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Oliver Twist and Jane Eyre

A Comparison of Orphans in Victorian Literature

Eva Persson
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Centre for Languages and Literature
Lund University
Supervisor: Birgitta Berglund

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Introduction

“Please Sir, I want some more.” (12) The famous words of Charles Dickens’ *Oliver Twist* asking for more gruel have touched many hearts during the years since Charles Dickens wrote the novel *Oliver Twist* in 1838. Oliver’s thin, hungry body and his shivering appearance go straight to your heart. The heartbreaking story of this young boy’s life has captivated readers for many years. All the hardships he has to endure and the happy ending are depicted in Charles Dickens’ humorous but sharp-witted form.

“Breakfast-time came at last, and this morning the porridge was not burnt; the quality was eatable, the quantity small; how small a portion seemed! I wished it had been doubled.” (55) The words of Charlotte Brontë in *Jane Eyre* (1847) describing Jane Eyre’s unfortunate situation at the Lowood institution make us wonder how this could ever be possible. How could people treat children this way, or stand by and see children be treated like this? Like Dickens, Charlotte Brontë draws a picture of a child for whom you feel great sympathy and compassion. Jane Eyre has her part of struggles and pains, including losing her best friend, almost starving to death and leaving her loved one, but her story too ends well.

The similarities between the two orphans depicted in Charles Dickens’ *Oliver Twist* and Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* are quite a few although there are many differences as well. Jane’s and Oliver’s respective upbringing, their relationships with the people around them, their feelings about being orphans and their ways of handling various situations, the impact good and bad people have on their lives, their living conditions, their education and occupations are all aspects to compare. The importance of money and the happy endings when the protagonists find out about their relatives are also evoking interest. So, what resemblances can be found in the lives of these two orphans? What differences? How are these orphans depicted and why are they depicted in this way?

To be able to more fully understand the situation of orphans at this time, this essay will initially give a general historical background as to what British society was like during the first half of the 19th century; the social structures, the early outcome of the industrial revolution and so on. Furthermore, this essay will provide some information about orphans; the way orphanages were run, the chances for the orphans to survive and also what possible occupations were available for the young people who left the orphanages.

The aim of this essay is to analyse and discuss the various similarities and the important differences between *Jane Eyre* and *Oliver Twist*, and to see if the works can tell us anything about Victorian society.

Historical background

Victorian society was a society in rapid change – a change which had actually started already before Queen Victoria's accession in 1837. Mitchell points out three major events that happened before 1837 which influenced life in Britain immensely. Firstly, after the Napoleonic Wars, peace came in 1815 causing people in England to feel pride and patriotism, self-confidence and security as well as a sense of entitlement. Secondly, during this period of the Industrial revolution England changed from being a nation of agriculture to a nation of manufacturing, turning England into the world's greatest economic power for most of the 19th century. Thirdly, in 1832 the Reform Bill was passed doubling the number of men allowed to vote. This was the first step towards democracy and the government recognizing responsibility for the well-being of the citizens of the country. (3)

After the peace in 1815, life for many people became difficult. McDowall says that after the peace there was no longer a need for war supplies so many people lost their jobs and men in the former army and navy now needed work. In the countryside life was not easy either. The landowning farmers had suffered from competing with cheaper imported corn, but now the government introduced laws to protect the price of their corn which led to rapidly increasing prices of bread and almost everything else. The wages, however, did not rise. In 1834 a new poor law, The Poor Law Amendment Act, was passed to improve the help for poor people but the government did not supply enough money and many people were even worse off than before. Only the people living in the dreaded workhouses received any help at all but the conditions there were miserable. People had to work very long hours, had little to eat and men were living separated from women. Many people moved to the towns trying to avoid the workhouses and to escape the hardships of the countryside life. (132)

Gradually, people in the middle and upper classes and also the government were becoming more aware of the living conditions of the poor, the working class and the orphans, partly through novels such as *Oliver Twist*. Diniejko claims in his article that *Oliver Twist* could be seen as a textbook of Victorian child abuse and as a social document about life in early Victorian slum. He also states that Dickens succeeded in making people of the time more aware of the bad conditions for the poor (5). Legouis writes that by the middle of the 19th century novelists turned from focusing on analysing personal emotions to presenting more social problems and according to him, "Dickens had given the initial impulse to this movement with *Oliver Twist* in 1838, in which he attacked the wretched lot of foundling

children ill-treated in the workhouses... Charlotte Brontë gave much space to the same problems in *Shirley*." (330)

