

Alice Grey and Helen Huntingdon: Anne Brontë's Healthy 'Working' Mothers

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By reading Anne Brontë's two novels through illness, this essay traces the development of two physically and mentally strong upper middle-class mother characters, Alice Grey, the heroine's mother in *Agnes Grey* (1847) and Helen Huntingdon, the heroine of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), into healthier, wiser and more independent women who successfully educate their own children. Although Alice's success is under-represented in the text and, consequently, often confused with Agnes's,¹ in parallel with Agnes's struggle as a governess in two different families, the close reading of the text of *Agnes Grey* shows Alice's far less dramatised but more dynamic survival through different social and marital positions. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* can then be read as retelling Alice Grey's story as wife and mother with a more positive outcome in relation to the heroine Helen who proves her strength and healthiness by nursing her alcoholic and sick husband. Alice takes charge of her daughters' education, learns from Agnes's failure as a governess in her first workplace and advises her to work for a family of higher rank, while Helen learns from her failed marriage to a spoiled man and disciplines her son so that he will not follow his father's evil example. The novels can then be seen not only as enlightening and cautionary tales for the reader but also as the records of these mothers' learning and teaching experiences.² They describe how Alice and Helen survive their illness-related domestic crises by exercising their upper middle-class female virtue and, paradoxically, how they discover or rediscover their place in the middle class after working as their husbands' nurse.

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The pedagogic tone of *Agnes Grey* which many critics have observed is dominant not only in her governessing but also in her sick-nursing. Agnes tries to console sick characters with educational or edifying acts rather than by performing physical tasks such as administering medicine and arranging pillows. For example, she attempts to amuse her invalid father by singing his favourite songs and soothe Nancy Brown, a cottager afflicted with "an inflammation in the eyes" (AG 145), "rheumatiz" (AG 147) and "religious melancholy" (AG 145), by reading the Bible to her. During her visits to Mark Wood, "a consumptive labourer" (AG 174), although he is in the last stage of his illness, Agnes tries to cultivate his mind by reading.

Agnes has learned what she does for the sick, singing and reading, from her highly refined mother who is married to a clergyman but was originally a squire's daughter: "My mother, being at once highly accomplished, well informed, and fond of employment, took the whole charge of our education on herself, with the exception of Latin — which my father undertook to teach us — so that we never even went to school" (AG 62). Thanks to her mother's home education,

Agnes has learned “[m]usic, singing, drawing, French, Latin, and German” and her talents are, in her mother’s words, “not such as every poor clergyman’s daughter possesses” (AG 112). In the face of the financial crisis caused by her father’s failed investment, Agnes decides to become a governess and profit from her accomplishments provided by her mother, whose accomplishments were in turn once provided by her upper middle-class parents who expected their daughter to profit from them eventually by marrying a man of the same rank.³

In her first workplace, it soon turns out that Agnes is not really expected by her employers to demonstrate her accomplishments in her teaching but rather to take physical care of her young charges. On arrival at Wellwood, Agnes is told by Mrs Bloomfield that the crib of one of her daughters, the nearly six year-old Mary Ann, has been placed in her room. Although Mrs Bloomfield distinguishes between the care of her children by nursemaids and by governesses, because of the latter’s superiority in social class, and in fact tries to prevent her daughter from acquiring “bad habits from the nurses”, what she requires Agnes to do for Mary Ann is “to overlook her washing and dressing, and take charge of her clothes” (AG 75). Highly accomplished as she is, Agnes struggles to perform the menial work of a nursemaid and to manage the boisterous children before she starts her lessons as a governess. It comes as no surprise that, despite their difference in social class, the only person in the household who sympathises with Agnes is the children’s official nursemaid, Betty. Her use of corporal punishment to take control of her charges eventually costs the nursemaid her position in the house. Although she never resorts to violence, Agnes is also dismissed before achieving any substantial improvement in the children’s behavior and her own skill as a ‘child-nurse’.

The fact that both the nursemaid’s hard measures and the governess’s more humanitarian approach fail may suggest that the Bloomfield children are quite uneducable and beyond the control of hirelings in the first place. There is an episode which reveals Mrs Bloomfield’s inability as the mistress of the house and as the educator of her children. At the dinner table, Mr Bloomfield blames his wife for spoiling originally excellent raw materials:

‘What is the matter with the mutton, my dear?’ asked his mate.

‘It is quite overdone. Don’t you taste, Mrs Bloomfield, that all the goodness is roasted out of it? And can’t you see that all that nice, red gravy is completely dried away?’

