

Jane's schooling in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to place Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847) in the theological context of its period, demonstrating how the Evangelical view of the innate sinfulness of the child, and the moral exertion of the Malthusian political economy influenced the education of children, especially those of the charity schools.

Keywords: charlotte bronte's, *jane eyre*, malthusian political

Introduction

Elaine Showalter in *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Writers, from Charlotte Bronte to Doris Lessing* (1977) described the red room in which Jane Eyre was locked up by her aunt as "a paradigm of female inner space". Showalter's Freudian analysis of the contents of the red room established its association with "the adult female body", arguing that Jane's punishment by her aunt Mrs Reeds is "an adolescent rites of passage", an experience of growing up as a female in Victorian England (Showalter, 94-95). The passage, which dwelt on the Freudian abundance of secret compartments and wardrobe in the red room, is as follows:

"The red-room was a spare room, very seldom slept in; I might say never, indeed, unless when a chance influx of visitors at Gateshead Hall, rendered it necessary to turn to account all the accommodation it contained: yet it was one of the largest and stateliest chambers in the mansion. A bed supported on massive pillars of mahogany, hung with curtains of deep red damask, stood out like a tabernacle in the centre; the two large windows, with their blinds always drawn down, were half shrouded in festoons and falls of similar drapery; the carpet was red; the table at the foot of the bed was covered with a crimson cloth; the walls were a soft fawn colour, with a blush of pink in it; the wardrobe, the toilet-table, the chairs were of darkly-polished old mahogany. Out of these surrounding shades rose high, and glared white, the piled-up mattresses and pillows of the bed, spread with a snowy Marseilles counterpane. Scarcely less prominent was an ample, cushioned easy-chair near the head of the bed, also white, with a foot-stool before it; and looking, as I thought, like a pale throne." (Bronte, 10-11)

Showalter's textual analysis of the complex imagery of the red room read it as a distinctively female experience of growing up in Victorian Britain. However, without undermining *Jane Eyre's* status as a female *bildungsroman*, the early nineteenth century historical context shows that it was a common punishment to lock children in "dark closets" for hours (Strachey, 55). Such harsh punishment was part of the strict disciplining of the child in early nineteenth century Britain. Some of the distinctive features of such a strict discipline are recounted in the autobiography of Rothiemurchus (1797-1830): how the children were dipped into a tub, "the ice on the top of

which had often to be broken before our horrid plunge into it." (Strachey, 56) The severity of food discipline formed part of the Spartan discipline with which children were raised in the early nineteenth century. Children could refuse nothing that was prepared for them, if they did "we not only got nothing else, but the dish declined was put by to appear again at the next meal, and be disposed of before we were permitted to have what else there was." (Strachey, 58)

The discipline, which was imposed on children at home, was paralleled in British schools in early nineteenth century. The children's dread of the authoritarian severity of parental discipline at home was accompanied by their relentless sufferings in the hands of the schoolmaster. The psychological trauma of children under such conditions is recorded in Edwin Hodder's biography of Anthony Ashley Cooper (1801-85), *The Life and Work of the Seventh Earl of Shaftesbury, K.G.* (1892):

"Of all the social changes of this century of change, perhaps there is none more remarkable than that which has come over the relationship of parents and children. It was once the almost universal practice for parents to rule their children by severity and fear, now the opposite extreme prevails; respect and reverence for parents have perhaps decreased, but affection has undoubtedly increased. In the case of many, the severity of home was bearable, inasmuch as it was of short duration, and the return to school was hailed with delight as a welcome relief. In young Ashley's case there was neither joy in going back to school, nor joy in coming home. His parents had a mistaken idea of education, of parental authority, rights, and obligations; and the fear with which Ashley regarded his schoolmaster and the bullies of the school was less than the fear with which he regarded his parents." (Hodder, 21-22).

A picture of the sadistic mentality of school teachers in early nineteenth century Britain is provided in John Epps (1806-69)'s remembrances of his stay in Mill Hill school, where the principal, displaying "a spiteful disposition", would "raise his arm the higher, and would bring down his cane with the additional force imparted by anger... This master used to have cobbler's cord wound round the end of his cane, so that the poor schoolboy might suffer more." (Epps, 46) This physical abuse of children as a pedagogical exercise was given a literary representation in the Lowood section of Charlotte Bronte's

novel *Jane Eyre* (1847). The infliction of a dozen strokes on Helen Burns's neck by her teacher Miss Scatcherd in Lowood is reminiscent of the brutal character of Wackford Squeers in Charles Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby* (1839), a novel in which the internal economy of Dotheboys Hall exposed the sadistic brutalizing of the young in the boarding schools of Yorkshire in early nineteenth century:

"'Bolder,' said Squeers, tucking up his wristbands, and moistening the palm of his right hand to get a good grip of the cane, 'you are an incorrigible young scoundrel and as the last thrashing did you no good, we must see what another will do towards beating it out of you.'

