

CHILDREN WITH CHILDHOOD: SHAPING PERSONALITY IN DICKENS' *OLIVER TWIST* AND BRONTË'S *JANE EYRE*

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ABSTRACT

The study object in this research is childhood in Dickens' *Oliver Twist* and Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. Although the two novels were written by two different writers, however, the novels have similarities to some extent, particularly about the social issue in childhood. Being a symbol of growth and rebellion of the child in the novels, childhood conveys the relationship of the child's survival and the shape of the character. Both Dickens' and Brontë's novel expresses some resemblances about childhood life. Through a critical analysis of Dickens' and Brontë's selected texts on the children's characters, this research aims to compare and examine how the social status in childhood can create the individual personality and how the character changes in the novel throughout their childhood. Being nineteenth century authors, Dickens and Brontë's conform to the writing conventions of that period. The method used in this study was descriptive qualitative. It will examine how the novel represents the characters by focusing on the various perspective of the narrator. The result shows that through the theme of childhood, both novels show the ability of this particular time of life to shape the personality of the character. The wicked condition in the institution, the absence of respect and affection, the ignorance of people, and the prejudice over the main character become the aspect in contributing the shape of Oliver and Jane's personalities. Both novels contain realism and drive the reader to become more aware and sympathetic towards the poor child.

Keywords: Childhood, Personality, Social Status

INTRODUCTION

Childhood is one of the running themes throughout Dickens's *Oliver Twist* and Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. Be a symbol of growth and rebellion of the child in the novels; childhood conveys the relationship of the child's survival and the shape of the character. Although there are many differences, both Dickens and Brontë's novels express some resemblances about childhood life. The protagonist characters in the story, both Oliver and Jane, share the same experience of living as an orphan. Initially, they also come from the same social status of the middle-class family inherited from their parents. However, the circumstance and the treatment they receive from people around them make both of them become such a servant and lower-class people.

These two novels are set in the nineteenth-century era. In this era, England has experienced the Industrial Revolution's new period. Many writers in this era tend to raise the story about childhood by presenting an orphan character in the narration to increase the social awareness of Victorian society. The appearance of the childhood theme in literature introduces a new atmosphere to culture. This becomes a medium for the writers to show their readers the actual reality of the orphan's life. How do they face terrible fate, and how can they handle it. The researchers expect the character to fight against adult tyranny. Basically, childhood is not only about the particular period of a person's phase of life. However, childhood is also dealing with many things beyond that. It is related to many aspects of human life, such as survival, self-development, and the search for identity.

In this study, the researchers will take two novels, *Oliver Twist* by Dickens and *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë, to be analysed. Both stories show some similarities in presenting the social class of childhood in the Victorian period. The researchers will examine how the social status in childhood can create the individual personality and how it changes the character in the novel throughout their childhood. The researchers also want to look at the influence of people around the characters and how the novel represents them by focusing on the various perspective of the narrator.

The theme of childhood has become the rising theme in English literature for a long time. The children are considered the main subject for many great literary works created in the Victorian period. In the nineteenth century era, many orphan children were often considered a threat to the social environment rather than be seen as innocent and pathetic children. Raising childhood themes in this era in literary works becomes an excellent way to voice the children's freedom. The term childhood nowadays is significant in understanding literary production in the nineteenth-century age. Literally, childhood is not always talking about something related to the period of people's lives but can also be seen as the symbol of self-development, growth, maturity.

On the other hand, childhood can also be seen as the symbol of regression, rebellion, and ignorance. In the nineteenth century, Children were regarded as the symbol of hope. The term childhood is considered the mark of the new life begins. In *Oliver Twist*, Dickens shows the reader the story of childhood life in nineteenth-century England with miserable London dealing with poverty and many nasty things. While In *Jane Eyre*, Brontë reveals the hidden pains of the protagonist character struggling with loneliness and being poorly treated by people surrounding her. In her work, Brontë expects her reader to understand the destructive impact of childhood on an adult's life.

