



LUND UNIVERSITY

Joint Faculties of Humanities and Theology

Centre for Languages and Literature

English Studies

Dealing with Death: The Romanticising of Tuberculosis in Three Victorian Novels

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ENGK01

Degree project in English Literature

Fall 2018

Centre for Languages and Literature

Lund University

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Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to investigate whether the characters of Charlotte Brontë's and Elizabeth Gaskell's novels *Jane Eyre*, *North and South* and *Ruth* romanticise tuberculosis, how the disease was romanticised, and what qualities the affected characters had to possess to die from the disease. Major and minor characters who contract the disease are scrutinised, as well as the characters surrounding them, to get a satisfactory picture of the romanticising. To better account for the contemporary ideals and values, the main focus is on beauty paradigms, goodness and religion. To investigate this above, the novels are scrutinised separately, summarised together in one section, and lastly a conclusion is presented. I anticipate that the characters indeed romanticise the disease, and that to die from it, you had to be a good person.

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Introduction

During the 19th century, tuberculosis was a very common disease, which might be the main reason for it being reoccurring in novels from the same century. The disease even reached epidemic proportions during the 18th and 19th centuries (Daniel). *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*, which is the Latin name for the disease, may have killed more human beings than any other disease of its kind (Daniel), so it is not hard to see how it would have affected the contemporary writers' choice of death for their characters. Tuberculosis has a range of symptoms, including weight loss, fatigue and a loss of appetite (McIntosh). Historically, a high amount of people contracted tuberculosis, and the disease has been around for most of human history (Daniel). It was such a common disease that it could also be found in animals traced to human contact, which makes it likely that humans contracted the disease first and spread it on (Klebs 14).

The aim of this essay is to examine whether the characters of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), and Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth* (1853) and *North and South* (1855) romanticise death, more specifically, the deaths caused by tuberculosis. The subjects of investigation in this essay will be main characters in these three novels who contract the disease, or characters close to the protagonists who do so. The novels have been chosen due to their inclusion of tuberculosis, and because they were written by two of the most prominent female writers of the 19th century. They have also been chosen because due to the contemporary relevance of Gaskell and Brontë, material on the novels would not be hard to access. As the disease was so very common during the 19th century, it is not strange that it is present in *Jane Eyre* and both of the Gaskell novels chosen for this essay. The focus will lie on how the afflicted characters are perceived by themselves and their close ones. In other words, I will investigate whether the characters had to be in a certain way to 'deserve' to die in tuberculosis, and whether tuberculosis was romanticised in fiction. To do this, characters and scenes from the novels will be presented and discussed with the aid of various sources on tuberculosis, romanticising and the novels themselves.

I argue that the characters in the novels that are subject to analysis in this essay dealt with the deaths by romanticising the disease, hence making it easier to deal with the loss of the tuberculosis afflicted characters. By romanticising, I mean that the characters partially glorified the disease, making it beautiful instead of horrible, and partially used it as a beautification of their God taking their loved ones too soon. I claim that the characters who died

from tuberculosis in these novels were good, beautiful people, and that their religious faith has an important role in whether they die from the disease or not.

The connection between beauty, goodness, and Tuberculosis is common in 19th century literature. At the time these novels were published, it was attractive to be pale with rosy cheeks, and to have hazy, shiny eyes. It was also attractive to be thin and in correlation with this it was attractive to have a modest appetite. Of course, these features could be naturally acquired, but tuberculosis enhanced several of the attributes that were already considered to be attractive for women (Day 2). It is highly possible that the average person during the 19th century did not comprehend or recognise tuberculosis as the life threatening disease it was, in its early stages. This could in its turn have caused the writers of the time to project their knowledge, or lack thereof, to their characters, so it is highly possible that the contemporary beauty ideals were implemented in their texts. Moreover, many people only mimicked the symptoms of tuberculosis due to the beauty ideals, and did not actually contract the disease. This could be a contributing factor to the lack of recognition, and thus the lack of comprehension regarding the gravity of the disease. Most of the characters analysed in this essay die because of tuberculosis, a disease I claim is deeply connected to goodness, Christianity and beauty.

Grief, Mourning, and Religion

Grief can have many different causes, such as unrequited love, injustice and death, and someone who was closely associated with death and mourning was Queen Victoria, who ruled the United Kingdom during the major part of the 19th century. The queen lost her husband in 1861, after over 20 years of marriage. She mourned him for more than 40 years, and showed this by dressing in black for the remainder of her life (Rappaport, Chapter 9). Victoria grew pale and thin from her grief, though she apparently appreciated when people commented that she got more beautiful than she had ever been before (Wagner, 190). The passage below is taken from a letter the Queen sent to her uncle Leopold, describing how devastated she was after the loss of her husband.