With this, and wholly disregarding a piteous cry for mercy, Mr. Squeers fell upon the boy and caned him soundly; not leaving off, indeed, until his arm was tired out." (Dickens, 101-102)

Brocklehurst's placing of Jane on the stool depicts a common nineteenth century practice of the public humiliation of pupils intended to correct their evil disposition. Helen is condemned to wear on her arm 'the untidy badge' for blotting an exercise. This public display of the child's errors was part of the same psychology which put children under strict parental surveillance. Brocklehurst tells teachers to "watch her: keep your eyes on her movements, weigh well her words, scrutinise her actions, punish her body to save her soul" (Bronte, 56) Elizabeth Sewell (1815-1906) in her autobiography recounts how for the offence of lying, children were made to "stand up in the schoolroom for several hours with a long black gown on, and a piece of red cloth—cut in the shape of a tongue, and on which the word 'Liar' was worked in white letters—fastened round the neck so as to hang down in front." (Sewell, 13-14)

The severity of food discipline imposed on the pupils of Lowood was a component of the new regime in which children were raised in the nineteenth century. The scanty supply of food in Lowood led to the starvation of pupils. The "penurious proportion" governed the daily distribution of meals in the institution, the relief from which was afforded only on Sundays when a whole slice of bread with a thin scrape of butter. (Bronte, 50-51) Jane's eating of the tasteless burnt porridge in Lowood is redolent of Mrs. Squeers's "brown composition, which looked like diluted pincushions without the covers, and was called porridge." (Dickens, 98)

"The refractory was a great, low-ceiled, gloomy room; on two long tables smoked basins of something hot, which, however, to my dismay, sent forth an odour far from inviting. I saw a universal manifestation of discontent when the fumes of the repast met the nostrils of those destined to swallow it: from the van of the procession, the tall girls of the first class, rose the whispered words:—'Disgusting! The porridge is burnt again!'...Ravenous, and now very faint, I devoured spoonful or two of my portion without thinking of its taste; but the first edge of hunger blunted, I perceived I had got in hand a nauseous mess: burnt porridge is almost as bad as rotten potatoes; famine itself soon sickens over it. The spoons were moved slowly: I saw each girl taste her food and try to swallow it; but in most cases the effort was soon relinquished. Breakfast was over and none had breakfasted." (Bronte, 38)

The gradual starvation of the pupils of Lowood described in this scene had not only its basis in the severity of food discipline

practiced in early nineteenth century but also in the Evangelical conception of the child as naturally sinful. This view of the innate sinfulness of child was a natural corollary of the Evangelical doctrine of total human depravity entailed in the concept of Original Sin. William Wilberforce (1759-1833) in *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians, in the Higher and Middle Classes, Contrasted with Real Christianity* (1799) wrote:

"Far different is the humiliating language of Christianity. From it we learn that man is an apostate creature, fallen from his high original, degraded in his nature, and deprived in his faculties; indisposed to good, and disposed to evil: prone to vice, it is natural and easy to him; disinclined to virtue, it is difficult and laborious: that he is tainted with sin, not slightly and superficially, but radically, and to the very core." (Wilberforce, 27)

In *Practical View*, Wilberforce affirmed "the perverse and forward dispositions perceivable in children, which it is the business and sometimes the ineffectual attempt of education to rectify." (Wilberforce, 33) In *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (1799), Hannah More, the member of the same Clapham sect, insisted that the aim of education should be to rectify "a corrupt nature and evil dispositions" with which children are born. (More, *Strictures*, 69) In *Coelebs* (1801), More referred to Lady Belfield's optimistic views on the education of children as erroneous, arguing that:

"The fundamental error was, that she had no distinct view of the corruption of human nature. She often lamented the weakness and vices of individuals, but thought all vice an incidental not a radical mischief, the effect of thoughtfulness and casual temptation. She talked with discrimination of the faults of some of her children; but while she rejoiced in the happier dispositions of the others, she never suspected that they had all brought into the world with them any natural tendency to evil; and thought it cruel to suppose that such innocent little things had any such wrong propensities as education would not effectually cure." (More, *Coelebs*, 83)

In the chapter titled "The Early Forming of Habits" in *Strictures*, More argued that by the instillation of "a habit of self-denial" and "the early excision of superfluous desires" in the girls, they will be "rescued from the temptation, to do wrong things, for the sake of enjoyments". (More, *Strictures*, 157) The evangelical insistence on the importance of self-abstinence is spelt out by Mr. Stanley in More's *Coelebs*: "that the world, that human life, that our own sins and weaknesses, found us daily and hourly occasions of exercising patience and self-denial; that life is not entirely made up of great evils or heavy trials, but that the perpetual recurrence of petty evils and small trials is the ordinary and appointed exercise of the christian graces." (More, *Coelebs*, 215-16) The model of behavior projected in the evangelical writings was the habit of self-restraint. The overwhelming sense of human depravity demanded that daily life be regulated to prevent man's collapse back into the natural condition of sin in which he is born.

