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Professor Jacqueline Perret

Nonfiction Writing

A Comparison of the Heroes of *Jane Eyre* and *Oliver Twist*

Since I first read Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, when I was ten years old, it has been one of my favorite novels. At first, the powerfully emotional and deeply absorbing plot primarily inspired my enthusiasm for the book. Once into the first chapter, I could not put the book down and found myself getting up in the middle of the night, just to discover how an especially exciting passage had been resolved. The tale possesses an abundance of the elements that typically interest girls in the beginning stages of adolescence: a plain young woman's passionate love for a mysterious and brooding man old enough to be her father; a blood-curdling scream emanating from the upper story of an English manor house in the middle of the night; a lunatic secretly locked up in the attic by her husband. All of these details sound like the makings for a romantic melodrama or a thrilling mystery novel, and perhaps these are the aspects of the book that caught my juvenile attention the first time I read the book. However, now that my appreciation for great literature has increased and my knowledge of fine writing has been sharpened by further education and reading, I am able to love and appreciate the novel at a much higher level.

While the story is indeed passionate and absorbing, Charlotte Brontë's style of writing – clear and precise yet powerfully emotional and beautifully descriptive – is what really makes the book a joy to read for men and women of all ages. In addition to appreciating the writing, I am now also able to perceive the revolutionary nature of the novel, which caused some critics to condemn the book when it was first published in 1847. For example, Charlotte Brontë was years ahead of her time when she proclaimed, in her novel, the independence and

Professor Jacqueline Perret

Nonfiction Writing

rights of women, mocked the vanity and hypocrisy of the Church of England's religious cant, and condemned the cruel barbarism of Victorian England's hierarchical social system.

My purpose in writing this essay is not merely to describe the merits of this book and recommend that everyone between the ages of ten and 110 read it (although I could do so heartily). Instead, I would like to compare *Jane Eyre* with another great Victorian novel and to point out the many similarities in their stories – particularly in the two young heroes. This second novel is *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens, which I read for the first time last year. While I was reading this novel, the characters and plot seemed vaguely familiar. At first I thought this was simply because I had once seen part of a movie based on *Oliver Twist* and had retained certain aspects of the story. However, I gradually began to realize that I was unknowingly drawing mental comparisons between the novel I was currently reading and the book I had loved since I was ten years old – *Jane Eyre*.

Aside from its similarities to *Jane Eyre*, the aspect of *Oliver Twist* with which I was most impressed was Dickens's ability to humanize each of his characters to such an extent that I was able to understand and sympathize with the experiences and pains of each one. Particularly powerful were Dickens' descriptions of his most villainous characters' thoughts and emotions. The reality of the book is, I believe, its strongest quality, and it is this aspect that makes Dickens's timeless story so emotionally poignant.

While both books have much individual merit, *Jane Eyre* and *Oliver Twist* share a remarkable number of similarities. First, both novels tell the story of a penniless and friendless orphan trying to survive in a harsh world. However, in addition to this basic

Professor Jacqueline Perret

Nonfiction Writing

parallelism, various similarities exist between the novels' young heroes, Jane and Oliver, specifically between their situations in life and between their personalities. It is also clear that Brontë and Dickens, who shared a decidedly negative view of the treatment of the poor in Victorian England, were both trying to provoke a movement against the social injustice of the time.

The most obvious similarity between Jane and Oliver is that they are both orphans growing up in hostile environments. When Jane's parents die shortly after she is born, her kind and wealthy Uncle Reed decides to raise her as one of his own children. Reed soon becomes gravely ill, however, and on his deathbed, he makes his wife promise to care for the little girl. Unfortunately, Mrs. Reed, a selfish and cold-hearted woman, resents this burden and treats Jane as little more than a servant, never showing her a bit of love or concern. When Jane is ten years old, Mrs. Reed sends her to Lowood, a bleak and disease-infested charity school run by the cruel, tyrannical Reverend Brocklehurst. Similarly, Oliver becomes a burden on society after his destitute mother dies in childbirth. He passes his miserable childhood in a crowded orphanage and a wretched workhouse, enduring such extreme starvation and abuse that his survival is just short of miraculous.

These tragic stories of neglected children exhibit many similarities. Both Jane and Oliver are born to poverty-stricken parents who die while their children are infants, and both children are left in the care of cold-hearted, selfish people who neglect and abuse them. Incredibly, both young people are able to emerge from their horrifying childhood as kind and compassionate human beings who can still look for and find the good in others.