[...] to be cut off in the prime of life – to see our pure happy, quiet domestic life, which alone enabled me to bear my much disliked position, cut off at forty-two – when I had hoped with such instinctive

certainty that God would never part us, and would let us grown old together [...] – is too awful, too cruel! (Wagner, 190)

Victorian England is often associated with formality and emotional distance. For instance, if someone wanted to comfort Queen Victoria, they could not hold her or offer the natural consoling gestures seen in today's families. This was of course due to the emotional distance, which was common at the time, and because Victoria was part of the royal family, and not a commoner, which made it all the more rare to offer comfort in this particular way (Rappaport chapter 9). Due to this emotional distance, it was probably not custom to mourn someone for as long as Victoria did. One would mourn and dress in solely black for a period after the passing of a loved one, but not for 40 years. However, as the royal family was considered to be an ideal family, it is reasonable to believe that other families adapted to the queen's way of mourning, and mourned for a longer period of time. It is possible that Queen Victoria, as such an idolized individual, caused others to express their own grief more openly, and that she set an example of how people should mourn.

Furthermore, to connect grief and mourning with romanticising tuberculosis, it is important to acknowledge the strict religiousness present at the time. Caroline Day claims that tuberculosis was connected to the concept of Divine will, because sin and redemption were prominent in the life and death of someone who suffered from tuberculosis (41). It seems as if suffering was necessary to acquire redemption, as she quotes Boyd Hilton, saying that “[...] pain was seen as an essential part of God's order, and is bound up with the machinery of judgement and conversion.” (41). Moreover, people had to romanticise and accept the illness, as they presumably thought of it as obeying God when adjusting to their loved ones dying.

The people at the time listened to the church when they claimed that Jesus, according to his prayer in John 17, still has a particular unfulfilled desire: that his people will join him in the home he has prepared for them in Heaven (John 14:2–4). Hence, questioning God's decision of taking someone away was to deny Jesus his wish. As it was commonly believed that God has purposes humans may never understand (Deuteronomy 32:39; James 4:15), and because people adhered to the idea that Jesus begged his Father to bring his people home, it became a way to accept their loved ones' deaths sooner rather than later. Considering the mortality rate of tuberculosis reaching epidemic proportions during the time (Daniel), accepting and dealing with death was perhaps more of a necessity than it is today. The contemporary comprehension was that God was only granting Jesus's wish, slowly but surely, by taking Christians from earth, to be by his side in Heaven.

Religion and tuberculosis hence seem closely connected. Philippe Ariès argues that the concept of a ‘beautiful death’ came to be because of the change in approach to death and illness in combination with the Romantic Movement (qtd. in Day 41), which put emphasis on individualism and emotion. Ariès claims that there was “[...] an influential cultural archetype in the notion of a ‘beautiful death, one resulting from the transformation in the approach to illness and death that accompanied the Romantic Movement and presented death as a beautiful experience to be approached with enthusiasm rather than dread.” (41) He largely bases this claim on a study of the works written by the Brontë sisters while most of the members of the family suffered and died from tuberculosis. Presumably, the ravages of consumption in such a public family as the Brontës’ increased the contemporary acceptance of the disease. Additionally, it is probable that the acceptance created the image that it was an easy and ‘beautiful’ ending (41), which could of course be wishful thinking from those remaining after a tuberculosis induced death. Moreover, Patricia Jalland has argued that there was an inclination towards a ‘good death’ and a beautiful one: By ‘a good death’, she means that the inflicted had a graceful approach towards death, and by ‘beautiful’ she means that the inflicted showed the ‘beautiful’ physical traits of the illness, and that they had a beautiful soul. The latter is, according to Jalland’s theory, revealed by the demise and decline, in other words, the approach towards death. An important part of dying of tuberculosis, or being the family of someone dying of the disease, was to resign and to accept death (qtd. in Day 41).

As displayed above, the romanticising of tuberculosis can be connected to both the beauty ideals of the time and to religion. The qualities described above grew to be considered beautiful, and so in connection with tuberculosis, which enhanced said qualities, the disease was romanticised, and the strict religiousness seems to be the reason that the romanticising was required in the first place. For the characters of *Jane Eyre*, *Ruth*, and *North and South*, romanticising the disease was perhaps necessary to cope with the many deaths it caused.

