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**Bobbie in *The Railway Children* – The  
Harmony Seeker**

Some critics<sup>i</sup> argue that male characters in Nesbit's works celebrate masculinity and hold an anti-female attitude. They often treat female characters as inferior and weaker. This essay contests this view, demonstrating that female characters often succeed in asserting their power as they learn to cope with different situations. In so doing, they function as role models for young female readers. The essay argues that Bobbie, one of the protagonists in *The Railway Children*, is one of Nesbit's strongest embodiments of the possibility of reconciliation between the two genders.

The motif of human reconciliation is of crucial importance in Nesbit's novels (Nicholson, 1). "Reconciliation" is normally defined as the reestablishment of cordial relations (Free online Dictionary), the process of making consistent or compatible (Dictionary.com), or the end to a disagreement and the re-formation of a good relationship (*Oxford Advanced Dictionary*). In this essay, "reconciliation" refers to the reestablishment of harmonious relations between male and female characters.

Bobbie is no "angel in the house"<sup>ii</sup> of the type commonly found in Victorian novels. She combines the best traits of females as well as males. Shirley Foster thus considers Bobbie an androgynous child<sup>iii</sup> (Foster and Simons, 140), and Briggs sees her as "a child at the cross roads" (Briggs, 27). Her success is a source of inspiration for readers as they consider how to deal with gender-related conflicts. Literature neither teaches nor preaches, it helps readers to understand (Lukens, 144). Unlike *Little Women*, which overtly preaches moral lessons, didactic messages in *The Railway Children* are by-products of the novel and interwoven with Bobbie's adventures.

Although the story is uncomplicated, the lessons that may be derived from it are complex and challenging. *The Railway Children* questions social issues<sup>iv</sup> such as class, economy and gender. This essay will focus on how Bobbie reconciles the gender-related conflict between female and male characters. First, opposing anti-female prejudice will be discussed. This issue

will then be integrated into the analysis of the motifs of cooperation and forgiveness. While the three subjects are examined separately for the purpose of clarification, they are interconnected in the novel.

Prejudice in this essay refers to male characters' attitude towards Bobbie as most of the characters in *The Railway Children* are male. Living in this community Bobbie often suffers from bias against girls, i.e. male characters often see her passive, beautiful, subordinate and dependent. She is despised and regarded as an adornment by the engine driver when he comments that the toy is just like her precious cheek (Nesbit, 49). His contempt for girls is exhibited as he says "we a-goin' to get you back" to your friends and all be forgiven and forgotten" (Nesbit, 49). The informal speech and tone of the engine driver manifests that he neither respects nor treats Bobbie's demand seriously. "[G]et you back" implies that Bobbie is considered a vulnerable and passive object who needs to depend on others and should be protected. By distinguishing between "we" and "you", the driver shows that Bobbie and he are not equals: he is superior to her.

There is, of course, nothing wrong with a child asking for help; it is the addition of "all be forgiven and forgotten" (Nesbit, 49) that is significant. The alliteration and rhyme emphasize that the driver believes girls should not intrude in his "sacred" (Nesbit, 50) zone. He thus considers Bobbie's intrusion a "sin". "[S]acred" implies holiness and formality. Both words are connected with religion, indicating that the driver considers his place holy and deserves to be treated reverently. However, in the analysis above when Bobbie asks him for help, his tone is casual and indifferent. The different manners indicate that his work is crucial while Bobbie's demand is trivial.

In attempting to assert her power Bobbie responds to the driver's bias against her with rage and dignity, demonstrating that girls are as independent as boys. Her attitude towards the driver's arrogance is explicitly exhibited when she says, "I'll pay you back – honour bright"

(Nesbit, 49). This sentence manifests that she does not depend on him and underlines her rejection to be put in a group with people who despise her. “[H]onour bright” further emphasizes her determination to be independent. Similarly, when she says “I’m not a confidence trick... - really, I’m not” (Nesbit,49), she shows that she is capable of taking responsibility and keeping her promise. Her determination is highlighted by the words “really”. By repeating “I’m not” Bobbie wants to convince the driver that she does not depend on anyone. Besides, the narrator further explains that she speaks “firmly, though her heart beat fiercely” (Nesbit, 49). The contradiction between her calm appearance and internal fear is connected by the word “though”, which indicates that although she is a girl, she does not shrink from the aggressive speech of the engine driver. On the contrary, she can overcome internal fear in her attempt to assert herself and obtain respect.

Bobbie’s success in getting the engine repaired challenges Peter’s doubt when he says “CAN girls help to mend engines” (Nesbit, 8) since she proves that girls can repair the engine. Surprised by her independence and strong determination, the engine driver agrees to mend the engine for her and even shows her how to operate the train. At the end of this scene it becomes clear that Bobbie and the engine driver have become friends for life (Nesbit, 50). Both Peter and the engine driver change their attitude towards Bobbie, i.e. from contempt to mutual regard.

