

Johanna Johnsson
EN2303
Autumn 2012
School of Education and Environment
Kristianstad University
Supervisor: Jane Mattisson

The Duality of the Railway in E. Nesbit's *The Railway Children*: How the Trains Represent Two Opposing Aspects of the Children's Lives

Then they all looked at each other. Each of the three expressive countenances expressed the same thought. [...]

Q. Where shall we go?

A. To the railway.

(Nesbit 22-23)

The above quotation from Edith Nesbit's *The Railway Children* (1906) describes when the three protagonists, Roberta, Peter and Phyllis decide to explore the railway, which gradually becomes an important part of their lives. This essay discusses the significance of the trains in *The Railway Children*. It argues that trains represent two opposing facets of the lives of the children: on the one hand, unity and communication and on the other, remoteness and disconnection.

According to the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, "unity" refers to "the state of being in agreement and working together" and "communication" is "the activity or process of expressing ideas and feelings" and "methods of sending information". These terms describe how the children develop relationships with people they encounter in or around the railway station and how the trains constitute a link between their former life in London and their present life in the countryside. "Remoteness" in terms of place relates to "far away from places where other people live". "Disconnection" as it is used in this essay refers to the separation of things. The terms "remoteness" and "disconnection" relate to how the children are reminded of the distance between themselves and their absent father; the trains not only link the children to their old life, they separate them from it. Together, these contradicting concepts of "unity" and "disconnection" create an ironic understanding of what the trains represent. Additionally, in order to understand how the railway affected early Edwardian British society, historical material will be taken into consideration.

In 1830, there were approximately 100 miles of railway open in Britain. The railway expanded rapidly and by 1852 there were around 6,600 miles (Freeman 1). The years 1850-1920 are known as "the railway age"; after 1952 came the most dominant phase of railways in Britain, which lasted until the end of the First World War (Fullerton 24). In the second half of the nineteenth century, further additions to the railway network were made; by 1901, the total route mileage had increased to almost 19,000 (Freeman 4).

Michael Freeman argues that the railway should be seen as a cultural metaphor during the Victorian period as it was an important part of the constantly evolving society:

It [the railway] had educational, intellectual, emotional and psychological dimensions. It was enmeshed in the spirit of the age, an undiminishing zest for bigger and better, for an all-pervasive machine technology and, in concert, a perpetual fascination with a sense of becoming, of living in an age of transition, in anxious and sometimes fearful contemplation of what the future held. (Freeman 19)

As the railway expanded, it went from being a mere transport network to a social phenomenon (Freeman 19). The trains represented modernity and change as well as an opportunity for people to communicate with each other. However, as the ending of Freeman's statement implies, feelings towards the rapidly evolving railway were mixed; the societal changes which the development of the railway network brought along were not always positive but frightening and overwhelming.

The Railway Children has been discussed from a multitude of aspects. Critics such as Chamutal Noimann and Barbara Smith focus, for instance, on the political values expressed throughout the novel; socialism and feminism are prominent themes in their works¹. However, it is rare that critics focus primarily on the railway. Its significance has indeed been considered and included as part of other arguments; Susan Anderson, for example, describes the railway as “an emblem of connectivity” (Anderson n.pag.) in her discussion about time and modernism². In this essay, however, the railway itself is the focal point.

In the beginning of the novel, the narrator introduces the protagonists by stating that “they were not railway children to begin with” (Nesbit 1). Indeed, their suburban London life is quite different from their life at “Three Chimneys”, a cottage in the countryside. In London, the three siblings lead a typical middle-class life: they live in a villa with both their parents and have all the material things they need. At this point, they do not have a personal relationship with the railway as it is, in their eyes, only a means of getting to different places (Nesbit 1). As Troy Boone claims, the suburb of London in which the children live is “an appropriate place for the middle-class subject who benefits from, but does not have a

¹ For further reading, see Chamutal Noimann's ‘Poke Your Finger into the Soft Round Dough: The Absent Father and Political Reform in Edith Nesbit's *The Railway Children*’. *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 30.4 (2005) 368-385 and Barbara Smith's ‘The Expression of Social Values in the Writing of E. Nesbit’. *Children's Literature* 3 (1974) 153-164.

