FEMININE INSIGHTS INTO VICTORIAN FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS: CHARLOTTE BRONTË'S SHIRLEY AND VILLETTE

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Abstract: The paper investigates how the lack of a secure attachment affects the behaviour and relationships of the feminine characters in Shirley and Villette. We talk about absent parents, parents who do not offer their love and time, or parents who died and left traumas in their children's lives. We analyze Caroline, a young girl raised by an aggressive father, and her mother leaving her at an early age, and we show why the connection to a caregiver is essential for the child's well-being. Mrs. Beck's three daughters have a physically present mother, but she is not willing to offer them love and support. She does not kiss or hug them and does not establish limits for their behaviour, typical features of parenthood for the 19th century, where nannies usually replace the parents. Throughout the paper we better understand Victorian society, but also how important is a healthy and close relationship between children and parents in early childhood. A secure attachment during childhood is the one that makes the child feel self-confident later in his life and gives him/her the balance for healthy future relationships, connection is the cure for trauma and the key to well-being.

Keywords: secure attachment, connection, love, quality relationships, trauma.

Quality relationships bring us balance, calm, happiness, and general well-being, that is why they are so important for one's healthy life. The first and most important relationship in our lives is the one with our mother: If we get attention, love, and time throughout our childhood and the caregiver is there for us meeting our needs, we are going to feel safe as adults and we are going to consider the world a safe place. Studies show that children who have a secure attachment are going to have: Better self-control, better emotional flexibility, better self-esteem, better stress management, better relationships with their colleagues, closer friendships during childhood, appropriate relationships as teenagers, and romantic relationships based on trust, better social skills, leader qualities, happy relationships with parents, siblings, confidence in life (Saltman, Bethany:179).

The main character that draws our attention in Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* is Caroline, who has never met her mother because her parents separated after her birth. Her father died when she was little, and her uncle took care of her for a couple of years. As studies show it is essential for the child to receive kind words, to spend time together doing activities, and to get support and love. Her uncle was not the most appropriate person to take care of her education and to give her enough attention and because of this lack of involvement, she does not have enough self-esteem or knowledge compared to other girls her age. She wants to learn French from Hortense Moore at the Hollow's Mill. The Moore brothers had a distinct kind of childhood, so their self-esteem is not low, even if they need reassurance from time to time. Hortense Moore feels happier and more balanced when Robert gives her his affectionate support and when her talents (sowing, playing guitar, speaking French) are appreciated. Her humour and state of mind improve when Caroline expresses her respect and excitement toward her musical talent. Robert himself remembers their mother as being loving and supportive, but having an irritating state of mind when it came to household tasks. The narrator expresses her opinion about the importance of affection in a century defined by the

lack of affection and connection to children: “Nothing is more soothing than affection. The quarrels within the family are degrading; the family connection raises the soul” (Brontë, Charlotte: 91). Even if these words were written almost 200 years ago, they define the studies about child’s attachment because the keywords are: affection and connection. The fact that Hortense had her brother close to her and a balanced childhood created the basis of a strong personality. Compared to Caroline she believes in her talents and knowledge and expresses her leadership qualities as a teacher. Caroline can be defined as being aware and ambitious, she wants to learn new things and to evolve. She is conscious that her childhood was empty of many cognitive experiences, and she is open-minded and willing to acquire new notions. Brontë’s female characters are very transparent when it comes to their ideas and feelings, a feature that is common to women in general, who tend to be more talkative, express their needs, and understand other people, are more analytic when it comes to their own feelings, men being oriented towards action.

The French poem, *La jeune captive,* by André Chénier is another proof that the character is on a journey towards herself: “Mon beau voyage encore est si loin de sa fin! /Je pars, et des ormeaux qui bordent le chemin/ J’ai passé les premiers à peine(...)” (Brontë, Charlotte: 98). Her journey is only at the beginning as the poem says and the obstacles were overcome with difficulty. “Je ne suis qu’au printemps- je veux voir la moisson/Est comme le soleil, de saison en saison/ Je veux achever mon année.” The young girl does not have life experience, but she is determined to learn and live each moment of her journey until the end, where she is going to find fulfillment.

The relationship between Caroline and her uncle is a formal one, Caroline is not open about all aspects of her life, she is not close to him or communicative, she is just obedient and polite. Her adoptive parent does not have a good opinion about women, and he considers them inferior to men, except the ones in high society, so Lina grows up with the idea that she is not enough, and she does not deserve anyone’s attention. Studies say how important “early healthy relationships with our parents are, as an indicator for success and well-being in life” (Gyorgy, Gaspar:20). Because she had never had her parents close to her to offer her their attention and her needs to be met, she thought she was not important, and people did not want to spend time with her because she was not worthy or interesting. Children must know and feel they are enough, they do not need to work or make efforts to receive love, it should come naturally and unconditionally.