The moral and social concern of many people gradually made life better for unfortunate children and new laws were passed. Mitchell reports that one was the Factory Act of 1802 stating that orphans under the age of twelve were not allowed to work more than twelve hours a day and that they were to receive some education (43). More new laws were passed as the situation of the working children became more well-known to the public; in 1840, for example, chimney sweeps could no longer use boys to climb inside the chimneys (43-44). This might give the impression of governmental concern for children; however, Roebuck claims that the aim of the reformers to restrict children's work hours to ten hours a day, the Ten Hours Act of 1847, was actually an attempt to restrict the working hours of the adults, since the adults depended on children assisting them (53). Whatever the intention of the new act was, both adults and children benefitted from it and society made a clear statement that children could not be seen as mere labour. Moreover, Mitchell alleges that crime rate was very high. Children over the age of seven were considered old enough to be held responsible for their acts and they were tried and sentenced the same way as adults. This meant that children were supposed to know what actions were illegal at an unreasonably young age and that they might get severely punished if they did not. Not until 1908 did the government pass the Children Act which entailed that children under the age of 14 could no longer be imprisoned. (97) This act was an obvious acknowledgement by the government that children should not be treated as adults and it stated an understanding for young children's inability to foresee the consequences of their actions.

Children in Victorian England received various degrees of education. According to Mitchell, the sons of aristocrats and landed gentry were sent to public schools. The eldest son was expected to take over after his father while the younger sons in many cases were supposed to take on professions such as military officer, administrator or clergyman. The daughters were educated at home in skills like singing, painting and playing an instrument in preparation for marriage. (23) The working class children on the other hand had little schooling. Mitchell reports that a man doing unskilled or semiskilled work could not provide for his family alone and, when the mother had to stay at home with the children, she would try to do some work at home. The children had to start working at a very young age, either at home or at regular jobs. A part of the working class, the skilled workers, could afford to educate their sons and daughters to some extent and many of them learned a trade through apprenticeship. (18-19)

The death rate was quite high. Many adult people died of accidents at work, illnesses and childbirth, leaving a large number of children with only one parent or without parents. Even if the children had one parent, they would, in many cases, be treated as orphans since a working mother could not support them and therefore they ended up in a workhouse. A single father could not work and care for his children at the same time so those children were often forced to go to an orphanage. (Mitchell 108)

As mentioned earlier, social concern increased among people of the middle and upper classes by the first half of the 19th century and the Parliament acknowledged the need to help the poor and disabled. Not only were laws passed to make life easier for the working class and children, but various public institutions were also set up to help the disabled children, the chronically ill, the mentally handicapped and others in need of help. Children's homes and orphanages cared for children with no parents as well as for children whose parents were unable to support them. According to Mitchell, these children received, along with food and clothes, an opportunity to later support themselves: "Boys were taught a trade such as carpentry or shoemaking; girls were prepared for domestic service." She goes on to say that pauper children were often more schooled than poor children outside of the workhouse. (94)

There was no law regulating legal adoption before the 1920s. Orphaned children could be informally adopted or, in case there was a will to that effect, they had a legal guardian. Children left with a small inheritance were often sent to school to get an education since this was regarded as the best way to spend the money. Boys could, for instance, be sent to military school and girls to a boarding school in preparation for becoming governesses. (Mitchell 108)

Childhood and caretakers

Life as an orphan in the beginning of the 19th century was usually not easy. Many orphans were not properly taken care of as regards health, schooling and the ever important psychological aspects of feeling loved and appreciated. Charles Dickens wanted to make people aware of the true living conditions for most of the poor orphans and tried to do so by writing *Oliver Twist*. Sir Ifor Evans says that Dickens felt that he had to convey a message about the cruelty of this time to the hard-hearted generation of the time. (179). The sharp criticism against the workhouses is an important aspect of *Oliver Twist*. It might seem strange that it was Dickens' goal for Oliver to belong to the middle-class into which he actually was born, and Barnard legitimately questions this goal, as it is the middle-class who has dictated

the social policies and created the workhouses (107). However, Hobsbaum claims that Dickens achieved his goal to enlighten his contemporaries and states that “*Oliver Twist* is securely based in reality” and is “a composite of sharp, perceived particulars.” (38)

In *Oliver Twist*, the members of the workhouse board try to think of a way to get rid of Oliver and they come up with the idea of sending him out to sea (22). Orphan boys of the time were often taught a trade and it was not unusual to send boys out to sea. Mitchell says that “There were also training ships to supply naval recruits.” (94) However, proper schooling for Oliver is obviously not the board’s aim, considering the line of thought that follows, indicating that the board is hoping Oliver might get killed at sea by the skipper or die when reaching an unhealthy port (22).

Even for an orphan of a higher class, life could be hard when the child was left with no money. Sometimes the child might be considered a burden to the relatives like in the case of Jane Eyre who was most reluctantly taken care of by her aunt, merely due to the request of Jane’s uncle on his deathbed (18). As mentioned earlier, Mitchell states that children having a small inheritance were often sent to boarding schools since the money was supposedly best spent on education (108) and this is what happens to Jane Eyre.