² See Susan Anderson's ‘Time, Subjectivity, and Modernism in E. Nesbit's Children's Fiction’. *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 32.4 (2007) 308-322.

close bodily association with, mechanized urbanity” (Boone III). The children’s perception of the railway is that it is convenient for getting from place to place; they are not, however, familiar with the people who work on the trains or at the stations.

The children’s attitude towards the railway is demonstrated when they discuss the mending of Peter’s toy engine (Nesbit 5). When their father asks Phyllis if she would like to be an engine-driver, she states that “my face would always be dirty” (Nesbit 5). Phyllis’s answer is typical of a middle-class girl of the time, while her sister Roberta’s is more sentimental: “I should just love it, [...] do you think I could when I’m grown up, Daddy? Or even a stoker?” (Nesbit 5). As Boone argues, Roberta’s lack of awareness about class difference – a stoker is lower in rank than an engine-driver – is presented as a danger to her throughout the novel (Boone III). Later in the story, in the chapter called “The Engine-Burglar”, Roberta becomes aware of the fact that she does not seem to belong among the train staff. After she has climbed on to the engine, she realises that “I’ve no business here. I’m an engine-burglar – that’s what I am, [...] I shouldn’t wonder if they could lock me up for this” (Nesbit 64). Roberta’s sudden awareness about her position demonstrates that she is an outsider; as Ralph Harrington argues, by climbing on to the engine she is “set apart from the mundane world” (Harrington n. pag.). When she enters the world of the train staff, she is disconnected from her own, making her anxious and insecure.

However, Roberta decides to ignore her insecurities and asks the engineers to mend Peter’s toy engine because she believes that “everybody that has anything to do with railways is so kind and good” (Nesbit 66). Roberta’s conviction turns out to be true as the two engineers decide to help her (Nesbit 66). Furthermore, they also show her the inside working of an engine (Nesbit 67); as they share their knowledge, Roberta becomes one of them. They part as friends, unified by the intricate mechanical working of a locomotive.

Class allegiance and thus class differences become very obvious when travelling by train. As Freeman argues, “class distinctions were an early and manifest feature of all railway experience” (Freeman 21-22); passengers were, for example, divided into first, second or third class as soon as they bought their ticket. In the novel, as the children leave their home and father in London, they must adopt a new lifestyle; this is demonstrated when their mother tells Roberta that “we’ve got to play at being Poor for a bit” (Nesbit 12). Mother’s statement suggests that their sudden poverty is only temporary. Their new rural and “simpler” way of life will end as soon as their father returns; while still belonging to the

middle-class, their changed circumstances force them to lead the life of a working-class family.

Boone claims that “once in the country, the railway children do not rehabilitate themselves but, rather, gain experience in the activity that is [...] appropriate to their social class: supervision of industrial workers” (Boone III). However, as this essay argues, by encountering different people whose work is connected to the railway, the children grow closer together at the same time as they extend their network of friends. The trains thus represent unity as they enable the children to connect more closely with others. Contrary to Boone’s claim, the siblings do not supervise the working-class; they are, albeit temporarily, becoming a part of it.

The children depart from their home in London without their father. As they leave by train, the railway literally works as an agent of separation, disconnecting the siblings from him. At the same time, the railway makes the children’s conversion to a fatherless life in the countryside more manageable (Noimann 372). According to Chamutal Noimann, the railway is “an important symbol of England’s embrace of progress and change that improved people’s lives” (Noimann 372). It enabled people to communicate with each other and visit new places. However, the three siblings are not able to visit their imprisoned father. Instead, the railway affects them positively by introducing new acquaintances, who are described by Noimann as “paternal substitutes” (Noimann 372). As the children do not have any contact with their father, they connect with other people, who fill the void he has left behind.