She has some bad memories of her father's behaviour: he used to leave the house early and come back extremely late without giving her any food during some of the days. He was angry and aggressive, and this behaviour did not have any explanation in the girl’s mind. One night she was sick, and he entered her room threatening her because he felt she was a burden to him. Because of the yelling, the neighbours heard her and saved her that night, this being the last memory with her father ” ...at night, when he came back, was like a madman, furious, terrible; or-still more painful-like an idiot, imbecile, senseless. She knew she had fallen ill in this place, and that one night when she was very sick, he had come raving into the room, and said he would kill her, for she was a burden to him; her screams had brought aid, and from that moment she was then rescued from him she had never seen him, except as a dead man in his coffin” (Wood, Madeleine:117).

Mr. Helstone never mentioned her mother to the young girl, and she had a lot of questions about her parents’ marriage, but her uncle, who was against marriage in general, kept silent about her parents' relationship. He talks about her mother:” She thinks nothing of you, she never enquires about you; I have reason to believe she does not want to see you (Wood, Madeleine: 118). She was not used to sharing her feelings, so when she was forbidden to visit Hortense and Robert, she wrote some letters but could not send them because she felt ashamed. It is particularly important in our early childhood to feel that our parents accept us

as we are, even if we are angry or sad. The girl kept all her feelings inside, and she suffered deeply. After Robert's rejection, she feels she needs her maternal love more than ever: "She longed for something else: the deep, secret, anxious yearning to discover and know her mother strengthened daily; but with the desire was coupled a doubt, dread-if she knew her, could she love her" (Wood, Madeleine:119). She dreams about her mother and imagines how she could love her. She missed her childhood, and she missed an ideal parental love: "She wished her mother came one day and looked at her with joy and eyes full of love and told her in a sweet voice: Caroline, my little girl, I have a home for you: you will come and live with me. All the love you needed, but did not get, I kept it for you with care, come now and serve yourself" (Brontë, Charlotte:331). She explains to Mrs. Pryor that: " sometimes I want a human being genuinely loves me...when I was a child I felt the need for attention, but just the servants were nice to me, but when people ignore us for a long time, we start not to care about their coldness" (Brontë, Charlotte:385).

When she feels sad and weak, Mrs. Pryor moves with her and takes care of her. This is the second time she has been saved in an unbelievably bad emotional moment for her, because Robert Moore has abandoned her, and she feels sick. There is also the theme of the "sickroom that repeats the key characteristics of the historical moment in which they are trapped but in the affective register. It is the static space of the sickroom that Caroline and Robert recover and relive a repressed maternal history that has been fundamental to the formation of their affective lives" (https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/30/article/805655)Robert Greene explains how the patterns that we experienced in our early childhood affect the way we see things as adults and every negative happening comes to take us back to our childhood roots:

In early childhood, we were at our most sensitive and vulnerable. Our relationship with our parents had a much greater impact on us the further back in time we went. These vulnerabilities and wounds remain buried deep within our minds. Later in life, a person or event will trigger a memory of this positive or negative experience, and with it a release of powerful chemicals or hormones associated with the memory (Greene, Robert:22).

She finds out that she is her real mother and starting that moment everything changes in her life. Everyone notices the changes in Caroline's appearance because she is healthier and happier. The fear, disappointment, and depression all disappeared thanks to a loving relationship that she missed for so many years that comes as a blessing for the young girl. Through the discussions between Caroline and Shirley, we understand how essential communication is for Brontë he underlines the importance of confession in the process of healing exactly like nowadays psychologists encourage us to heal our traumatic experiences by first being aware of them:" Brontë uses nursing as a trope to show the return to a child-like state of dependency, in which the traumatic wounds of the past must be worked through"(Wood, Madeleine125). Her mother helps her not only when it comes to Robert's absence but also when it comes to her father's forgiveness. Thanks to her mother's blessing Caroline is healed and she can heal Robert as well. The father-daughter conflict is solved, and Caroline can make peace with her traumatic past and with herself.