Another way in which Bobbie challenges the prejudice towards girls is through her role as a protector. In *The Railway Children* Bobbie often saves and protects others, e.g. she stays alone with Jim when he lies in the tunnel unconsciously (Nesbit, 125), and she saves Peter when he is caught by the bargee (Nesbit, 84). However, as the only boy, Peter sees himself as the head of the family when his Father is away and often claims that he is responsible for protecting girls.

In the tunnel Bobbie tells Peter she wants to stay with Jim but Peter hesitates as he says, “I don’t think...leaving you, let me stay, and you and Phil go” (Nesbit, 124). “[L]eaving” reminds readers of abandon and “I don’t think” implies that his assumption is merely based on personal opinions without support of any evidence. By separating “me” and “you and Phil” apart Peter indicates that he does not think that he and his sisters are equal, i.e. he is brave, strong therefore he should stay with Jim while his sisters are so weak and vulnerable that they need to be protected.

However, Bobbie’s deeds in the tunnel belie Peter’s assumption that girls must be under boys’ protection. In order to protect both Jim and her siblings, Bobbie replies “I’ll stay with him. You take the longest bit of candle” (Nesbit, 124). “I’ll” implies that she determines to stay and she is willing to protect Jim. “[C]andle” embodies hope and generates light. However, she tells her siblings to take the longest, indicating that she cares about their safety and wants to protect them by providing them with the best tool. She does not hesitate to offer her siblings the longest candle exhibiting that in Bobbie’s mind protecting her siblings should take priority over safety.

Left alone with Jim, Bobbie experiences fear when she “watch[es] their dark figures and the little light of the little candle” (Nesbit, 124). “[D]ark” is often associated with fear, hopelessness and evil. The darkness of the tunnel is intensified by “the little light of the little candle” (Nesbit, 124). [L]ight embodies hope, cheerfulness. However, by repeating “little”, the narrator highlights the disadvantages of the situation, i.e. the light is dim. Even worse, the light will go out at any time since there is only a small candle end. By using alliteration, the narrator underlines how terrifying the tunnel is. Furthermore, in order to save the candle for her siblings so that they can take Jim out of the tunnel, she extinguishes it. The darkness, the horror of the tunnel and her decision emphasize that although Bobbie is a little girl, she is ready to take risks and brave enough to protect her siblings and Jim.

Equally important, Bobbie's ability to act as a protector is verified by her wisdom and composure. When the siblings save the train, she uses her petticoat as a warning (Nesbit, 66). When she stays with Jim, she is able to make full use of the material to take care of his wound and ease his pain, e.g. she folds her petticoat to make a cushion and uses her handkerchief to relieve his suffering. Without any tool, she uses her nail to open the knife (Nesbit, 125). The narrator uses "somehow" (Nesbit, 125) to indicate that Bobbie is expected to open the knife with her thumbnail. In addition, she "fixes the little candle end on a broken brick" (Nesbit, 125). The "little candle end" demonstrates the scarcity of the material at hand. However, instead of using "puts", the narrator adopts "fixes" to emphasise that Bobbie puts the candle firmly on the brick. Her action suggests that in the face of hardship Bobbie not only knows how to save Jim but keeps calm. Her deeds assure Jim that he is safe in her hands.

However, as young girls, Bobbie and Phyllis are often treated as timid and vulnerable, which is reflected in the speech of the Doctor when he tells Peter, "WE are much harder and hardier than they are" (Nesbit, 136). The capitalized "WE" indicates that the Doctor considers boys to be dominant and prominent; they are, in other words, superior to girls. The alliteration in "harder and hardier" further underlines the strength and bravery of the boys. The Doctor's attitude towards girls is in direct contradiction to that of boys when he says, "girls are so much softer and weaker than we are" (Nesbit, 136). The narrator uses "much" to modify the boys' bravery but uses "so much" to emphasize the weakness of girls. The different expressions exhibit the great gap between boys and girls indicating that in the Doctor's mind, boys and girl are not comparable. Boys are courageous, they show no signs of fear, but girls are very weak and vulnerable.

Contrary to the doctor's assumption, Bobbie represents bravery and courage. When she opens Peter's knife in the tunnel, the narrator explains that the knife is "always hard" to manage even the halfpenny can open it "at all" (Nesbit, 125). "[A]lways hard" suggests that

the knife is very difficult to open and the degree of the difficulty is intensified by “at all”. However, Bobbie uses her nail to open it and her nail is broken which hurts her “horribly” (Nesbit, 125). The narrator uses “horribly” to emphasize her pain, but her behavior is in direct contradiction to that of Jim. He “cries” and “shrinks”, but Bobbie, without attending to her own wound, takes off Jim’s stock “slowly and carefully” (Nesbit, 125). “Slowly” and “carefully” demonstrates that she is determined to subordinate her own feelings and needs to those of others.