When the children visit the railway station for the first time, they are mesmerised by all the things that they have not noticed before. The details which they now observe make them realise the complexity of the railway as they pass “close enough to a signal box to be able to notice the wires, and to hear the mysterious ‘ping, ping’, followed by the strong firm clicking of machinery” (Nesbit 24). The children conclude that the railway is more interesting than they initially thought and enjoy exploring it. In this way, the trains become much more than a means of getting to different places. Once they have moved to “Three Chimneys”, the siblings are immobile; the trains no longer take them from one place to

another. Instead, they observe the trains as interesting objects; they give, for instance, the trains names³ and keep track of when they pass by (Nesbit 35).

Furthermore, the children's first visit to the railway station also introduces them to Perks⁴ the Porter (Nesbit 25). Their initial encounter is brief but it demonstrates that the Porter is a person whom the siblings will learn to hold dear. The Porter's presence is announced by "the twice-repeated tingling thrill of a gong" (Nesbit 25). The sound and the alliteration which describes it suggest that Perks is a person who will become important in the lives of the children. Also, Peter's perception of Perks is positive as he "felt at once that the Porter was a friendly sort" (Nesbit 25). The overall impression of Perks is pleasant; the reader anticipates that he will develop a closer relationship with the three children.

Returning to Noimann's notion that the people whom the siblings befriend act as substitutes for their father, the majority are in fact male. Noimann argues that "Perks is the children's favourite parental substitute, but he also represents working-class men, whose idea of masculinity manifests itself in their work ethic, loyalty and pride" (Noimann 376). As Perks represents the working-class and, at the same time, functions as a parental substitute it becomes apparent that the three siblings are integrated into the working-class; this further contradicts Troy Boone's claim stated earlier that the middle-class children act as nothing more than supervisors of the working-class.

One of the reasons why the children are able to create a close bond with Perks is that he takes the time to explain how things work; he never "seemed [...] tired of answering the questions that began with 'Why-'" (Nesbit 40). Moreover, these questions are often related to trains; Perks teaches the siblings how they function and what the different parts of the trains are called (Nesbit 40-41). Perks also introduces the siblings to the idea that trains should be described as humans and not objects:

"If you could get a holt of one o'them when the train is going and pull 'em apart, [...] she'd stop dead off with a jerk."

"Who's she?" said Phyllis.

"The train, of course," said the Porter. After that the train was never again 'It' to the children. (Nesbit 41)

³ "Green Dragon", "Worm of Wantley" and "Fearsome Fly-by-night" (Nesbit 35).

⁴ The Porter's name, Perks, is not revealed until page 53.

The fact that the train is given the same designation as a human indicates its significance. The children become increasingly fascinated by the trains as well as the stories Perks tells about them. In this way, he is not only a paternal substitute but also a replacement for their mother (Noimann 376). Both Perks and Mother are storytellers; Perks's stories about the trains replace the stories which Mother used to tell her children to entertain but due to their changed economic situation now writes for a living. The trains thus contribute to the development of the children's relationship with Perks; the siblings find their conversations very interesting, the communication between the children and Perks is enabled through their mutual interest in the trains.

Perks is clearly a warm and friendly person. The Station Master, on the other hand, makes a more austere first impression. The children's initial meeting with the Master is quite dramatic as he catches them stealing coal (Nesbit 31). In contrast to the introduction of Perks, the Master quietly sneaks up on the children: he "concealed himself in the shadow of a brake-van [...] and in this concealment he lurked till the small thing [Peter] on the top of the heap ceased to scrabble and rattle" (Nesbit 30-31). The reader does not anticipate that the Master will forgive the children for stealing coal as he makes an effort to catch them. As Noimann argues, the Station Master is "a detached, though compassionate, educator and moralist" (Noimann 375). Once he discovers the children "coal-mining", he functions as a voice of authority. When he asks the siblings to come along to the station, they believe that he refers to the police station but he actually has the railway station in mind (Nesbit 31). The Station Master is a representative of the middle-class; when he realises who the siblings are and sees that they are well-dressed, he immediately becomes gentler and more approachable (Nesbit 32). The children's social class is a contributory factor to why the Station Master lets them go without any punishment.