METHOD

The study takes Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* as the primary texts and identifies the problem evoked in the novel. The method used in this study was a descriptive qualitative. The research will be carried out through a detailed critical analysis of Dickens and Brontë's works pertaining social status and childhood. Moreover, a detailed examination of Dickens' and Brontë's texts will be carried out from a realist perspective. An extensive literature review will be

conducted to provide a deeper understanding of Dickens' and Brontë's works and their attitude towards the exploitation of the poor and children. Then, it will examine how the novel represents the characters by focusing on the various perspective of the narrator. A realist and naturalist reading of Dickens' and Brontë's selected texts will provide literary theory for this research. The secondary data will be reviewed through the library research method using a range of information sources such as the books, journals, articles relevant to the analysis, and internet search engines.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Social Status in Victorian British Childhood

Childhood can be seen as a medium to shaping children's personalities. Stephen Heath in *Childhood Times* points out that the idea of childhood can be experienced by the adults in a vicarious way through their memory and the interaction with the children, gives the value of the children's behaviour (S. Heath, 1997). When adults try to recall the childhood memory, they will expect to provide the children with the same good thing. When adults recall the terrible things in their childhood, they tend to give excellent protection for the children to avoid something terrible happen. I shall assume that the childhood period can be a suitable medium for people to shape the personality of the new generation in the future. The childhood period is talking about the past memory in our life and related to the future because people will learn and grow as a mature person through childhood. However, In the earlier period, the term of childhood has an insecure image. Christine Sutphin in "*Victorian Childhood*" mentioned the children and related the term of a child to the puritan perspective. She stated that because of the inherited sin, the children must be saved and being scrutinized under the adult's control (Lesnik-Oberstein, 2004). The children actually need strong protection from adults and have to be examined under adult's control. The researchers can argue that children can be seen as the symbol of innocence. It is because of their pure heart and lack of knowledge about something new. They are still young and do not have any sin at all. However, the condition of their environment can strongly influence their personality. As children, they still do not have much experience in their lives, so they easily imitate what adults do without considering the impact first.

In the nineteenth century, England became one of the most important countries in Europe because of its good economic condition. Many great discoveries bring sophisticated life in British life, such as the new-found technology which made life so much easier than before. Machinery also changes the previous manual process. However, on the other hand, this revolution also brings misery to the people of low social status. The massive change in this industrial era affects the social structure in society. The existing industrial revolution creates the social status in the nineteenth century of England. This class segregation was created based on many factors such as power, authority, properties, job, education, living condition, and culture. England grew so fast and became wealthy, but the poor working class has no improvement in their life (Steinbach, 2012). The bourgeoisie

community often mistreats the lower-class people. They did not care about the laborers' health condition and paid them low wages. The lower-class people who do not own properties have no chance to change their position in society. They do not have an opportunity to improve their living condition to be better. This phenomenon happens because they do not have any rights in politics. To enter political life, people need to get the proper education that is only provided for the upper-class people. Poverty becomes a fate for the lower-class people that remain unchangeable. In '*Children and Industry*' book, Cruickshank points out that child labor in the Victorian period is everywhere (Cruickshank, 1985). The children can be found everywhere in the street as pickpockets, beggars, and helpers. Then, they become as part of laborers in industrial factories and shops. In *Oliver Twist*, the phenomenon of labor in childhood is portrayed straightforwardly. The depiction of child labor's life during the industrial revolution of nineteenth-century England is really close to the reality because Dickens uses his own childhood experience.

During the Victorian period, there was such a paradox that the massively wealthy and the terrible poverty go along in this time. This kind of paradox also rises in the perception of children in the relationship with their childhood. Children have considered really important, and childhood is an ideal and romantic period of human life. Children are innocent and plain because they have not been corrupted by the world yet. However, apart from this, Ginger stated in '*Victorian Childhoods*' that the number of child mortality is increased over time (Frost, 2008). Yet the number of child labor also increased in this period. Many children died because of illnesses due to bad living conditions. I shall claim that there is massive exploitation of children in the Victorian era where the children are considered important in industrialization. Still, the people always ignore children's prosperity and let them die.

