Society of Apothecaries licensed suppliers of medical treatment, anybody could build up a reputation as a healer, a bonesetter, a herbalist and a midwife.¹⁶ Although nursing the sick was performed mostly at home, there were a limited number of hospitals. In 1851 there were only 7,619 patients recorded by the census enumerators as resident in hospitals.¹⁷ It can be estimated that before 1861 there were fewer than 1,000 'nurses'.¹⁸ Hospital nurses lived and worked in appalling surroundings at risk of epidemics under harsh working conditions. It is reported that nurses not only drank but also abused patients, stole and sold the property of the hospital they worked in,¹⁹ and were sometimes sexually involved with male patients, doctors and medical students.²⁰

The upper and middle classes were nursed in their home, whereby not just the immediate family but the whole household contributed to the care of the sick.²¹ Any family who could afford one or two assistants employed 'private nurses' or 'handywomen'.²² Families who could not afford the extra expense, but had sufficient servants, let them nurse the sick. Those who could not spare any of their servants from the everyday routine nursed the sick themselves. In short, the three kinds of home nursing were largely based on economic necessity, rather than on romantic familial love.²³

It is easy to imagine then that the practice of 'nursing' was elementary and primitive by today's standards. A paid nurse, whether at home or in hospital, would have given the elementary physical care which amounted to little more than a specialized form of charring and which a patient in other circumstances might have received from an amateur family member or personal servant.²⁴ Dingwall, Rafferty and Webster define early nineteenth-century nursing as follows:

[T]he greatest part of the care required by the sick involved some kind of assistance with activities of daily living that they were unable to carry out for themselves.²⁵

As long as the sick need assistance to fulfil their daily routine, a nurse's duties, more or less, overlap with domestic service. Indeed the antecedents of the nursing profession were historically drawn essentially from the domestic servant class.²⁶

It is not only the sick but also children who need assistance and personal service. If they were not officially employed as child-nurses, governesses in practice fulfilled the duties of

personal servants for their charges and many employers expected them to do so.²⁷ Servants also sometimes played a part in teaching their employers' children, inculcating in them knowledge of things, discipline, the unwritten rules of gender difference in behaviour such as what girls should not do and boys were allowed to do.²⁸ The only clear difference between governesses and servants was their social class. Although governesses originally belonged to the class of their employers, they were often excluded from the family as upper servants, performing the duty of nursing and needlework, and despised by the real servants.²⁹

It is hardly surprising that nursing-related jobs were performed mostly by women, because looking after dependants in need of assistance could be seen as a version of 'mothering'. Gender constraints defined the nature of women's work, and, conversely, women's work was defined by the contemporary association of women with motherhood which was, throughout Victoria's reign, regarded as the most valuable and natural component of female experience.³⁰ Women were thought to be most suitable for mothering jobs such as child-nursing, sick-nursing and education. On the basis of this tradition and history, Nightingale stated that not every person but "every woman" is a nurse of somebody, "whether child or invalid".

The work among upper and middle-class mothers and wives was divided into such overlapping aspects as sick-nursing, child-nursing, teaching, cleaning, sewing and cooking, and the roles were 'sold' and 'bought', allocated to working-class women and middle-class women in need. These jobs were therefore done in the household. When men had no wife, they resorted to their sister or any female relative who could work as the 'woman' in their household. When no woman was available, men bought the service of a 'woman' for their household. Reverend Patrick Brontë's several attempts to marry after his wife's death may have been related to his practical need to maintain the household and raise the children. He finally managed to supply a 'woman' in his house by asking his sister-in-law to live with his family. The custom of referring to housekeepers as 'Mrs', whether or not they were married, symbolises their position as a 'woman' or 'wife' of the family.

It then comes as no surprise that female domestic employees who performed the mother's work sometimes formed a quasi-family relationship with those they served. Governesses were in an awkward position in the household where they worked, not only in terms of their social status, but also in terms of their own possibilities of maternity and matrimony. Although they were required to act to some extent as surrogate mothers, they were themselves childless and their marriage prospects were restricted.³¹ As they were isolated from their own family and friends, there was a strong need to love and be loved in return. While they were expected to take care of their charges with their mothering 'nature', they were, paradoxically, virtually forbidden to be emotionally rewarded for it.³² As an example, Mary Wollstonecraft is said to have been dismissed from the household where she was working as a governess only because the children were showing signs of loving her more than their mother.³³ If their working conditions were more favourable than those of hospital or private nurses and domestic servants, as long as they had to work in someone's home as an employee, governesses had to endure not only financially and physically but also emotionally a hard life.

