

‘The sins of youth cannot be undone in age’:

**Exploring Childhood as An Echo of Adulthood in the
Works of Thackeray, Brontë, and Gaskell**

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‘The sins of youth cannot be undone in age’, warns the ‘death stricken’ Miss Furnivall at the end of Elizabeth Gaskell’s ‘The Old Nurse’s Story’, highlighting the horrific vitality of childhood experience.¹ For Gaskell, the choices we make, and the choices made for us in childhood are key in shaping our adult life. This concept is mirrored in the lengthier texts *Wuthering Heights* and *Vanity Fair*, in which Emily Brontë and William Makepeace Thackeray respectively both track the lives of multiple characters, over multiple generations, throughout childhood, adulthood, and even through death. These three narratives engage with generational familial relationships, providing an interesting perspective on changing relationships between childhood and adult life, primarily framed through the dynamics between child and adult characters. Throughout these narratives, the relationship between childhood and adult experience is explored through parental relationships and dynamics, as this is the most familiar,

¹ Elizabeth Gaskell, ‘The Old Nurse’s Story’, in *Household Words: A Weekly Journal*, ed. by Charles Dickens, 19 vols (London: Bradbury & Evans, 1850–59), VI (1852), pp. 11–20 (p. 20). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

yet nuanced, adult/child dynamic. Their repetitive generational naming of children creates echoes between childhood and adult experience, and parental and pseudo-parental figures either fracture or preserve the traditional relationship between children and adults here. In these novels and this short story, we see childhood expressed as an echo of adult experience, and we begin to see the changing status of both parents and children. I will first analyse parent/child relationships in the texts, especially in reference to absent parents and pseudo-parent figures, before moving onto a more general analysis of childhood experience.

In their writings, Brontë, Thackeray, and Gaskell toy with relationships between adults and children by destabilising and deconstructing them, primarily through adults who act as pseudo-parents to child characters, but also through absent parents. These two kinds of parents are especially interesting in conjunction with one another, as pseudo-parent figures often appear in spaces created by absent parents. This offers a nuanced view of childhood experience in relation to children's relationships to adults. In *Wuthering Heights*, the primary pseudo-parent figure is Nelly, who presents herself as a parental figure to all, even Lockwood. Nelly presides over the narrative, and appears in every generation of it, which gives her a certain authority both in creating and telling it. Catherine Linton almost expressly declares Nelly her pseudo-mother, as she tells her husband 'next to Papa and Ellen, I love you better than anybody'.² In categorising her father and her nurse together, we can see that Nelly has effectively taken on the role of her mother; she has filled the gap left by Cathy's death. In this sense, childhood experience in *Wuthering Heights* is dependent on adult relationships and behaviours. This is further seen in Heathcliff's waywardness, as when he is acquired by Mr Earnshaw, 'not a soul knew to whom he belonged' (Brontë, p. 35). Heathcliff is an orphan when we meet him, so he naturally sits outside of the traditional patriarchal family dynamic.

² Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* (New York: Race Point Publishing, 2014), p. 229. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

However, even when he works his way into Earnshaw's favour, he is still lacking a traditional family dynamic, as highlighted by the name 'Heathcliff' acting 'both for Christian and surname' (Brontë, p. 36). Heathcliff's childhood experience is framed by parental absence, and his adult life is built around cruelty and self-isolation. Interestingly, not only is Heathcliff's personal experience framed by the lack of parents, but his identity is carved around lacking children; he was named after 'a son who died in childhood', so we immediately see that Heathcliff, like Nelly for Catherine, fills an absence to preserve a traditional family order (Brontë, p. 37).

In using pseudo-parent figures, Thackeray tends to present a less-dangerous family dynamic than Brontë. We, once again, see a parental absence filled by a pseudo-parent as Amelia gives up her son upon the death of her husband. Amelia does this as she feels she cannot provide for him, whereas, when living with his grandfather, he 'had every comfort and luxury that a wealthy and lavish old grandfather thought fit to 'provide'.³ In choosing the option which is more emotionally destabilising for herself but provides stability and prosperity for her son, we see that Amelia preserves the safe and secure childhood for Georgy. Furthermore, when William Dobbin offers 'to take care of Amelia and her unprotected child', it is described as a 'civilian promise', which highlights the genuine nature of his protective oath, further indicating that pseudo-parent figures can be figures of stability and comfort (Thackeray, p. 673). Additionally, Thackeray's use of pseudo-parents is more stable than that of Brontë's, as Georgy remains in the family. While Heathcliff is handed over to a complete stranger, and Catherine entrusted to a hired servant, Georgy is put in the safe hands of the man who successfully raised his father. More than a pseudo-parent, Mr Osborne is a *grandparent*, who will not destabilise familial relationships but ensure a wealthy upbringing of his grandson.