The children of the upper class were treated nicely since they are considered the innocent and adorable creature. However, the poor children are exploited harshly by the bourgeois. Moreover, they are constantly being neglected by the society where they should be considered the same as any other child. This condition signifies that the life of Victorian society is according to social status (Mitchell, 2008). This class segregation then caused the different perceptions of the issue of children in general. Social status is an important thing in Victorian society to shape the perception and opinion towards other people. By considering the child's social status, people can decide how they should act and behave towards them. Nina Mazar, in her writing, points out to Henrich's statements that Psychologists show that people as part of socialization try to internalize the norms and values of their society, which can be a standard to compare their behavior (Mazar et al., 2008). The researchers can make a point that people act and treat people in their environment based on the norm and values of their society. In this case, the norms and values of Victorian society are based on social status. The children who belong to a low social status are treated harshly in an inappropriate way. In contrast, the children who come from the upper class are regarded as innocent and plain creatures.

Childhood as a medium of shaping personality In Dickens's *Oliver Twist* and Brontë's *Jane Eyre*

The plot of both novels; *Oliver Twist* and *Jane Eyre*, have some resemblance in many aspects. The first is the similarity of the other characters around them. In the first chapter of the story, Dickens and Brontë recount the beginning of the protagonist's life are from the sympathy of a wicked woman. In *Oliver Twist*, there is a character named Mrs. Mann, a hypocrite and fawning woman who is always pretending to be a kind-hearted person. However, in reality, she does not look like what people see her as a good caretaker. While in *Jane Eyre*, the protagonist character Jane is allowed to live in Mrs. Reed's house in Gateshead although Reed's family was still bullying Jane. Also, later, both of them are founded by kind people when they struggle to face their miserable fate. Oliver met his relative and got much affection from nice Mrs. Maylie's and Rose's. While in *Jane Eyre*, Jane met Helen and Miss Temple, at the first time she encountered Lowood. She makes a close relationship and gets much love from nice people around her when she has to face bitter reality in her childhood life.

The other similarity in both novels is the theme of social class, which is commonly raised by the Victorian writers in literary works. In *Oliver Twist*, Oliver is depicted as an orphan runaway from a workhouse and being fooled by people around him to commit the crime. Actually he comes from a respectable family but later his parents' friend, Mr. Brownlow suggests giving the money to the other Oliver's brother (Dickens, 1949). The same story is recounted in *Jane Eyre*. Brontë presents the character of Jane as an orphan who actually comes from a respectable family. The other resemblance is about the institution where the protagonist character spent in their childhood life. Oliver in *Oliver Twist*, begins his life at the very first time in the workhouse where he was born. Dickens in *Oliver Twist* depicts a workhouse as a place for poor people that are full of oppression and horrible atmosphere. This description is aimed to show the terrible condition of an orphan's life in the nineteenth-century era. The workhouse is supposed to be a place for giving aid to the poor children; however, it becomes a place close to the prison because all of the children are treated inhumanly. Many children are almost starving to death because they do not get proper meal and health. The workplace became the place to exploit children under the adults' control. Because of Oliver's desperation and fear towards the authority of adults, he decides to run away from the workhouse and finally meet the dodger.

The same story is told in *Jane Eyre* as well. Jane starts her life in Mrs. Reed's house, which is depicted as a terrible place for Jane. She is always being locked in a horrible red room by her aunt and often being the target of bully by her cousins. Later Jane is sent to Lowood which also described as a really terrible place to live. The institution is full of oppression and horrible as well as in workhouse in *Oliver Twist*. The place is described as an unhealthy place, therefore, so many students die at a very young age because of disease and malnutrition (Brontë, 2006).

