

# Surrogate mother figures in jane eyre

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Jane's marginal status as an orphan is partially obviated by various parental figures that appear throughout the novel. For example, Bessie and Miss Temple play very maternal roles and take Jane under their wings when she is wrongfully accused. However, while Miss Temple was incredibly important to Jane during her time at Lowood, she becomes lost to Jane after her marriage to a clergyman. Only Bessie, the housemaid at Gateswood, manages to sustain an ongoing relationship to Jane. Despite her minor role in the novel, Bessie is all the more important because she was the first mother figure for the beleaguered Jane. She is the only model of female kindness seen by Jane as a child. Jane is enormously grateful for her attention – and the reader suspects that Jane's fate might be very different without it. The reader first encounters Bessie when she and her foil Miss Abbot are called upon to respond to Jane's outburst against John. The difference in language and tone between Miss Abbot and Bessie is immediately evident. Whereas Miss Abbot is quick to condemn Jane for being "an underhanded little thing" and remind her to repent lest "something bad might be permitted to come down the chimney" (10), Bessie is more even-handed. At the outset, Bessie grants Jane's plea not to be tied up in exchange for a promise to stay still. During this exchange, Bessie looks at Jane and tries to realistically assess the situation. Jane's awareness that Bessie is assessing the situation rather than blinding prejudging her is evidence in her remark "and when she had ascertained that I was really subsiding, she loosened her hold of me" (10). Although this assessment seems trivial, it is the very first time in the novel that someone tries to see Jane for who she is. All of the other figures in Jane's life seemed to automatically condemn her without seeing her for who

she was. Unlike the other characters, Bessie acts on the basis of knowledge and compassion rather than prejudice. There is also a very distinct difference between how Abbott and Bessie address Jane. As noted supra, Abbot is quick to criticize Jane. Her remarks are calculated to sting. In comparison, Bessie warns Jane that the poorhouse will be the logical outcome of her actions. While Jane's situation may be enormously unfair, Bessie's remarks are calculated to protect Jane by reminding her of harsh consequences of her behavior. It is important to note that Bessie is not being critical – she refrains from criticism. Unlike Abbot, she uses “no harsh voice” and speaks in positive terms reminding Jane to be “useful and pleasant”. Thus, without opposing the Reeds or Abbot, Bessie establishes herself as Jane's protector in the household. Bessie's role as protector is firmly established after Jane's hysterical episode in the red room. Bessie responds as she did before – by assessing the situation and asking questions. Unlike Abbot who harshly prejudices without any knowledge, Bessie asks, “Miss Eyre, are you ill?” This assessment continues later when Mr. Lloyd attends to Jane. Bessie variously asks, “Do you feel as if you should sleep?” and, “would you like to drink or could you eat something?” The only people to give Jane the freedom to assert individual answers are Bessie and Mr. Lloyd. Bessie's kindness goes straight to Jane's heart. She notes that when she awoke in the nursery, she was aware that someone was “lifting me up and supporting me in a sitting posture, and that more tenderly than I had ever been raised or upheld before” (15). Bessie's kindness continued throughout Jane's recuperation. Unlike Mrs. Reed who was almost entirely out of the picture, Bessie brings Jane food from the kitchen on a specially painted plate

that captured Jane's imagination and sweetly sings songs about the fate of "the poor orphan child" (17-18). Although relatively powerless, Bessie acts as a good mother would, taking all steps possible to make sure that Jane is removed from Gateshead. The reader suspects that Bessie may have provided additional information to Mr. Lloyd about Jane's marginal status in the household when she invited him to walk into the breakfast room with her before he conferred with Mrs. Reed about Jane's condition. After providing the initial encouragement that Jane be sent to school, it is Bessie who finds Jane and makes sure her face is scrubbed and her dirty pinafore removed before her interview with the headmaster of Lowood, Mr. Brocklehurst. At every step of the way, the reader sees Bessie aiding the process by which Jane finally leaves. It is important to note that Bessie's maternal acts are not limited to kindness. There are several instances in which Bessie scolds Jane – and in one of the few lighthearted moments of Jane's childhood, Jane teases Bessie for this scolding. However, every instance of such scolding is marked by Bessie's knowledge of Jane's character and her situation in the world. Bessie hopes that Jane will learn to be more accommodating to the world – and in return be better treated. Unlike the harshness from Miss Abbot and Mrs. Reed, Bessie's scolding is motivated by a desire to help Jane. Bessie's last maternal act during Jane's time at Gateshead is to prepare Jane to leave and say goodbye. Here, Bessie seems determined that Jane's last days be marked by the affection that was so entirely missing there. In a tender exchange, the day before Jane's leave-taking, Bessie provides her last assistance saying, "I'll ask cook to bake you a little cake, and then you shall help me to look over your drawers; for I am soon to pack your trunk. Missis