3 Jane Eyre's Progress Towards True Nursing

With the contemporary notion of 'nursing' discussed in the previous section in mind, I should now like to trace Jane Eyre's development from an orphan to an idealised 'nurse'. Bessie, as her paid surrogate mother, bears considerable importance throughout Jane's childhood. Like many mid-nineteenth century servants, Bessie takes on multiple roles for Jane in the Reed household. She is present at Jane's epochal moments and watches her charge's development. Bessie also functions as a narrative device like a chorus voice to give the reader important information on the heroine, singing a ballad which summarises and foretells the orphan's destiny,³⁴ and showing the reader how she has been transformed after the red room episode and after the eight years at Lowood.

As her child-nurse, Bessie is directly responsible for Jane's health which she can both promote and endanger. A domestic medical textbook popular from the late eighteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century stated the importance of nurses for children's well-being:

Nurses are guilty of many faults, which prove fatal to infants. It is therefore the duty of parents to watch over their conduct with the greatest care, and to be extremely cautious in the choice of them.³⁵

As an orphan, Jane has no parent who carefully watches over her child-nurse's conduct so the greater part of Jane's well-being is in Bessie's hands. The significance of Bessie in relation to Jane's physical and psychological health is suggested as early as the second paragraph of the novel. After stating that there is no possibility of a walk because of the weather, the narrator Jane describes how the young Jane's sense of misery produced by the bullying Reed children is intensified by the chidings of her child-nurse:

I was glad of it: I never liked long walks, especially on chilly afternoons: dreadful to me was the coming home in the raw twilight, with nipped fingers and toes, and a heart saddened by the chidings of Bessie, the nurse, and humbled by the consciousness of my physical inferiority to Eliza, John, and Georgiana Reed. (7)

Jane's very first spoken discourse in the novel also reveals her anxiety about her nurse's possible unfairness or misunderstanding: "What does Bessie say I have done?" (7). So far, Bessie's management of her charge's health is not very successful, for Jane is a nervous child physically inferior to the Reed children.³⁶

In the red room episode, Bessie is described as a child-nurse who is not straightforwardly fond of her charge but more attentive to her than the rest of the household. Appalled by her 'tantrums', Bessie calls Jane "a mad cat" (12), and tries to tie her up with garters. Yet she loosens her hold once she sees her charge really subsiding, notices that she has experienced something paranormal in the red room, and asks if she is ill or hurt, while Abbot, Mrs Reed's lady's maid, simply accuses Jane of making a noise. Her admonition of her charge's behaviour sounds cruel to a child but holds an important lesson for someone in Jane's position: "you should try to be useful

and pleasant, then, perhaps, you would have a home here" (13); "If you dread them [people], they'll dislike you" (39). As a result, if Jane demonstrates no uninhibited affection for her, she finds Bessie's presence "far less obnoxious to [her] than that of Abbot" (19).

Although Bessie becomes kinder in the face of Jane's nervous fit, she continues to treat her charge somewhat inconsiderately and callously. She increases Jane's worry by whispering about her fit and asking another servant Sarah to sleep in the same room: "I daren't for my life be alone with that poor child to-night; she might die; it's such a strange thing she should have that fit: I wonder if she saw anything" (19).³⁷ Bessie lies to Mr Lloyd, the apothecary, that her charge has had a fall. Hearing from Abbot the story of Jane's parents, Bessie shows momentary sympathy, sighing, but the next moment she praises Georgiana Reed and thinks about supper. Thus, although she fulfils important roles for Jane on a daily basis, Bessie is at this point only a paid servant who simply performs her duties.

It is after Jane's first rebellion against Aunt Reed that her relationship with Bessie begins to improve. The excitement after the epochal event makes Jane bolder and more affectionate towards her nurse. Bessie returns her loving gesture with a promise to ask the cook to bake a cake and have tea together that afternoon. The scene closes in a friendly tone with Jane's kiss and Bessie's entertainment:

"And so you're glad to leave me?"

"Not at all, Bessie; indeed, just now I am rather sorry."

"Just now! and rather! How coolly my little lady says it! I daresay now if I were to ask you for a kiss you wouldn't give it me: you'd say you'd rather not."