Both Oliver and Jane experience the same treatment of social injustice because they always considered as a rebel and threat for people. In *Oliver Twist*, in chapter two when Oliver asking for more, the workhouse board judges him for being so rude and agree to punish Oliver by hanging

sentence (Dickens, 1949). They all never trust Oliver for being a good child and always judge Oliver negatively. In *Jane Eyre*, there is a scene when the first time little Jane met Mr. Brocklehurst, a man who Mrs. Reed is already informing that Jane is a bad girl, he said “No sight so sad as that of a naughty child, especially a naughty little girl” (Brontë, 2006). Mrs. Reed always makes a prejudice to Jane by putting her in a very evil image. Therefore, when Jane is sent to Lowood, all the people have already been told to punish Jane to make her a well-behaved child (Brontë, 2006). This scene indicated that as a poor child, she always being judged by the people even she does not do so.

In *Oliver Twist*, Dickens conveys the everyday life of the lower social class people in Victorian England and presents the darkness of nineteenth-century workhouse full of crime and poverty. Oliver is a child who comes from a middle-class family. However, his mother’s death automatically transforms his status to be a lower-class child. The children with no parents are considered as rebel and non-educated children. Therefore, people tend to treat them harshly. A family is considered a crucial factor in the development of children’s behaviour. Only the children from the upper and middle class can get the proper education and be treated nicely. As well as Oliver, Brontë also depicts her protagonist character, Jane Eyre as a child who comes from a middle-class family. However, because of her parents’ death, she automatically changed into a lower-class child who is always being tortured by the people surrounding her because she is considered a badly behaved child and rebel. By identifying the perception of children based on the social class, the researchers can point out that the children in high social status had more wonderful and longer periods of childhood than those in the lower social status. The poor children tend to lose their childhood time earlier because they have to face terrible reality. They have to work at a very young age while they are supposed to enjoy their life as a child. The children also have to struggle with the authority of adult who tends to exploit them. The poor children do not have time for leisure, and they have no freedom in their life.

Dickens reflects his memory of childhood and satire the condition of the poor law at the time. Through *Oliver Twist*, Dickens put his empathy and wants the reader to know about the importance of the workhouse as a media to assist poor children and orphan. However, the fact shows that the workhouse becomes a media of child exploitation. In this era, the children are pushed to work. The sovereign assumes that children can be so poor because they are too lazy to earn money and get their punishment. Therefore, children who live in the workhouse are always treated very severely. The condition in the workhouse is not so different from the condition in the jail, even worse. This condition is described clearly in *Oliver Twist* novel as Dickens’s form of empathy to the low social class people and criticizing the law. He tries to portray the detail of poverty in London and criminality to depict of the social and political conditions of Victorian England.

From the aspect of point of view, in *Oliver Twist*, Dickens use the third person narrative to recounts the story. He portrays Oliver as a unique narrator who often reveals the character and action by using a humorous style to satire the condition of the crime. Dickens uses Oliver to mock the hypocrisy of people who think that they have done all good deeds but, in facts, they are so selfish and

very greedy. He also depicts a reality of social injustice against the children. Here, *Oliver Twist* can be seen as a means of social satire that bring children exploitation. The novel has a very straightforward style of narration by presenting the life condition of children in the workhouse and reveals the corruption of the social system to the readers. Diniejko in his article stated that Dickens's *Oliver Twist* can be seen as a Victorian literary text containing the issues of children's abuse, and can be seen as the documentary of Victorian slums in London. He also mentions that Dickens is very successful in raising the social consciousness among people to be more aware of children's exploitation and poverty. The researchers can assume from this statement that Dickens did very well in driving the personal emotion of the reader, and his writing can be a compelling means to bring the message of the social issue. However, the impact of the third person narrative style is that the scenes in the novel seem like a report of a social reality instead of the individual journey of Oliver. Take an example in chapter fifteen there is a description of a scene:

