

THE HEALING POWER OF CHILDHOOD IN FRANCES HODGSON BURNETT'S *LITTLE LORD FAUNTLEROY*

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Abstract

This study examines Frances Hodgson Burnett's *Little Lord Fauntleroy* through the lens of childhood, masculinity, and social healing in Victorian society. The novel presents seven-year-old Cedric Errol as a transformative figure whose innocence, kindness, and moral integrity enable him to address the social and ethical failures of the British aristocracy. Through his relationship with his grandfather, the Earl of Dorincourt, Cedric initiates a process of personal and social reform that extends beyond the private sphere and influences the wider community. The analysis explores how Burnett employs the metaphor of the “body politic” to depict the estate as a social organism affected by corruption, selfishness, and neglect. Cedric's role as a healer is examined in relation to Victorian ideals of childhood and gender, highlighting his ability to bridge the gap between private morality and public responsibility. The study argues that Burnett constructs Cedric as an idealized child hero whose compassion and self-sacrifice contribute not only to the moral regeneration of individual characters but also to the restoration of social harmony. Ultimately, the novel demonstrates Burnett's belief in the transformative power of childhood and its capacity to remedy the shortcomings of adult society.

Keywords: Victorian childhood, masculinity, social healing, body politic, British aristocracy, child hero, social reform, moral transformation, Victorian literature.

Many readers are familiar with the wonderful works *The Secret Garden*, *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, and others. These stories tell of magic, faith in fairy tales, friendship, and love. All of them were written by the remarkable British writer Frances Hodgson Burnett.

Little Lord Fauntleroy was the first children's novel by the Anglo-American writer and playwright Frances Hodgson Burnett (1849–1924). It was published in installments in *St. Nicholas Magazine* from November 1885 to October 1886. In the

same year, it was issued as a separate book by Scribner's and soon became one of the most popular works of children's literature in the United States.

Frances Eliza Hodgson was born in Manchester, England, in 1849. Her parents had four other children—two sons and two daughters. Her father was a businessman, and the family was fairly well-off. When Frances was three years old, her father suddenly died. Her mother attempted to continue his business, but she had little understanding of it, and it brought losses rather than profits. Three years later, she moved with her children to a smaller house near poor neighborhoods. They lived there for almost ten years, during which Frances observed the lives of the poor, reflected on what she saw, and drew her own conclusions.

During those years, young Frances had two favorite activities: playing in an old abandoned garden near the house and reading books. She carried these memories throughout her life and later reflected them in one of her most famous works. Books became her refuge, a world of dreams into which she eagerly immersed herself. Being well-read and imaginative, Frances also enjoyed writing stories and recording them. She attended a small private school, where the girls often entertained themselves by listening to her stories. These were her first literary experiments.

In 1865, her mother finally sold the unsuccessful business and moved with the children to Knoxville, America, where her brother worked as a grocer. The period was difficult; the Civil War had only recently ended, and people had to work tirelessly simply to survive. It was then that Frances began writing seriously to help support her family. Her first published stories appeared under male pseudonyms. Two years after arriving in America, Mrs. Hodgson died. Frances had to work even harder to maintain the family income. Her efforts were rewarded when the prestigious magazine *Scribner's* became interested in her work and offered her employment. Thus, she became a professional writer. At the age of twenty-four, she married Dr. Swan Burnett. They had two sons, Lionel and Vivian, and her husband became an excellent literary agent who managed her affairs. With his support, she wrote actively, and her books were regularly published not only in America but also abroad. She traveled extensively, gathering impressions for future works, and became acquainted with

famous figures such as **Mark Twain** and **Oscar Wilde**, who read and praised her books.

Frances Burnett achieved worldwide fame through her children's classics: *Little Lord Fauntleroy* (1885–1886), *A Little Princess* (1905), and *The Secret Garden* (1911).

The most important thing in any person's life is family. It is essential for children to understand from an early age the importance of preserving love and respect within the family. However, this does not mean that strangers deserve less attention; they too need warmth and kindness. Readers are reminded of this repeatedly while reading the short children's novel *Little Lord Fauntleroy*. Although written more than a century ago, it remains beloved by readers. Parents continue to recommend it to their children in order to cultivate kindness and compassion. The novel captivates readers with the atmosphere of late nineteenth-century England while also portraying aspects of society and customs that may not appeal to everyone.

According to the plot, a young boy named Cedric lives in New York with his mother. After his father's death, the family experiences financial hardship, and his mother struggles to provide a decent life for them. She teaches Cedric to be kind, sympathetic, and understanding toward others. Because of their poverty, however, Cedric seems unlikely to have a bright future. One day, a lawyer arrives and informs them that Cedric is the heir to a British earl. The news brings both joy and sorrow, as the earl insists that mother and son must be separated. When Cedric arrives at his grandfather's estate, he encounters an entirely different world. The earl intends to raise him as a proud and arrogant heir like himself. Yet Cedric refuses to abandon his ideals. Gradually, he influences his grandfather, teaching him the value of kindness, generosity, and concern for others.