‘Well, I think the *beef* will suit you.’

The beef was set before him, and he began to carve, but with the most rueful expressions of discontent.

‘What is the matter with the *beef*, Mr Bloomfield? I’m sure I thought it was very nice.’

‘And so it *was* very nice. A nicer joint could not be; but it is *quite* spoiled,’ replied he, dolefully.

‘How so?’

‘How so! Why, don’t you see how it is cut? Dear — dear! it is quite shocking!’

‘They must have cut it wrong in the kitchen, then, for I’m sure I carved it quite properly here yesterday.’

‘No *doubt* they cut it wrong in the kitchen — the savages! Dear — dear! Did ever any one see such a fine piece of beef so completely ruined? But remember that, in future, when a decent dish leaves this table, they shall not *touch* it in the kitchen. Remember *that*, Mrs Bloomfield!’ (AG 82-83)

This conversation reveals the incompetence of Mrs Bloomfield as the manager of the household as well as the vulgarity of the retired tradesman who verbally abuses his wife in their governess’s presence. Mrs Bloomfield, originally the wife of a tradesman, or the wife of a man who is originally a tradesman, is in this way unable to fulfil her role as the mistress of a gentleman’s household. She not only ruins their dinner but also spoils her children by blindly believing them to be good-natured and talented. Tom in fact treats badly not only his governess but also his mother and once refuses to kiss Mrs Bloomfield when she asks him to do so. Moreover, her brother, Uncle Robson, exerts a bad influence on Tom, teaching him the sadistic pleasure of trapping and killing innocent birds. In this way, whether the children originally have a good temperament or not, the adults around them fail to provide them with good education.

At Horton Lodge and in its neighbourhood, Agnes gains a certain satisfaction by looking after those who can benefit from her care. She feels “very happy” (AG 154) to visit and help Nancy Brown and Mark Wood and to know that Mr Weston shares the same interest in caring for the sick. She also forms a mutual attachment with Rosalie Murray despite the latter’s class consciousness. More importantly, Agnes succeeds in re-educating and retraining the dog, Snap, which has been given up by Matilda Murray:

At my feet lay a little rough terrier. It was the property of Miss Matilda; but she hated the animal, and intended to sell it, alleging that it was quite spoiled. It was really an excellent dog of its kind; but she affirmed it was fit for nothing, and had not even the sense to know its own mistress.

The fact is, she had purchased it when but a small puppy, insisting, at first, that no one should touch it but herself; but, soon becoming tired of so helpless and troublesome a nursling, she had gladly yielded to my entreaties to be allowed to take charge of it; and I, by carefully nursing the little creature from infancy to adolescence, of course, had obtained its affections. (AG 168)

By looking after Snap and using such terms as “infancy” and “adolescence”, Agnes is experiencing a form of child-rearing. Her success in retraining Snap then proves her proficiency as a mother-nurse-educator. Significantly, the further deterioration of her father’s health and the sudden disappearance of Snap occur at the same time and these two incidents are treated in Agnes’s narrative as of equal importance:

In this time of trouble I had two other causes of affliction. The first may seem a trifle, but it cost me many a tear: Snap, my little dumb, rough-visaged, but bright-eyed, warm-hearted companion, the only thing I had to love me, was taken away, and delivered over to the tender mercies of the village rat-catcher, a man notorious for his

brutal treatment of his canine slaves.

The other was serious enough: my letters from home gave intimation that my father's health was worse. No boding fears were expressed, but I was grown timid and despondent, and could not help fearing that some dreadful calamity awaited us there. I seemed to see the black clouds gathering round my native hills, and to hear the angry muttering of a storm that was about to burst, and desolate our hearth. (AG 201-2)

While her father who, together with his wife, has reared Agnes finally dies, Snap which Agnes herself has nursed survives, rescued by Weston from the abuse of a cruel rat-catcher. The survival of what Agnes has saved together with Weston anticipates her future successful upbringing of her children in cooperation with him. If, as some critics observe, a woman in the novel takes the measure of a man from his treatment of animals,⁴ and tenderness towards animals is a major index of moral worth,⁵ Weston who saves Nancy Brown's cat and Snap will make a good husband and father in the future. If the dog symbolises their future cooperation in matrimony, it comes as no surprise that Snap brings Agnes and Weston together in their reunion on the beach. By marrying Weston and having her own children, she can finally fully exercise her ability as an excellent and accomplished educator: "Our children, Edward, Agnes, and little Mary, promise well; their education, for the time being, is chiefly committed to me; and they shall want no good thing that a mother's care can give" (AG 251). After failing in managing the Bloomfield children, Agnes achieves relative success in governing the Murray children, retraining Snap, teaching pupils at her mother's school, and taking moral care of the depressed Lady Ashby before becoming a confident mother and educator.