***Jane Eyre* and Tuberculosis**

In Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, we follow the young, orphaned Jane as she grows up, gets an education, starts working as a governess for a rich man, and the two fall in love. There is a minor character in *Jane Eyre* who contracts tuberculosis, but the impact she has on the protagonist Jane is very significant. The character’s name is Helen, and the girls meet at school, where Helen becomes the first friend of the protagonist Jane.

Helen is a character who is perceived as patient, forgiving, and intelligent by her friend Jane, although she does not seem to appreciate herself, due to certain qualities. When

approached by Jane's compliments she disagrees and claims: "I am ... slatternly; I seldom put, and never keep, things, in order; I am careless; I forget rules; I read when I should learn my lessons; I have no method." (Brontë 25). This statement indicates that Helen is constantly striving towards being a better person, even though she is perceived as a very good person and Christian by Jane. The below passage is from a scene where Helen tries to console Jane after Jane has declared that she would sacrifice anything to be loved by others.

Hush, Jane! you think too much of the love of human beings; you are too impulsive, too vehement; the sovereign hand that created your frame, and put life into it, has provided you with other resources than your feeble self, or than creatures feeble as you. Besides this earth, and besides the race of men, there is an invisible world and a kingdom of spirits: that world is round us, for it is everywhere; and those spirits watch us, for they are commissioned to guard us; and if we were dying in pain and shame, if scorn smote us on all sides, and hatred crushed us, angels see our tortures, recognise our innocence... and God waits only the separation of spirit from flesh to crown us with a full reward. Why, then, should we ever sink overwhelmed with distress, when life is so soon over, and death is so certain an entrance to happiness — to glory?
(79)

Helen tries to tell Jane that what is important is not how we are perceived by others, but how we are perceived by God. She believes that God is good, and that he will reward them in the afterlife, as long as they are good Christians. After contracting tuberculosis, Helen hopes that she, as a good Christian, will be welcomed into Heaven. Even though she doubts her qualities, as shown in the passage where she speaks of her shortcomings, it is evident that she believes that God is good, that he will see that she is doing her utmost to be a good Christian, and that she believes he will reward her when her spirit has been parted from her body. Her faith is one of her most prominent traits, and also the one Jane envies the most. As is evident in both in the passage above and the later scene where Jane and Helen talk about the afterlife, the latter hopes that she is worthy of ascending to Heaven:

[Jane:] "You are sure then, Helen, that there is such a place as heaven, and that our souls can get to it when we die?"

[Helen:] "I am sure there is a future state; I believe God is good; I can resign my immortal part to Him without any misgiving. God is my father; God is my friend: I love Him; I believe he loves me." (100)

Helen calls God good, friend and father. She hopes that God will forgive her for her shortcomings and believes that she can resign her immortal part to him without fear. This can be interpreted as Helen not being afraid of what happens to her spirit once it is in God's hands, as she believes God's goodness and ability to forgive will be enough for her to be welcomed into Heaven. She may have her flaws, but she believes that God is willing to forgive her for them. Perhaps she is not certain that she is welcome in Heaven, but she believes and hopes that she will get to go there.

When Jane sees Helen right before she passes away, she is surprised that Helen looks like usual, because she has heard the teachers and the nurses speaking of Helen's certain death, which is, according to them, rapidly approaching. Jane thinks they must be wrong. "Oh!" I thought, "she is not going to die; they are mistaken: she would not speak and look so calmly if she were" (Brontë 93). Jane is certain that someone who is on her deathbed could not possibly be so accepting of her fate, which is probably because Jane is not a devout Christian that early in the novel, and because she fears death because her parents died when she was young, leaving her with her uncle, and because her uncle died not long after, leaving her with her horrible aunt.

Helen, however, is not afraid. She is a devout Christian, and therefore accepts her demise and decline, as 'required' to die in tuberculosis according to Jalland's theory, and resigns to God's will (qtd. in Day 41). Helen comes across as a typical example of a good and beautiful Christian dying from tuberculosis in nineteenth-century literature. She meets all requirements that Jalland lists; she is good, devout, and beautiful towards the end of her life when she is marked by the disease. Her acceptance of death has a big impact on Jane, who feels reassured that her friend is not in pain, and that she is, in Helen's own words, "happy to be leaving the world's suffering behind" (58).

Helen's words adhere very well to what Florence Nightingale is quoted as saying by Carolyn A Day's book: "Patients who die of consumption very frequently die in a state of seraphic joy and peace; the countenance almost expresses rapture. Patients who die of cholera, peritonitis, &c., on the contrary often die in a state approaching despair. The countenance expresses horror." (qtd. in Day 52). Nightingale has written about this in her book *Notes on Nursing for the Labouring Classes*, from 1861. This statement can be applied to Helen in *Jane Eyre*. She is truly at peace, and is happy to leave the earthly world, when she passes. As Helen

dies in tuberculosis, she was, according to Nightingale's statement, expected to be happy and at peace, while if she had died in another disease, such as cholera, she would have been expected to die in despair (52). This gives further evidence of the romanticising of tuberculosis in connection with death was, as other common diseases were not romanticised in the same way.