Although Bobbie experiences fear, she does not need boys to protect her for she is able to encourage herself as she says, “Don’t be a silly little girl” (Nesbit, 124). Bobbie hates to be called “little girl” (Nesbit, 124) but she even addresses herself as “silly” this time indicating that she is dissatisfied with her reaction. Later when she identifies that Jim’s leg is “dreadfully swollen” (Nesbit, 125), she criticizes herself again. “[D]readfully” is often associated with shock and horror. It is nothing to be ashamed of a girl for feeling nervous when she faces the terrible wound, but she says “SILLY little girl!” (Nesbit, 125). This time “silly” is even capitalized indicating that she is angry with herself, and her fury being further highlighted by the exclamation mark. Bobbie’s sternness suggests that she believes her capability of surmounting fear alone; her self criticism is a means of encouragement as the narrator explains, “she feels better after it” (Nesbit, 125), indicating that she is indeed able to overcome her inner fear without the help of others.

Bobbie saves the train with her siblings is also an example of her bravery. Although Peter demonstrates an heroic attitude by ordering his sisters to obey his command when he says “stands firm! Wave like mad...” (Nesbit, 68), it is Bobbie who shows most courage in this rescue. The narrator explains that the train “[rattles]” along “very, very fast” (Nesbit, 68). “[R]attling” makes people feel nervous and frightened and the repetition of “very” emphasizes the fast speed of the train. As the train approaches Bobbie, it looks “black and

enormous” and its voice is “loud and harsh” (Nesbit, 68). “[B]lack” reminds people of horrible, evil, dangerous and “enormous” usually refers to something extremely large and creates a feeling of anxiety. The “harsh” voice often brings about unpleasant feeling, such as sharp, irritating, annoying. Similarly, “loud” associates people with noise, discomfort and vexation.

The detailed description of the train contrasts strongly with Bobbie’s concise speech when she says “They don’t see us! They won’t see us! It’s all no good” (Nesbit, 68). The contrast demonstrates that Bobbie is very brave and she can overcome her fear. The present tense in “don’t” implies that she is aware of the danger of the present situation; “won’t” shows that she is capable of deducing the consequence if the driver fails to see them. “[A]ll” verifies Bobbie’s ability to analyze various sides of problematic situation and to be capable of making the “right” judgment. Her speech demonstrates that Bobbie does not shrink from danger. Instead, she maintains her composure and thinks logically.

Furthermore, when the train comes nearer Bobbie refuses to stand back but cries “Not yet, not yet!” (Nesbit, 68). The repetition of “not yet” and the exclamation mark demonstrate her bravery and resolution, i.e. she will not stop waving or stay away from the railway until she makes the driver recognize the danger. Bobbie’s courage is further emphasized when the train is merely twenty yards from her. It looks terrifying but Bobbie stands still and cries “Oh, stop, stop, stop!” (Nesbit, 68). Here Bobbie shouts “stop” three times indicating that although she is a little girl, she will remain courageous and persevere in the face of danger.

Bobbie’s courage can be seen not only in her language but in her behavior. When the flag falls on the line she “jump[s] forward and [catches] it up, and wave[s] it” (Nesbit, 68). This sentence is short and simple, serving to emphasise the promptness of her action. “[A]nd” exhibits the sequence of her action when she saves the train indicating that she is able to think logically instead of being frightened by the train. “[C]atch” and “jump” suggests that Bobbie

is capable of taking initiative without hesitation. Bobbie's action verifies her ability of taking prompt action, making quick response and keeping composure even in danger. "[F]orward" implies that instead of flinching from danger Bobbie chooses to face it gallantly. Furthermore, the narrator says when she waits for the train her hand is tremble (Nesbit, 67), but her hand "[does] not tremble now" (Nesbit, 68). This change reemphasizes her bravery in the face of danger. Bobbie's deeds challenge the Doctor's assumption and demonstrate that girls can indeed be brave and strong.

Insisting on his own opinion, the doctor believes that females are weak and easily hurt both physically and emotionally. His bias is demonstrated as he says, "things that [men] shouldn't think anything of hurt them dreadfully. So that a man has to be very careful, not only of his fists, but of his words" (Nesbit, 137). "[S]houldn't think anything" contrasts strongly with "dreadfully" indicating the great gap between men and women, i.e. men are much stronger and hardier than women; the things which men regard as trifle and harmless will cause great influence on women, and the vulnerability of women is highlighted by "very". "[H]as to be" demonstrates his arrogant attitude, indicating that men are superior to women so that women are under men's protection and at their mercy.

However, when the siblings are criticized by Perks, Bobbie is the only one who shows no sign of fear. Her response to his impudent remark challenges the presumption of the doctor. She is not hurt by Perks's harsh words, but rises to the occasion. When Perks turns his back on the siblings, Bobbie says, "[l]ook here, this is most awful" (Nesbit, 98). The manner in which she talks to Perks is analogous to that of criticizing. "Look here" demonstrates that her tone is authoritative and the vehemence of her anger is intensified by the adjective "awful". Her attitude towards Perks indicates that she is not afraid of him though his words are harsh and his attitude is provoking. "[M]ost" highlights her anger at the way she and her siblings are treated. On the contrary, Phyllis sniffs "wildly" (Nesbit, 98). "Wildly" suggests that she is so

scared that she cannot even control herself. Similarly, Peter dares not defy Perks. The timidity of her siblings further emphasizes the courage of Bobbie as she is able to challenge Perks even without the support of Peter and Phyllis. As the novel progresses the narrator explains that when Perks still fails to turn round to the siblings, Bobbie says “[l]ook here” again “desperately” (Nesbit, 98). “[D]esperate” demonstrates that Bobbie is determined to assert her power, thereby obtaining respect.