The close reading of the text, however, simultaneously shows that her development and learning are relatively minor and not directly related to the happy-ending. Elizabeth Langland analyses the novel as a *Bildungsroman*, finding its parallels with the male novel of development which typically starts with the protagonist's dissatisfaction with home and a corollary desire to gain experience in the larger world.⁶ But Agnes is already an accomplished eighteen year-old girl at the outset of the novel when she goes into the world. After the dismissal from her first workplace, Agnes tries to fulfil her task better in the Murray household than before, for example, calling the children Miss and Master from the start as Simmons indicates,⁷ and indeed eventually finds herself more comfortable at Horton Lodge than at Wellwood House. Her overall success in her second workplace, however, owes much to sheer luck; the Murray children are some ten years older than the Bloomfields, so, as Agnes expects, "more rational, more teachable, and less troublesome" (AG 114) in the first place, and as John and Charles Murray are sent to school, this dramatically decreases the governess's toil.

More importantly, if Alice Grey is right, the Murrays are essentially more manageable than the Bloomfield children because of their 'inborn' good quality. Agnes expects the Bloomfields to improve through her long-term education, however slight, and, on leaving Wellwood, still rationalises her failure as caused mainly by the lack of time. Alice Grey by contrast indicates the ultimate futility of disciplining the Bloomfield children, ascribing it to the class the family originally belongs to, and advises her daughter to find a position "in a somewhat higher family — in that of some genuine, thorough-bred gentleman" (AG 112). It is not exactly Agnes, then,

but Alice who learns from the failure at Wellwood and changes the strategy for her daughter's future governessing. Agnes's relative success as a governess at Horton Lodge proves her mother's counsel to be appropriate.

Indeed Agnes discovers the Murray children's ability to respond to education, whether good or bad, and relates their disagreeable manners to the inappropriate education they received before her arrival.⁸ Rosalie's "faults" are "rather the effect of her education than her disposition: she had never been properly taught the distinction between right and wrong" (AG 122), and John "might have been a decent lad, had he been properly educated" (AG 124). The Murray children can then be compared to the originally excellent but carelessly treated meats at the Bloomfield dinner. The inborn ability to be affected by or benefit from education is in fact what Agnes herself has possessed as a child, according to her mother. Alice Grey prides herself on her having not neglected the problematic nature of her children: "I did not spoil you; and you were not perfect angels after all: Mary had a fund of quiet obstinacy, and you were somewhat faulty in regard to temper; but you were very good children on the whole" (AG 111). While Agnes thinks of education as the chief determinant in the formation of children's behaviour and personality, Alice Grey, as the phrase "on the whole" suggests, believes not only in the importance of education but also in children's innate quality which enables good education to function. Therefore, when her daughter is dismissed by the Bloomfields, Alice maintains that the children's nature has defied Agnes's attempts to teach them: "you cannot expect stone to be as pliable as clay" (AG 111). The Bloomfield children are after all not good enough to respond to Agnes's education. Snap is, by contrast, "an excellent dog of its kind" (AG 168) and indeed benefits from Agnes's retraining.

If, as Alice believes, children's responsiveness to good education indicates an essential difference between the "genuine thorough-bred gentry" (AG 113) and the rising gentry, healthiness may be another index of the superiority of the former. As children, there is no great difference in health between the Bloomfields and the Murrays. Among the four Bloomfield children, Tom, seven is a "well-grown boy" (AG 75), Mary Ann, six, is a tall girl with a "round, full face, and a high colour in her cheeks" (AG 75), and Harriet, two, is a "little, broad, fat, merry, playful thing" (AG 76). Only Fanny, scarcely four, is a "remarkably gentle child, and required encouragement" (AG 76). The Murrays also have four children and again three of them are overall healthy. Rosalie, sixteen, is "tall and slender, but not thin, perfectly formed, exquisitely fair, but not without a brilliant, healthy bloom" (AG 121), Matilda, two and a half years younger than Rosalie, is larger and darker than her sister and "big-boned" (AG 123), and Master John, eleven, is a "fine, stout, healthy boy" (124). Exactly like the Bloomfield children, only one of the four siblings has a less healthy constitution and disposition: Master Charles is "much smaller, paler, and less active and robust" (AG 125) than the one-year older John and described by his mother as "extremely nervous and susceptible" (AG 120). While the children of the two families show no particular differences in their health, the adults are contrasted in Agnes's observations of their physical characteristics. Mrs Bloomfield is a "tall, spare, stately woman, with thick black hair, cold grey eyes, and extremely sallow complexion" (AG 74), and her husband is a "man of ordinary stature — rather below than above, and rather thin than stout", with a "large mouth, pale, dingy complexion" (AG 82). By contrast, Mrs Murray is a "handsome, dashing lady of forty, who certainly required neither rouge nor padding to add to her charms"