"I'll kiss you and welcome: bend your head down." Bessie stooped; we mutually embraced, and I followed her into the house quite comforted. That afternoon lapsed in peace and harmony; and in the evening Bessie told me some of her most enchanting stories and sang me some of her sweetest songs. Even for me life had its gleams of sunshine. (40)

Next morning, Bessie is "the only person yet risen" (40) and helps Jane to depart for Lowood. By this time of separation, there is much less emotional inhibition between them: "I was taken from Bessie's neck, to which I clung with kisses" (41). Jane symbolically describes the ending of this period as separation from her nurse and the house: "Thus was I severed from Bessie and Gateshead" (41).

Even after Bessie disappears from her life physically, Jane retains what her nurse has instilled in her mind. In the coach on the way to Lowood, Jane imagines and dreads the kidnappers who had appeared in Bessie's 'fireside chronicles'. During the typhus outbreak at Lowood, Jane, almost forgetting Helen, spends most of her time with Mary Ann Wilson who, like Bessie, can tell Jane "many things [she] liked to hear" with "a turn for narrative" (77-78). In her encounter with Rochester, the adult Jane associates him with the 'Gytrash', a spirit which has appeared in one of Bessie's tales. The ominous dream of an infant reminds Jane of Bessie telling Abbot that a dream of children is "a sure sign of trouble, either to one's self or one's kin" (220). Thus Bessie has helped to shape the child Jane's taste and the adult Jane retains and exercises it

in viewing the world. Most significantly, the narrating-Jane is repeating what Bessie would often do: narrating a romantic and adventurous story successfully.³⁸

After receiving Bessie's nursing which is not sufficiently successful to promote her physical strength and mental stability at Gateshead, Jane meets at Lowood an ideal nurse figure, Miss Temple, who capably fulfils the roles of sick-nurse, child-nurse, mother and teacher.³⁹ She does her best under Brocklehurst's control to provide her pupils with more and better food. She teaches Jane how to convince people and defend herself with words and refutes Brocklehurst's accusation against her in front of the whole school. She induces from the fourteen-year old Helen "fervid eloquence" (73) by discussing politics, history and foreign literature, and examines her Latin. She is simultaneously benevolent and beautiful, kissing and holding Jane and giving her "a child's pleasure from the contemplation of her face, her dress, her one or two ornaments, her white forehead, her clustered and shining curls, and beaming dark eyes" (71). She is an attentive nurse, examining Helen's pulse and asking how she feels. When the outbreak of typhus transforms the Orphan Asylum "into a hospital" (76), Miss Temple devotes herself to caring for the sick pupils: "Miss Temple's whole attention was absorbed by the patients: she lived in the sick-room, never quitting it except to snatch a few hours' rest at night" (76). She also takes personal care of Helen, accommodating her in her own room.

The illness episode at Lowood, however, displays to Jane both the conventions of contemporary paid nursing and the boundaries of devoted voluntary nursing. She finds Helen's paid nurse asleep in the sickroom, neglecting her patient's fit of coughing, and sees forty-five out of the eighty girls fall ill and many of them die despite Miss Temple's devotion. Jane herself proves to be an incompetent nurse for Helen. She is simply helpless in the face of Helen's coughing fit. She never fully understands Helen's idea of going to God after her death so cannot console her with her sympathy. It is Helen who takes care of Jane's body: 'Jane, your little feet are bare; lie down and cover yourself with my quilt'; 'Are you warm, darling?' (82). Jane stays asleep when Helen dies. Thus, although Jane meets an ideal nurse figure and acquires a notion of committed nursing at Lowood, she at the same time confronts the difficulty of restoring health.

Eight years after Jane's departure for Lowood, Bessie reappears to bid farewell to her old charge who moves to Thornfield. At this reunion, neither Bessie nor Jane hesitates to express her delight:

"It's her, I am sure! --- I could have told her anywhere!" cried the individual who stopped my progress and took my hand.

I looked. I saw a woman attired like a well-dressed servant, matronly, yet still young; very good-looking, with black hair and eyes, and lively complexion.

"Well, who is it?" she asked, in a voice and with a smile I half recognised; "You've not quite forgotten me, I think, Miss Jane?"