It seems very likely that Helen's very strong religiousness has an impact both on how she accepts the disease, and on how much she suffers from it, as tuberculosis had many symptoms such as coughing, spitting out phlegm and blood, and fever (Day 2), and Helen does not seem to suffer very much. One could wonder how Helen can say she feels little pain, when tuberculosis is known to cause quite a lot of suffering. This leads me to the conclusion that just as in everything Helen does, God is present, and her religious faith gives her the strength to be calm, and to endure the pain. Furthermore, she knows that she is going to leave this world behind soon, and can hence endure with the knowledge that she will not suffer for long.

***Ruth* and Tuberculosis**

Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth* is about an orphaned young woman called Ruth who works as a seamstress, and she engages in a relationship with a man to whom she is not married, which has severe consequences. Just as in *Jane Eyre*, we get to see the main character grow. She does not age a lot of years in the novel, but she evolves as a person.

Gaskell was scrutinised when her preceding novel *Mary Barton* was published, and many extracts from said novel were criticised in the newspapers. When *Ruth* came out in 1853, it was not very kindly welcomed by Gaskell's readers, due to her previous novel, but with *Ruth*, beyond the reviews ranging from cautious praise to outrage, there was an absence of extracts, as could be expected due to the story being about a fallen woman in the regional press (Hammond 14).

There are two major characters who contract tuberculosis in *Ruth*: Ruth herself and Mr Bellingham/Mr Donne. Ruth seems to perceive Mr Bellingham as a friend initially, but already from the beginning she seems to fancy him, and vice versa. They engage into a relationship, and when this sin is discovered, Ruth's problems start to accumulate.

It is clear that Ruth is not a devoted Christian to begin with, but that she becomes one later on. Despite earlier being careless, having had a relationship with a man she is not married to, and giving birth to an illegitimate child, she grows as an individual throughout the novel. As society did not accept the behaviour of women in Ruth's situation, Ruth struggles with bettering herself. Eventually, she comes to terms with her errors, and seeks forgiveness from God, and

from herself, when she realises that she does not need to depend on the opinions of her society, only God.

Before coming to terms with her sins, when Ruth is at her lowest point, pregnant and alone, she is found by a minister called Mr Benson. At the time of their meeting, Ruth is just about to end her life, because she has given up hope, both in herself and in God, it seems, but Mr Benson comforts her, and he, his sister and housekeeper takes Ruth in. She takes great comfort in knowing that the Benson family loves her, but even more assurance is given to her when told by the Bensons that God loves her too. The passage below is taken from about the middle of the novel, before Ruth and the readers have realised her new born Christianity, as she sits watching the sunset:

Ruth forgot herself in looking at the gorgeous sight. She sat up gazing, and, as she gazed, the tears dried on her cheeks; and, somehow, all human care and sorrow were swallowed up in the unconscious sense of God's infinity. The sunset calmed her more than any words, however wise and tender, could have done. It even seemed to give her strength and courage; she did not know how or why, but so it was. (305).

Ruth finds comfort in the warmth and light she feels from the sunset, and this seems to be a representation of how God makes her feel. She feels warm, safe, and light hearted, for the first time in her life. She feels loved by someone, and though she does not realise why the sunset has such an impact on her, it is obvious that it is her emerging faith that truly warms her. Her new-born Christianity is what warms her.

A time after realising her faith, Ruth starts nursing the sick in Eccleston. She grows as an individual by taking care of people, and eventually gain a lot of friends. When tuberculosis breaks out, she has to stop working due to the risks, but after hearing that Mr Bellingham has fallen ill, she decides to help him, even though she is putting her own life at stake. This shows that Ruth has no will to see him suffer, even though he deserted her and led her astray. She has no wish to see the father of her child die, despite him being a bad person.

In regards of physical appearance, Ruth is described by her peers as a beautiful woman. They say very little about her personality when they describe her, but her beauty is repeatedly commented on, as shown in this comment: "Never mind, Ruthie, you're prettier than any of

them', said a merry, good-natured girl, whose plainness excluded her from any of the envy of rivalry." Ruth most probably grew even more beautiful due to suffering from tuberculosis, and she also ends up being a virtuous Christian. Hence, when contracting the disease, she does not only become more physically beautiful, but she is, by her society, presumably perceived as an even better person than she already was while caring for the sick.