"James, slumber peacefully! See! your terrible debt is canceled! Look! I wipe out the long, black account with my own hand! James, your child atones: this living likeness of you-this thing with your perfect features-this one good gift you gave me has nestled affectionately to my heart, and tenderly called me a mother. Husband! Rest forgiven!" (Wood, Madelein:130).

As we start reading *Villette*, the first child that we meet is Pauline who has recently lost her mother at only six years old and her appetite for food and life in general have been deeply affected. She is brought to Mrs. Bretton's house because her father is depressed and does not feel prepared to take care of her. The little girl cried for many days and wished that Mrs. Bretton's house had been her father's house. "Daddy, daddy dear" she would say all day

long. “Mrs. Bretton talked to her in short, affectionate words while she was caressing her hands, arms, legs. At the beginning she was welcomed with a thinking look, but soon she received a smile” (Brontë, Charlotte:9). When her father visited her, the girl changed completely for the better if he was by her side. She was calm, and happy, and expressed her ideas. After her father decided to move to another country, she felt lonely and upset and had to find another attachment figure in the person of Graham with whom she wanted to spend every single day. Studies showed that babies that have a secure attachment towards their mothers during the first year of life tolerate much better separation when they are older. (Saltman, Bethany:33).

It is essential to receive love throughout our childhood to be able to face any problem or obstacle when we are grown-ups. We do not function on our own, we are not independent creatures, and we have an interdependent relationship with our caregivers, a fact that prepares us for our adult life. “Bowlby discovered that orphans without a maternal loving substitute suffered terribly” (Saltman, Bethany:95). All children who are abandoned when they are little become anxious. This is the case with Polly who becomes anxious when her father comes back to her and is afraid that he is going to leave her again. Her behavior around him is that of a little girl who did not have her needs met at the right time and longs for her lost childhood to catch those moments again.

“Relationships are in the centre of human existence and of intellectual development” (Saltman, Bethany:15). Everything we do, “the patterns according to which we love, eat, sleep, create can be seen through the early attachment relationship” (Saltman, Bethany:22).

Both the mother and the child are supposed to be together, happy, enjoy life and their relationship. A child that gets love, warmth, and attention, will be a balanced grown-up. It is not only about food, clothes, or shelter, it is the need to be connected to somebody, that is why children cannot be kissed only in their sleep, a typical aspect of the Victorian period, they are supposed to be hugged and kissed daily: "We are deeply interdependent. We are unity. We are a relationship” (Saltman, Bethany:104). When Lucy Snowe comes and works as an English teacher at Mrs. Beck’s girl's boarding school she understands the aspects of the relationship between her, and her children and she presents us all the aspects through her eyes:" One could tell that she has never had the desire to lift the children on her knees, to kiss their lips, hug them and give them caresses and loving words” (Brontë, Charlotte:108). We feel that Lucy knows how important it is for the child’s well-being to feel their parents' love and hear supportive words. The coldness of an entire century could be seen in this novel because even if parents offered their children material things, they did not show them their true feelings. For example, if the little one, Georgette was spending time outside with her nanny and suddenly saw her mother, she was so happy and ran towards her joyful, but her mother stood there without kissing or hugging her and leading her back to Trinette.

John Gottman talks about the effect of loving care expressed by emotionally balanced parents who succeed in changing the function of the nerves for the better. So, the most important thing is preparing the children from the emotional point of view through discussions about their feelings and actions, without judging. In this way, the child is going to learn how to adopt positive behaviour (Goleman, Daniel:360).

When it comes to the relationship with her oldest daughter, Desirée, things were inappropriate, but in another way. The girl had bad behaviour, broke many things, took things that were not hers and lied. For all these matters her mother did not take any action, she used to say that it is important to watch every move, but do nothing so Desirée was uneducated, and things were not explained to her properly.

When Fifine was ill, Deisrée noticed the amount of attention her sister received, and she decided to fake her sickness to get time and attention. Georgette loved that Lucy was so caring and affectionate:

Lifting her on my knees and keeping her in my arms was a real pleasure to me. She wanted me to keep my head on her pillow and put her hands around my neck. The tender feelings, no matter what they were, were not seen often in this house (Brontë, Charlotee:143).

Lucy missed her joy when the little girl was sent to the countryside. In the 19th century, most of the children received love and time thanks to the nannies that were present and involved in their lives more than their parents:

The nanny was in effect a substitute parent. Nannies were usually older women who had never been married. Some of them were kind and caring and supplied the only love a child would experience. They would do the extra things to brighten a child's life such as playing games with them or fixing special meals on their birthday. (https://victoriancgildren.org/victorian-children-in-victorian-times).

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