The prototype for the protagonist, Cedric Errol, was Burnett's younger son, Vivian. Frances Burnett later admitted that he was such a sweet and trusting child, yet possessed remarkable dignity. One day she imagined him living in an ancient castle. That vision inspired her to write *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, the book that brought her immense fame. In Russian translations, the novel is often published under the titles *The Story of a Little Lord* and *The Adventures of a Little Lord*.

Burnett spent most of her life in America. Although she loved the country in her own way, she always dreamed of returning to England. This dream was partly realized in the 1890s when she purchased a house in Kent and was able to divide her time between the two countries. Britain remained an invisible but constant presence in her life. It is no coincidence that many of her literary characters are English and that several of her works are set in Britain.

In 1905, Burnett finally received American citizenship and settled in New York. She died there in October 1924. In the city's Central Park, visitors can see a small monument dedicated to a woman who wished to make the world and the people around her happier and kinder. All of Frances Burnett's books celebrate adventure and the triumph of good over evil.

Among the adaptations of Frances Burnett's books are both international and Russian films. One of the latter is *The Joys and Sorrows of Little Lord*, directed by Ivan Popov in 2003 and starring Aleksey Vesvolkin Jr., Stanislav Govorukhin, Olga Budina, and others. Her works have also been adapted for the stage in numerous theaters.

All of Frances Burnett's works captivate readers from the very first pages and make it difficult to put the book down. Readers empathize with her characters, vividly imagine her landscapes, and feel as though they are present within the atmosphere she describes. She loves her characters and wishes happiness for them. That is why her books seem filled with warmth and light—as though, on a summer day, one enters a magical garden: the wonderful, mysterious garden of her books and her life.

+The novel *Little Lord Fauntleroy* centers on a young American boy named Cedric. After his father's death, Cedric learns that he is the heir to his father's estate in England and is destined to become an earl. Consequently, he travels to England with his kind and loving American mother. There, Cedric is forced to live apart from his mother with his grandfather, a man disliked by everyone because he refuses to recognize Cedric's mother as a member of the family. Cedric's childlike innocence and selfless outlook gradually transform the proud and selfish Earl, improving not only his health but also his entire way of life. Even when a fraud threatens to destroy Cedric's new life by claiming that he, rather than Cedric, is the true lord, the young

hero remains calm, sincere, and composed. Owing to his kindness and generosity, Cedric and *Little Lord Fauntleroy* have come to symbolize the Victorian ideal of childhood (Sebag-Montefiore, 82).

As the ideal angelic Victorian boy, Cedric not only heals his grandfather but also addresses the problems within the society from which he comes, restoring the estate to the natural social order that Burnett idealized. Burnett portrays the estate as a diseased body, damaged by poor leadership, poverty, and a disruption of the natural social hierarchy. At the same time, Cedric appears as a masculine yet angelic figure whose influence heals both his grandfather's harsh temperament and the broader suffering of the community.

Although Cedric and his grandfather live on an estate that combines both private and public spheres, Cedric's efforts primarily focus on healing the public sphere. The issues he addresses through his influence on his grandfather extend beyond the household and include public concerns such as reducing poverty, distributing medical supplies, and managing rents. Because of this public-oriented activity, Cedric increasingly emerges as a public figure, not only due to his title but also because of his reputation.

By healing his grandfather, Cedric transforms not merely a private individual but also a public figure whose ownership of the estate has significant consequences for the surrounding community. This becomes especially clear when the community is imagined as a "larger social body." This concept, known as the metaphor of the "body politic" (Mills, 602), emphasizes that every part of society has its own function. When one part fails, the entire social body becomes unhealthy and requires healing. Cedric assumes the role of healer within this metaphor, helping to restore society to a healthy condition.

Throughout Cedric's story, the Earl's personal transformation occurs primarily through his relationship with his grandson. This process of healing affects not only the Earl's private life but also his public role. Initially, the Earl is portrayed as self-centered, cold, and indifferent. He neglects the welfare of his tenants and makes decisions that worsen their living conditions, damaging his public reputation. Cedric's innocence, sincerity, and kindness initiate profound changes within the Earl. The

boy's positive influence transforms him not only as an individual but also as the leader responsible for managing the estate. Cedric's compassion and willingness to help others encourage the Earl to reconsider his actions and responsibilities.

The Earl's healing is reflected in his growing acceptance of his public obligations and his efforts to fulfill them more effectively. He begins supporting the poor, improving living conditions on the estate, and paying closer attention to the needs of the community. This process demonstrates that Cedric's influence heals not only the Earl's behavior but also the collective life of the entire estate. The Earl's recovery thus symbolizes not merely personal change but also the restoration of the "body politic." By embracing his role as a responsible leader, he contributes to the well-being of all those who live on the estate. Cedric helps reconcile the Earl's private relationships with his public responsibilities, healing both spheres simultaneously. To demonstrate that Cedric heals the society in which he lives, Burnett first presents a problem associated with the British aristocracy: the system has become corrupted and dysfunctional. She begins establishing this idea before Cedric even arrives in England, through his frequent conversations with Mr. Hobbs.

