

Chunyang Ding

Ms. Morales

1 October 2013

Period 2

The Cold Victorian Childhood: Close Passage Analysis of Jane Eyre

Today's generation is perhaps seen as whining more about their lives than any other group of peoples, washed in a sea of #FirstWorldProblems of not getting the newest iPhone as it hits the markets or having a refrigerator full of food but nothing to eat. In contrast, the Victorian era children in Charlotte Brontë's Gothic novel, *Jane Eyre*, truly suffer and are pressed within inches of death. In the beginning of Chapter 7, Jane's narration of the bitter cold, elongated by the passage of time, is an allegory for not only the physical, but the emotional mistreatment of orphan children within a classist Victorian society.

Brontë's diction in describing the "severe cold" is a raw, universal sensation that is common to all of humankind, allowing the reader to intuitively connect with Jane's physical pain. The "chilblains" on their hands, the "swelled, raw, and stiff toes" and "inflamed" feet are all specific physical ailments that recall grotesque pictures of young girls, only "growing children", in pain. In addition, the "scanty supply of food" at Lowood results in "exigency of hunger" for the children, leading to girls turning on one another, as the older children would "coax and menace" the younger for their food. This was clearly a torturous scenario for anyone to be living through, simply because there was not enough care for the physical health of girls at orphanages.

Brontë also places an emphasis on the coldness and paralysis that the children suffered while in church, inverting the traditional paradigm of church being a saintly place of refuge and comfort. The misery in attending Sunday service can be seen through the progression of: "We set out cold, we arrived at church colder; ... we became almost paralysed." along the journey from Lowood to Brocklebridge Church. Deprived of even a spiritual sanction from the "bitter winter wind", the girls had no place to go.

However, this issue of mistreatment is not only accepted by the Victorian society, but even poked fun of, as evident by Mr. Rochester's jab of "Eight years! you must be tenacious of

life!” later on in the novel(126). It was clearly not a surprise that being sent to the orphanage was similar to a death sentence. Brontë, instead of berating a problem already evident throughout society, redirects our attention to the manner that this hellish reality is described. Instead of utilizing Jane’s personal responses to these hardships, there is almost a clinical fashion in which every detail is noted and categorized. There seems to be a clear disconnection between Jane’s emotions and the environment of Lowood.

Another key rhetorical device of this passage is Jane’s narrative tone, and how nonchalant voice shapes the passage into a different meaning. Although the descriptions of the fierce winter are clear enough, Jane’s reference to the chilblains on her feet as a “distracting irritations” and the scanty supply of food as “distressing” is not nearly as poignant as a starving, freezing child would be expected to cry for. In addition, the short, choppy syntax that is used reflects a refusal to describe in detail the events at Lowood. Instead, the key moments of the entire winter is briskly summarized, similar to a government report. There is minimal personal connection for Jane Eyre, even as her very life and livelihood was threatened.

As this portion is supposedly an autobiographical piece, the adult Jane should be picking out the most notable moments to be describing. Therefore, this relatively mild language is indicative of how as an adult, Jane viewed this agony as more of a nuisance. While it may be debated whether if this syntax is because of the nostalgia that accompanies time or because Jane truly was a very tough child, both explanations point to another external source of suffering that may have been rather invisible up to this point.

Brontë’s paradoxical diction points towards a different chill that freezes the bodies and the minds of children. Rather than the “wintry season”, it was the ice in people’s hearts that pushed adolescents to miserable lives. As Jane begins this passage, she remarks about the “fear

of failure” amongst the seemingly judgmental gaze of peers and teachers. All of the cold and death Jane faces are used only to establish how much worse social isolation could be, as she claims that “these points harassed me worse than the physical hardships of my lot”. In addition, Brontë uses the pronouns “I” and “we” almost interchangeably for the description of the physical hardships, which implies an equal correspondence for the isolation of the other girls. Although Jane is the character that is best explored, the other girls and their journeys at Lowood must not be forgotten as well. Later on, Jane’s social exclusion during Mr. Brocklehurst’s visit and punishment seems to merit considerably more attention than the pains of a season.

In addition to the bitter and unloving environment that Jane is forced to endure, Brontë also elongates the passage of time, crafting a unique perspective in the absurdity of a childhood life. This passage begins with Jane remarking on life during the “first quarter”, but grows more precise when referring to “January, February, and part of March”, continuing down this progression to “Sundays” and finally “the close of the afternoon service”. The narration of time has the effect of equating a single afternoon’s experience as being homogenous to every other day. Beyond not having places of refuge or comfort, the children seem to be suffering through a pointless, monotonous lifestyle. This kind of mental distress is just as painful as the emotional hardships or the physical ailments that attach the children.

In the Victorian era, orphan children who were sent off to boarding school returned in one of two ways: dead in a casket or conformed by the adults into the quiet, unquestioning, submissive young ladies. After many long difficult winters and abandoned hope, these two options certainly seem inevitable. However, Jane survives the ordeal not by being more clever or more powerful, but through the discovery of a group of friends that help preserve her heart,

not her body, from shattering. Bronte's poignant piece utilizes symbolism and goes beyond the traditional difficulties of being a child and enters the sphere of the youth culture.

Truthfully, with all of the advances in our modern world, today's youth still has a legitimate reason to complain about their loneliness. The period of adolescence is still a time fraught with insecurity and concern with the approval of others. Through Jane's emotional turmoil, the modern reader is reminded how the bonds of true friendship can overcome even the harshest winters.

Bibliography

Brontë, Charlotte. "Winter at Lowood." *Jane Eyre*. New York: TOR, 1988. 58-59. Print.