Ruth seems sure that she will be welcomed into Heaven, as is evident in the description of her death: "[...] they were too much awed by the exquisite peacefulness of her look [...] 'I see the light coming', said she. 'The light is coming', she said. And, raising herself slowly, she stretched out her arms, and then fell back, very still for evermore." (Gaskell 361). Ruth has suffered from her mistakes, and she dies in a good and beautiful way, which is only possible if you are good enough of a person, according to Ariès' claims (qtd. in Day 41). Ruth became a respected citizen and Christian:

Her ways were quiet; she never spoke much. Any one who has been oppressed with the weight of a vital secret for years, and much more any one of the character of whose life has been stamped on by one event, and that producing sorrow and shame, is naturally reserved. And yet Ruth's silence was not like reserve; it was too gentle and tender for that. It had more the effect of a hush of all loud or disturbing emotions, and out of the deep calm the words that came forth had a beautiful power. She did not talk much about religion; but those who noticed her knew that it was an unseen banner which she was following. The low-breathed sentences which she spoke into the ear of the sufferer and the dying carried them upwards to God. (316).

As this past passage describes, Ruth was in a good place when she finally pays the ultimate price for her sins and dies from tuberculosis. She gives her life for the sake of another person, and prior to this risks her own health for the sake of the people of her town. The Bible says that sacrificing one's life for someone else is an act of selflessness, which is described various times, for example: "Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matthew 10:39). This sacrifice is what eventually redeems Ruth from her position as a fallen woman. It seems to be the last step in her redeeming herself before her death, and her society grieves her after her passing, eventually deciding that she was a good

person, despite her being a fallen woman. Just as Helen in *Jane Eyre*, Ruth is perceived as a good person by her peers when she passes.

Ruth is, at the time of her death, entitled to compassion and kindness from others due to her services as a nurse: "By degrees her reputation as a nurse spread upwards, and many sought her good offices who could well afford to pay for them. (316). Ruth's peers are ready to mourn her when she passes, though she has been shunned for a long time, as she has earned their sympathy, and forgiveness.

Ruth hence adheres to the pattern of dying the beautiful, good death of tuberculosis, and being a good Christian. In the beginning of the novel, Ruth is described as "... too young when her mother died to have received any cautions or words of advice" (Gaskell 44). Perchance Ruth could receive additional sympathy, despite being careless in her younger years, due to her unfortunate upbringing, and could because of this be forgiven by her peers when she showed penitence. Ruth may not start her life as a good Christian, but she becomes one after her experiences and after a lot of hard work. Therefore, at the end of her life, Ruth seems to have paid for her sins, both in the eyes of society and God. She has redeemed herself, and hence earned a place in heaven, just like Helen Burns earns hers. Ruth evolves and becomes a good Christian, and a good mother in the end, with the help of The Bensons, who help her significantly with her faith.

The other character who contracts tuberculosis, Mr Bellingham, is by Ruth initially described as a charming young man. He was a man of a certain class, so he was probably perceived as very pleasant by his society, but he leaves Ruth to fend for herself later on, which is not gentlemanlike, which presumably makes the reader realise that he is quite an egoistic man. However, as Mr Bellingham has to be convinced by his mother to desert Ruth, one could argue that he cares for Ruth deep down.

Regardless if he cares about Ruth or not, Mr Bellingham is an accomplice in Ruth being shunned, hence almost ruining her life. Out of the two, he contracts the disease first, but is nursed back to health by Ruth. She thus chooses to help someone who helped condemn her to a horrible life even though she no longer seems to have feelings for him. Bellingham does not find out that it was Ruth who cared for him before she passes, as she leaves his side before he regains consciousness, which shows that Ruth nursed him out of the goodness of her heart, and because she felt it was the right thing to do, not to earn his favour, or the favour of others.

Ruth is good. She helps Mr Bellingham even though he is not a good person, and he does not die from the disease, unlike her. As Ariès and Jalland claim that death from tuberculosis was, in the eyes of society, a 'good' and 'beautiful' death, it could be argued that

Bellingham did not deserve a death of this kind. He has been unkind to Ruth, and others. Though little is said about his appearance, and we cannot assume that he is particularly handsome, he has been described as charming, so one can assume that he is not bad looking. However, he does not possess the goodness, or Christian devotion that is required for dying in tuberculosis, nor the quality of soul, as described by Jalland in Day's book, and when ill, he does not seem to handle the demise and decline very well (qtd. in Day 41).