Mr. Hobbs, the local shopkeeper who befriends Cedric, provides the boy's first lessons about the English aristocracy. He expresses strongly critical opinions about noblemen, particularly earls and marquesses. Burnett writes that "he was talking with Mr. Hobbs about England and the Queen, and Mr. Hobbs spoke very sharply against the aristocracy, expressing particular hostility toward earls and marquesses" (*Little Lord Fauntleroy*, 11). Through these conversations, Mr. Hobbs warns both Cedric and the reader about the social evils Cedric will encounter and eventually confront in England. The very flaws Mr. Hobbs criticizes—cruelty, selfishness, laziness, and greed—are embodied by Cedric's grandfather. Mr. Hobbs describes earls as men who "beat their tenants with sticks" and as "greedy tyrants," foreshadowing the selfishness and greed of Cedric's grandfather (*Little Lord Fauntleroy*, 11–12). Although Mr. Hobbs's remarks are somewhat exaggerated, they provide an early indication of the social problems Cedric will face.

After arriving in England, Cedric addresses the root cause of social disorder—the corruption of landowners—through his relationship with his grandfather. The Earl

has spent his life being portrayed as cruel and selfish. Earlier scholars have argued that Cedric simply "awakens the kindly feelings of his rough aristocratic grandfather through his gentleness" (Spilka, 291). However, insufficient attention has been paid to how this relationship reforms and heals all aspects of the Earl's character.

Cedric's grandfather is initially described as "a lonely man surrounded by luxury and wealth, yet genuinely loved and respected by no one," because he is "selfish, self-indulgent, proud, and passionate" (*Little Lord Fauntleroy*, 44). His selfishness and idleness bring sickness to the estate because he ignores the needs of his tenants, resulting in hardship and illness among them, while his own inactivity contributes to his declining health. Cedric becomes responsible for healing these weaknesses of character and the ailments that arise from them.

The spiritual cruelty and moral corruption evident in the Earl are reflected in his physical illness. Shortly after Cedric meets him, readers learn that the Earl suffers from gout, which severely restricts his mobility. The seriousness of his condition is emphasized repeatedly; he "suffers greatly from attacks of gout" and often struggles to breathe because of "anger, excitement, and gout," making it difficult for him to carry on conversations or perform daily tasks (*Little Lord Fauntleroy*, 66, 68). Throughout the novel, the Earl's gout is associated with his negative personality traits, and he is frequently described as an "irritable old man suffering from gout" (*Little Lord Fauntleroy*, 26).

Burnett's repeated pairing of these descriptions suggests a close connection between the Earl's moral flaws and his physical condition. This connection is reinforced later in the novel when his decreasing anger and loneliness are accompanied by improvements in his health. In the nineteenth century, gout was often regarded as the "disease of kings" because it was associated with rich food and excessive alcohol consumption—luxuries available primarily to the wealthy (Nuki and Simkin, 1). Victorian readers would therefore have understood the Earl's gout as a physical manifestation of his wealth and moral corruption. By helping to cure this illness, Cedric symbolically heals the physical expression of his grandfather's flawed character.

Almost immediately after learning of his grandfather's condition, Cedric begins trying to help him:

"Would you like me to help you?... You could lean on me, you know. Once when Mr. Hobbs hurt his foot with a potato barrel rolling on it, he used to lean on me."

(*Little Lord Fauntleroy*, 85)

In this way, Cedric directly assumes responsibility for his grandfather's well-being, offering physical support and demonstrating genuine concern for his recovery. During the same conversation, he even begins suggesting remedies:

"Did you ever put your foot in hot water and mustard?"

(*Little Lord Fauntleroy*, 87)

By proposing practical ways to improve his grandfather's condition, Cedric not only provides immediate assistance but also initiates a longer-term process of healing. Even in this first interaction, he reveals both a desire and a sense of responsibility to help his grandfather recover, while also striving to alleviate his present suffering.

Conclusion

Frances Hodgson Burnett's *Little Lord Fauntleroy* portrays seven-year-old Cedric Errol as an instrument for resolving the problems of the British aristocracy. He undertakes the task of addressing the root cause of the difficulties on his grandfather's estate—the Earl's corruption and selfishness. At the same time, Cedric begins the process of "healing" his grandfather's tenants and, by presenting the results of these efforts to his grandfather, transforms the relationship between the aristocracy and their tenants.

Cedric is uniquely suited to bring about these changes through his angelic character, his ability to attract and inspire others, and his youthful masculinity, which enables him to symbolically take the place of his deceased father. By entrusting such power to a very young protagonist, Burnett demonstrates that children are capable of solving problems created by the adults in their lives and that young boys, in particular, can serve as models for correcting failures within public life.

Burnett portrays Cedric's heroism as being rooted in children's capacity for self-sacrifice and their ability to embody idealized gender roles that compensate for the

shortcomings of adult life. Overall, young Lord Fauntleroy becomes capable not only of "healing" the unsuccessful adults in his own life but also of "healing" society itself by correcting the corruption and dysfunction caused by selfishness among the aristocracy.

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