Furthermore, although Bobbie is a girl, she knows that a harmonious relation is based on mutual respect. Therefore, when Perks fails to respect her she refuses to be obedient and submit to Perks’s arrogant attitude. When Perks insists on his own opinion and refuses to listen to her explanation, he even turns his back to her she says, “we’ll go if you like – and you needn’t be friends with us any more if you don’t want...but before we go, do let us show you the labels...” (Nesbit, 98). Although Bobbie is speaking to the same person, her tone is different. In the sentence followed by conjunction “but” there are three contractions, indicating that her tone is casual and the style of her speech informal. However, when she begins to justify the action of the siblings, she does not use a contraction. Her deliberate attempt to change her speaking style indicates that she is dissatisfied with the way Perks treats her so that she will not show her respect to him if he fails to respect her. “[D]o” emphasizes that she is not subordinate to him but will insist her own opinion, i.e. no matter how Perks treat her she will not relinquish her right to justify herself. “[N]eedn’t” shows that she does not consider Perks as important and essential. The repetition of “if you” emphasizes that whether she will be friend with Perks or not is depend on the attitude of Perks but she will stick to her principle, i.e. if he insists on expressing his arrogance she will not care that she will loose a friend.

On the contrary, Phyllis’s attitude towards Perks is in marked contrast to that of Bobbie as she says “WE shall always be friends with YOU, however nasty you are to us” (Nesbit, 99).

By avoiding a contraction Phyllis demonstrates that although Peter shows no respect to her, she still considers him important and respectable. “[A]lways” and “however” show that she will bear Perks’s aggressiveness and submit to him no matter how he treats her. In doing so, she puts herself in a submissive position. Phyllis’s actions highlight Bobbie’s resolution to assert herself. As the novel develops, it becomes clear that it is Bobbie who finally makes Perks understand the motive of the siblings. He toasts that “May the garland of friendship be ever green” (Nesbit, 100). The change in Perks demonstrates that Bobbie is able to reconcile the conflicts without losing her own power and status.

Another example of how Bobbie refuses to be treated as subordinate is demonstrated when she follows Peter to steal coal. As the only boy in the family, Peter often declares he is the head and does not show respect to her sisters. Instead, he often considers himself a leader and asserts his authority. When he decides to venture out alone, she refuses to take his sisters with him by saying “[a]ll I ask is... you won’t blab” (Nesbit, 24). “All I ask” shows that he considers himself a commander so that what he expects, demands and wants his sisters to do is follow his instructions. “Won’t” implies that he believes that girls like blabbing and takes it for granted that his sisters are no exception.

In the face of her brother’s arrogance, Bobbie challenges his imperative attitude by saying “we haven’t got anything to blab” (Nesbit, 24). She expresses her rage as Peter deprives his sisters of the pleasure of adventure and the narrator uses “indignantly” to manifest the vehemence of her attitude. Here Bobbie claims that it is unfair to have a secret from his sisters, to treat girls as submissive, preventing them from making choices and excluding them from taking part in Peter’s plan. Bobbie’s speech demonstrates that the girls are treated as passive and inferior, i.e. they know nothing about Peter’s plan so that they have to keep silent and have no choice but to wait and listen to Peter’s instructions. The capitalized

“TO” demonstrates that it is ridiculous to assume that his sisters will blab to Mother when they know nothing.

Although Peter tells Bobbie it is a “forlorn hope”(Nesbit, 24), i.e. it is unlikely that her sisters will be allowed to go with him and they are powerless to change his mind, Bobbie refuses to submit to his dominant style and determines to follow him. When Peter is caught by the station master Bobbie says “It is our fault as well as Peter’s. We [help] to carry the coal away - and we know where he got it” (Nesbit, 26). Instead of considering themselves followers and outsiders, Bobbie believes she, Phyllis and Peter are group members. “[As] well as” demonstrates that they believe their role is as important as Peter’s and thus they should share the same responsibility. By repeating “we” Bobbie implies that girls are the agents of action<sup>v</sup>. The hyphen links her explanations to further convince the station master that they are belong together. Furthermore, the explanation emphasizes the important function of his sisters, indicating that Peter’s plan will not succeed without their assistance.

Although Peter is angry with his sisters, his aggressiveness is softened when he allows Phyllis to hold his hand, and he changes to another topic abruptly (Nesbit, 27). The change in Peter’s attitude contrasts with his previously dominant style when he says “I’m going to lead it. All I ask is that if Mother asks where I am...” (Nesbit, 24). Here Peter repeats “I” three times, indicating that he is a self-centered boy and wants to be a commander. What is more, the use of “I” contrasts strongly with “you”. By separating “girls” and “boys” apart it demonstrates that they are not equal, i.e. he is dominant and his sisters are subordinate. The contrast between his previous imperative and softened tone at the end of the scene reconfirms that Bobbie is capable of reconciling conflicts. The message here is clear: although Peter treats his sisters as inferior, passive and useless, Bobbie challenges this prejudice by her deeds.