³ William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 655. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

Often, in *Vanity Fair*, childhood experience is framed by fragmented parent/child relationships. This is especially true of Rebecca and her son, as ‘she disliked him.... He bored her’ (Thackeray, p. 518). Despite being physically present in Little Rawdon’s childhood, Rebecca is constantly emotionally absent, presented even more clearly as she ‘forgot to take any step whatever about her son’ (Thackeray, p. 750). The effect that this has on her son is notable most cleverly in the fact that Little Rawdon effectively has no narrative significance. Thackeray highlights the role of the mother to us in a metatextual way, as Little Rawdon’s life is unable to go anywhere significant because of his absent mother, who is herself one of the key characters. It would stand to reason that the child of Rebecca, the protagonist of the novel, has a significant narrative arc of their own, so Thackeray’s defiance of this assumption crystallises Little Rawdon’s overall insignificance, due to his mother’s absent parenting style. In the progression between these two quotes, we can see that Rebecca goes from disdainful to simply absent-minded about her son, in deep contrast to Amelia who ‘cared for nothing and nobody except Georgy’ (Thackeray, p. 540). Amelia and Rebecca are constantly posed as foils throughout the novel, which continues into their relationships with their children. Where Amelia is doting, but rendered absent by tragic circumstances, Rebecca is always emotionally absent, and is physically absent as soon as she has the opportunity to travel, at which time she leaves Rawdon in the hands of pseudo-parents Lady Jane and Pitt.

We see a similar dynamic in ‘The Old Nurse’s Story’, which takes this concept further in order to highlight the generational layers of repetition in parenting behaviours, as characters go on to re-enact their childhood experiences of parenting. There are multiple layers of parenting in this short story, as Gaskell indicates the director of Rosamond’s parents’ wishes, Lord Furnivall; Rosamond’s official guardian, Miss Furnivall; her true caretakers in the manor, Dorothy and James; and finally, the true parent figure, Hester, her Nurse. Throughout this story we can see how care of a child is passed around until it falls to the seemingly rightful person,

but before even characterising these parents figures deeply, Gaskell highlights the nuances of parenting. There is a multitude of parent figures and parenting styles throughout the short story, so we can see how caring for a child, in a middle-class family, is nuanced and tricky. Firstly, we see how Lord Furnivall ‘never took much notice of Miss Rosamond’, possibly due to his unrequited love for her mother, and that Hester doesn’t think that Mrs Stark ‘did care for any one, except her mistress’ (Gaskell, pp. 11, 12). In the first few pages of the story, we already know that her parents have died, and two of the chieftains of Rosamond’s care are disinterested, so Gaskell wastes no time in highlighting the absentia and apathy that frames Rosamond’s childhood. This is particularly interesting, as we know Hester to become the Nurse for Rosamond’s children in the future, so this sense of distance from her own children is replicated from her experience of childhood. Indeed, these three texts are rich in their depiction of generational repetition of action, which aligns with Kathleen Tillotson’s idea that mid-Victorian writers sought to recreate visions of their lost childhood, due to the rapid change seen between their childhood and adulthood. She notes that ‘cut off abruptly from the stagecoach world in their youth, [Victorian writers] prolonged and idealised it in memory. By constantly recreating it, they made good their age’s seeming betrayal’.⁴ Here, Tillotson encapsulates why Victorian texts focus so heavily on generational repetition; because their writers had experienced such intense generational development and change. In Rosamond’s case, I would suggest that the concept of apathetic parents is further explored later in the text, when the secret of the manor is divulged. We are told that ‘though she was a wife and a mother, she was not a bit softened’, so we can see that the legendary Maude, whose ghost haunts the manor, is also characterised as an overly emotional, uncaring parent (Gaskell, p. 18). Perhaps it is her supernatural presence that infects the behaviours of other guardians in the narrative, creating a

⁴ Kathleen Tillotson, *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 107.

predestined predisposition for apathetic parenting, or perhaps Gaskell sought to reclaim a sense of generational stability lacking in her society.