and her husband is a “tall, stout gentleman with scarlet cheeks and crimson nose” (AG 119). Although words related to health can be equivocal, so that “big-boned” and “stout” can, for example, indicate vulgarity or dullness rather than healthiness, it is true that, while the children of the two families are similarly healthy, the Murray adults are described overall in more positive physical terms than the Bloomfield adults. This may suggest that in *Agnes Grey*, characters of better birth tend to be healthier and prove this when they become older.

If healthiness indicates the superiority of the genuine gentry, it can ultimately explain why Richard and Alice Grey respond differently to their financial crisis. Richard is a respected clergyman who “in his younger days, lived pretty comfortably on the joint income of a small incumbency, and a snug little property of his own” (AG 61), while Alice is originally a “squire’s daughter” who has married him “against the wishes of her friends” (AG 61). In their married life they share the same material conditions, but, in the face of the crisis, they show essential differences in their resilience. Richard Grey blames himself for his failure in financial investment and escapes into physical decline and mental depression, whereas Alice tackles the financial loss and her husband’s illness by economising on the household expenditure with as little effect as possible on Richard, attempting to cheer him up, and conceiving the idea of sending him to a watering-place and selling Mary’s drawings. If her efforts cannot cure her husband, she achieves a series of considerable successes for a widow in mourning and with limited means. She marries off her penniless first daughter, Mary, and helps her second daughter to succeed as a governess. By sending Agnes as a governess from home, she profits from her educational investment in her children, whereas her husband has failed in his financial investment. She negotiates the shock of her husband’s death without harming her health: “My mother’s strong mind had not given way beneath even this affliction: her spirit, though crushed, was not broken” (AG 212). While Lucy Snowe is miraculously made into the school director by M. Paul, Alice Grey establishes a school through her own resources and manages it well.

It is then not only the heroine but also her mother who survive their transplantation into different social classes and unexpected challenges in life. Agnes departs from her father’s parsonage, moves through two different families as a governess, works as a teacher with her mother, and finally returns to a parsonage by marrying Weston. She overall remains in the same social class and her governing outside her home is basically a temporary divergence necessitated by her family’s crisis. Ironically, during her governing, Agnes learns that taking good care of her own children from the start is more productive and rewarding than attempting to educate already spoiled children. If all true histories contain instruction, as Agnes states in the incipit of the novel, what the story of her struggle as a governess teaches is, paradoxically, the ultimate futility of educating children of low quality, and the superiority of people from the genuine gentry. Simmons argues that her marriage to Weston and educating her children realise her final freedom from the restrictions of class, and her empowerment as an effective matriarchal figure.⁹ Langland maintains that Agnes marries after the reader has been made to feel she has the option of self-support.¹⁰ My contention is that these observations would also be relevant to Alice: she releases herself from the tie of her family and achieves independence and self-support as a successful matriarchal figure. What is contrasted to Lady Ashby’s joyless marriage is then not only Agnes’s happy home-making and child-rearing, as Langland remarks,¹¹ but also Alice’s

commitment to the home and the husband she has chosen.

Alice's upper-middle class virtue is proved, however, even more paradoxically, by her working like a middle-class woman in need, or a working-class woman. After educating her daughters herself as the wife of a clergyman with a modest income, in the face of her husband's illness, Alice works as "his nurse" (AG 214). After his death, she is able to establish and run a school to earn her living with her experience of home-teaching: "Thanks to my having had daughters to educate, I have not forgotten my accomplishments" (AG 212). Being active and busy helps to maintain Alice's mental and physical wholesomeness, as the narrating-Agnes observes: "We often pity the poor, because they have no leisure to mourn their departed relatives, and necessity obliges them to labour through their severest afflictions; but is not active employment the best remedy for overwhelming sorrow . . . the surest antidote for despair?" (AG 216). Alice declines her father's proposal to readmit her to his family if she admits her mistake in marrying an inappropriate man. She chooses to stay in the middle class and perform 'women's work' as a teacher, like the middle-class widow Madame Beck in *Villette*, because for her, to live and work in the middle class is the healthiest choice. Describing both Agnes's final happiness in 'mothering' her own children in her own home and Alice's performance of 'mothers' work' as an independent teacher, *Agnes Grey* values the middle-class lifestyle which requires women's labour and promotes their health.

