Too Tired To Even Dream: The Plight Of Children In Jane Eyre And Hard Times

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Abstract

This research paper attempts to examine the issues of schooling and education in two major texts of Victorian times: Jane Eyre and Hard Times. These two texts highlight the various techniques and mechanisms of moral disciplining towards a child executed by Victorian society. To be more specific I look at the regimes of disciplinary mechanisms which are highlighted in the schools depicted in the two texts mentioned above. This essay explores the ways the Victorian schools produced an Institutional child by methodically thwarting the creative and imaginative faculties of a child. Some of the disciplinary mechanisms involved include homogenization of differences among children, silencing of dissent, punitive exercises, and naming. These subjugating and dehumanization measures are explored in detail in the essay through the methodological framework of close reading and theoretical analysis.

Keywords: Schooling, Moral Discipline, Institutional Child, Homogenization, Punitive Exercises

Introduction

Life for children in Victorian times was difficult, to say the least. It is now well documented that child labour played an important role in Industrial Revolution. It is shocking enough to read the laws regarding the child at the time. The children had to work for about fourteen to eighteen hours straight in the mines. Lack of proper ventilation, spine deformation, or the fear of explosions was ever-present fear. We live in an age of Child Protective Services with Universal Rights to Children but children in the 19th century had to wrestle with a broad spectrum of occupations: Chimney Sweep, Factory worker, Textile Mill, Prostitution, to name a few. Ironically and sadly, the society for the prevention of cruelty to animals was created in 1824 which was 67 years before the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to children, which was created in 1891.

Phillipe Aries in his book Centuries of Childhood argues that the notion of childhood developed over a period of time. The concept of childhood was quite different, pre-1700, from what is today. There was a tendency in the Middle Ages to view children as miniature adults. But if we look at Victorian times, we see no such “development” as the definition of the child
was ever so fluid and relatively indeterminate. Children were put in the same jail as the adults who committed capital crimes. A child was also punished and tried in the factories like an adult.

Wordsworth is often credited with the discovery of a Romantic Child. The Wordsworthian child most often acts as a child of nature. His concept of childhood was apolitical. In "My Heart leaps up when I behold" he states “The child is the father of the man”. But these views were not entertained in the Victorian times as parents were really concerned with the task of disciplining their children, their efforts to “break the child's will” as they strictly adhered to the Calvinist's belief that a child is born with inherent sin. So, the expression “spare the rod and spoil the child” was popular amongst them. The Calvinist view of child-rearing defeated the Rousseauian views in Emile. Children of any time can be categorized as the children of the poor compared to the children of the rich. We find this contrast in The Cry of the Children and the Forsaken Merman. In the 19th century, the poor children suffered more but the rich ones were also not exempt from some of the larger agendas of moral disciplining. Children were “reared in a genteel environment which robbed them of their creative impulses. A child who was unable to show affection towards her parents was considered to have moral flaws. Judith Slow man in one of her essays says that “child's behaviours were treated as a commodity which can be exchanged for parental approval”. In the 21st century, we take it for granted, that education is a fundamental and universal right of a child. But can we say the same for children in Victorian times? We will look into the issues of schooling and education in two major texts of Victorian times: Jane Eyre and Hard Times. In Jane Eyre, Jane prepares herself to go to school with a romantic notion that it would be an entrance to a new life. Even Mr. Llyod encourages her with his words, “The child ought to have a change of air and scene”. Later she realizes that Lowood is a somewhat larger enclosed space. Her romantic notion of freedom gets subverted in the gloomy architecture and its binding walls. Even the garden is surrounded by walls to separate the outside world. In Hard Times the description of the scene in the schoolroom is given as "a plain, bare, monotonous vault". The creative and imaginative faculties of a child grow in a conducive environment. But in these schools, the fancy of the child is thwarted and suppressed. The third gentleman in Hard Times tells Sissy, “You are never to fancy.”

One of the major characteristics of Lowood school and other schools of the Victorian Age including Gradgrind's private school was to produce an Institutional child. Homogeneity was seen as a value. The modes of cultivation of this uniformity can be found in the dressing pattern, the cutting of the curls. The idea of homogeneity was based in terms of class. Brocklehurst's daughters interpreted uniformity as an identification marker of poverty.