In another second I was embracing and kissing her rapturously. "Bessie! Bessie! Bessie!". (90)

Bessie tells her former charge that she has married Robert Leaven, the coachman of the Reed family, and has christened her daughter Jane. Here Bessie, who is keen to observe how Jane has

grown up, in effect shows the reader how Jane is “quite a lady” (92) now, cultured and educated. Bessie also discloses to Jane and the reader information on the present situation of the Reed family and the visit of Uncle Eyre, Jane’s future benefactor, to Gateshead some seven years ago. Thus Bessie is a reminder of the past and a herald of the future, present both at the ending of the heroine’s old world, Lowood, and at the beginning of a new one, Thornfield.

At Thornfield, Jane takes several steps further towards the position of ideal nurse by repeating nursing-like acts, but still has a long way to go. When Rochester falls from his horse and sprains his ankle, she voluntarily proposes to help him. Jane, however, cannot even fulfil his request for her to hold his horse’s bridle, dreading the excited creature. All she does is to let Rochester lay his hand on her shoulder and hand the whip to him after he manages to mount the horse by himself. Jane nonetheless enjoys a sense of being helpful and active: “I was pleased to have done something; trivial, transitory though the deed was, it was yet an active thing, and I was weary of an existence all passive” (115). This event marks her entry into quasi-nursing at Thornfield. Back in the house, she does not really nurse Rochester but listens to his story. It is the injured Rochester who stimulates Jane’s mind with the account of his past and improves her health:

The ease of his manner freed me from painful restraint; the friendly frankness, as correct as cordial, with which he treated me, drew me to him. I felt at times as if he were my relation, rather than my master: yet he was imperious sometimes still; but I did not mind that; I saw it was his way. So happy, so gratified did I become with this new interest added to life, that I ceased to pine after kindred. My thin crescent-destiny seemed to enlarge; the blanks of existence were filled up; my bodily health improved; I gathered flesh and strength. (146)

This passage suggests that Jane’s true happiness lies in acquiring a substitute family with whom she can promote her mental and physical wholesomeness, which she cannot really gain by teaching Adèle.

Jane then saves Rochester from the fire Bertha has caused but she does not really nurse him: she only awakens her master who is stupefied by the smoke, and extinguishes the fire. Although she saves his life, her own health is threatened because Rochester leaves her feeling cold in his room and, even after his return, does not release her until she says so. As a result, next day both Adèle and Mrs Fairfax notice her looking unwell. Although her nursing of Richard Mason on Rochester’s orders further increases the intimacy between the governess and the master, it is still far from the ideal nursing she comes to perform at the end of the story. It is Richard Mason and not Rochester whom Jane nurses. It is a task imposed on a governess/servant by her master so she has no autonomy and is even forbidden to talk to her patient. The health of her own mind and body is threatened again while she nurses Richard Mason, confined in the attic in fear of the bestial creature in the adjacent room: “I could not have lasted more than two hours: many a week has seemed shorter” (211).

After these events, Bessie appears again to mark the end of Jane’s girlhood and the beginning of her womanhood and to help her to rationalise her past as a lonely orphan. When she

returns to Gateshead to see her dying aunt, recalled by Bessie, Jane is first brought to her old nurse's lodge before entering the house and receives her literally and metaphorically warm hospitality with food and fire:

[. . .] she insisted on my taking off my bonnet and having some tea; for she said I looked pale and tired. I was glad to accept her hospitality; and I submitted to be relieved of my travelling garb just as passively as I used to let her undress me when a child.

Old times crowded fast back on me as I watched her bustling about—setting out the tea-tray with her best china, cutting bread-and-butter, toasting a tea-cake, and, between whiles, giving little Robert or Jane an occasional tap or push, just as she used to give me in former days. Bessie had retained her quick temper as well as her light foot and good looks.

Tea ready, I was going to approach the table; but she desired me to sit still, quite in her old, peremptory tones. I must be served at the fireside, she said; and she placed before me a little round stand with my cup and a plate of toast, absolutely as she used to accommodate me with some privately purloined dainty on a nursery chair: and I smiled and obeyed her as in bygone days. [. . .]

In such conversation an hour was gone: Bessie restored to me my bonnet, &c., and, accompanied by her, I quitted the lodge for the hall. It was also accompanied by her that I had, nearly nine years ago, walked down the path I was now ascending. [. . .]