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While *Agnes Grey* under-represents the survival of an originally upper middle-class wife and mother through different class and marital situations and only indirectly indicates her virtue and health, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* fully dramatises such a survival in the main plot in relation to the heroine and foregrounds the vice and illness of upper middle-class men. In Anne Brontë's second novel, those who are nursed and those who nurse make a far clearer contrast than in her first novel. In *Agnes Grey*, those who are nursed vary in terms of sex, age, class, and even species; Agnes 'nurses' a middle-class male (Richard Grey), a working-class male (Mark Wood), a working-class female (Nancy Brown), an upper middle-class female (Rosalie Murray), young pupils at school, and a canine (Snap). Those who 'nurse' are varied as well; not only Agnes but also Hatfield and Weston visit Nancy Brown and Alice Grey educates her daughters, nurses Richard Grey and teaches her pupils. In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, by contrast, upper middle-class women overall perform the role of 'nurses' and take care of their present and future male family. For example, Helen nurses her husband, later her uncle together with her aunt, and corrects Hattersley's dissipation with his wife, Millicent, and Gilbert's misunderstanding about Lawrence being her lover. Helen also educates her younger family and friend; she disciplines her son Arthur and teaches Esther Hargrave the dangers of a marriage of convenience.

It is not a coincidence that men need to be nursed by women in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, since male characters' illness and injury are mostly caused not exactly by accidents, contagion, or infection, but by their own self-indulgence which, as Langland remarks, Brontë identifies with a male lack of self-restraint.¹² Lawrence is injured by Gilbert who is jealous of his intimacy with Helen and loses self-control. Even when he visits his victim to make an apology, Gilbert indulges

himself in displaced eroticism, associating Lawrence's body with his sister's. Arthur's condition after a fall from his horse is exacerbated by his long bout of self-destructive dissipation.¹³ If the fall itself is an accident, his illness is the natural consequence of his own depravity, as his doctor asserts,¹⁴ and in this sense, self-inflicted.¹⁵

The case of Helen's uncle demonstrates the most stereotypical interrelationship between illness and upper middle-class male self-indulgence. While typhus kills Jane Eyre's clergyman father, and consumption afflicts Mark Wood, the 'labourer' in *Agnes Grey*, Helen's uncle is attacked by gout, an illness which has traditionally been associated with a luxurious diet and sexual debauchery.¹⁶ Gout was a symbol of success and social status because, before the twentieth century, it was often generated by an upper-class European diet which consisted of vast quantities of sweet or fortified wines and food heavy in protein and starch.¹⁷ It was usually associated with the male sex; in fact, in 1837, 207 deaths from gout were registered in England and Wales of which 161 were male and 46 female, and next year saw 170 male and 45 female deaths from the disease.¹⁸ In *Agnes Grey*, the male character of the highest rank in the novel, Mr Murray, indeed suffers from gout and is described as a stereotypical gouty patient:

I was told that [Rosalie's] papa had the gout, which made him very ferocious, and that he would not give up his choice wines, and his substantial dinners and suppers, and had quarrelled with his physician, because the latter had dared to say that no medicine could cure him while he lived so freely [. . .]. (AG 231)

Anne Brontë in this way associates gout not only with self-indulgence but also with aggression, which is shared by many of her male characters in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Gilbert, Arthur, the young Arthur and Helen's would-be seducer, Walter Hargrave.

The gout of the haughty and self-indulgent Mr Murray forms a classic class and gender contrast with the rheumatism of the humble and hardworking cottager Nancy Brown. In today's medicine, rheumatism means any painful disorder of joints or muscles not due to infection or injury and includes gout along with rheumatic fever, rheumatoid arthritis, osteoarthritis, and so on. In the mid-seventeenth century, Thomas Sydenham who pioneered the nosological idea of a 'natural history of diseases' established that rheumatism and gout were different diseases.¹⁹ During the 1840s, gout and rheumatism were often discussed together in medical literature because of their similar symptoms. Charles T. Mackin, a contributor to *The Lancet*, for example, observed that the difference between the two diseases is merely a degree of intensity, and typical gouty and rheumatic patients are distinguished by their gender and class. According to his article, some of the characteristics of gout are: "rare in females", generally "superinduced by high living, free indulgence in the pleasures of the table, &c. &c." and "hereditary, descending".²⁰ On the other hand, the characteristics of rheumatism are: "frequent amongst females, especially that class who are necessarily exposed to the action of those causes to which it is attributable" and "more frequent amongst the lower orders, and those to whom poverty and privation are familiar visitors".²¹ It seems likely that Anne Brontë was aware of these medico-cultural implications of gout and rheumatism, and made Helen's uncle suffer specifically from gout to imply his upper middle-class male vice which in effect creates Helen's marital tragedy.