The coal-incident makes the children wary of visiting the railway station (Nesbit 35). They cannot, however, be separated from it for long. When Peter accidentally encounters the Station Master on his way to the village, it becomes clear that the Master has put the incident behind him as he tells Peter to "give us a look in at the Station whenever you feel so inclined" (Nesbit 39). The Station Master thus becomes a friend and the children are able to visit the station without apprehension.

As already established, the children give the trains names. One particular train, which they call "the Green Dragon", is significant when considering how the trains represent the two

opposing facets of the children's lives: communication and disconnection. "The Green Dragon" is a symbol of both aspects. As it carries passengers to and from London, it links the children to their father. At the same time, the three siblings themselves do not have the opportunity to actually travel by train and visit him; the train is thus a constant reminder of their old life, which they are disconnected from. When the children wait for "the Green Dragon" to pass by, the following conversation takes place:

"The Green Dragon's going where Father is," said Phyllis; "if it were a really real dragon, we could stop it and ask it to take our love to Father."

"Dragons don't carry people's love," said Peter; "they'd be above it."

"Yes, they do, if you tame them thoroughly first. They fetch and carry like pet spaniels," said Phyllis, "and feed out of your hand. I wonder why Father never writes to us." (Nesbit 36)

Phyllis's statement at the beginning of the exchange demonstrates the distance between the children and their old life. Furthermore, it also expresses the difficulties of communicating with their father; Phyllis believes that it would be easier to stop a "really real" dragon than to get on the train and go to London. Her idea implies that she views interaction with her father in person as impossible. Peter's reply suggests that dragons, as well as trains, cannot convey feelings. Phyllis's response is positive as she persuades her brother that feelings can be attached to a dragon or a train indeed. She uses the dragon as a metaphor for the train: "they fetch and carry as pet spaniels" refers to the fact that trains carry people from place to place. The word "pet" suggests that they are controlled by humans; as inanimate objects, trains have no free will. Phyllis also claims that the dragon, or the train, will "feed out of your hand", implying that she believes that trains are able to carry feelings as, in essence, they do what is asked of them.

As stated in the previous paragraph, the trains are controlled by humans. However, throughout the novel, they are often described as if they were actually alive and not very different from man. The trains express themselves in their own voices; for example, when Roberta tries to speak to the engineers, "the Engine happened to speak at the same moment, and of course Roberta's soft little voice hadn't a chance" (Nesbit 63). Another example that demonstrates that human characteristics are applied to the trains is when Roberta at one point asks herself if "the engine itself had not heard her" (Nesbit 93). Both examples

suggest that the trains are as significant as humans and thus a vital part of the children's lives.

"The Green Dragon" enables the children to communicate with a man whom they call "the Old Gentleman"; when the children wave to the train in hopes of sending love to their father, a man waves back from a first-class carriage (Nesbit 36). The exchange of waves marks the beginning of a new friendship. When Mother becomes ill and is ordinated an array of expensive medicaments which she cannot afford (Nesbit 44-45), the children decide to ask the Old Gentleman for help, demonstrating that they have trust in him. Furthermore, the three siblings also show their creativity; by writing a message on a white sheet which they nail against a fence, they ask the Gentleman to "look out at the station" (Nesbit 47). The children thus manage to communicate with the Old Gentleman even if they have not met in person. "The Green Dragon" both separates and unifies the children and the Gentleman; the fact that the Gentleman is situated inside the train separates him from them physically as he swiftly passes by. They are, however, united by their connection to the railway.

The Old Gentleman values the children's bravery and creative problem solving; there is no rational reason for him to help the siblings (Noimann 374); nevertheless, he decides to do so. The Gentleman is able to help them because of his high social status; as Noimann argues, the siblings inspire him "to think creatively to utilize his wealth to better the lives of others" (Noimann 374). The Gentleman's generosity towards the children demonstrates that he is willing to be friends with them; this is yet another example of how the railway unites people of different social classes.