Unlike Phyllis, a stereotypical character<sup>vi</sup>, Bobbie refuses to be treated as inferior. She challenges traditional gender roles in an attempt to increase her power and status. When

Bobbie declares she wants to be an engine driver, Phyllis rejects the idea since it will dirty her face (Nesbit, 8). However, Bobbie's power is "more about being aware of one's agency than it is about controlling other people" (Trites, 8). For her, opposing anti-female prejudice is not a means of prevailing over male characters but a means of challenging the prejudice.

In addition, she strives for harmony and promotes cooperation between the genders. When Peter refuses to tell his sisters his plan she replies, "[you] might tell US, Pete" (Nesbit, 24). "[M]ight" suggests that her tone is polite and tender; her manner of speech contrasts with Peter's aggressiveness indicating that Bobbie does not want to compete with Peter but to reconcile conflicts. By calling "Pete" Bobbie shows her intimacy with her brother, hoping to bridge the distance between them. Later when she says she "[does]" think she "might" "help" him. Her sincere hope for cooperation is exhibited by "does"; "might" shows that her tone is polite and "help" demonstrates that she is eager to assist Peter instead of competing with him.

Bobbie hates to treat female and male as rivals : "The worst of all my lesson things is learning who succeeded who in all the rows of queens and kings" (Nesbit, 144). "[Q]ueens" and "kings" represent female and male respectively and "worst" emphasizes her hatred for separating the genders. Bobbie's attitude towards gender relation echoes the comment that in Nesbit's works the gender rivalry shifts towards teamwork (Rutledge, quoted in Thompson, 231). As a coordinator, Bobbie is the one who devises plans, settles disputes among her siblings and encourages them to help each other. She makes her siblings understand that their goal cannot be achieved without mutual assistance and compromise. Bobbie's desire for cooperation is demonstrated when she persuades Peter and Phyllis to work together to save the train.

The support of team members is an important impetus to cooperation. Although Peter comes up with one idea of using something red to attract the driver's attention, it is Bobbie who supports his suggestion as she says, "Oh, yes, tear them...if you like" (Nesbit, 67). The

exclamation “Oh, yes” suggests that she is inspired by Peter’s suggestion and completely agrees with Peter. Her tone is both decisive and polite, indicating that she has confidence in Peter and gives him the right to decide what he wants to do. On the contrary, Phyllis does not show any willingness to cooperate as she “falters” and says, “[y]ou’re not” “you’re not going to TEAR them?” (Nesbit, 67). “[F]alter” suggests that Phyllis hesitates to accept Peter’s plan and the repetition of “you’re not” further emphasizes her doubt about the appropriateness of his action. Her refusal of Peter’s idea is further emphasised by the capitalized “TEAR”. The comparison between Bobbie and Phyllis’s reactions to Peter’s suggestion demonstrates that the latter does not know how to make a sensible decision based on a mutual goal.

There are, of course, disagreements in any group, but it is how to settle the dispute that is important. Unlike Peter who criticizes Phyllis “brief[ly]” (Nesbit, 67) by saying “shut up” (Nesbit, 67), Bobbie explains the reason to Phyllis at length hoping to make her understand the difficulty of the task and the terrible consequence if they fail to prevent a train accident. She tells Phyllis “Phil, if we ... there will be a real live accident, with people KILLED. Oh, horrible!” (Nesbit, 67). “[R]eal” functions to emphasize that the terrible consequence is not imaginary and “live” demonstrates that it will take place in front of them if they cannot stop the train. The capitalized “KILLED” underlines the seriousness of the consequence; “horrible” is often associated with nightmares, disasters and catastrophes. By emphasizing the three words, Bobbie explains the difficulty of the task in an attempt to persuade Phyllis to cooperate. Besides, the way in which Peter and Bobbie speak to Phyllis are markedly different. While Peter criticizes Phyllis “sternly” (Nesbit, 67), Bobbie talks to her softly, addressing her as “Phil”, in order to bridge the distance between them. Bobbie is a mediator whose primary function is to promote cooperation.

Furthermore, when Peter and Phyllis quarrel about the flag (Nesbit, 67), Bobbie says, “Oh, what does it matter ... if we can only save the train?” (Nesbit, 67). The exclamation

“[o]h” demonstrates that for Bobbie, their quarrel is childish and meaningless in comparison with the rescue. Unlike Peter and Phyllis who often emphasizes “I”, “myself”, “my” (Nesbit, 67), Bobbie says “we” indicating that she believes they are partners so that the joint effort is of crucial importance. By emphasizing “Only” Bobbie tells her siblings to focus on their mutual aim. Furthermore, instead of criticizing her siblings or explicitly preaching the importance of cooperation, Bobbie uses the interrogative form to make them reflect on the need for cooperation.