As mentioned, it could be argued that Mr Bellingham cares for Ruth after all, as evident from this passage from the beginning of the novel: "Mr Bellingham attended afternoon service at St, Nicholas' church the next Sunday. His thoughts had been far more occupied by Ruth than hers by him [...] He was puzzled by the impression she had produced on him, though he did not in general analyse the nature of his feelings, but simply enjoyed them with the delight which youth takes in experiencing new and strong emotion." (Gaskell 26).

This passage also shows that Mr Bellingham does not seem to think about the consequences of his actions in general. He prefers to just act on impulse instead of reflecting on where things might take him. This is exactly what he did with Ruth, it seems. The two initiated a relationship which was never going to be accepted by society or his family, but he chose to do it anyway, disregarding what it could do to Ruth and her reputation. Ruth, being left motherless at an early age, has not been taught everything general girls would have been taught, and is too innocent to always understand matters, so she was probably not aware of what could happen due to her relationship with Mr Bellingham. Though his intentions were probably not malicious, the consequences were disastrous.

***North and South* and Tuberculosis**

North and South, also by Elizabeth Gaskell, is about Margaret, a young girl who is forced to move away from her home town in the South, which she loves. When she moves to Milton, a town in the North, she is at first deeply unhappy. However, she finds comfort in the acquaintances she makes there, and learns to adapt to her new home.

Mary Hammond mentions that when the novel first was published, was claimed that *North and South* was written as a direct response to the imbalances of Gaskell's previous novel *Mary Barton* (7). The relations between the characters of masters and working in *Mary Barton* men were criticised, as many thought Gaskell was exaggerating the bad conditions of factory

workers. It is believed that Gaskell tried to alleviate her previous supposed exaggerations by making the relationships between masters and men in *North and South* more balanced.

Just as in *Ruth*, there are two rather major characters who appear to contract the disease in *North and South*. The first one is Bessy, a very good friend of the protagonist Margaret, and the second one is Margaret's mother, Maria. Bessy is already ill when Margaret first meets her, while Maria falls ill a while after the family has moved to Milton.

It appears to me as if Bessy did not suffer from tuberculosis, but another disease called byssinosis. Byssinosis is a chronic respiratory disease caused by exposure to cotton dust over a period of years. The dust produces asthma-like symptoms, for instance chest tightness, shivering and coughing, which can lead to death or permanent damages on your lungs. In the mid-19th century, doctors and novelists continuously wrote about these problems, as the industrialisation grew. Gaskell describes in *North and South* how workers were 'poisoned by fluff' (Bowden and Tweedale 3), as is the cause of byssinosis, which leads to the probable conclusion that Bessy died of byssinosis, and not tuberculosis.

As the symptoms of byssinosis are very similar to those of tuberculosis, and as tuberculosis was very common at the time, it is possible that the other characters presumed that she did indeed die of tuberculosis and not of another respiratory disease. The knowledge of what truly ails Bessy does not really change the romanticising made by some of those close to her. It can be questioned whether Gaskell herself intended for Bessy to die in tuberculosis or not, but as she mentions the 'cotton fluff', it could be a direct response to the amount of workers falling ill in factories at the time the novel was written. The death of Bessy can still be romanticised by those near her, as it is never mentioned what leads to her untimely death. The characters may well have assumed it was the common disease of tuberculosis, and not an occupational hazard such as byssinosis.

Bessy is ill when Margaret meets her, and she gradually gets worse during the course of their friendship. She tries to keep her spirits up, and the two girls become closer and closer as time passes. Bessy is described as a sweet, young girl, who has had a hard life, as she mentions in the following comment: "[...] if this should be th' end of all, and if all I've been born for is just to work my heart and my life away, and to sicken i' this dree place, wi' them mill-noises in my ears for ever [...]" (120). As she has had a rough life, Bessy as a Christian hopes to know peace in Heaven. Pious Christians were during the Victorian era very concerned with dying a 'good death' and various works of literature called the *ars moriendi*, the art of dying, were published to teach Christians how to die in a good way (Jalland 17). It is reasonable to believe that these beliefs have affected other works of literature, such as the novels being

investigated in this essay. This gives further reason to believe that the characters in said novels want a good, Christian death, as the writers may have been impacted by works such as the *ars moriendi*. Prior to her death, Bessy talks to Margaret about her father and his lack of religious faith, and how it impacts her:

I wish father would not speak as he does. He means well, as I telled yo' yesterday, and tell yo' again and again. But yo' see, though I don't believe him a bit by day, yet by night — when I'm in a fever, half-asleep and half-awake — it comes back upon me — oh! so bad! (119).

