An Apology for Anti-Heroes: Re-Interpreting Two Major Antagonists of English Literature

Pranav Babu[1], Dr. M G Priya[2]

[1]UG Student, [2]Guide
KH.AR.I5ENG21015
Department of English Language and Literature, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham Kochi

ABSTRACT

Antiheroes are one of the less focused character types in literature. Like heroes and villains, antiheroes also deserve close reading and understanding. An anti-hero is a narrative protagonist who lacks the qualities of a conventional hero. Unlike the archetypal heroes, these are protagonists who lack courage, strength, and strong morals. Due to these factors, such characters are generally despised and hated by society. This paper is a close reading and systematic analysis of some anti-heroes who have left an indelible mark on the pages of English literary history – Fagin from '*Oliver Twist*' (1838) by Charles Dickens, Shylock from the play '*Merchant of Venice*' (1596) by William Shakespeare. The study is primarily based on archetypal criticism. This research aims to review these anti-heroes as penned by the authors through their works, observing their character at length and analyzing the nuances of their development in the selected literary texts.

[Keywords: Antiheroes, Archetypal Criticism, Literature]

Introduction

"Literature adds to reality, it does not simply describe it. It enriches the necessary competencies that daily life requires and provides; and in this respect, it irrigates the deserts that our lives have already become."

-C.S.Lewis

Literature has always been a source of inspiration for many till now. To some it's a source of entertainment, while to others, it's a great source for deep thinking and research. Every literary work has its unique character whom people remember for a long time. The characters, setting, theme, plot, and historical background of literary works have been a topic of discussion. Novels offer immersive journeys into imagined worlds or reflections of our own, inviting readers to empathize, question, and explore the complexities of life. Authors, through their innovative writing techniques, create sensational fictional characters that often become an area of study and research in the later years.

The emergence of new theories and studies paved the way for new ways of thinking. One of the greatest impacts of this phenomenon is that it changed people's perception of many characters. Characters whom people thought evil were no longer evil, and those they considered heroes were no longer heroes. People began to look at things from a different perspective and gradually, they understood the pain and suffering of the villains, whom they marginalized. As a result of this, many novels and works have been created in recent years which look through the antagonist's perspective who is also the protagonist of his or her story. This is where the concept of "everyone is a hero in their own, eyes, mind, and story" gains relevance. Everyone has their sense of justice and some concepts of what is right and what is wrong. After all, the basic purpose of novels and books is to convey one's feelings, through writing.

Literature is not only a means of disseminating knowledge but also serves as a window to lives that we may never have the opportunity to experience or imagine. It offers us a unique perspective on the world and teaches us to empathize with and extend a helping hand to those around us. Books that delve into topics such as gender and cultural studies have enabled us to coexist in society without any prejudices or misunderstandings. The power of literature is immense, and it can transform human lives and enhance the quality of our existence over time.

Archetypal Criticism

Among the various meanings of the word "literature" That the dictionaries suggest, that of John Morley affords Our best point of departure. "literature" he says, "consists of all the books? and there are not so many? where Moral truth and human passion are touched with a certain Largeness, severity, and attractiveness of form." Charles W. Kent, The Sewanee Review, Vol. 3, No. 3 (May 1895), pp. 307-313 (7 pages) page,207 Para 2, 1st line)

Archetypal criticism, also known as Mythological criticism, is a literary theory that interprets a text based on recurring myths and archetypes in the form of narratives and symbols, character types, themes, and images which common to a wide variety of literary works and are easily identifiable.

These recurring items are a result of the elemental and universal patterns of the human psyche. An archetype can be a statement, pattern, behavior, prototype, "First", form, or a main model that other works, objects, statements, or patterns of behavior, copy and emulate or merge into. The concept of archetypes came into prominence in the twentieth century. The development of literary criticism through the works of C. G. Jung, and literary theorist Northrop Frye further helped this venerable philosophical literary concept reach prominence and usage in the late twentieth century.

Carl Gustav Jung (26 July 1875 - 6 June 1961) was a Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst who founded the Analytical psychology. He was a prolific author, illustrator and correspondent and a complex and controversial character, presumably known through his works.

According to archetypal criticism, the form and function of a literary work are determined by the archetypes. A text's meaning is often shaped by cultural and psychological myths. In simpler words, Archetypes are the unknowable basic forms personified or concreted recurring images, symbols, or patterns which may include motifs, such as the quest or the heavenly ascent, recognizable character types such as the trickster or the hero, symbols such as the apple and the snake.

