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A Report on The Casual Vacancy by J.K. Rowling

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Adam L. Cairns
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Monday Segment
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A Report on *The Casual Vacancy* by J.K. Rowling

Bibliographical Data:

Rowling, J.K. *The Casual Vacancy*. London: Link, Brown Book Group. 2012.

Background Information:

Who is the author? (What is the nationality and origin? When did the author write? Check standard reference books.)

The author is J.K. Rowling, a pen name used while authoring her work. Her real name is Joanne Rowling, but uses the pen name as a way to make her writing more attractive to men. She is an author from the United Kingdom, most recognizable for her work on the Harry Potter series.

As a struggling single mother, J.K. Rowling turned to writing as an outlet for handling the misfortunes in her life. She began to write the Harry Potter series in 1990, but did not actually publish her work until 1997, thus launching her writing career.

After her completion of the Harry Potter series, she turned to a book that was more “adult” in nature. She began writing *The Casual Vacancy* in 2010 and published in 2012. The book was not a huge success, however, did show that J.K. could publish in multiple genres.

What other work has the author done?

Joanne Rowling has published 11 books under multiple pen names. She is most famously known as J.K. Rowling, where she published the world renowned Harry Potter Series. This consisted of 7 books, starting with *The Philosopher’s Stone* and ending with *The Deathly Hallows*. She developed the idea for the Harry Potter series in 1990, however, it took her 7 years to finally publish the first book in London, England in 1997.

Her second book was under the same pen name of J.K. Rowling. Joanne wanted to distance herself for the children's book genre and break into the adult genre. This brought her to publish the book *The Causal Vacancy* in 2012. The book was successful but not as popular as Rowling expected.

For this reason she chose to take on the second pen name of Robert Galbraith. Her hope was that readers could disassociate any books published under this name with the famous Harry Potter series, which launched her career. Using the new pen name, she published *The Cuckoo's Calling*, *The Silkworm*, and *Career of Evil*. Again, not as popular as the Harry Potter series, but with the new pen name, her reputation as J.K. Rowling was no longer being compromised as a result.

What is the author's reputation?

Most people instantly recognize the name, J.K. Rowling. Children and families know her famously around the world for her works on the Harry Potter series. As a writer she is well respected in the fiction and children's novel genre. She is a humble and private person who is not one to seek fame or recognition.

In the eyes of the media, however, her reputation is quite different. She is widely known as thin-skinned, and reluctant to interview or disclose much about herself for fear of what will be said or reported about her. As a way to control her reputation through the press and media, she is not shy to file class action lawsuits when reported information is skewed, inaccurate or not approved for disclosure. This makes her reputation through the press one of intrigue, but reluctance to pursue at the same time.

Joanne Rowling, however, does not only have a great reputation as an author. She is also well respected as a charitable giver and Philanthropist. Influenced by her humble roots, being a single mother, losing her own mother and many other experiences through her life, Rowling makes it a priority to give back to people who are in need of support. From these influences she puts most of her focus on working against poverty, child abuse prevention and support, and Multiple Sclerosis (of which her mother suffered and ultimately passed from).

She currently oversees the charitable foundation *Gingerbread* who lends support to single parent families in need. She has also founded a charitable group, *Lumos*, in which she uses to bring awareness to worldwide child abuse issues. In regard to her second most charitable cause, she has contributed monetarily and philanthropically to Multiple Sclerosis. Her largest contribution was funding to Edinburgh University to build a research center for their Regenerative Medicine department, naming it after her mother, Anne.

Are there any important or enlightening circumstances connected with the composition of this work?

Rowling had the idea come to her during an airplane ride to the United States. She describes the idea as an epiphany moment where she just instantly knew the concept of a local election would be a premise she could base a great novel around.

Her main purpose for writing this novel was to allow herself to explore writing in an adult genre. During her writing of the Harry Potter novels, she enjoyed developing the story and world however felt limited in her writing and areas she wanted to explore. Writing *The Casual Vacancy* allowed her the freedom to push the boundaries of her writing further than she had in the past and explore ideas in her writing that she was unable to do before.

References

“J.K. Rowling Biography” *www.Biography.com*. Np. 2015. Web. 01 NOV 2015.

“J.K.Rowling” *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. 15 SEP 2015. Web. 01 NOV 2015.

“The Casual Vacancy” *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. 30 JUL 2015. Web. 01 NOV 2015.

Subject Matter of the Book

What kind of book is it? (Is it fiction, history, popular psychology, textbook, technical?)

The Casual Vacancy is a fiction novel set in present day. The setting is a fictional town called Pagford, found in the West Country, U.K.

What is the subject of the book?

There are a few plots found in this book, most of which are controversial, adult, and ethically or morally challenging. The overarching story line involves the election of a new Pagford Parish Councilor. Early in the story, the current Councilman, Barry Fairbrother, suddenly dies while attending a dinner with his wife at a local country club just before their anniversary. With Barry’s death comes the need to replace his leadership on the council, thus an election is held in Pagford.