Charlotte Brontë lost her mother at the age of five and she and her sisters were fortunate enough to be able to continue living with their family. Lamonica claims that the Brontë sisters had a special interest in the situation of orphans because of their loss and that their writing was influenced by it (11). Although Brontë is more subtle than Dickens in her way of criticizing society, many scholars and critics have observed her attempts to draw attention to the bad conditions of the time. Brontë clearly tries to shed light on the terrible conditions of some charitable institutions. A contemporary review of *Jane Eyre* in an article in *Critic* gives us rather solid evidence that Brontë’s description of the Lowood conditions is accurate:

... she is sent to a Charitable Institution, whose wretched fare, exacting tyranny, puritanical pretension, and systematic hypocrisy are painted with a vividness which shews them to be no fiction, but a copy from the life, and it is evident that the author has aimed a well-directed blow at actually existing charities in more than one county, of which this one is a type. (1)

In his article Johnson claims that *Jane Eyre* is a novel showing contemporary situations, by saying that it is undoubtedly based on nineteenth-century society. He does point out, however, that since it is a novel, it is a world constructed by Brontë, not reality (1). In addition,

Wright's article states that critics generally consider *Jane Eyre* to be a realistic text, and specifically claims that Jane's being a governess is a means of criticizing the attitudes of the time. Since the governesses were well-educated but earned very little, their position was ambiguous, and through the contemptuous behaviour of Blanche Ingram towards Jane, Brontë highlights the awkward position of the governess. (3)

Oliver's character is not thoroughly described by Dickens. Compared to *Jane Eyre*, the reader rarely gets to take part of any deeper thoughts or feelings, leaving him or her with only a more shallow knowledge of who Oliver is. Ford and Lane state that Dickens is not giving the reader any "psychological realism" and that Oliver's reactions are not typical for a child of his age (262). They describe Oliver as a "figure of symbolic significance" (263), meaning that he represents all workhouse orphans, and as such does not need to have a psychological individuality. "it is Oliver's situation rather than himself that moves us" (263). Indeed, Oliver's situation moves us; he is ill-treated, unfairly accused of crime and taken away from his benefactors whom he loves. Dickens' contemporary readers did probably not care about the lack of psychological depth since the terrible situation of the orphans was enough then. Hobsbaum describes Oliver as "the embodiment of goodness; a means of setting society in perspective". He describes Oliver acting "as emblem rather than character" (38). Dickens' reasons for this were presumably to show the vast distance between innocent orphans and the society supposed to care for them.

While Oliver might not be depicted in detail, many of the surrounding characters are extreme and vividly painted by Dickens. One of Oliver's first caretakers, Mrs. Mann, is described as a false, fawning woman. She sticks her head out of the window in "well-affected ecstasies of joy", she lies to Mr. Bumble, saying that "one or two of the dear children as is so fond of you" and she speaks of the children as the "blessed children" although she treats them badly (6-7). Moreover, she threatens Oliver behind Mr. Bumble's back by shaking her fist to restrain him from revealing anything bad about her treatment of him (7) and only a few seconds later she hugs him (8). She also gives Oliver a piece of bread, pretending to be kind, but in reality not wanting Oliver to arrive at the workhouse famished (8) since she for good reasons does not want to be perceived as a bad caretaker and risk being subject to an investigation about her work. Mr. Bumble is another character portrayed in a negative way. He is repeatedly described in unflattering terms such as fat and choleric (6), and he has ridiculously high thoughts of himself and his importance. Fagin, cold-hearted and intimidating, is described as "... a very old shrivelled Jew, whose villainous-looking and repulsive face was obscured by a quantity of matted red hair." (56) Dickens' vivid, ironical

and picturesque portraits of his characters are commented on by Barnard saying that Dickens had an "... eye for the extreme, the grotesque, the abnormal." (109) which most certainly was meant to arouse the readers' feelings of compassion and empathy.

Furthermore, it is interesting that Ford and Lane argue that "...Dickens is continually dealing with the forms of evil which the absence or failure of love may breed..." (191) since Oliver himself never shows any sign of evil. He has not only been bereft of love for the larger part of his life, but he has also been treated really badly. Oliver is deceived by the Dodger and Charley (66), threatened and hurt by the Jew (114) and utterly betrayed by his own half-brother. Still, he harbours no evil thoughts but gladly agrees to sharing his inheritance with Monks (412). Oliver is a kind and calm child, although he sometimes reacts violently. He is rather pale and weak, understandably a consequence of his poor childhood. He responds very positively to people treating him nicely, such as Mr. Brownlow and Mrs. Bedwin whom he shows great affection and appreciation. After being kidnapped by Fagin while running an errand for Mr. Brownlow, Oliver's greatest concern is that Mr. Brownlow and Mrs. Bedwin will believe that he is a thief and he begs Fagin to send the books and the money back (113). Oliver, being his kind, innocent self, brings out the best even in a previously hardened character like Nancy. She regrets taking him back to Fagin, thinking that by doing this, she is making him a thief and a liar from now on (116), and she stops Fagin from beating up Oliver by wrenching a club out of his hands (114). Despite his generally calm and loving disposition, Oliver does, on some rare occasions, show such great anger that he cannot control himself. This is for example the case when Oliver beats up Noah for speaking ill of his mother (41).