The children ask the Old Gentleman for help in several situations throughout the novel. When the siblings encounter a Russian man at the station who has come to England in search for his family (Nesbit ch. 5), they decide to help him and they are convinced that the Old Gentleman is the right person to turn to. When the children describe the Russian's situation, the Gentleman agrees to help (Nesbit 107); this does not only result in the Russian's reunion with his family, the Gentleman's helpfulness also strengthens the friendship between him and the children.

Furthermore, the Russian's situation is in many ways similar to Father's (Noimann 380): they are both, for example, imprisoned without having committed a crime and both are

separated from their families. The Russian's presence at "Three Chimneys" reminds the children of the fact that their own father is absent. When Mother lends the Russian some clothes, Roberta discovers that they belong to Father (Nesbit 77-78) and this knowledge makes her fear that Father is actually dead. She is afraid that he has been replaced (Noimann 380). The Russian thus has a dual function: he represents Father's absence as well as the possibility of bringing him back home.

In sharp contrast to all the friendly people the children encounter is Bill the Bargee. He is one of the few characters who are not connected to the railway and he is also pictured as one of the most hostile. When he discovers that the siblings are fishing in what he believes to be his canal, he tells them to leave. As Peter is reluctant to do so, the Bargee grabs him sternly by the ear (Nesbit 115). This act of violence demonstrates the Bargee's antagonistic manners; however, his "furious fingers" and "crimson countenance" (Nesbit 116) do not scare Peter off as he decides to return to the canal as soon as the Bargee has left (Nesbit 117).

Peter's initiative to go back turns out to be of great importance as the siblings discover that the Bargee's boat is on fire (Nesbit 119). The children realise that there is a baby on board and together they rescue it from the flames (Nesbit 120). This heroic achievement makes the Bargee realise that he was wrong in being rude to the siblings and as Mother concludes when her children are safe at home and have told her about the incident: "you've made another lot of friends, [...] first the railway and then the canal!" (Nesbit 125).

When the children first encounter Bill the Bargee, he is presented as a stereotypical man who lives on the river. He is "red-faced, heavy and beefy" (Nesbit 115) and he finds pleasure in visiting the pub (Nesbit 117), which makes the reader draw the conclusion that he is a heavy drinker. As Rebecca Lukens argues, "when a character has very few individual traits, the character does not seem to exist as an individual human being. When the character seems to have only the few traits of a class or of a group of people, the character is called a **stereotype** [original emphasis]" (Lukens 82). Furthermore, a stereotype does not necessarily have to mirror reality. As Lukens claims, a stereotype is often "inaccurate and unjust" (Lukens 82-83). A stereotype's main function is to make a specific role easily recognised (Lukens 83). In the Bargee's case, he acts as a contrast to the people whose work is tied to the railway. By comparing his aggressive behaviour with the

generosity of the Old Gentleman for instance, the reader draws the conclusion that the people who are connected to the railway are friendly and helpful.

Moreover, as Noimann argues, Bill the Bargee “also represent[s] an older economic system of commerce and transportation that was quickly becoming obsolete with the development of the more efficient and modern railway system” (Noimann 377). Already in the beginning of the nineteenth century there were plans to develop the railroads into a general mode of transportation (Schivelbusch 5). As the railway became increasingly dominant, the problems connected to the waterways became more discernible: the canals were, for example, prone to freezing in cold weather and in summer heat they dried up (Freeman 27). Compared to the canals, the railway was much more effective:

It might appear foolish to suggest that the opening of the Liverpool and Manchester Railway in 1830 marked the end of the *ancien régime* in transport [...] but it does help to focus attention on the era after 1830 as the one that saw a radical transformation in the dynamics of the transport sector. Until then, transport improvement had amounted to little more than a process of refining and adjusting pre-existing systems. The pace of change was certainly quicker in some decades than in others – witness the canal mania of the 1790s and its aftermath – but there was nothing really to compare with the age of steam. (Freeman 27)

As a representative of the waterways, Bill the Bargee and his crude behaviour towards the children demonstrate that this particular transport network is outdated. The Bargee is desperately hanging on to the resolution that the river belongs to him (Nesbit 115-116); as it has lost much of its significance, however, it is not important who owns it.