Helen marries Arthur with no sufficient instruction by parental figures. Although her aunt attempts to dissuade her niece from marrying a rake, her uncle, optimistic and indifferent about it, writes to her father to ask for his consent. Helen's father who "has entirely given [her] up to [her uncle and aunt's] care" (*TWH* 164) gives his consent to his daughter's unpromising marriage. Thus, the lack of adequate guidance by the two key male figures responsible for her life helps to cause her later suffering in matrimony. Although she does not particularly relate her failed marriage to the absence of a father-mentor, Helen believes that Arthur's excessive self-indulgence and poor self-control can be ascribed to a lack of control and education by his parents:

I often try to persuade him to learn the piano, but he is far too idle for such an undertaking: he has no more idea of exerting himself to overcome obstacles than he has of restraining his natural appetites; and these two things are the ruin of him. I lay them both to the charge of his harsh yet careless father and his madly indulgent mother. If ever I am a mother I will zealously strive against this crime of over indulgence — I can hardly give it a milder name when I think of the evils it brings. (*TWH* 214)

Arthur's case reflects a mid-nineteenth century parental tendency to have high expectations of boys but to be lenient towards their better moral upbringing.²² In this way, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* generally foregrounds male sex-related vice as the main cause of Helen's ruined marriage.

Even though she is no orphan, because of the absence of moral guardians, Helen is psychologically and morally as vulnerable as the young parentless protagonists of Charlotte and Emily Brontë. Nevertheless, she comes to perform the role of 'mother' for her child-husband who does not know how to take care of himself. Helen in fact finds Arthur in sleep "looking as careless and sinless as a child", and when wet weather prevents him from going outdoors, "as restless and hard to amuse as a spoilt child" (*TWH* 214). Against her uncle's expectations, he has no interest in "nursing" (*TWH* 168) his property and continues his extravagant life-style of intoxication and womanising. Helen in vain tries to persuade him to "take care" (*TWH* 246) of himself and warns against the eventual ruin of his health. As he remains immature and fails to nurse or take care of anything, it comes as no surprise that he is unable to behave like a parent towards his own child, and shows childish jealousy and aversion.

More precisely, Arthur behaves like a sick child because of his addiction to alcohol, and Helen 'nurses' him while mothering her real child. As his addiction is related to his psychology, his lack of self-control, his symptoms are also similar to those of mental illness: first the mixture of nervousness and delirium, and then depression when his health improves temporarily. Although his addiction is ultimately self-caused, Arthur plays the victim and expects to gain from his 'illness'. He eloquently expresses his 'complaints' and defends his violent attitude towards those who serve him:

'What *could* you mean, Helen, by taking the servant's part against me,' said Arthur, as soon as the door was closed, 'when you knew I was distracted?'

'I did not know you were distracted, Arthur, and the poor man was quite frightened

and hurt at your sudden explosion.'

'Poor man indeed! and do you think I could stop to consider the feelings of an insensate brute like that, when my own nerves were racked and torn to pieces by his confounded blunders?'

'I never heard you complain of your nerves before.'

'And why shouldn't I have nerves as well as you?'. (TWH 243)

Arthur further claims for his wife's 'treatment' and demands alcohol as his 'medicine', which, overwhelmed by his fit, Helen promptly administers to him. Manipulated by her 'patient' and resorting to a wrong kind of therapy, Helen proves to be an incompetent 'nurse' in her relationship with her sick husband.

In this absurd situation in which an originally healthy adult demands the privileges of a sick child, Helen recognises her nursing Arthur as futile and, like Agnes Grey, starts entertaining her expectations of those who are younger and more responsive to her education, thereby attempting to prove herself a good 'mother-nurse'. She tries to prevent Esther Hargrave from risking her inner happiness by marrying the wrong man for material comforts. While trying to save Esther from making the same mistake as hers, Helen also attempts to prevent her son, Arthur, from acquiring his father's evil habits. It is, however, difficult for her to monopolise the education of her own child and protect him from the "contaminating influence" (TWH 311) in her upper middle-class household which accommodates a number of guests and hirelings. Her son indeed absorbs what his father and his guests say to him until he almost believes his own mother to be "wicked" (TWH 347) and is further exposed to the corrupting influences of his governess, Miss Myers, one of his father's mistresses. Unlike most of the Brontë sisters' working heroines who struggle as 'surrogate mothers' in others' households, Helen suffers because her 'mothering' is divided into several roles to be performed by hirelings so she cannot be in perfect control of her own son's education. Helen finally flees to Wildfell Hall where, despite her neighbours' gossiping about her identity and criticism of her method of disciplining little Arthur, she enjoys the 'privilege' of nursing her child on her own.