I will now focus on the primary pseudo-parent figure in the story, Hester. Right from the beginning, Hester is tender and motherly towards Rosamond, and even the children in the frame narrative, whom she calls 'my dears' (Gaskell, p. 11). The opening of the narrative sees the tragically early death of Rosamond's parents, which is followed by Hester's oath that she 'would have gone with the little child to the end of the world', so we can see how Gaskell immediately characterises Hester as a nurturing, devoted guardian for the young orphan (Gaskell, p. 11). I would suggest that the feature of this short story that most consistently and effectively casts Hester in the role of pseudo-parent to Rosamond is the ways in which she refers to the child, such as 'my little one', 'my bright and pretty pet', and 'my darling' (Gaskell, pp. 12, 11, 16). Throughout the text, we are constantly reminded of Hester's intimate, protective relationship with Rosamond through her use of affectionate nicknames, which I would argue is especially notable in comparison with the constant, and slightly confusing, naming of other characters with 'Furnivall'. Furthermore, the use of possessive pronouns furthers the sense of ownership and belonging of Rosamond to Hester, meaning that we can see her acute affection for the child, even through the pronouns.

In presenting characters as pseudo-parents in the place of absent parents, we can see that the authors fulfil the expectation of a traditional family dynamic of a parent and child. Indeed, Thackeray, Gaskell, and Brontë offer an effective substitute for the traditional family, perhaps proposing that the Victorian concept of an ideal family dynamic is outdated and unnecessary. Conversely, we can see how some narratives use pseudo-parent figures to subvert this tradition, and to create more fractured, less symmetrical relationships between children and adults. Finally, there is a stabilising option of pseudo-parents within the family, which subverts the traditional family dynamic, but does not fragment childhood experience.

In *Vanity Fair* and *Wuthering Heights*, names are key in framing relationships between children and adults, as names are frequently repeated across generations. In *Wuthering Heights*, we see Catherine reborn in Cathy, and Linton Heathcliff's name echoes former generations in both his forename and surname. Similarly, in *Vanity Fair*, we follow three generations of George Osbornes, and two Pitt Crawleys. The three Georges are possibly the most significant characters as we can see that the name is a means of framing childhood identity and shaping adult prosperity in *Vanity Fair*, and even a demonstration of vanity itself. When the eldest George takes over care of his grandson, he 'was as proud of him as ever he had been of the elder George', so we can see the mirroring not only of names, but of identity (Thackeray, p. 653). Identity is, here, dictated in childhood, so Georgy's grandfather's pride indicates to us that he will grow up to be just like his father, as was predetermined by his name. This repetition of names links childhood and adult experiences, as even when a new generation is born, their life as a child is inherently linked with adult experience through previous generations sharing their names. Gaskell mobilises a similar concept in 'The Old Nurse's Story', as Hester wishes that Rosamond could grow up in the same place as her mother. This wistful notion of generational repetition is starkly contrasted to the horrific childhood experiences Rosamond has at Furnivall Hall, highlighting how perhaps an identical generational childhood would have been preferable to a more individualised one. Brontë takes on Thackeray's repetition of names and uses it in a different way; to create a sense of haunting, as Lockwood describes the spectral 'obtrusive name' which forbids him from sleeping (Brontë, p. 18). Whilst the repetition of names in *Vanity Fair* pokes fun at the cyclical nature of children growing into adults, and mirroring their parents, and 'The Old Nurse's Story' positions generational repetition as an ideal, *Wuthering Heights* uses it far more seriously to portray the unstopably harrowing nature of perpetuating childhood trauma.

Continuing the analysis of Amelia's separation from her son, I would argue that, in their presentation of absent parents, the writers play with contemporary politics surrounding parental authority. Firstly, we can see this when Amelia hands over parental duties to her father-in-law, as he is more able to provide wealth and stability for her son. This is a gendered decision, as her husband's death did not take away her own wealth but did indeed take away his social authority and influence as a wealthy, successful man and soldier. Thackeray here alludes to contemporary politics, as Berry tells us that mothers were not granted immediate custody of their children upon the father's death until the 1886 Guardianship of Infants Act. Written in 1848, *Vanity Fair* occupies a moment of parental politics which dictates automatic authority and custody to the father, so I would suggest that Thackeray satirically exaggerates this to the point that even a child's grandfather has more parental authority than the mother, as 'the law did not accurately reflect rising public sentiment about the family, particularly the role of the mother'.⁵ Here, we can see that Thackeray highlights the undervalued role of the mother in childhood experience, as he presents the socially held view that it is more important to have a socially significant masculine example than a caring female parental figure. There is a similar gendering of parental roles in 'The Old Nurse's Story', as the unnamed father of Maude's child is constantly absent throughout the child's life. This is a converse gendering of parental roles to that of Thackeray, which could come from differing perspectives of male/female writers. Gaskell presents to us the conscious absence of fathers, especially in illegitimate or unconventional relationships, whereas Thackeray laments the involuntary absence of a devoted father and highlights a mother's ineptitude in the face of single parenthood. Gaskell's interpretation of motherhood is far more sympathetic: a young woman is abandoned by the father of her child, and left with unaccepting parents, who ultimately cause the death of her and

⁵ Laura C. Berry, 'Acts of Custody and Incarceration in *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*', *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 30 (1996), 32–55 (p. 34). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

her young child. For Gaskell, the condemnation of young, single mothers is a matter of life and death, but Thackeray clearly sees it as a commitment to the welfare of a child.