When comparing Bill the Bargee with the Old Gentleman, it becomes clear that they represent different character traits as well as transport networks. The Bargee’s behaviour is primitive and disobliging while the Gentleman’s is cordial and helpful. The people who are connected to the canal are pictured as unintelligent; the fact that the Bargee and his wife leave their baby alone while visiting the pub (Nesbit 118) causes the reader to believe that these people are irresponsible and deficient. Furthermore, earlier in the novel, a boy on a barge is shown to be throwing coal at the siblings (Nesbit 55). This incident makes the children draw the conclusion that the people on the canal are “anything but kind” (Nesbit 55). On the other hand, the people who are connected to the railway are characterised by generosity and kindness; they become close friends with the children. Even the Station

Master who caught them stealing finds it in his heart to forgive them; his sympathetic nature is typical of the people whom the siblings befriend and who are connected with the railway.

Throughout the novel, the children receive help from others. It is also important to note that the siblings return these favours; as mentioned earlier, they rescue a baby from a barge on fire and they prevent several locomotive accidents. When discussing how the trains represent unity and disconnection, the dangers that are connected to the railway become conspicuous. The perception of the railway that the reader acquires is quite idealised, however, there are many instances in the novel that illustrate that there is indeed an element of danger connected with it. Early in the novel, Mother is particularly careful to point out to her children that “you mustn’t walk on the line [...] what should I do if you got hurt?” (Nesbit 42-43). Mother’s warning does not of course keep the siblings away from the railway, but it makes them, as well as the reader, aware of the risks involved when exploring it.

Furthermore, Roberta’s feelings when standing close to an engine also demonstrates that it should be approached with caution: “it looked much larger and harder than she had expected, and it made her feel very small indeed, and, somehow, very soft – as if she could very, very easily be hurt rather badly” (Nesbit 63). Roberta’s awareness of her own vulnerability is far from irrational: severe locomotive accidents were quite common during the first thirty or forty years of the railway age (Freeman 85).

As the railway became the predominant transport network, the “technological accident” was introduced (Freeman 84). As Freeman explains, “the ‘technological accident’ was where the technological apparatus destroyed itself by means of its own power. The more efficient the technology, the more catastrophic was the potential scale of its destruction” (Freeman 84). On several occasions, and as already established, the children prevent such accidents; this will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

In the chapter called “Saviours of the Train”, the siblings witness how an earthquake or the like causes “rock and trees and grass and bushes” (Nesbit 89) to fall on the railway line and create a mound which will cause any passing train to derail. The children quickly realise the gravity of the problem; as Roberta states “if we can’t stop the train, there’ll be a real live accident, with people *killed* [original emphasis]” (Nesbit 91). The siblings once again, as in

the case with the signs made of sheets used to make contact with the Old Gentleman, demonstrate their skill in communicating with the incoming train; by tearing Roberta's and Phyllis's petticoats into pieces, they create warning flags which they wave in front of the train to make it stop (Nesbit 91-93). As Noel Streatfeild points out, "of course she [Edith Nesbit] knew that children in 1905 had never seen a red flannel petticoat, but [...] if there were not what else were the children to tear up to make red flags to stop a train?" (Streatfeild 123). As Streatfeild also argues, this reasoning is "excellent" (Streatfeild 123), as it enables the children to fully express their creativity.

In stopping the train, the siblings earn the gratitude of the people at the station: "the praises they got for their 'prompt action', their 'common sense', their 'ingenuity', were enough to have turned anybody's head. [...] And as they went [home] Station Master and Porter and guards and driver and fireman and passengers sent up a cheer" (Nesbit 94). In the following chapter, each of the three siblings also receives a gold watch as a reward for their heroic action (Nesbit 102) – an action that brings the children even closer to the railway and shows how much they care about it.