Bessy is worried that she might not be welcome in Heaven due to doubting God in her weaker moments. However, Margaret speaks to her about God, and urges her not to lose faith. After Bessy has gone on about how she is losing her faith, all Margaret has to do to calm her down is to say that they have a father in Heaven. Bessy's faith in God stays with her until her unfortunate end.

For the Christian Bessy, dying a 'good death' may have been important, but her father, Nicholas Higgins, has very different beliefs from his daughter. He does not accept the idea that God wants his children in Heaven with Jesus, and he finds it deeply unfair that his daughter is to be taken from him. An example of him expressing this is when he speaks of Bessy after her death: "What wi' hard work first, and sickness at last, hoo's led the life of a dog. And to die without knowing one good piece o' rejoicing in all her days!" (Gaskell 265) Bessy's father does not believe in God, and he does not romanticise the illness Bessy has contracted at all. He does not see anything beautiful or good in dying, and especially not in an illness which torments his daughter so. Mr Higgins is hence an example of someone who does not romanticise tuberculosis, or death at all, which is all the more noticeable when you put him in comparison with the Bensons from *Ruth* or with Margaret from *North and South*. This shows that Christianity has a big part in the romanticising, and that those who were not devout Christians could perhaps not romanticise tuberculosis and death in the same manner as those who were.

Margaret who is very close to Bessy, tries to help her by strengthening her faith, which calms both of them down, as they are both Christian, and both believe that those who are faithful to God will ascend to Heaven. As Ariès claims, tuberculosis was considered a beautiful, and easy way to go (qtd. in Day 41), and though Bessy actually dies from another disease, this can be applied, as the symptoms and circumstances were very similar. Margaret and Bessy both believe that after her suffering, Bessy will be accepted into Heaven.

Just as Ruth and Helen Burns, Bessy is a good, Christian person. She is a sweet girl who works hard to help her father, and she is a good friend to Margaret. Though she is different from Helen Burns and Ruth in many ways, the three share devotion, being a good friend and modesty as common traits. Bessy continuously expresses her devotion, and seems to have been doing so throughout her life. Even at the very end of her life, when she seems to lose hope in her darker moments, Bessy continued praying to God, and thought a lot about the afterlife. Bessy is a child of God just like Helen and Ruth, and should hence be welcomed in to Heaven. Even though she was of humble background, she stayed faithful to her God, and kept her faith through her illness. All this despite her father not being religious, which makes it all the more commendable.

Bessy handles her demise and decline rather well. As little is mentioned about her looks, one cannot assume that she is beautiful, but since the disease itself beautifies the afflicted, we can assume she was beautified before her death regardless of her initial appearance. Bessy is hence a character that possesses the qualities necessary to die from tuberculosis, according to Jalland's theory (qtd. in Day 41). She is at peace when she dies, as Jalland (qtd. in Day 41) describes as necessary and expected when dying from tuberculosis, which further implicates romanticising of the disease. Bessy's peace of mind also aligns with Florence Nightingale's theory that you die peacefully after contracting tuberculosis (qtd. in Day 52). This can be applied regardless of Bessy actually dying of tuberculosis or not, as it is quite possible she was assumed to have tuberculosis.

The other character in *North and South* who is thought to suffer from tuberculosis is Margaret's mother, Maria. She is described as a loving mother, though not very helpful to either Margaret or her husband, Mr Hale. It is not specifically mentioned what ails Maria, only that she is terminally ill, but as tuberculosis was extremely common at the time, and as her condition got worse from moving to the industrial area of Milton, it is very likely that tuberculosis is what she contracted. In a study about tuberculosis, the results said that 225/311 cases came from overcrowded places. The frequency of overcrowding was higher in industrial areas (Brown 56), which is an explanation to Maria's condition worsening after the move to Milton, an industrial area. She also has symptoms which align with tuberculosis, such as weakness, thinness and pale skin. Both the doctor and Margaret herself seem to be afraid to pronounce the name of the disease, which would be very natural if the mother had contracted tuberculosis, as the frequency of the disease at the time was very high, and the survival rate was very low, leading to a natural fear of the disease.

Margaret's mother slowly languishes, and the grief of her family is constricted by Margaret's decision to not tell her father what ails her mother. She decides that he cannot bare such sorrow, and chooses to protect him from it by not telling him immediately. When he finds out about his wife's illness, he does not take it very well, despite Margaret's attempts, as he realises Maria is going to die.