The interplay of gender and parenthood in 'The Old Nurse's Story' continues, as we see how, in a similar way to how Little Georgy's life is dictated by his grandfather, Rosamond's future is decided by a wealthy cousin rather than her primary parental force, Hester. Although Hester is not the biological or familial guardian of Rosamond, she is the force of stability and constancy in her life, as Hester remains consistent when Rosamond loses her parents and moves to live with new guardians. Hester tells us that 'I should have liked Miss Rosamond's youth to have passed where her mother's had been', and we later know the Manor House to be a place of fear, discontent, and secrets, so we can see that Hester's wishes would have been of greater benefit to the child (Gaskell, p. 11). Despite her proven wisdom, and her closeness to Rosamond, Hester simply has to obey orders following the death of Rosamond's parents. This appears to be an allegory for the status of mothers, similarly to that of *Vanity Fair*. Written in 1852, this story also predates any real rights for mothers, so it is clear that both Thackeray and Gaskell highlight the diminished role of the mother by suggesting that a distantly related male relative is of more influence and benefit to a child than their mother/mother figure. Indeed, Emily Brontë considers this same public sentiment in her writing. In *Wuthering Heights*, mothers are othered almost completely, featuring generally only in death or in 'pseudo' form, whereas father figures are presented as more instrumental in crafting childhood experience. In a similar way to Thackeray and Gaskell, Brontë considers a parent's death in order to present masculine parental dominance, but we also see an absence of mothers rather than of only a father, or both parents. There is no significant mother figure for either Heathcliff and Cathy, or Edgar and Catherine, all of whom are emotionally unstable and wild. Thus, where Thackeray light-heartedly satirises the diminished role of the mother, Brontë is more aligned with Gaskell in seriously highlighting the danger of entrusting childhood stability with the father, or a

masculine guardian figure, alone. For Thackeray, the mother is a submissive, absent figure, whereas for Brontë and Gaskell, the absence of any maternal power is a tragedy which perpetuates childhood instability.

In relation to contemporary social outlook on childhood, both novels were written shortly after, but set securely before the Infant Custody Bill of 1839, which saw the status of a child shift from being property to a recognised person (Berry, p. 32). I would suggest that Heathcliff's narrative—a warped 'rags to riches' story—neatly echoes this social development, as we see him grow from an orphan whose pronouns were originally 'it' rather than 'he', to 'usurper of [Earnshaw]'s affections', and finally to the 'landlord' of Thrushcross Grange (Brontë, pp. 33, 36, 1). Heathcliff begins as subhuman and grows to become the favourite child; through Heathcliff's progress in his childhood, we can track the progressing status of the child in the eye of the law. Additionally, in 'The Old Nurse's Story', we hear the narrative of an unwanted, hidden child go from shame and invisibility to a haunting dominance, as Maude's daughter is a visceral, powerful force even after her death. I would also suggest that the significance of pseudo-parent figures in these texts is possible only through the expanding personhood and agency of the child, as they are only able to be parental figures by being seen as a guiding force by the child themselves. If the attachments of children were not figured as narratively important, as is possible through expanding childhood agency, pseudo-parent figures in literature would not be possible.

Vanity Fair, 'The Old Nurse's Story', and *Wuthering Heights* offer nuanced perspectives of childhood, figuring them not only as echoes, but as a force of creating adult experiences. These narratives frame childhood in relation to adult experience primarily, and most interestingly, through the role of parents. The parent/child dynamic is identified as the closest and most intricate adult/child relationship, and the one through which children understand adulthood. As Thackeray, Brontë, and Gaskell toy with these relationships by

figuring and refiguring them, they truly highlight the importance of parent-like figures on children's development. The pseudo-parental figures disrupt the traditional dynamic, as they are able to occupy a space of deep care without biological attachment, and biological parents are often characterised as cold and uncaring. Whilst biological parents are cold figures, who offer their children little but transgenerational burdens, pseudo-parents offer warmth, love, and a model for children to follow. Thackeray, Brontë, and Gaskell draw on contemporary thought on the role of parents and the status of the child, to open up a new space for parents in narratives, offering a nuanced perspective on childhood experience.

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