Another example that demonstrates the children's ability to help others is when they rescue Jim the Hound from the train tunnel (Nesbit ch. 12). When Peter and Phyllis decide to ask a signalman for assistance, they discover that he is asleep and "if a signalman sleeps on duty, he risks losing his situation, let alone all the other dreadful risks to trains which expect him to tell them when it is safe for them to go their ways" (Nesbit 178). The children prevent yet another accident by waking the signalman; this is expressed through his outburst of relief: "thank God, thank God you came in when you did – oh, thank God!" (Nesbit 179). By trying to help the Hound, the siblings end up helping the signalman as well.

Together with some farmers, the children bring Jim the Hound to "Three Chimneys" where their Mother and the Doctor care for him (Nesbit 182-185). As Mother writes to Jim's grandfather, the children learn that Jim is the grandson of one of their most beloved friends, the Old Gentleman (Nesbit 197). It is quite ironic that Jim the Hound needs to be rescued from the railway for which his grandfather is responsible. This draws attention to the duality of the railway; the positive experiences the children acquire in connection to the railway are counteracted by its dangers. Moreover, by rescuing the Old Gentleman's grandson, the three siblings also return his favours; this unifies them and strengthens their friendship.

Furthermore, the presence of the Gentleman also prepares the children for their Father's return (Noimann 381). Just before witnessing the paper-chase, Roberta sends a letter to the Gentleman asking him to help her imprisoned father who is falsely accused of treason and espionage (Nesbit 158). When Roberta walks the Old Gentleman to the gate after visiting his grandson, he reassures her that he will do anything in his power to help her father:

“You're a good child, my dear – I got your letter. But it wasn't needed. When I read about your Father's case in the papers at the time, I had my doubts. And ever since I've known who you were, I've been trying to find out things. I haven't done very much yet. But I have hopes, my dear – I have hopes.” (Nesbit 199)

The Gentleman's statement implies that everything will soon go back to normal in the lives of the children; their old life will be restored once Father returns. The twice repeated “I have hopes” suggests that the Gentleman is quite certain that he will succeed in bringing the siblings' father back to them. It is also worth noting that the Gentleman makes it possible for the children and their Mother, even before the return of Father, to go back to their old way of life. As Mother cares for Jim, the Old Gentleman decides to make her “Matron” of the “Three Chimneys Hospital” (Nesbit 198); this means that Mother no longer has to worry about being poor and not having food on the table. Arguably, this point in the novel marks the end of the family's temporary adherence to the working-class; this also changes the siblings' relationship with the railway as they “seemed to be hardly Railway children at all in those days” (Nesbit 204). As their economic situation improves, the railway becomes less important in their lives.

However, the children prove that they have not forgotten about the railway, as demonstrated by Phyllis's reflection: “I wonder if the Railway misses us [...] we never go to see it now” (Nesbit 205). The siblings realise that they have neglected their relationship with the railway and decide to resume their habit of waving to “the Green Dragon”⁵, the train which they believe takes their love to Father (Nesbit 205). As they do this, they become aware of the significance of their connection with the train and its passengers:

Then, when the train passed the fence where the three children were, newspapers and hands and handkerchiefs were waved madly, till all that side of the train was fluttery with white. [...] To the children it almost seemed as though the train itself was alive,

⁵ In the novel, “the Green Dragon” is in this case referred to as “the 9.15” (Nesbit 205).

and was at last responding to the love that they had given it so freely and so long.
(Nesbit 207)

The greetings the children receive from the passing train imply that something positive will happen, this is the first time their waves are acknowledged by all the passengers and not only by the Old Gentleman. The siblings are now convinced that the train is actually able to carry feelings as it is, through the passengers intense waves, giving love back to them.