When he becomes truly ill after falling from his horse, however, Helen returns to Arthur to perform the role of a real sick-nurse. As the Victorians were attracted to the implicit ideal of a woman's redemptive potential,²³ Helen's nursing of her debauched husband can be seen as an early version of the Angel in the House and as the embodiment of female virtue. Her nursing is, however, necessary more for her own well-being than for her husband's recovery. By nursing Arthur, she hopes to redeem herself from her past blind infatuation with him, because her idea of good nursing entails genuine affection, so nursing the patient whom she no longer loves can operate as punishment for the nurse. The idea of dutiful and loveless nursing as a cruel punishment is suggested earlier when Helen puts the baby Arthur in the arms of her husband who detests his own son: "You shall nurse him for me, as a punishment" (TWH 230). After sending away his careless hired-nurse, Helen occupies the sickroom and now works as an efficient and devoted nurse. She chooses her brother as the witness of her attempts at self-redemption and records the whole event in her letters to him: "I have said enough, I think, to convince you that I did well to go to him" (TWH 430).²⁴

If Jane Eyre's success as Rochester's nurse is measured by her contribution to his recovery, Helen's excellence is proved not by her patient's recovery, but by the patience and faith she maintains for her self-redemption till his death. Arthur's death then signifies not exactly her defeat but her fulfilment of duty, and above all, her own healthiness and strength, which are contrasted with the unwholesomeness and weakness of the deceased. Although she faints shortly before Arthur's death, she does not stay ill and soon helps her aunt to nurse her gouty husband. As a reward for her perseverance, Helen is lawfully and psychologically liberated from her husband's bondage, comes to educate her son without others' interference, and marries Gilbert whom she has chosen without rashness or blindness.

While Agnes Grey survives the outside world with the help of her originally upper middle-class mother's wisdom and virtue, Helen Huntingdon nurses her husband and liberates herself from upper middle-class male vice, finally to settle down with the middle-class Gilbert. If one needs to learn before teaching someone, Helen first learns from her failed marriage the importance of parental guidance and then educates her son²⁵ and Esther until she succeeds in making her son detest alcohol and Esther choose an appropriate husband, her own brother. In the process, she transforms from the incompetent nurse of her alcoholic husband into a competent and confident mother-mentor. All the major defective upper middle-class male characters finally die — her irresponsible father, her gouty uncle and her addicted husband — whereas the wholesome female characters survive and form a long-lasting female bond which is stronger than any temporary male relationship founded on debauchery or any dysfunctional marital relationship. Helen's adoption of her mother's maiden name during her hiding symbolises the female bond in the novel which is under-represented in the matrimony of female characters but sustained throughout the text. Her aunt and Milicent warn against Helen's marriage to Arthur, Rachel faithfully supports her mistress throughout her hiding, and Esther takes charge of the young Arthur during Helen's absence. If the heroine's marriage at the end of the novel forms the classic denouement of the nineteenth-century female narrative, albeit it is her second, it neither ruins the female solidarity the heroine has established during her suffering, nor isolates her from her female friends who have supported her. Helen's aunt, who is also liberated from her sick husband, joins Helen and Gilbert in their new home, while Esther consolidates her sisterhood with Helen by marrying Lawrence and becoming her sister-in-law. By finally excluding upper middle-class male 'ills', the novel provides the heroine with the 'privilege' of the lower class — freedom to 'mother' her own child — and brings her to a materially inferior but mentally and physically more wholesome world.