Mutual assistance is an indispensable component of cooperation. Bobbie’s determination of furthering joint effort is epitomized by the successful rescue of the bargee’s baby. Her willingness to help Peter is manifested when she replaces him to inform the bargee about the fire. When Peter tells her he cannot run, Bobbie simply replies “Then I’LL run”(Nesbit, 87). “Then” demonstrates that she does not hesitate to help him; the capitalized “I’LL” highlights her willingness to share Peter’s responsibility. Moreover, her speech is very concise and her tone decisive, indicating that she has the confidence to finish required task.

Working as a group, every member must try their best to fulfill their respective responsibility. As the novel progresses, the narrator explains that Bobbie runs “like the wind across the bridge and up the long white quiet twilight road” (Nesbit, 87). “[A]cross” and “up” imply that it is not a flat road. At that moment Bobbie’s knees and elbows are “grazed and bruised” (Nesbit, 86), but she still runs like the “wind”. The simile demonstrates the speed of her running; the contrast between the pain of her knees and her fast speed highlights the great effort she is making. The rhymes in “[W]hite, quiet, twilight” (Nesbit, 87) further emphasize the mystery of the road. The description of the road and Bobbie’s action demonstrates that although it is terrifying, Bobbie overcomes her fear and puts all her energy into achieving their goal.

Bobbie's willingness to help her brother and the desire for cooperation is also demonstrated when they save the baby from the burning boat. Although Peter "[flings]" Bobbie aside, she insists on assisting him. "[Fling]" exhibits the roughness of Pete but this time Bobbie does not cry, and she "struggle[s] up again" (Nesbit, 86). "[S]truggle" suggests her pain and "again" shows her determination to help Peter. Furthermore, instead of staying away from Peter, Bobbie is "close behind" him (Nesbit, 86), the narrator repeating "close" twice. Bobbie is ready to offer help at any time, and as they belong to a group, she will not leave Peter alone.

Bobbie's determination to collaborate is also demonstrated when the siblings save Jim in the tunnel. In order to cooperate, every group member should know their respective task. When Jim faints again, Bobbie tells Peter and Phyllis that they "must go and get help. Go to the nearest house" (Nesbit, 124). Her tone is authoritative, and by emphasizing the word "nearest" she makes her instruction more specific. Furthermore, when she asks her siblings to carry Jim to the manhole she says "[i]f you take his feet and Phil and I take his head, we could..." (Nesbit, 124). By distinguishing "you", "Phil" and "I" she ensures that her siblings have a clear understanding of their respective responsibilities. In this way, Bobbie demonstrates that she knows how to plan a task efficiently. The pronoun "we" indicates she sees them as a team. Moreover, "[i]f" and "could" demonstrate that she does not want to force them to follow her instruction but urges them to cooperate.

Cooperation is based on an agreed decision and requires compromise. Unlike Bobbie, Peter fails to practice teamwork at first for he does not focus on the group's mutual goal but on his own prejudice against girls. In order to help Peter to make a sensible decision Bobbie does not reproach him directly but says, "you and Phil go – and lend me your knife. I'll try to..." (Nesbit, 124). Here the narrator uses a hyphen to change the subject abruptly, indicating that Bobbie does not want to be in conflict with Peter. Moreover, the hyphen explains how

she plans to use the knife in order to demonstrate her professional knowledge. The way in which she addresses disagreement makes it easier for Peter and Phyllis to accept her suggestion. Her professional knowledge helps her siblings to feel confidence in her plan.

However, Peter still hesitates to accept Bobbie's suggestion by saying, "I hope it's right what we're doing" (Nesbit, 124). His definition of "right" is different to that of Bobbie's. From Peter's perspective, "right" refers to whether it is acceptable to leave a girl alone or not. In contrast, Bobbie believes that "right" applies to the most workable and effective way to save Jim. She thus replies confidently, "of course it's right". However, as Peter refuses to cooperate she asks him "what else WOULD you do?" (Nesbit, 124). The capitalized "WOULD" suggests that Bobbie believes Peter cannot provide any better suggestions, but since she has experience<sup>vii</sup> she urges her siblings to trust her and work together rather than wasting time.

In addition, Bobbie further criticizes Peter when she says, "Leave him here all alone because it's dark? Nonsense. Hurry up, that's all" (Nesbit, 124). Darkness symbolizes danger, evil and horror. On the one hand, Bobbie tells Peter it is cowardly to leave Jim alone because Peter worries about her safety. On the other, they should not leave Jim in darkness as they fully appreciate the danger. Irritated by Peter's hesitation, Bobbie finally loses patience as she says, "Nonsense. Hurry up, that's all" with brief sternness. "Nonsense" suggests that she thinks it is ridiculous to leave Jim in darkness; "hurry up" and "that's all" indicate the need for immediate action. The combination of the three short phrases demonstrates that Bobbie wants to tell her siblings to concentrate on their mutual goal, i.e. focus on the best way to achieve their aim rather than insisting on their personal opinion.