Love and friendship are thus brought to the children by the trains, culminating in the return of Father. The Station Master upon Father's homecoming is quick to point out to Roberta that "the 11.54's a bit late" (Nesbit 209); after the Master's remark, "the 11.54" is mentioned several times (Nesbit 209-211); it is, of course, the train that will bring Father back home. Earlier in the novel, it is stated that "they [the trains] seemed to be all that was left to link the children to the old life that had once been theirs" (Nesbit 35). This statement can be taken literally as Father returns by train (Nesbit 211). His arrival at "Three Chimneys" unites the family and makes the story come full circle; at the end of the novel, the remoteness between the children and their father has disappeared.

As the story ends, the narrator remarks that "we may just take one last look, over our shoulders, at the white house where neither we nor anyone else is wanted now" (Nesbit 212). When Father returns, the children inevitably go back to their old way of life. The last lines of the novel imply that the siblings no longer need help from others; even the reader is completely excluded from their lives. As Noimann argues, the return of Father is "a difficult situation for the children to negotiate because they do love their father and want him to come home, but at the same time so much of what made their lives happy and fulfilling may be lost" (Noimann 383). The siblings' connection to the railway and the friends they have made when exploring it are overshadowed by the presence of Father, this is quite ironic as the railway enables the resolution of the plot (Anderson n. pag.); the Old Gentleman, who is a Director of the railway, is responsible for bringing Father back to the children.

The railway is thus a symbol of great significance when discussing unity and disconnection in the lives of the children; as Susan Anderson claims, "its place as a symbol of connectivity for most of the novel also highlights the fact of separation, as it is no longer needed when the father's presence is restored" (Anderson n. pag.). Father, who from the very beginning of the novel has been pictured as "just perfect" (Nesbit 2), paradoxically

ends up as an agent of separation; because of him the children are disconnected from the railway.

The Railway Children provides the reader with not only a “successful depiction of real children” (Smith 163) but also an idea of how one event, the imprisonment of Father, leads to the discovery of a whole new world: the world of the railway. In the words of Chamutal Noimann: “Bobbie, Peter, and Phil are transformed from being their father’s children to being ‘railway children’, which is a transition from living in a [...] domestic family to living in [...] [a] community where all are equally ‘children of the railway’” (Noimann 373). As this essay demonstrates, the children’s disconnection from their old life enables them to develop friendships with other people; these friendships are equally important to the relationship with their father.

Furthermore, the children’s relation to the railway itself is of notable importance; the adventures they experience around it stimulate their creativity and imagination, as Phyllis points out: “it’s magic, [...] I always knew the railway was enchanted” (Nesbit 88). The mystery and excitement of the railway contribute to its fascination; the protagonists as well as the reader are captivated by its technology and ability to change people’s lives.

Works Cited

Anderson, Susan. 'Time, Subjectivity, and Modernism in E. Nesbit's Children's Fiction'. *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 32.4 (2007) 308-322.

Boone, Troy. 'Germs of Endearment: The Machinations of Edwardian Children's Fictions'. *Children's Literature* 35 (2007) 80-101.

Fullerton, Brian. *The Development of British Transport Networks* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975).

Freeman, Michael. *Railways and the Victorian Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

Harrington, Ralph. 'Perceptions of the Locomotive Driver: Image and Identity on British Railways, c.1840-c.1950'. (1999).

<http://www.york.ac.uk/inst/irs/irshome/papers/locodriv.htm>, accessed November 15, 2012.

Lukens, Rebecca J. *A Critical Handbook of Children's Literature* (New York: Pearson Education, 2007).

Nesbit, Edith. *The Railway Children* (London: Penguin Books, 1995). First published 1906.

Noimann, Chamutal. 'Poke Your Finger into the Soft Round Dough: The Absent Father and Political Reform in Edith Nesbit's *The Railway Children*'. *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 30.4 (2005) 368-385.

Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary.

<http://oald8.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com>, accessed November 12, 2012.

Schivelbusch, Wolfgang. *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1986).

Smith, Barbara. 'The Expression of Social Values in the Writing of E. Nesbit'. *Children's Literature* 3 (1974) 153-164.

Streatfeild, Noel. *Magic and the Magician: E. Nesbit and Her Children's Books* (London: Ernest Benn Limited, 1958).