"If it did not come strictly within the scope and bearing of my long-considered intentions and plans regarding this prose epic... to leave the two old gentlemen sitting with the watch between them long after it grew too dark to see it ...I might take occasion to entertain the reader with many wise reflections on the obvious impolicy of ever attempting to do good to our fellow-creatures where there is no hope of earthly reward...But, as Mr. Brownlow was not one of these ...I shall not enter into any such digression in this place." (Dickens, 1949)

When reading this part of the description, the reader might be brought to a description of reality of what is happening in society. There is an absence of the relationship between the reader and the individual character (Oliver), so the reader cannot really get a deeper understanding of Oliver's personality. As Ford and Lane point out in Arnold's book '*Oliver Twist, The Dickens Critic*' that Dickens is not presenting public about any psychological realism and the reactions performed by the protagonist character do not show the typical action of the children at Oliver's age (Kettle, 1962). Ford and Lane depict Oliver as a figure of symbolic significance, and they also mention that Oliver himself does not bring the reader into his life. However, his poor living condition bring the reader into his situation. From this statement, the researchers can assume that Oliver's reaction is showing the performance of orphans in general, so he does not represent his individual personality. In this case, Dickens does not really insert the emotional feeling of individual character to make the reader understand Oliver's life as a single story of an orphan. In presenting his story, Dickens is more focusing on the situation faced by Oliver as an orphan.

In *Oliver Twist*, through the third person narrative style, the reader cannot really get the individual personality of the protagonist character. Compared to *Jane Eyre*, Brontë uses the first-person narrative to describe the personality of Jane as the lead character. Therefore, through this narrative style, the reader can get a sense of directness into the character's life. The readers brought into the deeper sensation and feeling of the story through Jane's narration style as the protagonist

characters. Therefore, we as the reader can get the thought of who Jane Eyre is. However, the reader may not rely fully on the story because by using this kind of perspective, Jane can justify her own action because she is the one who share the story. In *Oliver Twist*, Dickens only recounts a short period of childhood from Oliver's life. However, in *Jane Eyre*, Brontë recounts Jane's childhood story until she becomes an adult. Therefore, the readers only know about the life of Oliver in his childhood and never know whether his childhood will influence his life later when he becomes an adult. While in *Jane Eyre* the reader can get the emotional feeling of Jane and the influence of her childhood time in her future adult life. In *Jane Eyre*, Brontë illustrated the protagonist character in more detail. She does not only present the condition of Jane's life but also shows to the public what Jane sees and feels. Therefore, the reader can get more deeply to the thoughts and personality of Jane Eyre. As well as Brontë expresses more descriptions of the reason behind Jane's action. For example, there is a scene in chapter three Jane shows her feeling and strong determination on what she thinks she wants to do and she will take care of herself. She said: "Yes, Mrs. Reed, to you I owe some fearful pangs of mental suffering, but I ought to forgive you, for you knew not what you did: while rending my heart-strings, you thought you were only uprooting my bad propensities." (Brontë, 2006) Her utterance shows that she is really brave to convey what she feels and thinks to people. In her childhood time, she also does not really know how to control her emotion. It is clearly shown when Jane gets really angry about John reed who wants to bully her many times.

In both novels, the main characters are showing resemblances and differences. In *Oliver Twist*, Dickens recounts the whole life story of the child until the end. While in *Jane Eyre*, Brontë recounts the story of Jane starts from her childhood until she becomes an adult. Both protagonist characters share the same feelings and also the same reactions. Jane and Oliver perform strong reaction when they get severe treatment from people surrounding. As mentioned previously, two characters try to react violently because they want to survive and stand for themselves. However, as children, they still have love and affection towards people who treat them nicely. Their heart still pure and need love since they never get love from family in their childhood life. The two characters, both Oliver and Jane show their respect and affection by doing a good action.