“You shall go into the breakfast-room first,” said Bessie, as she preceded me through the hall; ‘the young ladies will be there’. (227-228)

By repeating the tea time of her childhood in a pleasant way, Jane masters her unpleasant memories of her then somewhat harsh nurse. Bessie's welcome to a great degree satisfies Jane's childhood need to be cared for by a motherly figure. Furthermore, the reunion shows her another model of a good mother; the adult Jane observes that Bessie, now Mrs. Leaven, is overall a good mother for her children, if she has not been a perfect child nurse for her. After seeing Miss Temple's motherly care for her pupils as a teacher, Jane now observes how Bessie nurses her children as their true mother.

After passively accepting Bessie's motherly hospitality, Jane tries to take an active role in attending her aunt who is neglected by an irresponsible hired nurse. Aunt Reed, however, returns Jane's goodwill with her confessions of how she reluctantly came to take charge of the baby Jane, how she disliked her and how she deceitfully replied to John Eyre's letter concerning his niece. Despite Jane's attempt at reconciliation at the last moment of her aunt's life, the patient remains callous and treats her niece as a mere attendant:

“My disposition is not so bad as you think: I am passionate, but not vindictive. Many a time, as a little child, I should have been glad to love you if you would have let me; and I long earnestly to be reconciled to you now: kiss me, aunt.”

I approached my cheek to her lips: she would not touch it. She said I oppressed

her by leaning over the bed; and again demanded water. [. . .](240)

While the first sign of friendship between the young Jane and Bessie is expressed by the child's kissing the nurse, Aunt Reed's refusal to kiss her niece shows that Jane's voluntary nursing out of good will ends in failure and she never becomes reconciled with her, even though she to a considerable extent masters her childhood memory. After Jane is warmly received by her old nurse, unexpectedly accepted by Eliza and Georgiana, and her aunt dies, Bessie never reappears in her story. It no longer needs the symbolic figure of the heroine's childhood.

After the visit to Gateshead, the autobiography starts describing Jane's womanhood which is marked by her acceptance of Rochester's proposal. When her wedding is interrupted and Rochester's confinement of Bertha Mason revealed, Jane now acknowledges Grace Poole as another irresponsible nurse who is drunk, and lets her patient escape from her room and cause trouble in the mansion, and her fiancé as the manager of such dysfunctional nursing. Jane then makes an agonising decision not to play the role of moral nurse for Rochester who expects her to cure him of his past mistake of marrying Bertha.⁴⁰ Tired of life with his mad wife in the West Indies, he conceives the idea of returning to Europe for his "[r]egeneration" (308). After the revelation of Bertha's confinement, Rochester directly asks Jane to become the 'instrument' for it: "You will not be my comforter, my rescuer?" (318).

Jane refuses both to 'cure' Rochester, and to be nursed by him, because her own health is threatened. Rochester exploits the vague and elusive notion of madness to make Jane his moral 'nurse':

"Jane, my little darling (so I will call you, for so you are), you don't know what you are talking about; you misjudge me again: it is not because she is mad I hate her. If you were mad, do you think I should hate you?"

"I do indeed, sir."

"Then you are mistaken, and you know nothing about me, and nothing about the sort of love of which I am capable. Every atom of your flesh is as dear to me as my own: in pain and sickness it would still be dear. Your mind is my treasure, and if it were broken, it would be my treasure still: if you raved, my arms should confine you, and not a strait waistcoat --- your grasp, even in fury, would have a charm for me: if you flew at me as wildly as that woman did this morning, I should receive you in an embrace at least as fond as it would be restrictive. I should not shrink from you with disgust as I did from her: in your quiet moments you should have no watcher and no nurse but me [. . .]". (301)

This statement obviously contradicts his former explanation to the public that he confines Bertha because of her medically certified madness. Jane knows that Rochester cannot be a good nurse when she becomes ill and, on the contrary, he will sacrifice her health for his own well-being. He relentlessly makes Jane feel like the sick child she used to be:

Jane Eyre, who had been an ardent, expectant woman—almost a bride—was a cold,

solitary girl again: her life was pale; her prospects were desolate. [. . .] I looked at my love: that feeling which was my master's --- which he had created; it shivered in my heart, like a suffering child in a cold cradle; sickness and anguish had seized it. (295-96)

She in fact starts to feel physically weak: "I was sickening from excitement and inanition; neither meat nor drink had passed my lips that day"; "my head was still dizzy, my sight was dim, and my limbs were feeble. I could not soon recover myself" (297-98). Although Rochester administers wine to Jane and revives her temporarily, this does not necessarily prove him to be a good nurse because alcohol is essentially neither nourishing nor therapeutic but, on the contrary, could be harmful and addictive in the long run. In order to resist falling ill, she is determined not to become his mistress: "Mr. Rochester's mistress; delirious with his love half my time" and "fevered with delusive bliss" (359).⁴¹ Jane finally leaves Rochester whose will to be cured in turn endangers her health.