Maria comes from a rich family, but married for love rather than money. She gave up many comforts to be with Mr Hale, and though she complains about this choice of love instead of money often, she loves her family a great deal, as can be perceived from the scene where she begs Mrs Thornton to be there for Margaret if Maria dies: "Margaret – you have a daughter – my sister is in Italy. My child will be without a mother; - in a strange place – if I die – will you – [...] 'You wish me to be a friend to Miss Hale', said Mrs Thornton" (Gaskell 289). After this, Maria can no longer speak, and she only presses Mrs Thornton's hand as a reply. This scene makes it quite clear that Mrs Hale is a gentle and loving woman, despite her flaws.

She has been a good wife, and a good, though sometimes not very understanding, mother, and she appears to have been a good Christian. So here too there is a clear connection between dying in tuberculosis, and being a good Christian person, and Christian. Despite her flaws, Maria thus seems to fulfil the criteria as described by Jalland for those who deserve to die in tuberculosis (qtd. in Day 41). Additionally, Maria deteriorates quickly, but she manages the demise and decline patiently. This is yet another 'condition' for being allowed to die in tuberculosis according to Jalland (qtd. in Day, 41). Maria dies in peace and thereby also complies with Nightingale's description of those dying in tuberculosis (52).

Conclusion

To conclude, Ruth, Mr Bellingham, Maria Hale, and Helen Burns all contracted tuberculosis. It is possible that Bessy Higgins may have died from another disease called byssinosis, but she has still been included in this essay, as she quite likely seemed to have contracted tuberculosis to those surrounding her. All characters but one, Mr Bellingham, are good, beautiful people, and good Christians. As it happens, Mr Bellingham is also the only character who contracts the disease that does not die from it. In *Ruth, North and South*, and *Jane Eyre* there are clear connections between Christianity, beauty and goodness. The characters who contract tuberculosis are consistently described using the three words above, not only in the words of the author, but in the words of the surrounding characters. Those who die in the disease die while at peace, and they are not afraid to leave their earthly selves behind them.

I have come to the conclusion that the thesis of this essay is accurate, and that the textual evidence works in its favour. It seems very likely that the characters in these novels romanticised tuberculosis to cope with the death of their loved ones. As explained previously, there are several theories regarding tuberculosis being regarded as a good and beautiful way to die, and it certainly complies with the characters who die from the disease. All the characters who die, or are thought to die in tuberculosis, are described as good, Christian people, and are perceived as such by their close ones and their society.

Helen Burns' faith is commendable, and envied by those surrounding her. She is an innocent child at the time of her death, and she constantly tries to better herself. She is Christian, good, and, if not before her unfortunate illness, at least after, she is beautiful. Helen Burns is a good example of the romanticising of tuberculosis.

Ruth is at the time of her death perceived as a beautiful and loving young woman, and she is devoted to God. She meets all the requirements described in this essay to pass away from tuberculosis, and is hence textual evidence of the romanticising.

Mr Bellingham, the only one of the characters presented in this essay that does not die from the disease, is in fact not a very good person while the others are. Because of his lack of goodness, he does not seem worthy to die due to tuberculosis. He is not a good person, and though he might be attractive, he does not meet the 'requirements' mentioned various times in this essay, to die in tuberculosis. He therefore only serves as supplementary proof that tuberculosis was romanticised, and that those who died due to the disease had to be good enough to do so.

Bessy is Margaret's best friend, and she dies in a tiresome respiratory disease. Though it may not be tuberculosis, the disease was possibly presumed to be tuberculosis. Bessy too meets the obligations to die in tuberculosis, and though her appearance is not commented on too much, one can draw the conclusion that she is at least not unattractive, because this would probably have been mentioned. Bessy was a good person, a good daughter who tried to help her dad with the family income, and a good Christian. She is hence further evidence of the romanticising.

Maria, the mother of Margaret, married for love, and she loved her family very much. She is mainly described in a good manner, and perceived as such by those who surround her. She is a good Christian person, a caring mother, and the Hale family as a whole is described as good looking. Maria hence meets all the requirements to die in tuberculosis. This is further evidence that, to die in the romanticised disease, you had to be good, Christian, and beautiful.

It is not strange that the protagonists, and their loved ones, of these novels has to find a way to move forward from these deaths, hence romanticising the disease to the extent where they considered tuberculosis to be a good and beautiful way to die. They sincerely believed that if you were a good, beautiful Christian, and contracted tuberculosis, it had to be God's will that you die. They, as Christians, had to hope that there was something good and beautiful about dying, especially when dying in such a disease, which in fact even made you physically more beautiful according to the contemporary ideals. After all:

“Hope is the last thing that dies in man; and though it be exceedingly deceitful, yet it is of this good use to us, that while we are traveling through life it conducts us in an easier and more pleasant way to our journey's end.”

Francois De La Rochefoucauld

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