A stubborn insistence upon one's own preference often causes dispute but it will ultimately lead to reconciliation with the help of forbearance, as "forgiveness is an integral component of reconciliation" (Victor, 372). The importance of forgiveness in *The Railway*

*Children* is largely demonstrated by Bobbie's attitude towards Peter. As a natural mediator, Bobbie is often the one to apologize first. The fiercest conflict between Bobbie and Peter takes place when Peter insists on using the rake as he says, "Don't - I tell you I said this morning I meant to have it." (Nesbit, 144). His tone is analogous to that of a dictator's. Besides, the repetition of "I" indicates that he is supercilious and self-centered. "[M]eant to" shows his arrogance and aggressiveness.

Irritated by Peter's aggressiveness, Bobbie is furious with him at first but her anger changes into guilt, and she finally forgives him. At first, Bobbie does not care about Peter's wound at all, as she says "[s]erve you right" (Nesbit, 106). Her tone is harsh and the narrator explains that she "trembles with fury" (Nesbit, 146). But as the novel progresses, her concern for Peter is demonstrated as she says, "Oh, suppose Peter should die, or..., or..., or...!" (Nesbit, 107). This is a long sentence extended by commas, indicating that under her anger, she is, actually, very upset and disturbed; the word "or" suggests that she does reflect on various possibilities, and the exclamation mark shows her deep concern for Peter. Her internal struggle<sup>viii</sup> as she wavers between anger and guilt is so intense that she says it "out loud", wishing "[she] had never been born" (Nesbit, 107). "Out loud" indicates that she cannot conceal her feeling anymore.

Overwhelmed by her guilt, Bobbie apologizes to Peter first. She says "[o]h Peter, I AM so sorry" "It was ALL my fault" (Nesbit, 108). Although they are siblings, the style of her speech is formal: she does not address him as Pete as usual, and her tone is serious. By avoiding a contraction, she indicates that she realizes the seriousness of the accident. The alliteration in "so sorry" demonstrates the extent of her regret, and the capitalized "AM" suggests that she accepts the responsibility herself. Furthermore, the simple present tense manifests that she is haunted by her guilt for a long time and constantly regrets her action. "[A]ll" demonstrates that she does not only forgive Peter but attributes blame to herself.

At the end of the scene, it becomes clear that the tension between Bobbie and Peter dissolves as they form a harmonious relationship, heralded by Peter's suggestion "Let's call it Pax...bury the hatchet in the fathoms of the past..." (Nesbit, 109). Peter often feels his lack of verbal skill<sup>ix</sup> in expressing his feelings but here he uses a metaphor, indicating that he attaches great importance to the re-establishment of cordial relations among his siblings. "[L]et's" shows that his tone is not as harsh and rude as usual. In addition, Peter either does not mention Bobbie's name or addresses her as "silly". However, here he addresses her as Bobbie and even refers to her as an "old chap" (Nesbit,109), a term of endearment.

Furthermore, Bobbie's forgiveness of Peter when they play at setting bones is another example of how she re-forms harmonious relations among her siblings. Tied up by his sisters, Peter shouts "You beast!" (Nesbit, 134). The exclamation mark demonstrates his aggressiveness. Although Bobbie is angry with him she chooses to forgive him when she says "I'm very sorry, Pete" (Nesbit, 136). She addresses Peter as "Pete" in an effort to bridge the distance between the siblings and the sincerity of the apology is indicated by "very". In addition, she "whisper[s]" and "lean[s] close" to him (Nesbit, 136). "[W]hisper" indicates that her tone is tender. "Close" shows her willingness to reconcile with him.

In addition, Bobbie's forgiveness of Peter is demonstrated by her admission that boys are "very brave sometimes" (Nesbit, 137). Although Peter criticizes her harshly, Bobbie neither mentions his cowardice nor quarrels with him directly. Instead, she recognizes the merit of boys. Furthermore, she tries her best to persuade Phyllis to forgive Peter; when Phyllis hesitates to apologize Bobbie says "we are sorry" (Nesbit, 139) first. Even when Peter is still "stiff and superior" (Nesbit, 139) Bobbie repeats "we are sorry" (Nesbit, 139) to emphasize her eagerness to cease fighting with him and ease the tension between the siblings. In attempting to heal the conflicts Bobbie says "let it BE Pax, Phil, let's get the tea. Pete, you might lay the cloth" (Nesbit, 139). "[M]ight" and "Pete" demonstrate that her tone is soft and

polite. The capitalized “BE” and “let’s” reinforce her strong desire to establish a harmonious relation among her siblings.

Furthermore, the importance of forgiveness to reconcile conflicts is demonstrated from Peter’s different attitude towards Bobbie and Phyllis. When Bobbie forgives Peter as she says boys are sometimes brave, Peter merely replies “I see” (Nesbit, 137). In contrast, Phyllis challenges Peter as she rejoins boys are “just the nastiest, rudest” (Nesbit, 137). Her tone is provoking and her comments about boys are made in the absence of any proof. In doing so the tension between her and Peter is not eased but intensified as Peter says, “Go ahead, Phil – I shall put up with you whatever you say because you’re a poor, weak, frightened, soft-” (Nesbit, 184). “[P]ut up with” implies that he does not quarrel with her not because he accepts her idea but he has to bear her annoying speech; the hyphen suggests that if Phyllis does not interrupt him he will continue to criticize her. In the analysis above it is evident that forbearance will lead to reconciliation but attack will further escalation of the conflicts.