It is not Rochester but the Rivers family and their servant, Hannah, who look after Jane's exhausted body and soothe her agonised soul. Hannah obeys St John's orders but stays dubious about the stranger who has begged for food and one-night's accommodation. When she recovers enough to get up after passively accepting their care, Jane goes to the kitchen and actively tries to eradicate Hannah's prejudice against the poor. The scene closes with Jane's confident proposal for their reconciliation:

"But I do think hardly of you," I said; "and I'll tell you why—not so much because you refused to give me shelter, or regarded me as an impostor, as because you just now made it a species of reproach that I had no 'brass' and no house. Some of the best people that ever lived have been as destitute as I am; and if you are a Christian, you ought not to consider poverty a crime."

"No more I ought," said she: "Mr. St. John tells me so too; and I see I wor wrang—but I've clear a different notion on you now to what I had. You look a raight down dacent little crater."

"That will do—I forgive you now. Shake hands."

She put her floury and horny hand into mine: another and heartier smile illuminated her rough face: and from that moment we were friends. (342)

This resembles the scene of reconciliation between Jane and Bessie at Gateshead, but, if she is physically weak, Jane is now far more active and self-confident towards the person who nurses her. Jane never lets Hannah take any advantage of her being weak and in need of assistance, although she might if Rochester nursed her now.

Teaching at the village school in Morton after her recovery not only rewards her with her pupils' progress but also provides her with a literal and figurative home: "My home, then—when I at last find a home,—is a cottage" (358); "I felt I became a favourite in the neighbourhood. Whenever I went out, I heard on all sides cordial salutations, and was welcomed with friendly smiles" (366). Teaching village girls is, however, not her final vocation, and nor is

the cottage her final home. In fact, once she receives her legacy, she decides to leave the school after the arrival of a substitute. Similarly, Moor House cannot be her real home even after the Rivers family turn out to be her real cousins. Jane also rejects St. John's proposal of marrying her and going to India where the harsh climate is likely to affect her health. As she confesses to the reader, in her relatively happy days in Morton and Marsh End, the thought of Rochester continues to distress her. All these suggest that Jane's goal should be achieved in relation to Rochester and her home should accommodate both of them without ruining her own health.

On hearing Rochester's telepathic call, she no longer hesitates to return to him, even though she is at this point uncertain of his physical and spiritual transformation. In fact, the call is represented as something divine which Jane is compelled to answer and follow: "I seemed to penetrate very near a Mighty Spirit; and my soul rushed out in gratitude at His feet" (420); "My Spirit [. . .] is willing to do what is right; and my flesh, I hope, is strong enough to accomplish the will of Heaven" (421). It turns out that Jane's action is right because in Ferndean Rochester is described as a deformed and disfigured but reformed and redeemed man: "I thank my Maker that in the midst of judgment He has remembered mercy. I humbly entreat my Redeemer to give me strength to lead henceforth a purer life than I have done hitherto!" (448). If Jane's return to Rochester is regarded as legitimised by God, this episode places the *Bildungsroman* beyond the autobiography of an orphan and transforms it into a pilgrim's progress.

His disability provides not only Rochester with the punishment for his past sin and final redemption, but also Jane with an opportunity to nurse the man she loves: "I will be your neighbour, your nurse, your housekeeper. I find you lonely: I will be your companion" (435). The subject of these sentences, 'I', symbolises Jane's self-determination and powerfully demonstrates her autonomy. Her nursing satisfies and even empowers herself as well as giving the patient "comfort" and "consolation" (435), so being with Rochester no longer threatens her own health:

There was no harassing restraint, no repressing of glee and vivacity with him; for with him I was at perfect ease, because I knew I suited him: all I said or did seemed either to console or revive him. Delightful consciousness! It brought to life and light my whole nature: in his presence I thoroughly lived; and he lived in mine. [. . .](437)

Jane then consolidates their relationship by accepting his proposal. By becoming his wife, she finds a way of asserting herself in relation to him and asserting her gradual development as a 'nurse'. As his wife, she can most effectively exercise her ability and put into practice what she has learned by observing other nursing figures and performing quasi-nursing herself, because good nursing requires true attention and affection. Rochester in fact feels most comfortable when he is being nursed by his future wife: "I preferred utter loneliness to the constant attendance of servants; but Jane's soft ministry will be a perpetual joy" (445).

