

## **Just Who *Is* the Orphan Boy? Or, How Jo Brought Empathy Back into the Middle Class**

**Delia Davis**

Poor Jo. His features are obscured by dirt; his body overcome by disease; his mind lost to the decay of disuse. This ragamuffin street sweeper wanders aimlessly through the convoluted landscape of *Bleak House*, movin' on and on— until move on, he can no longer. As a classic Dickensian character trope, Jo's meager existence can be easy to dismiss. His poor orphan boy caricature almost certainly condemns him to the laundry list of one-dimensional Victorian literary characters of little significance. And yet, he stirs up such an acute emotional response in Dickens' readership. One contemporary reviewer refers to Jo as "the gem of 'Bleak House'" and fondly wishes "peace to the ashes of the poor outcast" (Anon, 672). The disparity between Jo's hackneyed external representation and the poignant feelings he incites among readers suggests that Jo's identity is a deceptively complex one: a stock character on the surface, but with an embedded metaphysical function to the novel. Charles Dickens intimately intertwines the omniscient narrator's observations with Jo's character, directly linking his plight to the ills of nineteenth-century English society but also stuffing Jo's caricature with an authenticity that implores pathos.

Just as the bottomless, all-consuming Jarndyce and Jarndyce case pervades the novel, lurking amidst the fog of the city, so too does Jo exist in the world of *Bleak House*. While other characters appear mainly confined to their homes, Jo has no designated space. Dickens finds him everywhere— the dung-carpeted city streets, the brickmaker's, Tom All Alone's, the graveyard, on the steps of St. Paul's Cathedral. City constables perpetually harass him to move on, so that he does not loiter. "But where?" Jo asks in desperation (Dickens, 19.308), to which the constable

replies in oblivious apathy, “My instructions don’t go to that . . . my instructions are that this boy is to move on” (19.308). With nowhere to go, no one to turn to, and no chance of any upward mobility, Jo moves in circles, anonymous and worthless but embedded into the fabric of the cityscape. His movements are as repetitive as his actions: “Jo sweeps his crossing all day long” (16.256), appearing, in a sense, eternal. Dickens sporadically dredges Jo up to tie him to the filth and squalor of London, to parade him in a tawdry display of the city’s great problems. Thus Jo’s caricatured existence transforms into a thematic symbol.

Emphasizing Jo’s attributes as a poor orphan boy also creates a vehicle by which Jo—as the symbol of contemporary English social ills—may function. One such characteristic is Jo’s lack of education. “I don’t know nothink,” he insists to those around him, modestly but truthfully. “It is because you know nothing that you are to us a gem and a jewel,” Chadband tells him enthusiastically (19.313), divulging a cruel irony and a callous lack of understanding. Chadband equates Jo’s lack of education to the innocence of youth, and prattles on about how “glorious [it is] to be a human boy” (19.313). Unfortunately, Chadband’s decadent words of acuity fall on the ears of a boy who lacks any opportunity to “receive the lessons of wisdom” which he is so “capable of profiting from” (19.313). Further, Chadband’s sermon exposes Jo’s inverted experience of innocence. Presumably, Jo’s innocence should derive from the fact he is merely a “human boy,” still in his youth, still oblivious to many facets of the world. Instead, the reader understands that Jo cannot possibly retain any childlike innocence, as he is thrust immediately into a world of hardship and hunger, devoid from the beginning of any parental guidance or care. For Jo, “innocence” comes in the form of illiteracy, which inevitably estranges him from other humans. Thus, despite his intrinsic enmeshment with the cityscape, Jo ironically does not get to participate in civilization. As a symbol, he becomes a ghost, alienated from his

fellow man. This deep underlying rift between Jo and the rest of society begins to cultivate a sense of empathy in the reader's breast. Although readers rarely invest their sentimentality in flat characters or symbols, Dickens utilizes Jo's insignificance to plant the seedling for such a pathos.

Moreover, when all of Jo's interactions highlight either his simplicity or his liminality, they simultaneously starkly outline the faulty nature of social institutions—particularly those which profess to “help” the poor and destitute. In brief moments of respite, when Jo pauses from his moving on just long enough to gnaw on table scraps, the reader catches a voyeuristic glimpse of Jo's private moments of wonder. At the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, Jo “admires the size of the edifice, and wonders what it's all about” (16.258). Similarly, at St. Paul's Cathedral, he considers the building as “the crowning confusion of the great, confused city; so golden, so high up, so out of reach” (19.315). Both of these buildings symbolize self-professed philanthropic institutions, yet they are incomprehensible to the boy who needs their assistance the most. The buildings are large, grandiose, and seem to stand in great apathy towards poor Jo. He cannot for the life of him wrap his mind around these “sacred emblems” (19.315) any more than he can understand the “mysterious symbols” (16.256) that preside over the entirety of civilized society, with its letters and religious texts and shop window signs. These instances echo Jo's interaction with Chadband because there is again the sense that an insurmountable distance lies between the two, and the privileged party that should shelter and provide solace (the Church) is instead preoccupied with grandstanding its colorful feathers and admiring itself in the mirror. As Dickens carefully develops pathos to a poignant swell, he also continually reminds readers that Jo is a product of society.