Jane's character is described in much more detail. Charlotte Brontë does not only describe what happens to Jane but also gives the reader access to her thoughts and feelings throughout the entire novel. Moreover, Brontë gives some explanations as to why Jane acts the way she does. On one occasion, Mr. Lloyd asks Jane if she would not rather live with her kind but poor relatives than stay at Gateshead. Jane, not knowing much about industrious, respectable poverty, sees poverty as degrading and says no even if she longs to be part of a family (26-27). Jane has a strong will to take care of herself and is not afraid to say what is on her mind. This is a trait of character that some people, like Mrs. Reed, highly disapprove of (19), while others, in particular Mr. Rochester, find it most charming and refreshing (136) and I believe it is a major reason for him falling in love with her. Jane stands up for herself, and even if she is happy to help others she does not like to accept things she has not earned. As she gets older, she is very well aware of her position in society, always acting with respect and humbleness, careful not to cross any social lines, although she speaks freely with Mr.

Rochester. When Mr. Rochester wants to put jewellery on her and dress her in lace and satin, she responds by saying “[D]on’t address me as if I were a beauty, I am your plain, Quakerish governess.” (257) A few moments later she continues by saying: “And then you won’t know me, sir; and I shall not be your Jane Eyre any longer, but an ape in a harlequin’s jacket - a jay in borrowed plumes.” (258) Mr. Rochester does not agree with Jane’s humble opinion of herself, he thinks she is a beauty, delicate and aerial (258). An illustration of Jane’s belief that you should earn what is coming to you is when she is almost dying from hunger and exhaustion. She finds it humiliating to ask for food, and she does not blame the people rejecting her ask for help, since she knows that beggars often are an object of suspicion and that she, being a well-dressed beggar, is even more so (325).

Education and employment

Two important aspects in the novels are education and work. Oliver receives almost no education while at the workhouse. He is offered an apprenticeship first by a chimney sweep, Mr. Gamfield, which luckily he does not need to accept (21), and then by an undertaker, Mr. Sowerberry (25). In the beginning of this apprenticeship Oliver acquires a great deal of experience and Mr. Sowerberry takes great advantage of the fact that Oliver plays his part in the mournful processions so well. He lets Oliver take part in many mournful processions to train him to become an accomplished undertaker (39). This, however, is not looked kindly upon by Mrs. Sowerberry and Noah Claypole who treat him very badly, and so does Charlotte because she likes Noah (40). When Oliver lives with Mrs. Maylie in her countryside cottage an old gentleman is engaged to teach Oliver to read better and to write. Oliver appreciates this immensely and works very hard to please him (238). He also listens to Mrs. Maylie and Rose speaking about books and to Rose reading (238). Every week Oliver studies a chapter or two from the Bible which he then proudly read to Mrs. Maylie and Rose at Sunday evenings (239). Later, when Oliver lives with Mr. Brownlow, he studies hard (255) and enjoys it which leads the reader to believe that eventually he will become a well-educated young man.

Jane on the other hand, is given a really good education. At the age of ten she knows how to read and while reading books with pictures she also learns about birds (10). At Lowood she studies hard and purposefully and she acquires knowledge of a wide range of subjects such as religion, geography, history, grammar, French, writing, arithmetic, music, art, sewing and gardening. She does very well in her studies and after six years of studying at

Lowood she is offered a position as teacher there. Jane keeps this position for two years and then applies for a job as governess (86, 91). Later, she works as a village teacher in Morton and is highly appreciated by her pupils. While living at Moor House, Jane reads many books and discusses them with Diana and Mary (346-347), and Diana offers to teach Jane German (347). Jane also learns Hindustani after being asked to do so by St John (393). However, even if Jane becomes very well educated, she still has little or no other opportunities to make a living than as a governess, or possibly as a girls' school teacher. Being a governess meant having to live in families for the period of time requested, then moving on to a new family. This, of course, entailed that it would be difficult to settle down for a longer period of time, unless getting married. Jackson claims in his article that the Industrial revolution did not help middle-class women very much, and he also says: "The precarious lifestyle of the governess remained all that a middle-class, single woman like Jane Eyre could strive for." (1)

Plot and people

The main characters in the two novels are both different and alike. Since *Oliver Twist* is about a ten-year-old boy and *Jane Eyre* tells the story about a girl from the age of ten till she is an adult, it goes without saying that there are differences in the plots. One of the most obvious differences, Oliver being a boy and Jane a girl, of course leads to different situations when it comes to, for example, employment. The settings are different as well, even if both the protagonists move about a couple of times, partly living under dreadful circumstances, partly experiencing satisfying living arrangements.