It is also interesting to think of Ford and Lane's argument about the evil thing in Dickens's narration. They underline that Dickens always present the theme of evil and the lack of affection towards the children (Kettle, 1962). Actually, in *Oliver Twist*, Oliver never does such evil things however he is merely a little boy who never get any affection from family and people around him. Therefore, he tends to do something terrible because of the influence of the environment. Oliver is get fooled by the dodger and gets betrayed by Fagin's gang member. Oliver is in a complicated situation after joining together along with Fagin and the dodgers as a pickpocket. Although Oliver sometimes commits crime and makes a violent reaction towards people, he is still a weak and plain boy. When his first encounter with the world of criminals, Oliver does not obey the rules of the group even he tries to run away from the place of the pickpocket. It is reasonable if we think of his

background as a poor boy life in such a terrible environment. When Oliver meets good people such as Mr. Brownlow and Mrs. Bedwin, he can bring out a good behavior to show his respect. Sometimes Oliver performs a violent action because he does not know how to control his anger. He gets so upset when Noah mocking his mother and tries to beat him.

Besides, Oliver's personality is strongly influenced by the characters around him. Generally, Oliver gets acquainted with many good and bad people in his life. At the beginning of the story, he met Mr. Bumble, Noah, and other workhouse board members who always exploit him in the workhouse. Later, he met Fagin's gang and encounters the world of crime. Fagin treats Oliver as his possession. He wants to exploit Oliver for his own advantage. Therefore, he tries to drag Oliver into a crime world. He treats Oliver in a very oppressive way. He scares Oliver by showing his cruel and peculiar behavior.

CONCLUSION

In both *Oliver Twist* and *Jane Eyre*, the condition of the childhood environment can influence the character's personality. The condition of the environment is framed by the people around the main character, the place, and the treatment they receive that indicate the existence of the social class which becomes the standard and values of Victorian society in treating people. Through the description of the childhood period, Dickens' conclusion is substantially creating the character of Oliver who can handle the terrible situation he faces although he was being fooled by the people around him and react violently against oppression. However, Oliver never loses his simplicity and honesty. Actually, he is very nice. He meets various kinds of characters around him and he learns about people to develop his discernment. Later, he learns many things from his life experience. While in *Jane Eyre*, Brontë depicted Jane as a very brave child who always stands for her rights. For both characters in the novel, they are actually very nice and well-behaved as a child. Overall, the researchers can say that the story of Oliver and Jane as an orphan are close to the condition of the orphan life as a whole. Dickens and Brontë demonstrate the childhood life from a different point of view by using the social status to depict the treatment received by the main characters. The researchers can point out that because of their social status, Oliver and Jane always treated badly and got no respect from people. A powerless child and have no resistance will be endangered by the condition of life and cannot survive in their life.

By using the childhood theme, both novels show the ability of this particular time of life to shape the personality of the character. The wicked condition in the institution, the absence of respect and affection, the ignorance of people, and the prejudice over the main character become the aspect contributing the shape of Oliver and Jane's personality. Both novels contain realism and drive the reader to become more aware and sympathetic towards the poor child.

Considering the impact of the culture and the values of the people which surround the child on shaping their will to act, and the social structures, the children must work through from within in

navigating the world in their childhood life. Both novels were not only successfully portrays the sufferings of the children in 19th century Britain, but also become the most important social medium which effectively criticize the economic, social, and moral abuses in the Victorian era. Both writers showed compassion and empathy towards the vulnerable and disadvantaged segments of English society, and contributed to several important social reforms. Therefore, this research can be a comparison of children's ability to act in other contemporary cultures like nowadays, and to look at what those cultures say about childhood and child rights. In English literary world, one could look at such authors as Dickens and Brontë, and their works to get a sense for the perception of childhood in other parts of the world and a child's ability to act in the colonies at the time, different power structures in play, with other views on the class systems, race, and money.

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