Moral identity of an orphan

Literature, British Literature

In Charlotte Bronte's novel Jane Eyre, an orphan is represented as both the protagonist and the narrator of the story. Jane is a meek, plain, but good-natured girl who learns early on the hardships of life. Orphaned by the death of her parents, Jane is forced to live as a dependent under the roof of the widowed Mrs. Reed. Mrs. Reed and her two children treat Jane with everything but kindness, equality, and love. From the time of her parent's death to the fateful day that allowed Jane to leave the Reeds, Jane was starved for affection and belonging. Despite these hardships, Jane grows to be a strong independent character that is consistently standing up for morality and equality even if it means losing love. The presence of an orphan in this nineteenth-century novel serves as a foil to the other characters, a factor for plot movement, and an identity to the hardships that Victorian women face both in fiction and in history.

In order to fully understand the significance of Jane as an orphaned character, we must first look at her background and her early life. Bronte uses John Reed to tell the reader the story of Jane's dependency: " you are a dependent…you have no money; your father left you none; you ought to beg, and not to live here with gentlemen's children like us, and eat the same meals we do, and wear clothes at our mamma's expense" (Bronte, 15). From John Reed's awful description of the life of Jane Eyre, the reader learns that the main character is a dependent on a family who is not immediately her own and considered to be part of a lower social standing compared to that of the family. This is the representation of the orphan: unwanted, unloved, and ill-treated. It is clear that the absence of parents in Jane's life creates for her

a childhood of constant degradation and isolation which will impact her actions later on in life.

Besides bearing the representation of a young and neglected child, the orphan in this novel is represented by her moral conduct and beliefs. This virtue is a perfect example of a foil to almost all of the other characters in the book, with the exceptions being Miss Temple and Helen Burns. Acting as a comparison to the other characters in the story highlights not only her own goodness but the other characters harsh and despicable characteristics. Starting from the beginning of the novel, the reader automatically dislikes characters such as the Reeds, Mr. Brocklehurst, and Miss Scatcher. By the time that Bronte has introduced all of these characters the reader is already completely sided with Jane and completely against the others because of the knowledge that is based off of Jane's pure and virtuous values. As somebody who the reader trusts and agrees with, she serves as the perfect person to give a true and accurate interpretation of the other characters. For example, Jane expresses her feelings and creates a telling picture of Mrs. Reed with the quote, " Well might I dread- well might I dislike Mrs. Reed, for it was her nature to wound me cruelly. Never was I happy in her presence. However carefully I obeyed, however strenuously I strove to please her, my efforts were still repulsed" (42). The reader is unable to accept any character that treats the likable Jane in such a horrid manner. Even Rochester has his moments where he is somewhat of a wicked character. Bronte highlights this during a conversation between him and Jane: " Besides, since happiness is irrevocably denied me, I have a right to get pleasure out of life; and I will get it, cost what it may" (Bronte, 163). Of course, Jane outspokenly disagrees

with this selfish principle proving that she not only has patience in midst of temptation, but also has moral goodness compared to Rochester. The fact that Jane is an orphan plays an important role in this concept. Jane never had a real family and from the example of Mrs. Reed, she never had anybody to spoil her or look the other way when she behaves badly. If she did, she very well could have turned out to be like John or Georgiana. In other words, the orphan does not belong anywhere; therefore, she hasn't been tainted by any kind of society standards.

Also, Jane is a very modest individual. Living with the Reeds, at school, and even at Rochester's estate when the likes of Miss Ingram are visiting, Jane is constantly being reminded that she is not the same as others; often times she is below. Although her humility puts others before herself and allows her to never act selfishly, it does have serious effects on Jane's self-esteem and sense of worth. This humility that is part of Jane's persona can be contrasted to most of the other characters in this novel all the while proving their overall moral identity to the reader. For example, Jane paints a portrait of both herself and of Miss Ingram. After looking at these portraits side by side, it becomes even clearer to Jane that aesthetically, she is far from Miss Ingram. Jane even goes as far as to call herself a " stupid dupe" (190) and advises to " cover [her] face and be ashamed" (190). This demeaning viewpoint that Jane has about herself is without a doubt a creation of the Reed family's treatment of her. If Jane's parents were still living, she surely would not have felt like such an outsider both aesthetically and literally.