With the election looming over the town, many of the ethical dilemmas are taking the main stage among the voters and people who are running for the council seat. This brings to light the second main plot. One of Barry Fairbrother’s main areas

of focus is a housing unit called “The Fields” found just on the outer boundaries of Pagford. The Fields is meant to house lower class people in the town and because of its reputation many of the townsfolk are wanting to disassociate it from Pagford, giving the rights of The Fields to the next town over. By doing so, the town of Pagford would then be able to create a shopping center and higher scale housing. Barry was against this move by the town and fought valiantly to keep The Fields as part of Pagford. Barry grew up in The Fields, and having taken advantage of the better educational system and higher wages found in Pagford as apposed to the adjacent town, was able to become successful in life and prosper for himself and his family.

Barry wanted to ensure that the lower class children of The Fields always had the same opportunities that he had. Handing The Fields to the neighboring city means that those citizens would have lesser education and now be associated with a less wealthy and supportive town. Once the election was announced, this became a major point of contention for those running for the seat.

The second ethical dilemma and story line is the fate of a methadone clinic called Bellchapel. If The Fields was to transition to Yarvil, the adjacent town, Bellchapel would fall casualty. This, again, means that people who are in need of support are now being dropped from Pagford and forced to find assistance elsewhere, if at all. For many of the members of Pagford, this is not an issue they care for because it simply means that the lowest class of people who inhabit their town would likely be moving on and no longer a nuisance within the town limits. To others in town, they are challenged with throwing people who need care and assistance into the streets. This plot is very similar to The Fields plot in that it plays directly into the election.

The final major plot is that of Krystal Weedon, her mother, her brother and the social worker who is assigned to her family. Krystal is a teenage girl who lives in The Fields with her mother and brother. Her mother is a drug addict and occasional prostitute. Because of her situation, a social worker is assigned to her family and frequently checks in with them. Krystal is essentially the caregiver to her brother, as her mother’s addiction keeps her from being able to care well for either child.

The social worker is faced with an ethical decision in regard to removing Krystal and her brother from the home and putting them in foster care. Krystal is very against being placed into foster care out of fear of losing her brother and ending up in separate homes. As the story progresses, it is worrisome for the social worker in her decision to allow Krystal and her brother to stay, because the mother’s addiction and actions have become more damaging to her children. Not wanting to upset Krystal or some of the other townsfolk, she decides to keep Krystal’s family in tact.

What material does it treat?

This book's ethical content really spans 3 chapters from the book, being Chapter 5: Ethical Decision Making, and Chapter 6: Moral Philosophies and Values.

In regard to Chapter 5, the first focus is individual factors of moral behavior. In the example of Barry Fairbrother, he is fighting against much of the town in an attempt to keep The Fields a part of Pagford. His belief in why this is ethically a good decision is based on his personal influence as a child who grew up in The Fields. Many others in the town are morally comfortable with displacing The Fields and changing the lower class people who live there to a town with less support, education, and opportunity. Part of this comes from their background and external social influences. Many have not experienced the challenges that citizens of The Fields face, nor do they realize the benefit of the support that the town provides. This very much can be shown through a locus of control. Based on a town member's internal and external influences, they will have very different ideas of what is morally acceptable in regard to the Fields.

The second focus will touch Chapter 6 in the regard of economic factors. The ethical dilemma of the Fields is heavily based in the economic standing of the individual assessing which decision is the right one to make. In the novel, those who are financially successful and who's social circle is higher class, tend to suggest that The Fields is reassessed to the neighboring town. Whereas, those who are modest to lower economic status are more interested in providing opportunity to those who live in The Fields and keeping them in the better educational and supportive town of Pagford.

In the instance of The Fields and Bellechapel, it most closely relates in Chapter 6 to the theory of Teleology and Deontology when suggesting The Fields and Bellechapel stay active and part of Pagford. This is because in the case of Teleology, considering this decision morally acceptable creates a desired result of support and opportunity to those who live in this environment. In the case of Deontology, it is the right of the people who currently live in the Pagford limits to have access to those support systems and higher level of public services. Transitioning those people to a different town with lesser resources would be a failure to provide those individuals their full rights.

With these examples, there is an ethical or moral argument being made by multiple members of the town, which is a larger, more external and debatable dilemma. With regard to the social worker who is overseeing Krystal and her family, the moral and ethical challenges she faces are more internal and a conflict within herself. Kay, the social worker, is challenged with a few different ethical decision-making philosophies, which are affecting what she believes is right and wrong. The best material, however, that her situation represents is Kohlberg's Model when reduced to three levels. Kay deals with her immediate personal interests in what she believes is right and wrong. This is shown by her passing

judgment of Krystal, her mother and brother. She then moves into deciding what is actually right in the eyes of her position, society and the law. Ultimately she decides what she will do once she reaches stage 3 and looks beyond the law and social norms.

In regard to all of these ethical dilemmas and story lines, the relationship of the ethical and moral challenge is really based on previous experiences, moral compass and both a person's internal and external influences. A person's belief system really drives where they stand ethically on the decisions that need to be made in the novel, and this contributes to how intense the dilemma is.

What is the tenor of the book—the author's basic interpretation of the material?