* * *

While the novels by Charlotte and Emily Brontë make most of their main characters ill or disabled, whether they are male or female, Anne Brontë's novels mainly describe how her female characters stay overall healthy finally to solve the problems created by their sick male family members. Marion Shaw argues that Anne Brontë may be a more daring novelist than Charlotte Brontë, although the religious cast in her novels perhaps disguises how feminist her heroines and narratives are.²⁶ Although Shaw does not particularly indicate Anne Brontë's representations of

illness as reflecting her feminism, reading *Agnes Grey* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* through illness certainly illuminates female characters' ultimate superiority to male characters in mental and physical strength. While Charlotte Brontë's heroines survive with miraculous plot changes created by their own illness, Anne Brontë's female characters resolve their crises without any such positive effect of illness. As Agnes shows her surprise at and contempt for Grandmamma's 'abuse' and 'misuse' of her own health as conversational topics, Anne Brontë has little idea of letting her heroines regress into or thrive on illness in their struggle for victory.

Notes

* All citations from Brontë's texts are from *Agnes Grey*. Ed., intro. and notes. Angeline Goreau (London: Penguin, 1988), abbreviated as AG in this essay and from *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Ed. Herbert Rosengarten, intro. Margaret Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), abbreviated as TWH.

¹ For example, Betty Jay, *Anne Brontë* (Devon: Northcote House, 2000) 32, and Larry H. Peer, 'The First Chapter of *Agnes Grey*: An Analysis of the Sympathetic Narrator' in Julie Nash and Barbara A. Suess, eds., *New Approaches to the Literary Art of Anne Brontë* (Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2001) 22-23.

² *Agnes Grey* depicts Agnes's experience as an educator and simultaneously functions as instruction to the reader: Jay 9. Mary Summers argues that *Agnes Grey* is indeed a 'conduct book' which targets anyone involved in the educating or the upbringing of children: *Anne Brontë: Educating Parents* (Beverly: Highgate Publications, 2003) vi. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* can also be seen as a story of education, for each layer of the text such as Brontë's preface and Gilbert's letter to Halford addresses an aspect of pedagogy: Lee A. Talley, 'Anne Brontë's Method of Social Protest in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*' in Nash and Suess 133.

³ James R. Simmons, Jr. argues that Agnes feels that the only training necessary for her position as a governess is that she emulates her own mother or enacts a transference of her mother's relationship with her and her sister onto the relationship with the Bloomfield children: 'Class, Matriarchy, and Power: Contextualizing the Governess in *Agnes Grey*' in Nash and Suess 37.

⁴ Elizabeth Langland, *Anne Brontë: The Other One* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1989) 111.

⁵ Stevie Davies, ' "Three distinct and unconnected tales": *The Professor*, *Agnes Grey* and *Wuthering Heights*' in Heather Glen, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Brontës* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 85-86.

⁶ Langland 96-99.

⁷ Simmons 38.

⁸ Marion Shaw argues that Anne Brontë's religious beliefs are closer to those of an Arminian Methodist in which the individual child is supposed to be born with a capacity for both goodness and evil: "Anne Brontë: A Quiet Feminist" in *Brontë Society Transactions* 21.4 (1994): 125-35, 127, 130.

⁹ Simmons 40.

¹⁰ Langland 113-14.

¹¹ Langland 109.

¹² Langland 133.

¹³ A physician of King's College Hospital, R. B. Todd, observed that "[i]ntemperance, the fruitful source of disease, [was] often a great hindrance to the successful application of remedies, and, even

although discontinued for the time, it exerts a weakening influence on the system”: *The Lancet*, October 29, 1842, 1842-43, vol. 1, 150.

¹⁴ It was in reality difficult for porters and doctors in hospitals to distinguish accident victims from simply drunken people who were not admitted: F. B. Smith, *The People's Health 1830-1910* (London: Croom Helm, 1979) 253.

¹⁵ For the interrelation between addiction and illness, see Virginia Berridge, “Victorian Opium Eating: Responses to Opiate Use in Nineteenth-Century England” in *Victorian Studies* 21 (1978): 437-61, esp. 456-461.

¹⁶ Roy Porter and G. S. Rousseau, *Gout: The Patrician Malady* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998) 229.

¹⁷ Roderick E. McGrew, *Encyclopedia of Medical History* (London: Macmillan, 1985) 116-118.

¹⁸ *The Lancet*, January 22, 1842, 1841-1842, vol. 1, 574.

¹⁹ Porter and Rousseau 8.

²⁰ *The Lancet*, March 22, 1845, vol. 1, 312.

²¹ *The Lancet*, March 22, 1845, vol. 1, 312.

²² Chitham argues that infidelity may result from inadequate education, especially of the male: Edward Chitham and Tom Winnifrith, *Brontë Facts and Brontë Problems* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1983) 104.

²³ Langland 24.

²⁴ Langland argues that Helen's diary and her letters to her brother constitute primary evidence for her excellence, 120-24.

²⁵ Summers 78.

²⁶ Shaw 134.