As the novel progresses, it becomes clear that Bobbie often serves as a mediator in conflicts, ultimately reuniting the family and creating a happy ending<sup>x</sup>. The narrator repeats “life at Three Chimneys [is] never quite the same” (Nesbit, 143), e.g. boys and girls play together, and the parting is over. The novel ends with the reunion of the family. Some critics argue that the father’s return to the family contradicts the superiority of matriarchy, negating the value and power of female characters to act independently (quoted in Noimann, 369). However, Bobbie does not want to separate the genders, but endeavors to heal the conflicts. Therefore, the return of the father is seen as a harmonious completion and a prerequisite for balanced relations between males and females.

Bobbie’s view of anti-female prejudice, cooperation and forgiveness develops throughout the novel, the first-mentioned developing most clearly. The relation between male and female characters develops from dispute to reconciliation. The foundations of the

development are mutual respect and understanding. By challenging anti-female prejudice, Bobbie exhibits the strength of a girl, i.e. independence, initiative, intellect and bravery, and thus obtains respect from male characters. However, a harmonious ending of the novel cannot be obtained without the cooperation between male and female characters. They collaborate with one another as they cope with difficulties. As a result, they learn to recognize their respective merits and even learn to become interdependent. In comparison, the motif of forgiveness is less strongly developed. Even when Bobbie apologizes to Peter she does not relinquish her eagerness for equal status with male characters as she tells Phyllis “let’s show him we’re not any more beast than he is” (Nesbit, 139). It is evident that forgiveness is a means of easing tension rather than reconciling conflicts.

Bobbie embodies the hope of reconciliation between the genders. In *The Railway Children* she challenges the anti-female prejudice of the male characters, thereby furthering cooperation and reconciliation between males and females. The didactic message is intergrated into Bobbie’s experience. Engaged in Bobbie’s adventure, female readers obtain pleasure as they step outside themselves and experience a different kind of childhood. Meanwhile, they are given opportunity to identify with Bobbie and begin to reconsider the meaning of their own existence (Nodelman, 21). Her success provides the readers with hope that gender-related conflicts can be solved. The final episode reinforces her capability to reconcile conflicts; her deeds assure female readers of the existence of the possibility of challenging gender stereotypes and asserting power and self-confidence, even where least expected.

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- <sup>i</sup> Barbara Smith, *The Expression of Social Values in the Writing of E. Nesbit*. pp. 157-158
- Julia Briggs, *E. Nesbit, the Bastables and The Red House: A Response*. p.83
- <sup>ii</sup> “Angle in the house” is an ideal womanhood in Victoria era. Readers who are interested in this term within children’s literature are referred to Claudia Nelson’s. *Boys Will Be Girls: The Feminine Ethic and British Children’s Fiction, 1857-1917*.pp.1-5
- <sup>iii</sup> Androgyny in literature suggests the combination of the best traits of female and male and a balanced relation between female and male. Readers interested in androgynous nature in Nesbit work are referred to Claudia Nelson, *The ‘it’ Girl (and Boy): Ideologies of Gender in the Psammead Trilogy*. pp.1-14. Bobbie’s androgynous nature is discussed in Pamela Richardson, *Boys, Girls and Trains: Ambiguous Gender Roles in E. Nesbit’s The Railway Children*.pp.90-96
- <sup>iv</sup> Noimann Chamutal, *Poke Your Finger into the Soft Round Dough: The Absent Father and Political Reform in Edith Nesbit’s The Railway Children* .pp. 368-385
- Barbara Smith, *The Expression of Social Values in the Writing of E. Nesbit*. pp. 157-158
- <sup>v</sup> See Roberta Seelinger Trites, *Waking Sleeping Beauty: Feminist Voices In Children’s Novels*.pp.26-32
- <sup>vi</sup> See Rebecca J. Lukens. *A Critical Handbook of Children’s Literature*, p.86
- <sup>vii</sup> In chapter thirteen it is clear that Bobbie is going to be a Red Cross Nurse,p.133
- <sup>viii</sup> Readers interested in internal conflict are referred to Lukens, *A Critical Handbook of Children’s Literature*,p.106
- <sup>ix</sup> When Bobbie describes the train as “a great dragon tearing by”, he says “it’s awfully tall”. p.21 Even when he is rewarded for averting the accident he falters and fails to extend his thanks eloquently .p.74
- <sup>x</sup> Male and female characters play together and get along well (Nesbit,p 144-148); the draper’s boy who used to be less civil and contemptuous now touches his cap and says “morning, Miss”; the blacksmith, seldom gives smiles, “[grinns]” broadly” at the time. P.150