

Care

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WHAT is “care”? The term has become popular due to the pandemic, and in the past few years literary scholars have become interested in using care as a methodology to transform our critical work.¹ The action of caregiving and the feeling of caring are not the same thing, although they tend to produce each other. Care refers to deeds; we might define it as “meeting another’s need.”²

Drawing on feminist and disability theory, we can use care not just to explore the social relations of our Victorian subjects but also to think about our own work. Care theory might be a particular kind of theoretical lens. It can act like a telescope to bring those faraway, long-ago Victorian social interactions into focus, but, like all telescopes, it uses a mirror, reflecting back ourselves and making us consider how we read and what we read for.

To understand the promise of ethics of care, we need to acknowledge its origins in feminist and disability theory.³ Care ethicists have established that care is inherently interrelational, involving a complex mutual interplay between carer and cared-for. Crucially, everyone is dependent, because everyone needs care to survive. Recent theorists often focus on mutual aid, small voluntary collectives fostering political action and local networks.⁴ We increasingly recognize that our social lives, our relationships, our mutual work, depend on our abilities to intuit and meet one another’s needs in fluid, responsive, and ongoing ways. In centering dependency and contingency, care ethics radically departs from traditional philosophical ethicists’ assumption of an autonomous individual whose agential decisions are based on universally applicable logical principles.

This perspective allows literary critics to benefit from practices and theories that have not always informed our work, learning from lived social formations including African American other-mothering, queer

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families of choice, global kinship structures, and Indigenous relations to the natural world. Disability studies contributes serious thinking about caregiving and mutual dependence. Moreover, since care has historically been feminized as part of women's mission, it has been part of an explicitly feminist philosophy from the beginning, and much of its most influential work addressed maternal care as the basis for all social interactivity.⁵

By foregrounding the experiences of historically underrepresented people, ethics of care allows us to address the Victorian novel from perspectives that have not traditionally powered what we think of as "theory." Indeed, as an embodied practice endemic to human flourishing and often practiced by marginalized and precarious populations, care offers a very different perspective from the abstract critiques offered by high theory. Care ethicists, who often are not academics, bring their lived experience with disability and political activism and diverse cultural expectations of care to enrich this shared knowledge. Like a telescope, then, it brings in phenomena that might initially seem quite far away.

Care is also a historically appropriate metric to use for the Victorian era, when an older practice of local, amateur caregiving began to give way to an emerging practice of institutional, public health carework. Many mid-Victorian texts think through this shift, mourning or commemorating a vanishing world of local care communities. Victorian texts often continue to record intimate experiences of social interdependency, an experience of enmeshment that is particularly attuned to Victorian women's lives. We can think of the paradigmatic mutual aid communities in Dickens's novels, featuring neighbors, ex-servants, retired military men, friends, shopkeepers, fellow travelers, clerks, all joining to meet someone's need. But such small groups of relations, friends, neighbors, and servants show up everywhere: the domestic groups of Gaskell's novels, the large families of Yonge's fiction, the clerical and parliamentary cohorts in Trollope's chronicles, the rural townspeople of Hardy's novels, indeed all the work, school, and home ensemble casts of the Victorian imagination. By studying these intimate representations of care communities, we can learn a great deal about how care communities work and what goes wrong when they fail.

In studying caregiving in Victorian texts, we can draw on sociological studies of caregivers to understand the kinds of stressors that make caregivers feel invisible, mechanized, or inauthentic due to emotional labor—an insight into what it feels like to be, say, Grace Poole, Mrs. General, or Mrs. Sparsit, and a way of making their experiences more central. But we can also think about carers and caregivers as meeting

the needs of the story itself. Instead of Alex Woloch's theory that characters are isolated agents engaged in an agonistic fight for narrative space, we can try to see them as mutually engaged in co-shaping their shared story.⁶

Finally, we can turn care theory toward ourselves, using that mirror. Are we enmeshed in a care relation with the texts that we study? Are we giving care by writing or teaching about the text, and if so, whose needs are we meeting? What is the relationship between criticism and care, and what would it look like if we consciously tried to make our writing into acts of care?

If care is a telescope and a mirror, it can also function as a fish-eye lens: a mode of seeing more widely than we could otherwise. For reading with care means trying to focus the edges of the frame—the experiences of servants, caregivers, the minor characters of the Victorian novel. It helps us foreground characters who are female, disabled, racially marked, queer, those whose situations produce the social dynamics that we want to explore. We look through that lens to see a distant era—but we also might see ourselves mirrored back, indebted to diverse global cultures and the needs of precarious populations, watching, sympathetically, how care causes us to reflect on the relation between Victorians and ourselves.

NOTES

1. Recent work includes Kristen H. Starkowski, "Constructions of Caregiving in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*," *Brontë Studies* 42, no. 2 (2021): 183–96, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14748932.2021.1875634>; D. Christopher Gabbard, "From Custodial Care to Caring Labor: The Discourse of Who Cares in *Jane Eyre*," in *The Madwoman and the Blindman: Jane Eyre, Discourse, Disability*, edited by David Bolt, Julia Miele Rodas, and Elizabeth Donaldson, 91–110 (Ohio State University Press, 2012); Talia Schaffer, *Communities of Care: The Social Ethics of Victorian Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021); and Stephanie D. Clare, *Nonbinary: A Feminist Autotheory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).
2. Schaffer, *Communities of Care*, 35.
3. Foundational theories of care include Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Bernice Fisher and Joan C. Tronto,

“Towards a Feminist Theory of Care,” in *Circles of Care: Work and Identity in Women’s Lives*, edited by Emily K. Abel and Margaret K. Nelson, 35–62 (New York: SUNY Press, 1990); Eva Feder Kittay, *Love’s Labor: Essays on Women, Equality, and Dependence* (New York: Routledge, 1999); and Virginia Held, *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

Recent work includes Daniel Engster and Maurice Hamington, eds., *Care Ethics and Political Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* (Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018); The Care Collective, *The Care Manifesto: The Politics of Interdependence* (New York: Verso Books, 2020); Hil Malatino, *Trans Care* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020); and Maurice Hamington, ed., *Care Ethics in the Age of Precarity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021).

4. See Piepzna-Samarasinha, Care Collective, and Dean Spade, *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next)* (New York: Verso Books, 2020).
5. See Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace* (London: The Women’s Press, 1990); Virginia Held, *Feminist Morality: Transforming Culture, Society, and Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).
6. Alex Woloch, *The One Versus the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

