
In Which Two Different Novelists Offer Criticism Of Victorian Twist And Jane Eyre

Both *Oliver Twist* and *Jane Eyre* are stories that tackle the dilemma of Victorian society's power struggles, the issues with discrimination and the hardships of class mobility. Many parallels can be drawn between the two eponymous characters. They are both born orphans and spend the formative years of their lives in abusive environments due to their unfortunate nature as orphans and the lack of generational wealth they carry because of it. Due to this they live incredibly hard lives even compared to many from the Victorian era. Dickens and Bronte make sure to portray the lower classes in the beginning of their books as having no way out of their living situations (due to Victorian society's power structure) short of a miracle (such as coming across an unknown inheritance).

Dickens and Bronte portray the hardships of class mobility in such a bleak way as to parallel the real lives of many of the lower classes in real life Victorian society who did not have a happy ending waiting for them. Both protagonists are treated almost like criminals in their respective texts purely for their class, showing how both authors' intended to paint and reflect the bleak reality of the Victorian society they were living in. Bronte and Dickens both lived in the same time period their novels were written about. They portray England as being so concerned with matters of class it gets to the point of obsession. Neither author agrees with this outlook on class and serves to criticise it through their description of both the rich and poor.

In *Oliver Twist*, Dickens employs clever use of sarcasm and irony when describing the rich and the events that encircle them (specifically in relation to their clothes). Dickens often uses clothes as an indicator of social standing or "power" in Victorian society and a perfect example of this can be seen in Mr. Bumble before and after losing his signature beadle hat. With the hat on, he is his usual pompous and arrogant self, concerned only about putting up a public front about caring about the children in the factory, but when he is reintroduced later in the story without the hat, he comes across as pathetic and weak, showing who he truly is. In chapter 37 he is described as having "The mighty cocked-hat was replaced by a modest round one.

Mr. Bumble was no longer a beadle." The use of the word "mighty" now being replaced by "modest" perfectly sums up Mr Bumble's character and also works as a wider microcosm for the perceived morality behind the Victorian power structure. All of the upper-class people in *Oliver Twist* depend on keeping up illusions to appear like good people, whilst people like Oliver are good regardless of what they wear, showing Dicken's dismissal of the widely held concept that class was equal to morality. A similar example of this can also be seen early in *Jane Eyre* in which the servants find it harder to relate and sympathize with Jane due to them not considering or finding her conventionally attractive. Abbot states of her "if she were a nice, pretty child, one might compassionate her forlornness; but one really cannot care for such a little toad as that". This shows that in Victorian society, not only does the power structure apply to the rich and poor and what garments they wear, but even to things you are born with such as your facial structure and features, those being born with what Victorians considered "fairer" features getting better treatment than those with features like Jane. Bronte uses this passage not only to highlight the deeply flawed thinking and logic of Victorians of this time but also to suggest that whilst the people judging Jane may think they are superior to her (as they perceive themselves as more

beautiful than her), she actually stands above them on the moral ladder due to her actually judging people on the timbre of their character.

Something which is further propagated by her eventual relationship with Rochester, disregarding his physical appearance. Both authors attempt to convey the point that regardless of where someone is born in the standing of the Victorian power structure it does not reflect their intelligence or morals. In *Oliver Twist*, Dickens makes sure to highlight that poor and rich people are of the same intelligence and have just as good (if not, oftentimes better) morals as rich people. It is only through how the poor get treated that they are pushed towards a life of crime. Many examples of Oliver being treated as an animal or as something less than human are portrayed throughout the book which directly conflict with the way the reader knows Oliver should be treated (as a kind, caring young boy). A particularly striking example can be seen in Mrs. Sowerberry's reaction towards parish children stating, "I see no saving in parish children, not I; for they always cost more to keep than they are worth".

Assigning a worth to these children and talking about them in terms of money seems very clinical and dehumanises them. This again allows Dickens to criticise the power structure of Victorian society as if we can sympathize with Oliver we could likely sympathize with the many poor children who were in Oliver's exact same position. Bronte echoes a similar sentiment in *Jane Eyre*. Bronte paints the orphans as underprivileged and mistreated, something which Jane has experienced prevalently through her childhood. With reminders such as "you ought to be aware, Miss, that you are under obligations to Mrs. Reed: she keeps you: if she were to turn you off, you would have to go to the poor-house." Almost making her seem like an item to be owned than an actual person with feelings and emotions. The cautionary, bordering on mean tone highlights the reality of the way many upper-class people and adults spoke to orphans and lower class people in Victorian society and only served as a way for the rich to try and solidify Victorian society's power structures to keep themselves in a good place.

Both protagonists of *Oliver Twist* and *Jane Eyre* have different ways of reacting to their mistreatment due to Victorian society's power structure and different ways of manifesting and utilising these feelings and thoughts that come along with it. Dickens has intentionally written Oliver to be a timid, likeable and model boy (partly due to his age and that it makes it easier for us to sympathize with him and that it shows any sort of person can come from any walk of life). Because of these traits Oliver is apprehensive to incite anyone's anger, even if they have hurt him. He never takes explicit/open action against his oppressors. 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". Regardless of Oliver's mistreatment by the Victorian society's power structure incites a burning desire for justice and revolution in the mind of the reader against this status quo.

As such even when small acts of rebellion (that Oliver himself may not even recognize at his age) occur such as in the beginning of the text when he has "suffered the tortures of slow starvation for three months" and is, at last, so "voracious and wild with hunger" that, one evening he dares to ask the Master for extra food. His scared and mousy plea of "Please, sir, I want some more" is far from a massive, co-ordinated act of rebellion against the system that has wronged him for so many years but coming from a boy who has been undeservingly abused since birth it does take a big amount of courage. This is Dickens painting the good qualities such as courage that will take Oliver into great places in his future. This is him showing that whilst the class divide, and the current Victorian society's power system may be hard to

overcome, it is poor people with heart such as Oliver that will change it for the better as opposed to the throes of selfish rich/upper class people we encounter throughout the text in Oliver's eyes. Jane, a child of more fiery and strong-spirited tendencies, exhibits her rebellion more 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 unhopied-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 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. Both characters do, however, gain happy endings towards the end of their respective texts in spite of the hardships they face with Oliver being adopted into a loving family and gaining rights to his inheritance and Jane settling down with Rochester, gaining her inheritance and having a child. This again reflects both authors views that whilst society may not view the lower classes as being equal to the upper classes, there is indeed a way out and a happy result waiting for them.