The reader's intensifying emotional connection with Jo crescendos with the collision of two different tones from the omniscient narrator that transform Jo's plight into a performative, moralistic display. Dickens' attitude oscillates between a detached anthropological perspective and an empathetic paternal voice when regarding Jo. Dickens formally introduces Jo through free direct speech, a muddled combination of the omniscient narrator and Jo's own perspective:

*Name, Jo. Nothing else that he knows on. Don't know that everybody has two names. Never heerd of sich a think. Don't know that Jo is short for a longer name. Thinks it long enough for HIM. HE don't find no fault with it. Spell it? No. HE can't spell it. No father, no mother, no friends. Never been to school. What's home? Knows a broom's a broom, and knows it's wicked to tell a lie. Don't recollect who told him about the broom or about the lie, but knows both. Can't exactly say what'll be done to him arter he's dead if he tells a lie to the gentlemen here, but believes it'll be something wery bad to punish him, and serve him right—and so he'll tell the truth (11.177).*

In this passage, both the omniscient narrator and Jo are speaking. Technically, the omniscient narrator merely relates Jo's responses to the Coroner. But the lack of quotations and the totality with which Dickens mimics Jo's vernacular botches the distinction between the narrator and Jo, so the reader is led to believe that the narrator has a familiarity with or access to Jo's interior. However in later scenes, the omniscient narrator often detaches himself from Jo, placing himself above the setting as he watches; in these moments, the omniscient narrator is wholly separate from Jo, if not mostly apathetic to his situation. He perfunctorily glosses over the actions that Jo performs—“Jo sweeps,” “he knows,” “Jo lives” (16.256)—but describes in sordid detail the state of Jo's lodgings. The omniscient narrator appears so much more captivated with the surrounding environment than the banal orphan street sweeper. With the sensibility of an archeologist seeking to record the impoverished setting of the nineteenth-century inner-city, Dickens recreates the “ruinous place” of Tom All Alone's, noting its “black, dilapidated street, avoided by all decent people,” its “tumbling tenements” with their “swarm and misery” (16.256).

Jo becomes a small speck in Dickens' expansive landscape of human depravity, where "bold vagrants...establish their own possession" and "vermin parasites appear...crawl[ing] in and out of gaps in walls and boards" (16.256-257). Jo loses his individuality, even as a minor character. Consumed by the omniscient narrator's portrait of city slime and slum, Dickens appears to suggest that Jo is merely another figure in a case study of sorts. He becomes, perhaps, an object that Dickens may refer to when he desires to bring the study closer to those examining it.

But in this same breath, the omniscient narrator returns to Jo and becomes so fascinated with Jo's "strange state" (16.257) that he begins to examine Jo much more intimately than before. Through the use of first-person, the narrator attempts not just to speculate about Jo's interiority, but to possess Jo and emulate his consciousness:

*It must be very puzzling to see the good company going to the churches on Sundays, with their books in their hands, and to think (for perhaps Jo does think, at odd times) what does it all mean, and if it means anything to anybody, how comes it that it means nothing to me? To be hustled and jostled, and moved on; and really to feel that it would appear to be perfectly true that I have no business, here, or there, or anywhere; and yet to be perplexed by the consideration that I am here somehow, too, and everybody overlooked me until I became the creature that I am! (16.257-258).*

The musings are startlingly probing and existential, especially coming from such a one-dimensional, undeveloped character. But the reader trusts the omniscient narrator because of his wry and perceptive tone in prior scenes, and because Jo has already entered the story through a similar mutated narrative perspective. The first-person impersonation illuminates an interiority and depth the reader could not have fathomed, creating a very personal connection between the reader and Jo. Perhaps Dickens' middle-class readership could not relate to the rot and squalor that Jo is so intimate with, but readers can certainly relate to an inner monologue that questions its place in life. Who hasn't felt a little bit lost in their skin at times, who among men has never

fallen into a sense of isolation? Dickens illustrates that even through layers of poverty and maltreatment, a human remains a human.

Moreover, the juxtaposition between the clinical case-study narration and the highly intimate first-person perspective that Dickens embodies reveals to the reader a disparity between the reader's own perspectives. The disinterest that the omniscient narrator holds reflects the apathy middle-class readers would feel from simply recognizing a social problem at a distance. Yet a detachment exists that cannot persist when faced with a close account of that same problem. Dickens forces these disparate associations together. A collision brings about enlightenment for the middle-class reader; he can now bridge the gap between the two. Not only does a greater pathos for Jo develop, but a bristling sense of injustice emerges within the reader as well. This sense of injustice culminates at Jo's deathbed, when Dickens gravely reminds us that these poor orphan boys are "dying thus around us, every day" (47.734).

Ultimately, Dickens creates a character that middle-class readers can simultaneously view as a symbol of greater injustice and as a potentially real boy whose growth will be forever stunted by his circumstance, by raw unforgiving chance. Jo appears fundamentally as a character that wishes no harm upon anyone; yet he is doomed to remain anonymous and obscure in the annals of history. His victimization by forces outside of his control resonates deeply in the hearts of readers, who can begin to see themselves in the same unfortunate position. Thus, Jo is able to transcend both the strictures of a flat character and the analytical nature of the symbol, instead morphing into a very specific projection of fear, the fear born of the recognition that *it could be me*. Dickens works mercilessly through this pathos to pull back the curtains of English society and expose the lack of systemic justice but also the utter hypocrisy of a nation that deems itself

so civilized and religious while destitute creatures like Jo roam the streets forlornly, uttering “I don’t know nothink,” in a quiet plea for help.

### Bibliography

Anonymous. "Bleak House," *Eclectic Review*. N.S. 5<sup>th</sup>, Vol. 6, London, 1853.

Dickens, Charles, and Nicola Bradbury. *Bleak House*. London, Penguin Books, 2003.