Lowood and Gradgrind's private schools were institutions with efficient disciplinary mechanisms. In a scene, Miss Scatcherd reminds Helen, “Burns, you poke your chin most unpleasantly, draw it in.” In the book, The First Principles of Polite Behaviour published in 1825, similar measures were devised for children. For e.g., the section “Yawning in Company” says, “Only look at the youth, how he stretches out his arms and opens his mouth wide... There is nothing vulgar than to yawn in a company”. These were termed as slatternly habits. In Hard Times also the opening lines make it clear that the students are in for factual rote learning:
“Now what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts." A clear agenda has been set out for the students to follow. Any dissenting voices (like that of Sissy) are silenced. These disciplinary mechanisms were mostly derived from the religious doctrines of the 19th century. The Calvinist ethos was implemented in strict terms while at the same time having an economic purpose. The skills of the girls at Lowood were sold in the marketplace. It is also interesting to note that Children in Lowood were called by their surnames. In Hard Times Sissy Jupe was addressed as "Girl number twenty" by Gradgrind. In subsequent passages, we find that you to her wishes. Sissy's name is changed by Gradgrind to Cecilia against her wishes. This shows that the identity of these children is taken away and moulded to fit their notions of uniformity and convenience. The prevailing atmosphere of gender discrimination in Victorian times is also revealed in the first three chapters of Hard Times. We find that the "boy's definition of a horse" was preferred and considered more factually sound than a girl's. In Lowood, the syllabus didn't include natural boys as philosophy as it was considered inappropriate for the girls.

Mr. Brocklehurst and Mr. Gradgrind represented the same class of patriarchal heads of the school who propagated their philosophies of education and child-rearing. They exerted an active and direct influence in their institutions. Mr. Brocklehurst propagated the Calvinist ideas while Mr. Gradgrind adhered strictly to Bentham's Utilitarian principles while taking it to the extreme. We notice that there is a clash of ideologies between the two characters but still both of them have denigrating effects on the children. They exert their influence firstly on the disciplinary mechanisms of the school and its teachers. Miss Temple is answerable to Mr. Brocklehurst for her kind act of responsibility for giving an extra meal to the children on a day of burnt porridge as breakfast. In the private school of Mr. Gradgrind, teachers like M'Choakum child (Which is a pun on choke 'em child) took classes under the supervision of The Third Gentleman and Mr. Gradgrind.

Mr. Brocklehurst also exerts his power through punitive exercises. Jane Eyre was humiliated in front of the class as she was made to stand on a stool for half an hour and called a deceitful creature. The curly hair of another girl, “natural curls” according to Miss Temple, were cut down as it was called a deviation from the norm. Helen was made to wear a card of shame which had the word "slattern" written on it; much like the punishment meted out to David Copperfield. The girls at Lowood were beaten by braids on their necks. Foucault had said that "a human entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it in order to make a human body into a machine.” This is worth quoting as this is exactly what Mr. Brocklehurst and Mr. Gradgrind did. The psychological terror imprinted on the minds of the children was stronger than the physical harm inflicted on them. This also reflects the adult's inability to recognize the emotions of a child. These adults, pillars as they were called, were hypocrites and members of the organized world. A child who deviated from these structures of society was termed as misfits or sinful. We find this in Gradgrind's reaction when he finds his children peeping at a circus.

Conclusion
We also find biographical elements in these two major works. Descriptions of the were Bortes controlling Lowood Institution, where Jane is sent, were inspired by Bronte's time at Cowan Bridge. Bronte underscores harsh criticism of the Victorian notions of charity. The Victorians were concerned with the appearance of charity. Even Charles Dickens in his letter on ragged schools declares that it is a " vast, hopeless nursery of ignorance, misery, and vice". The character called the third Gentleman in Hard Times is also a dig at the Department of Practical Art set up in 1952. Dickens was also critical of the National teacher training scheme. Tyranny was the preferred mode of discipline in these schools. On the other hand, we have Miss Temple whose aim was similar to Mr. Brocklehurst, but she influenced the minds of the girls with passive goodness. This form of tyranny was more effective. Some students like Jane Eyre and Sissy Jupe; though meek and subdued, rebelled. But we see that their mind is largely controlled by the prevailing system. Jane Eyre declared as she left Lowood " | appeared a disciplined and subdued character", Sissy Jupe was made to agree that it was improper to have flower representations on a carpet. The encounter between Helen Burns and Jane Eyre before Helen's death reminds us of the poem The Cry of the Children by Elizabeth Barrett Browning. All these children are miniature adults. They are forced to become adults before time. The children in the poem seek death in life. Helen tells Jane that death is her "last home". Even in Hard Times Louisa tells her father Mr. Gradgrind "I was tired. I have been tired a long time". In the account of the "Watercress girl", Henry Mayhew was similarly astonished as he observed that the Watercress girl "had entirely lost all childish ways, indeed, in thoughts and manner, a woman". So, we find that these two texts highlight comparable instances of schooling in Victorian times. Both the authors satirized the education system and its evils.

Bibliography