Lawful marriage is not exactly something which, as Fraiman contends, chains Jane to the maternal role of an irate nurse/servant in relation to her master.⁴³ It is rather something which secures Jane a space to work in without leaving home for money to perform one of women's multiple roles and suffering bad working conditions, social isolation and emotional frustration.

The fact that Jane's final workplace is the domestic sphere indeed reveals the contemporary boundaries of a woman's progress in patriarchal society.⁴⁴ However, if a mid-nineteenth century woman like Jane is more or less destined to stay at home and perform women's or mothers' work, whether as an employee or a family member, Jane does at least obtain the best home imaginable where she can provide true nursing for the man she has chosen of her own volition while promoting her own health as well as his.

Jane's nursing finally proves to be successful when Rochester regains the sight of one of his eyes and the birth of their son releases him from symbolic castration.⁴⁵ Although Rochester once says that the "unhealthiness" (300) of Ferndean might eventually kill Bertha if he kept her there, their new home is no longer described as health-damaging but as facilitating the well-being of Jane and Rochester. Not only is Jane rewarded with Rochester's recovery but, by performing the active role of mother and nurse herself, she also compensates for her lonely childhood when she was only a passive recipient of Bessie's paid nursing. In short, by marrying and nursing Rochester, Jane is not simply serving him but also fulfilling her own needs and mastering her maternal loss. Jane Eyre transforms from a poor dependant looked after by a surrogate mother, to a charity schoolgirl, to a paid employee, to a voluntary nurse and to a wife and mother. She finally celebrates her victory in her real home where she enjoys 'mothering' her real family.

Notes

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* All citations from Brontë's text are from *Jane Eyre*. Ed. Margaret Smith, intro. and revised notes. Sally Shuttleworth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

¹ Florence Nightingale, *Notes on Nursing: What it is, and what it is not* (New York: Dover Publications, 1969). The first publication of the book in England was in 1859.

² Helene Moglen, *Charlotte Brontë: The Self Conceived* (New York: Norton, 1978) 108, 112.

³ Pauline Nestor, *Charlotte Brontë* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1987) 50.

⁴ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, 'A Dialogue of Self and Soul: Plain Jane's Progress' in *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979) passim.

⁵ Barry V. Qualls, *The Secular Pilgrims of Victorian Fiction: The Novel as Book of Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982) esp. 43-44.

⁶ Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*, new ed. (London and New York: Verso, 2000 [1987]) 187-88.

⁷ Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch and Elizabeth Langland, eds., *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1983) 5-6.

⁸ Jerome Hamilton Buckley, *Season of Youth: The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1974) 17-18. Moretti also regards the prominence of childhood and youth as one of the characteristics of the English *Bildungsroman*, 182.

⁹ Abel, Hirsch and Langland 7-8.

¹⁰ Susan Fraiman, *Unbecoming Woman: British Women Writers and the Novel of Development* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993) 6.

¹¹ As Heather Glen indicates, Jane's success is realised not solely by her efforts but also through

fairy-tale coincidences such as a legacy, a reunion with cousins and a convenient death: *Charlotte Brontë: The Imagination in History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 53, 60. Yet it is simultaneously true that she shows her maturity in the face of such coincidences and deals with miraculous incidents correctly; she tries to share the legacy with the Rivers family and decides to return to Rochester after hearing the telepathic message. Karen Rowe argues that Jane succeeds in maturation by transcending a fairy-tale paradigm which limits female maturation to a Christian romance in “ ‘Fairy-born and human-bred’: Jane Eyre’s Education in Romance” in Abel, Hirsch and Langland 87-89.

¹² Adrienne Rich, ‘Jane Eyre: The Temptations of a Motherless Woman’ in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence, Selected Prose, 1966-1978* (New York and London: Norton, 1995 [1979]) 89-106, 95.

¹³ Fraiman 100-7.