Mr. Brocklehurst's reprimanding speech to Miss Temple, who replaced the burnt porridge in the breakfast with bread and cheese, is indicative of the severity of the Evangelists' training in abstinence:

"Madam, allow me an instant. You are aware that my plan in bringing up these girls is, not to accustom them to habits of luxury and indulgence, but to render them hardy, patient and self-denying. Should any little accidental disappointment of the appetite occur, such as the spoiling of a meal, the under or overdressing of a dish, the incident ought not to be neutralised by replacing with something more delicate the comfort lost, thus pampering the body and obviating the aim of this institution; it ought to be improved to the spiritual edification of the pupils, by encouraging them to evince fortitude under the temporary privation. A brief address on those occasions would not be mistimed, wherein a judicious instructor would take the opportunity of referring to the sufferings of the primitive Christians; to the torments of martyrs; to the exhortations of our blessed Lord himself, calling upon his disciples to take up their cross and follow him; to his warnings that man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God; to his divine consolation, 'if ye suffer hunger or thirst for my sake, happy are ye.'" (Bronte, 53)

On seeing the naturally curled locks of a girl in the Lowood institution, Brocklehurst emphasized the need "to mortify in these girls the lusts of the flesh" by teaching them to clothe with "shamefacedness and sobriety, not with braided hair and costly apparel." (Bronte, 54) Charlotte Bronte's fictional description of the Lowood institution is modeled on the Clergy Daughter's School at Cowan Bridge, where Charlotte Bronte and her sisters were pupils. (Gaskell, vol.1, 54) The fourth rule of the Cowan school relating to the clothing articles which a girl was expected to carry with her states: "The pupils all appear in the same dress. They wear plain straw cottage bonnets, in summer white frocks on Sundays, and nankeens on other days; in winter, purple stuff frocks, and purple cloth cloaks." (Gaskell, vol. 1, 53) The principle of scarcity which governed the provision of clothing at Lowood is considered a cause of hardship by Jane: "Our clothing was insufficient to protect us from the severe cold: we had no boots, the snow got into our shoes and melted there; our ungloved hands became numbed and covered with chilblains, as were our feet." (Bronte, 50) The pupils' endurance of the damp and paralyzingly cold environment of Brocklebridge Church premises (to which they were made to walk on Sunday mornings in winters) seems to correspond to Charlotte Bronte's experiences at Cowan Bridge. Bronte's biographer writes: "The path from Cowan's Bridge to Tunstall Church, where Mr. Wilson preached, and where they all attended on the Sunday, is... a bitter cold one in winter, especially to children whose thin blood flowed languidly in consequence of half-starved condition. The church was not warmed, there being no means for this purpose." (Gaskell, vol. 1, 60) Arguing that the character of Helen Burns is "as exact a transcript of Maria Bronte as Charlotte's wonderful power of reproducing character could give", Elizabeth Gaskell writes that Charlotte Bronte still retained a sense of indignation at the cruelty to which her dying sister was subjected by Miss Scatcherd (a character in the novel) in the school. (Gaskell, vol.1, 60-61) Charlotte Bronte's criticism of the evangelical teachings personified in the character of Mr. Brocklehurst, the director of Lowood school, is based on Rev. William Carus Wilson, who ran the Clergy Daughter's School at Cowan Bridge, where Charlotte and her sisters studied.

The rigour which Jane experiences in Lowood is also related to the charitable character of the institution. Helen Burns explains to Jane that Lowood Institution is "partly a charity-school" and that its "charity children" were supported by the benevolent-minded people of London. (Bronte, 42) Underlining the "evangelical, charitable" nature of the Lowood establishment, Brocklehurst expresses his disapproval of Julia Savern's curled hair: 'Naturally! Yes, but we are not to conform to nature: I wish these girls to be the children of Grace: and why that abundance?' (Bronte, 54) The "lusts of flesh" which he wants to mortify in these girls and his disapproval of "abundance" have a strain of Malthusian perspective, which remained an important strand of the dominant evangelical sentiment of the first half of the nineteenth century. (Hilton, 65) The elements of moral exertion and abstinence introduced in Malthus's suggestion of sexual restraint as the preventive checks on population overgrowth in his second edition of *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1803) were utilized by evangelists for their own ends. Poverty became a sign of moral degeneration once the laws of political economy were brought into harmony with evangelicalism. So Thomas Chalmers, an evangelical divine and the opponent of the poor relief, could assert in the "Political Economy of the Bible" (1844-45) that "Imprudence will be followed up, as it always is, by suffering." (Chalmers, 30) Boyd Hilton in *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1785-1865* (1988) has demonstrated how the Malthusian message of the threat of natural calamities and famine was utilized by evangelists to teach men "to elevate their minds above their passionate flesh" and the message of divine grace through such self-denial. (Hilton, 81) As Heather Glen has rightly noted that the England depicted in *Jane Eyre* is that of the New Poor Law, in which the calculations of political economy conceive of the poorhouse as a place of deterrence and not of refuge. (Glen, 50) The theoretical bases of the New Poor Law (1834) included Thomas Malthus's *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, David Ricardo's iron law of wages, and Edwin Chadwick's utilitarian approach to poor relief. Charlotte Bronte's indictment of the gradual starvation of the pupils in the Lowood charity institution can be linked to her father Patrick Bronte's participation in the 1830s in the local opposition to the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. (Barker, 265-69)

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