Professor Jacqueline Perret

Nonfiction Writing

Unlike so many destitute orphans in Victorian England, they do not allow themselves to be pulled down by their unfortunate circumstances into lives of crime and misery. Rather, they bravely face the obstacles that stand in their way and become worthwhile, upright citizens. Dickens himself said in his preface to the third edition of *Oliver Twist* that he "wished to show, in little Oliver, the principle of Good surviving through every adverse circumstance and triumphing at last" (Tillotson 166).

But Jane and Oliver go beyond triumphing over evil; they not only become virtuous individuals themselves but are also able to win the love of others. Jane, who had always thought that she was without friends or relatives in the world, discovers that she has three cousins, John Rivers and his two sisters, and later starts a family of her own with Mr. Rochester, a man with whom she shares a deep and passionate love. Oliver is adopted by Mr. Brownlow, a benevolent and wealthy old gentleman and then learns that Rose Maylie, a young and beautiful woman who befriended Oliver when he was destitute, is his aunt. Surrounded by love and the luxuries of a comfortable home, Oliver looks forward to a bright future he had never dreamed possible. The fact that Jane and Oliver are both able to find such happiness and contentment after growing up among some of the worst conditions imaginable is indeed proof that "the principle of Good" can "[triumph] at last" (Tillotson 166).

Jane and Oliver's success in overcoming the poverty and neglect into which they were born is a strong indication of their similar personalities. Both are sensitive children with strong emotions and intense feelings that are deeply injured by the cruel treatment they receive. As critic Nancy Pell observes about Jane, "She describes her habitual mood as

Professor Jacqueline Perret

Nonfiction Writing

'humiliation, self- doubt, forlorn depression'; accustomed as she is 'to a life of ceaseless reprimand and thankless fagging,' there are especially terrible moments of 'unutterable wretchedness of mind' which reduce her to silent tears" (80-81). This description would apply equally well to Oliver's state of mind, yet both children have the courage to revolt against the injustices they receive at the hands of their superiors.

Jane and Oliver have different ways of manifesting their injured feelings, however. Oliver is inherently meek and obedient, and because he is such a model boy, loathe to arouse anyone's anger, he never openly revolts against authority. The critic Irving Howe describes Oliver as "an orphan, a waif, an outcast. He is a puling, teary little fellow, never rebellious for more than a few minutes, and seldom even angry. He is a perfect little gentleman" (205). Yet Oliver's burning sense of the inequity of a social system that condemns the poor to lead lives of misery compels him to speak out, in his small way, against such injustice. One of the best examples of his courage to fight for what is right occurs early in the novel, when Oliver is still in the workhouse. He has "suffered the tortures of slow starvation for three months" and is, at last, so "voracious and wild with hunger" (12) that, one evening after supper, he gathers the courage to ask the Master for more food. His timid request of "Please, sir, I want some more" (13) is hardly an act of rebellion or insubordination, but it does require a great deal of courage in a boy so small and so accustomed to perpetual, unmerited abuse. This episode proves that Oliver's character is strong and his mind virtuous, and these are the qualities that ultimately lead to his success in life.

Jane, a child of more fiery and strong-spirited tendencies, exhibits her rebellion more

Professor Jacqueline Perret

Nonfiction Writing

forcefully. Because she has had to depend on herself for consolation and sustenance

throughout her lonely childhood, she is quite self-sufficient. As critic Heidi Kelchner puts it,

"Jane's lack of family...has instilled in her a strong sense of self-reliance and independence.

Even as a child in Sarah Reed's house, Jane recognizes the injustice of her predicament"

(1196). This recognition is most strongly revealed early in the novel with Jane's passionate

verbal insurrection against Mrs. Reed. The event which triggers this explosion occurs during

the visit of Mr. Brocklehurst, the owner of the boarding school to which Jane will soon be

sent. Without allowing the girl to defend herself, Mrs. Reed tells Mr. Brocklehurst that Jane

is a wicked and deceitful child in need of strict discipline (37). This extreme injustice drives

Jane to vent the inner feelings of revolt that she has so long suppressed. Looking back on the

event from a more mature perspective, Jane eloquently describes her emotions at this time:

"*Speak* I must; I had been trodden on severely" (40). The rare burst of defiance that follows

leaves Jane with a "sense of freedom, of triumph" (41); she feels as if she has broken free

from an "invisible bond [and] struggled out into unhoped-for liberty" (42). Yet despite this

momentary outburst of rebellion, Jane still retains her strict sense of right and wrong. After

the first wave of exultation rolls over her, she realizes the wickedness of having spoken so

disrespectfully to a woman nearly four times her age. The adult Jane explains, "A child

cannot quarrel with its elders, as I had done; cannot give its furious feelings uncontrolled

play, as I had given mine; without experiencing afterward the pang of remorse and the chill

of reaction" (43). Jane's strength of character and courage to speak out against what she

knows to be wrong are tempered with a firm set of moral standards and convictions. Like

Professor Jacqueline Perret

Nonfiction Writing

Oliver, she possesses the qualities that will enable her to rise from a childhood of poverty and misery to a life of fulfillment and happiness.