intends you to leave Gateshead in a day or two, and you shall choose what toys you would like to take with you" (33). Bessie uses this occasion to assure Jane that " I believe I am fonder of you than of all the others." (33). When Jane actually leaves the next day, Bessie comes to Jane at 5: 00 AM. Finding Jane already dressed and washed, Bessie makes breakfast. The two leave Gateshead in the dark and traverse the gravel road to the porter's. Having assured Jane that she is first in her heart, like a good mother, she pushes Jane into the world and into the hands of the coachman. In each of the aforementioned exchanges, Bessie has consistently been the only one to show kindness to Jane and to attempt to better her place in the world. It is this kindness that allows Jane to move forward in the world and under the wing of her next mother surrogate, Miss Temple. Bessie appears two more times in the novel. These appearances bear examination because they coincide with major transitional periods in Jane's life and speak to the long-term relationship between Jane and Bessie. The first time Bessie reappears is just before Jane leaves Lowood. This also coincides with the permanent loss of Miss Temple, Jane's other mother figure. Without Miss Temple, Lowood has become a hollow place in the world for Jane - who has elected to venture beyond its bounds and place herself in private service. This was a frightening and dangerous step for Jane to make as she entered into a world that offered virtually no protection. It is at just this time that Bessie reports that " I thought I'd just set off, and get a look at you before you were quote out of my reach" (77). The seemingly coincidental appearance of Bessie at this auspicious time suggests that Bessie continues to look after Jane. During Bessie's visit, we learn she has married Robert Leaven, the Gateshead

coachman. However, unlike Miss Temple, marriage is not an obstacle to her relationship to Jane. Indeed, insofar as Bessie named her first daughter after Jane, the marriage has the effect of deepening her bond to Jane. The second time Bessie appears in the novel is also a transitional period. Once again, we see Jane on the threshold of a major life change – only this one even less certain. Jane anticipates a change in her situation because Mr. Rochester is soon to marry. However, just as soon as she returns from Gateshead, his wedding plans undergo drastic changes – and ultimately leave Jane completely bereft and alone in the world once again. Bessie's husband acts as a messenger to summon Jane back to Gateshead. Using Robert Leaven as an intermediary cements the idea that Bessie's marriage has not severed the relationship between Jane and Bessie. He appears at Thornfield to tell Jane that John Reed has suicided and that Mrs. Reed is summoning her back to Gateshead. Immediately after her return, Brontë curiously refers to Bessie in this passage as “ Mrs. Leaven”. This reference occurs only once and is immediately followed by a sentence in which Jane kisses her old protector and calls her “ Bessie”. It appears that Brontë was trying to emphasize that even though Bessie's status had changed, her relationship to Jane remained the same. In this transitional period back at Gateshead, the reader sees Jane with a startling new maturity. Gone is her anger at Mrs. Reed and her daughters. In its stead is a competence and acceptance of the situation. Jane deals with Eliza, Georgina and Mrs. Reed practically, confidently and with much insight. However, Jane's behavior with Bessie remains unchanged. She lets herself be taken care of, saying “ I was glad to accept her hospitality; and I submitted to be relieved of my traveling garb just as passively as I

used to let her undress me when a child” (193). Bessie continues to dote on Jane, serving her tea and toast, and learning about Jane’s new world. In conclusion, although Jane is an adrift in the world as an orphan, she is not altogether without strong mother surrogates. Although Bessie is a very minor figure in the novel, she plays a significant role as Jane’s primary protector at Gateshead. She continues to appear at transitional points in the novel which emphasizes her continued relationship to Jane. Even despite Jane’s growing maturity, Bessie remains the one person who provides nurturing and sustenance. Works Cited Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. Ed. Richard J. Dunn. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2001.