Besides the fact that the young Jane is completely dependent on the Reeds, she never experiences any kind of intimate relationship with the Reed family. In another sense, Jane was never allowed to escape the title of a charity case. Jane would have loved to be called a daughter or a sister, but her severely starved heart never gained those relationship titles. The reader pities Jane and feels sympathetic for her as she expresses this need for love to Helen Burns: “ to gain some real affection from you, or Miss Temple, or any other whom I truly love, I would willingly submit to have the bone of my arm broken, or to let a bull toss me, or to stand behind a kicking horse, and let it dash its hoof at my chest” (Bronte, 83). Jane makes extreme and desperate oaths to prove her need for affection. From this passage alone, the reader is led to believe that Jane would put this need for affection before all else. Jane’s decisions throughout the novel, however, prove this inference to be false. The main character’s devout search for affection and love is often complicated by her need to be independent. Jane’s independent nature was also created and fed by the fact that she is an orphan. Throughout her young life, Jane never belonged to anybody or anything; this young girl was forced to learn how to survive on her own. The struggle between Jane’s need for affection and autonomy is one that eventually drives the plot of the story and creates the woman of Jane Eyre.

The theme of independence in this novel can best be proved by Jane’s actions towards the person she loves the most. Her relationship with Rochester is anything but easy as she is forced to choose between her two deepest desires. Rochester is willing to give her love and a sense of belonging but at the cost of her independence. However, the independent

nature that Jane develops early in her life does not fail her. Jane quickly realizes the extreme importance for her, as a woman, to maintain an equal footing in the relationship. For example, during the short period of wedding preparations for Jane and Rochester's wedding, the couple is engaged in a power struggle that is the most significant example of Jane's need for autonomy. Even though Jane's love for Rochester is proven to be anything but unrequited by his proposal and their engagement, Jane expresses her feelings of frustration: " the more he bought me, the more my cheek burned with a sense of annoyance and degradation" (Bronte, 313). The carriage that they are riding in during this moment of the story becomes a cell as Rochester is forcing Jane to start wearing elaborate silk dresses and expensive jewelry. Jane is slowly losing herself as she is becoming more inferior to Rochester's position and less like a " plain, Quakerish governess" (Bronte, 303). The reader is starting to see the beginnings of the transformation of a simple and alienated orphan to a high-class society girl. However, the independent nature that Jane developed early does not fail her. Jane finds a way out of the situation by appealing to her uncle about an inheritance, leaving Rochester's estate, finding a job through St. John, and finally coming back to the disabled and dependent Rochester with the upper hand. Throughout this orphan's story, there are many instances that jeopardize her independence but prove her strength through various trials and temptations. Like Rochester, St. John also has a need to keep Jane by his side as he insists, " A part of me you must become" (Bronte, 472). Jane responds to the significant men in her life with nothing but what is enduring to her core values. These instances prove that in Jane's heart, autonomy is

the need that comes before all else and Bronte’s audience will never see Jane waver while enduring the path for this prize even if it means that she has to give up true love and affection. Jane’s strength comes from the lessons she received from her difficult childhood and estranged lifestyle.

It is clear that Jane desperately desires love and friendship; the reader can unmistakably see that Jane puts an extremely high value on these types of emotions and relations. However, it is interesting to see that Jane always chooses the path of strength rather than giving in to affection. This novel represents the orphan as the moral identity despite the many hardships that she is forced to endure throughout her life. This moral identity to the orphan is a strong foil to the other characters and a reason for plot movement and development. By the end of the story, Charlotte Bronte has fully emphasized the strength of the orphan, which can be somewhat surprising given the unfortunate representations that orphans often receive. Bronte allows little pity for Jane Eyre as she is a strong and self-reliant young woman.

WORKS CITED

Bronte, Charlotte. Jane Eyre. New York: Barnes & Noble, 2003. Print.