
“I am just a kid and life is a nightmare”¹: Victorian Childhood in *Jane Eyre*

Ana Belén Joyce

Jane Eyre, written by Charlotte Brontë, and published for the first time in 1847 under the pen name Currer Bell, is one of the most famous novels of all time, even almost 200 years later, with translations to various languages and theatre, television and film adaptations. Charlotte Brontë (1816-1855) was an English writer and poet, together with her sisters, Anne (*Agnes Grey*) and Emily (*Wuthering Heights*), who also published their works under pen names. Their father was a clergyman, and Charlotte and her siblings were raised and educated mostly at home, which was the case for most families at that time. Some aspects of her life are reflected in the novel in question, for instance, her spirituality, and the fact that Lowood School is based on The Clergy Daughters' School to which Charlotte and her sisters attended until the outbreak of typhus.

During the Victorian period, children outnumbered adults by far. However, we can say that they were mostly seen as objects with a purpose. This being either to cleanse the adults' corruption with their purity, or to be educated to change society when adulthood was reached; partly due to this, a significant number of schools emerged during this period. These, along with literature, were in charge of moulding children's uncorrupted minds. *Jane Eyre*, written in first person, starts from her childhood, and continues until her adulthood. How does this book represent Victorian childhood? Does it try to educate children, or to educate adults?

On the one hand, children from privileged classes had more possessions and less difficulties than working-class children. Nevertheless, life was not easy for either. Claudia Nelson (2014) mentions that “While Victorian writers on domesticity stressed the wonders of the parent-child bond within privileged classes, in practice children belonging to those classes often had minimal contact with their parents.” (p.70) Since they were born and until they reached a certain age, they were taken care of by nurses, nannies and governesses, and they spent very little time with their parents. Once they were off to school, they could only see their families during vacation time. Brontë reflects the reality of Victorian aristocracy children. When reading about her cousins, John, Georgiana and Eliza, and about Adèle, it is actually sad to see how, even being home schooled, they have little interaction with their parents or, in Adèle's case, her guardian. Mrs. Reed does not even know, or does not want to know, how cruel her son is, but she considers Jane an untamed beast, when the spoiled monster is actually John. The consequences of their lonely and cold upbringing is reflected in their adulthood. John becomes a gambler, ruins his family fortune, and dies, supposedly by committing suicide. Georgiana becomes a self-centred, attention-seeking, spoiled woman incapable of doing anything by herself. Eliza turns into a distant and cold woman, who has no intention of preserving her family bond with Georgiana; she does not cry even while looking at her mother's lifeless body. As for Adèle, trained by her late mother to entertain adults by singing, dancing and reciting poetry, she is taken as ward by Mr. Rochester, who takes her to his house in England, and he barely stays there until Jane moves in, even when he had promised the little girl to be with her.

1. Reference to the song “I'm Just a Kid” by the band Simple Plan.

On the other hand, working-class children were raised and educated mostly at home. Living in small spaces, instead of mansions in which you could go an entire day without crossing paths with other residents, made families spend more time together, and helped to have a closer bond, reflected in the novel in Bessie's family. This does not mean that they were always more loved. Child labour was very common, starting even at the age of 4. Rich people considered the children of the working-class "savages" who grew up in incompetent and toxic backgrounds, and therefore, their aid was necessary, even if it was by force.

Jane's character is an interesting one, given that she is an orphan, but raised in a wealthy family. She is despised by her aunt, who treats her unfairly, accuses her of crimes she did not commit, puts her through torturous punishments, the most remarkable one being leaving the poor 10-year-old child locked in a room where supposedly her uncle's ghost was present. In order to get rid of the little girl she promised to keep and look after, Mrs. Reed sends Jane to a charity school. Therefore, Jane gets the opportunity not all children had, at that time, to get an education for her future.

Schools had an important role in education and character training. During this period, the number of schools rose considerably, and became available to both wealthy and poor children. They would go to school after turning 10 years old. Poor children began accessing education at 'Sunday school', though it is worth noticing that they could not access regular school education until 1870. Children were taught subjects such as mathematics and languages, and also those necessary to prepare them for a future job (for girls, house-related and education activities, and for boys, labour-related activities). The character training was based on morals imposed by religious views from that time, and education was overwhelmingly strict. This is all perfectly reflected in Lowood School. Authorities shame their students through public humiliations and physical punishments for every minor mistake. Jane has a hard time seeing the unfairness and the abuse of authority of the school personnel. Is it really necessary to call out a child and have her stand on a stool, and encourage her classmates to avoid her because an adult considers her a little wicked child on the false accusation of her being a liar? On the bright side, Jane finds affection for the first time in Helen, who helps in her growth, and in Miss Temple, who is the first person close to a mother that she has had in her life.

Literature for children had a great development in the Victorian period. Its aim was to educate children on morality, but with the addition of entertainment as priority, which was not present in previous times. Illustrated books were very popular. The stories did not only portray the consequences of bad actions and wrong behaviour in children, but also of the bad actions and wrong behaviour in adults, who were to be corrected by children. Adult stories from that period were difficult to distinguish from those for younger people. Novels such as *Jane Eyre* started describing cruel childhoods which were "an intensely frustrating time shaped by loneliness, boredom, abuse or neglect, and shame at their inadequacies or misdeeds" (Nelson, 2014, p. 78). The purpose of these novels was to evoke empathy in the adult readers, in order for them to start being concerned about the children's neglected lives. If the child failed to soften the hearts of the adults in the imaginary world, at least the adult readers would soften and start changing, instead of just moulding children to change society. Jane fails to soften Mrs. Reed's heart, who hates her even in her deathbed; but the little girl has grown and does not feel resentful towards the woman who caused her misery, that she "should have been glad to love [...] if [she] just had let [Jane]" (Brontë, 1847/2015, pp. 345-346).

The childhood represented in *Jane Eyre* makes the reader feel sorry and angry at the pain and misery the little ones went through. They did not even have authority to defend themselves. This

is a criticism of the adults' neglect for the children in their society, to the status of invisible possessions that can only be useful as instruments for the adults' benefit, be it to contrast their corruption with the purity of the infants, to gain economic benefit, or to change the society according to what the adults want. Incredibly, these things still happen in different places of the world, with little change sometimes, almost 200 years later.

References

- Brontë, C. (2015). *Jane Eyre, An Autobiography*. South Australia: The University of Adelaide Library. (Original work published 1847)
- Nelson, C. (2014). Growing Up: Childhood. In H. F. Tucker (Ed.), *A New Companion to Victorian Literature and Culture* (pp. 69-71). John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