The last comparison to be made between these two novels pertains to their similar moral and social messages. Charles Dickens and Charlotte Brontë both possessed strong opinions about the social system in Victorian England and, specifically, about the cruel treatment of the poor. One reason for the strength of their feelings, besides the atrocity of the injustice itself, is the fact that they themselves had been victims of the social system and its prejudices. After Dickens' family came into financial difficulty when he was twelve years old, he was forced to spend five months in a shoe-blackening warehouse (Nelson n.p.), where he experienced first-hand the horrors of the workhouse. Dickens would later use the knowledge he gained from this experience in his vivid descriptions of the workhouse in *Oliver Twist*. Likewise, Brontë based many of her depictions of the horrible conditions at Lowood charity school (the boarding school to which Jane is sent) on her own experience at the Clergy Daughter's School (Kelchner 1194). Therefore, both authors are able to speak with authority and accuracy about the miserable locations described in their novels.

Furthermore, both authors took their writing very seriously because they saw it as a means of exposing to the upper classes the atrocities that were being committed against the poor, in hopes that more fortunate individuals would be able to effect a change in the law.

In order to fully understand these authors' eloquent protests against the Victorian social system, it is necessary to understand first what G.K. Chesterton refers to as "the national situation" (148). Chesterton points out that the cruel social laws of the time were products of

Professor Jacqueline Perret

Nonfiction Writing

a "generation [who] held that clearness, economy, and a hard common-sense would soon destroy the errors that had been erected by the superstitions and sentimentalities of the past" (148). In trying to do away with the lax laws and sentimental attitudes of the Romantic Age, the lawmakers of Victorian England implemented a system that went overboard in the areas of economy and common sense and ended up making the lives of the poor not only miserable but completely without hope of any improvement. Dickens and Brontë saw that unless some initiative was taken to improve matters, the poor would be forever restricted by this cruel social system.

These two novelists and others like them took up their pens with the goal of producing a dramatic change in English society. Although *Oliver Twist* was Dickens' first attempt at such writing, it was a monumental success in exposing what he called the "foul and frowzy dens, where vice is closely packed" (qtd. in Howe 205). Chesterton describes the enthusiasm with which Dickens became an advocate for the forsaken and abused: "...when Dickens came out to fight, [the workhouse] was the first thing that he broke with his battle-axe.... His revolt...was the revolt of the weak against the strong" (148). This propagandistic style of writing, because of the way in which it exposed the disturbing facts that many would have preferred to leave in the dark, at first created quite a scandal among the reading public. The critic Bruce D. Reeves observes that, from its very beginning, *Oliver Twist* "[plunges] the reader into an uncomfortably unromantic world where people are starving to death, children are 'accidentally' killed off by their charitable keepers, the innocent suffer, and the cruel and unscrupulous prosper. Dickens does not hesitate to lay the facts out clearly" (4669). Yet

Professor Jacqueline Perret

Nonfiction Writing

despite their horrifying accounts of reality, I do not perceive either *Oliver Twist* or *Jane Eyre* as grim or depressing. Both novels, by telling the stories of two young waifs who win the war against poverty and oppression, show how the poor can triumph over their circumstances. "Jane Eyre's response to suffering," critic Doreen Roberts comments, "is never less than energetic.... The heroine is trying to hold on to her sense of self in a world that gives it little encouragement, and the novel does put up a persuasive case for her arrogance and pugnacity as the healthier alternatives to patience and resignation" (4222). Victorian novels such as these gave hope to the suffering masses and, more importantly, were ultimately effective in destroying the old social system and creating one in which the poor could lead more happy and productive lives.

A critical analysis of *Jane Eyre* and *Oliver Twist* reveals the magnificence and power of these two works. It is this greatness that has allowed the novels to transcend time and place in their universal appeal to readers of all ages. Today, more than a century after they were written, they continue to touch the hearts and minds of readers around the world with their simple moral messages about love, justice, and the power of the human spirit.

Professor Jacqueline Perret

Nonfiction Writing

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