¹⁴ The phrase ‘dry-nurse’, already an old-fashioned expression in the nineteenth century, indicated either a child’s nurse who did not suckle her charges or in the sense of general sickbed nursing. Famously Pip in *Great Expectations* was ‘dry-nursed’, that is, ‘brought up by hand’. ‘Wet-nurse’, on the other hand, meant a child’s nurse who suckled. ‘Sick-nursing’ was a popular term in the nineteenth century and used for all forms of nursing apart from child-care nursing. Infant and child care was also termed ‘health-nursing’ to distinguish it from ‘sick-nursing’. For the terminology, see Catherine Judd, *Bedside Seductions: Nursing and the Victorian Imagination, 1830-1880* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1998) 53, note 1.

¹⁵ See, for example, George Devereux and Florence R. Weiner, “The Occupational Status of Nurses” in *American Sociological Review* 15 (1950): 628-34, 628.

¹⁶ Robert Dingwall, Anne Marie Rafferty and Charles Webster, eds., *An Introduction to the Social History of Nursing* (London: Routledge, 1993 [1988]) 1.

¹⁷ Brian Abel-Smith, *A History of the Nursing Profession* (London: Heinemann, 1979 [1960]) 2-3.

¹⁸ Christopher Maggs, ‘A General History of Nursing: 1800-1900’ in W. F. Bynum and Roy Porter, eds., *Companion Encyclopedia of the History of Medicine* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993) 1309.

¹⁹ F. B. Smith, *The People’s Health 1830-1910* (London: Croom Helm, 1979) 260.

²⁰ Abel-Smith 10 and Lee Holcombe, *Victorian Ladies at Work: Middle-Class Working Women in England and Wales 1850-1914* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1973) 70.

²¹ Dingwall, Rafferty and Webster 3.

²² Dingwall, Rafferty and Webster 7.

²³ Dingwall, Rafferty and Webster 8-9.

²⁴ Dingwall, Rafferty and Webster 18. Abel-Smith 4.

²⁵ Dingwall, Rafferty and Webster 6.

²⁶ Abel-Smith 5.

²⁷ Holcombe 12.

²⁸ Pamela Horn, *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Servant* (Phoenix Mill: Sutton Publishing, 1995) 79. Leonore Davidoff, Megan Doolittle, Janet Fink and Katherine Holden, eds., *The Family Story: Blood, Contact and Intimacy, 1830-1960* (London and New York: Longman, 1999) 169.

²⁹ See, for example, Kathryn Hughes, *The Victorian Governess* (London and Rio Grande: The Hambledon Press, 1993) xvi.

³⁰ Hughes 55.

³¹ Hughes xvi.

³² Hughes 58-59.

³³ Alice Renton, *Tyrant or Victim?: A History of the British Governess* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1991) 39.

³⁴ Gilbert and Gubar 363.

³⁵ William Buchan, *Domestic Medicine or, The Family Physician* (Edinburgh: J. Pillans & Sons, 1802) 35.

³⁶ For Rich, Bessie functions as one of Jane’s female supporters, 93. Gilbert and Gubar casually call

her a “kind nursemaid” but focus more on her role as the presenter of Jane’s life, singing a song with lyrics which predict Jane’s future wandering on the moor, 342. Rowe argues that, in the fairy-tale frame of the novel, Bessie is maternal but lacks the power to transform Jane into a princess, or free her from Gateshead, 73. For Fraiman, Bessie is not particularly benevolent but significant as the model of a working woman for Jane, 100.

³⁷ Thoughtless whispering to be heard by and so excite the sick is what Nightingale warns against in her *Notes on Nursing* 45.

³⁸ See Fraiman 120 and Rowe 72.

³⁹ Judd argues that Miss Temple provides a model for Jane of selfless, dedicated, and attentive nursing, 76.

⁴⁰ Judd argues that Rochester toys with the role of patient, and as long as he remains vigorous and healthy, he cannot achieve a perfect union with Jane, 67.

⁴¹ For Jane’s will to master madness, see Helen Small, *Love’s Madness: Medicine, the Novel, and Female Insanity 1800-1865* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998 [1996]) 167-69.

⁴² For the importance of teaching as something opposite to madness, see Small 173-74.

⁴³ Fraiman 116-20. Judd views their marriage as that between nurse and patient, 66.

⁴⁴ Gilbert and Gubar consider the negative image of Ferndean, an asocial life in a decaying house, as showing Brontë’s inability to envision viable solutions to the problem of patriarchal oppression, 369-70.

⁴⁵ Judd calls this “the cure of male impotence through the ministrations of the nurse”, 43.