Archetypal criticism is supported by the theory of Carl Jung who postulated that the entire humankind possesses a collective unconscious," a kind of 'universal psyche' which is apparent in dreams and myths and which harbor's themes and images that we all inherit.

For a long time, heroes and villains played a significant role in literature, fighting and opposing each other's actions and ideologies in their unique ways. Usually, a person becomes a hero when he dedicates his actions or sacrifices himself for the greater good of the people around him. Most importantly, the heroic qualities one possesses make him a hero. On the other hand, villains are the complete opposites of heroes, causing pain and destruction wherever they go. However, there is another category of people who are also termed as villains, yet they are not truly villains.

They are commonly called anti-heroes.

An anti-hero is a narrative protagonist who lacks the qualities of a conventional hero. Unlike the archetypal heroes, these are protagonists who lack courage, strength, and strong morals. Due to these factors, such characters are generally despised and hated by society. When Antiheroes are placed against conventional heroes they are often misinterpreted as villains.

What differentiates antiheroes from the traditional villains are their goals and objectives. While heroes are purely noble and kind-hearted, Antiheroes are a combination of both virtuousness and wickedness. Antiheroes have their sense of justice, and unlike heroes, they choose a path that is violent and evil to serve it. This often leads to them portrayed as an outlaw a vigilante, or an Antihero. The actions of antiheroes are mostly born out of revenge and rage, which is a byproduct of the suffering and pain they endured in their life. Some people have their views and ideologies on specific human communities and races. These ideologies can sometimes prove to be extremely dangerous and destructive to certain communities that have no harm. Such an ideology is what led to the mass persecution and genocide of innocent Jews in Germany during the Holocaust of the Second World War.

There are different types of antiheroes in literature. The ones that we commonly see are the classical antiheroes, who are plagued by self-doubt and a lack of confidence. Another variety of antiheroes are the ones who hate society and the people who live in it due to the ideology it holds against them. Sometimes, an antihero can be an ordinary man who completely lacks heroic traits. Such antiheroes may have an immense greed for money and other materials, a selfish nature, or extreme laziness. Among all these varieties of anti-heroes, there is a category of anti-heroic characters called vigilantes.

Even though they perform the same functions of a classic hero, which is thwarting crimes and protecting the innocent from harm, they are considered outlaws due to their actions which usually involve serving justice outside the law. These are characters driven by strong morals and a strong sense of justice. They, in simpler words, do good deeds in a bad way. Due to these complexities, antiheroes are less understood by people who, for ease, term them, villains. Heroes in literature reflect the concept of a perfect or ideal human being, someone who is the epitome of righteousness, and truthfulness in a corrupted world. All these characteristics give them a superhuman figure. Antiheroes, on the other hand, represent the common man, who is susceptible to human emotions and feelings.

List of antiheroes

Two of the major antiheroes this paper aims to review and analyze are '*Shylock*' from the play "Merchant of Venice" written by William Shakespeare in (1596), and '*Fagin*' from the novel "Oliver Twist" written by Charles Dickens in (1838).

Shylock

Shylock is the chief antagonist in the play "Merchant of Venice", he is portrayed as a cruel, and wicked Jewish Moneylender who uses brutal methods to extract the money he provided. However, while looking at his life, we can see that he was an unfortunate victim of racism and was religiously discriminated against. Even though Shakespeare portrayed him as a ruthless, cruel, and greedy moneylender, he also successfully made the readers and audience sympathize with him through his story. To substantiate this statement are the lines from the play itself.

Signior Antonio, many a time and oft

In the Rialto, you have rated me,

About my money and my usances.

Still, have I borne it with a patient shrug

(For sufferance is the badge of all our tribe).

You call me a misbeliever, cutthroat dog,

And spet upon my Jewish gaberdine,

And all for the use of that which is mine own.".

(Shakespeare, Act 1, scene 3, Lines116-124).

The above lines tell us how badly Shylock was treated by the Christian community, of which Antonio and the other characters in the play were a part. He was denied even the slightest human consideration. All these events created a sense of hate and violence in his mind towards the Christian community. Society is the real villain of the play. while looking at a different perspective, one can see that Shylock was just a normal human being who was fed hate and abuse by society in the name of religion and race. Most importantly, Anti-Semitism plays a very important role in the play.