The major theme of this novel is individual morality issues. In comparison to the three major plot lines that have very particular moral and ethical issues and dilemmas, a far more interpreted theme in the novel is how from a surface perspective people seem to be very good hearted and well intentioned. They may reflect as morally outstanding, strong citizens, and trustworthy individuals. In most cases, however, under the surface, each person has their own moral and ethical challenges they face, often times bending on their moral compass.

Joanne Rowling really tries to bring to light the idea that people are many times able to fake good morality, while being ethically and morally challenged. Some examples in the novel are a housewife who to the town is an outstanding woman, however, secretly struggles with alcoholism. Another is a well-respected man of the town who participates in severe child abuse. A few of the married couples are actively participating in adultery. It is these themes and examples throughout the novel, which tear at the reader's, own moral compass.

Method of Organization

Summarize in your own words the table of contents

The table of contents is broken up into 7 different sections. Section I is then broken into each day of the first week leading up to and following the death of Barry Fairbrother. The number of chapters for the days varies between 1 and 10 chapters to cover each day. Starting at section 2, each is broken into 8 to 11 chapters.

The chapters are not titled, only represented by which section they are located and a roman numeral indicating the chapter number. There are no themes or informational details in the table of content besides having the section numbers and days of the week in section 1. By looking at the table of contents, the reader would not be able to deduce what content was located in each chapter.

What are the tone and style of the book? (What kind of audience is being addressed? Does the author give interesting facts or analyses?)

The novel is written in 3rd person, mostly following one character, or family of characters at a time, giving their particular perspective. The best description of the style is contemporary realism. It is most reminiscent of a soap opera style story telling.

It is written to attract adult readers who are interested in gossip style, morally corrupt characters. It is a departure for what J.K. Rowling is known for writing, which could be difficult in attracting the correct readers for the novel. This novel would not relate well with readers of her previous books, at least as a direct transition.

Readers who enjoy this novel would likely also enjoy novels by William Nicholson, Nick Alexander, or similar authors.

State four to ten main ideas of the book. Be as descriptive as possible.

- I. The election of a new city council member.
 - a. After the death of Barry Fairbrother, a seat has become available on the Parish Council, which will be filled through the process of a town election.
- II. The debate of redistributing The Fields and Bellechapel to Yarvil.
 - a. Debated under the blanket of “saving money for the town”, Pagford is faced with redistributing a part of their town, “The Fields” to their neighboring town. This would give the most underprivileged part of Pagford to the responsibility of another town, ultimately raising the cultural and overall value of Pagford’s reputation and land values. In doing so, the more need worthy citizens would lose much of their support and resources, essentially guaranteeing they will not recover or have an opportunity of success. Pagford would then also lose the responsibility of Bellechapel, a methadone recovery clinic. As a result of the The Fields changing hands, Bellechapel would be shut down and those taking advantage of what it offers would be forced to either find another option or forego their recovery.
- III. The moral compass of the Pagford citizens, both from a surface and hypocritical stance.
 - a. In learning and revealing the hidden side of many of the Pagford townsfolk’s lives, it is realized that many of the people who are the most predominant in the town are morally challenged. There are instances of alcoholism, child abuse, rape, adultery, and other topical areas in which people who are seemingly on the moral high ground are choosing paths that are not actually so.

- IV. The ethical decision involving Krystal Weedon, her mother and brother.
- a. Kay, a social worker that is new to the town of Pagford is given the Weedon Family case to oversee. During her time with the Weedon family, she becomes faced with a difficult decision in removing Krystal and her brother from the home or allowing them to stay with the mother out of fear that the siblings would be split up in the foster care system.

Select and quote one short passage as an example of the author's insight. Why did you select this quote?

He never seemed to grasp the immense mutability of human nature, nor to appreciate that behind every nondescript face lay a wild and unique hinterland like his own.

I chose this quote because the part of my book is discovering the hypocritical nature of many of the characters in this novel. The morality issues that the characters display, and the secretive nature was a compelling aspect. I think that beyond the plot of the novel, this is the true purpose for Joanne Rowling's work. It is more a story of poor human nature than difficult ethical decisions. The above quote really embodies this concept in one sentence and gives scope of both how little you may know of a person, and how morally challenged a person may be, even when they show as a good person on the surface.

Lastly, give your overall synopsis of the book and your final recommendations.

This novel, although a vast departure from the Harry Potter series, which made J.K. Rowling famous, this novel is almost as compelling and deep with conceptual themes. The multiple plots and large number of characters being developed can lend to the overall story becoming confusing and difficult to follow, however for the targeted reader, this level of lore can add to the intensity of the novel. There becomes anticipation of what may be discovered next, or who's story will take the next turn.

Ultimately, this story is a comedic tragedy. However, the moral dilemmas and ethical concepts that are shown in the novel are easily compared to what has been discussed in class.

As a book recommendation to compare to the class content, I would say that this is a great read. Even from a personal standpoint, the book is well written and full of deep character development. I found it both entertaining and easily relatable to the concepts in class chapters.

I would easily recommend this as a read for the class by other students looking to complete the book report. There are multiple ethical dilemmas and decision-making concepts that give good, rich examples to reinforce what is being learned.