The two main characters share some feelings and reactions. They both react very strongly when being abused or offended. As previously mentioned, Oliver beats up Noah Claypole thoroughly for speaking ill of his mother (41), and Jane completely loses her temper and attacks John Reed physically when he tries to bully her one time too many (13). Oliver prospers when first taken care of by Mr. Brownlow and Mrs. Bedwin. His lonely heart opens when he feels love and a sense of belonging for the first time in his life (194). Later, when Oliver finds out that Rose is his relative, he is deeply moved and genuinely happy that he now belongs to a family (401). Jane has very much the same feelings when she arrives at Lowood and makes friends with Helen and Miss Temple. She earns their respect and affection and repays it with love and respect. When later she meets her cousins, Diana, Mary and St John, she is very content with having found family. She feels, for the first time in her life, the great

pleasure of complete congeniality (346). At the end, when she finally marries Mr. Rochester and has children, her heart is full of love and joy (445).

The two protagonists also experience the injustice of being regarded as bad children, with lost souls and beyond redemption. There is little or no understanding of Oliver's and Jane's feelings and behaviour. When Oliver has asked for more gruel, the members of the charity board all agree that Oliver surely will be hung (13) since they believe nothing good will become of him. A short time thereafter, Oliver fearfully begs the magistrate not to send him to Mr. Gamfield. Mr. Bumble, who does not sympathize with Oliver's feelings, utters the words: "... of all the artful and designing orphans that ever I see, Oliver, you are one of the most bare-facedest." (21) Oliver is informed that he will be going to work for Mr. Sowerberry and that if he complains or comes back he will be sent to sea to drown or be knocked on the head. Oliver, probably not knowing what to make of this information, shows very little emotions regarding this threat, which leads the board to consider him a hardened young rascal (25). When Jane meets Mr. Brocklehurst for the first time, he is already convinced that Mrs. Reed's negative opinion of Jane is correct, saying "No sight so sad as that of a naughty child, especially a naughty little girl." (34). He is appalled that Jane does not like the Psalms and believes it proves she has a wicked heart (35). At Lowood, he warns the other girls of Jane and urges the teachers to punish her body to save her soul, if such salvation is even possible since Jane is a liar (68).

There are some obvious similarities in the plots between *Oliver Twist* and *Jane Eyre*. One of them is the people around them. In the beginning both Oliver and Jane are at the mercy of unfriendly women. Oliver is badly treated by Mrs. Mann and Jane is living at Gateshead where Mrs. Reed most reluctantly provides her with a home. They are also both later taken in by kind people, when they are in a miserable state. Oliver is wounded and has a fever but, luckily, he knocks at Mrs. Maylie's and Rose's door (209) and they help him. Jane is nearly starved to death when she knocks at the door of Moor House (330) and she also receives help after a little while. In a short time, both Oliver and Jane develop close and loving relationships with their respective benefactors. Interestingly enough, both Oliver and Jane later find out that they are somehow related to their benefactors, thus belonging somewhere, becoming part of a nice family.

Another resemblance in the novels, which is closely connected to the one mentioned above, is the question of social status and money. Oliver is an orphan, just barely escaping becoming a criminal and he finds out that he is actually from a respectable family. He is adopted by his late father's good friend Mr. Brownlow who can offer him a really good life

(413). Oliver is entitled to the entire inheritance after his father but willingly agrees to Mr. Brownlow's suggestion to share the money with his half-brother Monks (412). In *Jane Eyre* almost the same story is told. It turns out that Mary, Diana and St John, who so kindly have taken her in, are her cousins (380). Jane inherits a great deal of money, all rightfully hers by law. However, she gladly shares it with her cousins, in fact, she insists on doing that (384). Since we get to follow Jane Eyre until she is an adult, we also know that she is happily married and now belonging to a higher class.

There are two further aspects that the two novels have in common and those are the happy endings and the authors' summaries of what happens after the main story is finished. At the end of *Oliver Twist* Dickens summarizes what happens to all the characters and the reader is left with a lovely sense of satisfaction; the bad people get what they deserve and the good people will live happily ever after. Jane tells the reader what her life is like ten years after the actual story ends and thereby assures the reader that her life will be beautiful and fulfilling.

Finally there is a curious resemblance worth mentioning about names. When Oliver feels so poorly at the police station that he cannot even tell Mr. Fang his name, the officer makes one up for him, Tom White, without Oliver realizing it (73). Jane on the other hand deliberately tells Mary, Diana and St John that her name is Jane Elliott since she anxiously wants to avoid being found (333).