"The most contentious problem of the play, and the key issue of Radford's film, is the perception of its anti-Semitism. Harold Bloom has put the case forcibly and unambiguously: "One would have to be blind, deaf, and dumb not to recognize that Shakespeare's grand, equivocal comedy The Merchant of Venice is nevertheless a profoundly anti-Semitic work" (171)." (Frank P. Riga Mythlore, Vol. 28, No. ¾ (109/110) (Spring/Summer 2010), pp. 107-127). One of the major negativities of this character is the extreme revenge mentality, which can be seen in the method of repayment he places in front of Antonio if he ever fails to repay the loan.

Fagin

Fagin plays the role of chief antagonist in the novel 'Oliver Twist' by Charles Dickens. Throughout the novel, He is depicted as a crooked old man who exploits young children especially boys, by training them to steal money and other possessions from people. Set in the backdrop of the Industrial Revolution, the novel throws light on the lives of people who are less benefit from it. Lack of housing, extreme poverty, hunger, and an increased crime rate were some characteristics of this age. Due to poverty, people undertook odd jobs, of which pickpocketing was one.

Fagin, here is a person who undertook such a job and trained Children to do so. Gradually over time he successfully created a crime syndicate on his own. Though the employees (children) were treated badly, food and accommodation are what made them complain. Although there is no valid excuse for the crimes by Fagin, He was also a victim of the poverty and struggle of the age. Life in workhouses was difficult for everyone, including children with limited food and excessive working hours accompanied by hard labor.

Food and shelter were a necessity of that age. In the novel, Oliver is shown to ask some more gruel when he is in the workhouse, and he is scolded for the same.

'Child as he was, he was desperate with hunger and reckless with misery. He rose from the table; and advancing to the master, basin and spoon in Hand, said: somewhat alarmed at his temerity: 'Please, sir, I want some more.'. (Dickens, Oliver Twist, page 14, chapter 2)

These are the items he promised to Oliver and others in the group in exchange for his service which is theft. This is the strategy most people do nowadays.

Fagin in the novel represents the trickster archetype. He is the darkness that prevails in the protagonist's life. Throughout the story, Fagin has been portrayed as a Jew, mainly due to his appearance. His appearance is described as having red hair, a larger nose, a crooked pose, and a personality centered around being greedy and miserly.

Fagin is also aware that he is a miser and viewed as one by society.

'Ah!' said the Jew, turning rather pale. 'They—they're mine, Oliver; my little property. All I have to live upon, in my old age. The folks call me a miser, my dear. Only a miser; That's all.'

(Dickens, Oliver Twist, page 56, chapter 9)

Fagin's, negative character can be due to the Anti-Semitic prejudices which existed in the society at that time. Jews suffered greatly due to the laws and policies implemented in England in the early 19th century. Many Jews had to leave, (flee) due to these policies.

The Jewish Naturalization Act of 1753, an attempt to legalize the Jewish presence in England, remained in force for only a few months. Thus, Fagin in this novel is mainly hated and despised due to his actions which involve child labor, that too for an illegal act, manipulating those around him, hoarding supplies, greediness, and a selfish nature.

Conclusion

Thus, by analyzing Charles Dickens's Fagin and Shakespeare's *Shylock*, it is evident that even though both are archetypal representations of marginalized characters and villainous traits. However, both differ in many ways. Fagin Represents the persistence of evil and Greed, whereas areas Shylock although evil is driven by a sense of revenge and represents the archetype of revenge and hate towards a community that tortured him.

Fagin, on the other hand, had no reason to hate society other than the anti-Semitic prejudices, since left that alone, he was not the only one to live miserable life in an age like that. While comparing the two literary characters, It has been found that Shylock in some ways deviates from the traditional antagonist archetypes. There is a great necessity for a re-reading and a reinterpretation of both characters.

Works Cited

Kent, Charles W. "What Is Literature? An Attempt at a Definition." *The Sewanee Review*, vol. 3, no. 3, 1895, pp. 307–13.

www.jstor.org/stable/27527848.

Riga, Frank P. "Rethinking Shylock's Tragedy: Radford's Critique of Anti-Semitism in '*The Merchant of Venice*.'" Mythlore, vol. 28, no. ¾ (109/110), 2010, pp. 107–27.

 www.jstor.org/stable/26814914.