Locations and living conditions

The changes of location play an important part in both *Oliver Twist* and *Jane Eyre*. Oliver's life starts with him being born at the workhouse, in a town not named by Dickens (1). At the age of eight or ten months he is moved to a branch-workhouse where he stays till the age of nine (4), then he is taken back to the workhouse where he was born (8). About half a year later, Oliver is handed over to Mr. Sowerberry, the parochial undertaker, to be his apprentice (25). After having a terrible time there, Oliver runs away (48), heading for London where he is taken in by Fagin, a deceitful old criminal (61). To Oliver, all of these places are unwelcoming, cold and dark. There is no love or care and he does not have enough to eat. It was clearly Dickens' aim to make the readers aware of these miserable circumstances when writing this novel. Barnard's statement confirms this assumption:

Dickens' theme is man's inhumanity to child, and his social target is the new workhouses established on Benthamite principles which laid down that relief of the poor and starving should be made so unpleasant, and should be so meagre, that it would upset as little as possible the natural "balance" of iron economic laws. Oliver is thus not just the representative of childhood, but a symbol of all suffering humanity. (107)

Dickens ironically writes that the workhouse was a place where poor people enjoyed spending time, a place where they did not have to pay for anything and everything was play and no work (11). Ford and Lane state that "The first eleven chapters of *Oliver Twist* are an evocation of misery and horror. We have been drawn straight ... into a world of the most appalling poverty and ugliness" (253). Furthermore, they say that "The *Oliver Twist* world is a world of poverty, oppression and death. The poverty is complete, utterly degrading and utterly realistic." (256) Clearly, Dickens' aim was, once again, to make people aware of the living conditions of many orphans, by showing how Oliver's situation was miserable in many ways, but also having a positive undertone showing that there is love and people who care in this world. Richardson argues in her article that "there can be no doubt that had the young Dickens not witnessed the cruelty of the workhouse at such close quarters, he could not have written so convincingly of *Oliver Twist*'s plight." Dickens lived close to a workhouse for four years and for a short time even worked in a factory, probably alongside children from a workhouse (3-4). However, Richardson claims that conditions were even worse than Dickens depicted. In 1866 a commission was appointed to investigate the London workhouses. Richardson says: "Their reports made horrifying reading ... now ... here was hard evidence that the author had not exaggerated the horrendous conditions" (6). This article gives rather solid proof that Dickens was well acquainted with the wretched circumstances in the workhouses. The question arises why he did not let his readers know the whole truth and perhaps one reason was that the real circumstances were so terrible that he did not think his readers would believe them.

Then, however, Oliver's life takes a turn for the better. He comes to Mr. Brownlow's home where he is being very well taken care of and he is deeply fond of his benefactors. After being forced to return to Fagin for a period of time, since Fagin, for reasons still not revealed to Oliver, does not want to let him go, Oliver finally ends up with his relatives, finding himself in good circumstances.

Jane's story too, starts off at a bad place. She is living at Gateshead with her aunt Mrs. Reed and her three cousins, who treat her very badly since they believe she is just an unwelcome burden. By the age of about ten, Jane is sent to a boarding school, Lowood (85). In Jane's experience, these two places are cold and unfriendly although in different ways. At Gateshead she is left out and feels very unfairly treated. She is utterly frightened when she is locked up in the room where Mrs. Reed's late husband, Jane's uncle, died (16). The only person being somewhat nice to Jane is the nurse, Bessie, but she also treats Jane badly at times. Although very young, Jane speaks her mind and stands up for herself, but she never feels loved or understood. At Lowood it is cold and the food is scarce. The unhealthy location of Lowood in a foggy dell, in combination with malnutrition and neglected colds, make the pupils liable to typhus and many of the girls die (78). Thormählen claims that Charlotte Brontë is known to have blamed a boarding school for the death of two of her sisters (63-4). In the light of that statement, it seems clear that the way Brontë depicts Lowood aims to make the contemporary readers aware of the conditions at the boarding schools. Not everything at Lowood is bad for Jane since she does find a friend in Helen and also in Miss Temple. However, in the beginning she is constantly worried. Mr. Brocklehurst has told Mrs. Reed that he will make sure Miss Temple and the teachers at Lowood will be well informed about how deceitful Jane is (36). Jane fears that Mr. Brocklehurst's information will ruin her newfound friendships and the contentedness she feels at school, but when he finally tells everybody, Jane is pleasantly surprised to hear Helen say that the other girls and the teachers do not like him and do not care about what he says (70-71). Miss Temple assures Jane that she believes in her no matter what (73). She also writes to Mr. Lloyd and he sends her a letter clearing Jane's name completely and this Miss Temple tells everyone at Lowood (76). Jane's apprehension and the other girls' dislike of Mr. Brocklehurst is well founded. Thormählen says that although Mr. Brocklehurst is a caricature, her opinion is that "many of the book's 1847 readers will have found his sermonising about mortifying the flesh of children to save their souls only too recognisable." (185) She goes on by saying that "the ... idea of curbing children's evil propensities and breaking the will of young sinners was still sufficiently alive" (185). Thormählen is referring to the Wesleyan/Evangelical idea that young sinners should be restrained and Mr. Brocklehurst seems to be a dedicated advocate of this belief.

After two years of teaching at Lowood, Jane feels her life is not fulfilling enough (88). When Miss Temple gets married and leaves Lowood Jane feels she is no longer the same. Her calm, contentedness and sense of belonging are gone (86). She longs to see other places and to meet new people (88) and she realises that there is a world outside Lowood if she has the

courage to explore it (86). She moves to Thornfield Hall where her life changes again (97). She is quite content being Adele's governess and she enjoys the kind company of Mrs. Fairfax. However, there is still a part of Jane that needs something more than a quiet life in the country, no doubt a reasonable feeling for a young woman. She highly appreciates the conversations with Mr. Rochester, him giving her mind a challenge that she gladly and with great success can respond to. She accepts his marriage proposal, despite the differences in class, but when she finds out that Mr. Rochester is already married, her sense of right and wrong makes her run away (295), knowing it will be devastating not only for herself but also for Mr. Rochester if she stays. She travels and wanders for days, finally ending up at Moor House where the siblings Mary, Diana and St John kindly take her in (332). They develop a deep friendship and Jane starts teaching at the village school, being thorough and faithful as always. It seems as if Charlotte Brontë wanted to display her opinion of the school system by her way of depicting the school in Morton. Thormählen says: "The village school at Morton is a particularly interesting educational institution in that it encapsulates much of the ongoing debate on popular education in early- and mid-nineteenth-century England." (69) Thormählen refers to the contemporary debate on schooling for the lower orders, discussing national compulsory education opposed to schools like the one in Morton which was supervised by a clergyman and supported by rich people (69-70). According to Thormählen, Jane's success at teaching these peasant girls could be seen as a "piece of anti-national-compulsory-education propaganda" meaning that Brontë was against the national scheme of compulsory education (70). Thormählen raises another interesting point about the education of rustics at the time. The prevailing view in the first half of the 19th century was that God gave people their stations in life and that the poor should not strive to rise in society. However, Brontë displays a different point of view when she lets Jane and St John convey that education will help poor people and Jane also believes in the "essential equality of rustics and aristocrats." (Thormählen 73)

Some time later, Jane decides to change locations again. She has, against her better judgement, almost agreed to marry St John and go abroad with him (414). However, these plans are upset because that same night she has a strange feeling in her heart. In her mind, she hears Mr. Rochester's voice calling for her (414). She decides to go and see him but finds Thornton Hall destroyed by fire (419). She manages to locate Mr. Rochester at Ferndean and they decide to get married now that Mr. Rochester's wife is no longer alive (423). As mentioned before, Jane, like Oliver, ends up living in a warm, caring environment filled with love and also fortunate enough to have found relatives.

The reader of *Oliver Twist* most certainly has much compassion for Oliver, and can easily empathize with his fears and joys since Dickens knows how to depict people and settings graphically. The settings are clearly created to enhance these feelings. For instance, Dickens makes Fagin's place dark and dirty and Rose's and Mr. Brownlow's homes are warm and nice. Brontë also uses the settings in a clever way. Even if Gateshead is a warm place, Jane is, as previously mentioned, terrified when being locked into the dark room (16). Lowood is utterly cold in the winter, but Jane also finds warmth there, in making new friends and gaining the respect of the teachers. Both Thornfield Hill and Moor House are welcoming, loving homes where Jane feels very much at ease most of the time.

Differences and diversities

There are several differences between the novels. As mentioned earlier, one important difference is the way the characters are depicted. While Dickens describes Oliver in third person, quite briefly, and the reader is given only indirect opportunities to know his thoughts, Brontë describes Jane's thoughts both vividly and in detail, this being facilitated partly by Brontë writing the book in the first person.

Another difference is the circumstances in which the two main characters find themselves at the beginning of the novels. Oliver is born in a workhouse, a baby, poor and at the mercy of others. He has no idea who he is or where he comes from. Jane is also at the mercy of others, but she is ten years old, and even if she does not have any money of her own, she is fed and clothed. She knows who her parents were and that she does have some other relatives besides Mrs. Reed and her children, although she thinks they are poor.

The range of time described in *Oliver Twist* and *Jane Eyre* differs a lot. While the former deals only with a short period of Oliver's life, from when he was born to when he is a young boy, the latter portrays Jane's life from when she is a girl of about ten to her adult life. This, of course, also means that the reader only gets to know the child Oliver, whereas Jane's adolescence and adult life, including work and love, are revealed. The reader never gets to know how Oliver's childhood affects him later on in his life but Jane's life is described in more detail and both the reader and Jane herself realise that her childhood of course has had an impact on her adult life, the choices she has made and the way she has handled things.

Two other differences are education and work. As mentioned, Oliver gets very little formal education in the beginning, but Mr. Brownlow gives him the opportunity to study

(255). Jane is very well educated and succeeds in her positions as teacher at Lowood, in Morton and also as Adele's governess.

There are some differences regarding locations as well. *Oliver Twist* is thrown back and forth between very bad places such as the workhouse, Mr. Sowerberry's business and Fagin's place and the nice, comfortable homes of Mrs. Maylie and Mr. Brownlow. He is treated very differently depending on where he is. Jane also moves around a number of times, but she does it of her own free will. Jane is actually only treated really badly at Gateshead. She quite likes being at Lowood and she loves staying at both Thornton Hall and Moor House.

In both *Oliver Twist* and *Jane Eyre* the reader encounters characters from different classes in society and with different personalities. In *Oliver Twist* we get to know people from the working class, such as the workhouse employees, and from the upper class, for instance Mr. Brownlow. We also encounter characters from the most unfortunate layer of society, thieves and other criminals like Fagin and Sikes. There are all kinds of personalities in all the classes. For instance, Nancy, even though she is at the very bottom of society, leading a hard life, has a good heart and would probably have been a hard working, well-behaved girl given the opportunity earlier in life. The people in the workhouse board are mostly stingy and not very committed. The characters in *Jane Eyre* are mainly middle class and upper class, and here too, some of them are mean, like Jane's cousin John, and unsympathetic, like Mrs. Reed. St John is a firm believer in God, but still he is relentless when he turns down the love of Rosamond Oliver. He is very manipulative and persuasive when he wants Jane to go with him to India as his wife, to the extent that he almost gets her to agree although she really does not want to marry him. Mrs. Fairfax is a genuinely kind person with welcoming and unaffected manners. Jane's two cousins, Diana and Mary, have a calm and gentle disposition and they generously share both their knowledge and their home with Jane.

Conclusion

After reading about Victorian society in general and about the situation of orphans at this time in particular, I would like to claim that both *Oliver Twist* and *Jane Eyre* most likely give the reader a true picture of what life was like for orphans at the time. The two novels show different aspects of orphan life, depending on what social class the child belonged to. In my opinion it is highly likely that poor young orphans without relatives or guardians, like Oliver, had a hard time at the workhouses, getting poorly fed, little or no education and were being

treated with very little respect. They were often forced to take hard and dangerous apprenticeships and quite a few of them were lured into criminal life or purposely turned criminal in order to survive or get a sense of belonging. Many diseases flourished and mortality was high. A weak young person with little power of resistance would probably be in great danger of becoming seriously ill or even die. In *Oliver Twist* as well as in *Jane Eyre*, there are descriptions of how mortal diseases affected the lives of the protagonists. Orphans in the upper and middle classes were often sent to boarding school to get an education so that they could support themselves as adults. Young, well-educated women often became governesses, a respected occupation suited for them, as in the case of Jane Eyre.

Obviously the coincidences regarding the main characters finding their relatives in both novels stretch the imagination somewhat, but nevertheless the plots manage to a great extent to describe the reality of orphan life in Victorian society. The wretched situation in the workhouses and boarding schools, the lack of respect and understanding for children, society's ignorance and prejudices, and also the orphans' options to support themselves as adults are depicted in a very realistic manner.

Even though the two novels differ regarding style, length, characters, plot and details, they both convey realism and bring out empathy in the reader, and they obviously influenced Victorian society to improve the situation for orphans. The glimpses of life in the workhouse and boarding school and the lack of love and respect most certainly contributed to the changes later made in society.

Fortunately, much has happened since then. I believe that above all Charles Dickens' graphic and very realistic novel played a major part in influencing society, leading to positive changes for the orphans. Charlotte Brontë's description of Lowood might also, in my opinion, have had a positive effect on how boarding schools were run and maybe some relatives in the upper classes treated the orphans in their care better after reading *Jane Eyre*.

In conclusion, both *Oliver Twist* and *Jane Eyre* are believable representations of what life was like for orphans in Victorian society. *Oliver Twist* was clearly written to enlighten and engage people of the time. Dickens had a sharp and humorous style but he did not let his readers get to know his protagonist very thoroughly since his main purpose no doubt was to make people aware of the horrendous situation of the orphans. *Jane Eyre* seems to be aiming to entertain as well as influence and educate. Brontë weaves her opinions and criticism of society into her novel with more subtlety, balancing between pure fiction and reality.

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