

Charles dickens: portrayal of nancy in oliver twist essay sample

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Charles Dickens' " Oliver Twist" is an 1838 novel. The novel is about an orphan named Oliver Twist who lives in horrible conditions in a workhouse. Later, Oliver falls under the guidance of an undertaker. Unable to endure, he escapes to London where he comes across Artful Dodger, the head of a group of young pickpockets. Oliver's innocence blinds him from the fact that the activities are illegal. Consequently, he meets Fagin, the group's senior criminal instructor.

" Oliver Twist" introduces the reader to a myriad of characters; however, Nancy emerges as the most striking character. She is a former pickpocket of Fagin's who is now a youthful prostitute. Additionally, she is Bill Sikes' mistress. Her human decency and her love for Sikes clash when Sikes mistreats Oliver. Despite Nancy's criminal background, Dickens' writing portrays her as the most principled character in the story. Her decency allows her to sacrifice her life for Oliver. Sikes' kills her for unveiling Monks' plans. Therefore, Nancy serves an important function within the structure of the story.

Nancy's importance in " Oliver Twist" lies in the fact that she represents Dickens' leading preoccupation with women who are social outcasts.

(Eagleton 151) Throughout the novel, Dickens does not hint at Nancy's occupation as that of a prostitute; however, the reader can draw conclusions to this through her friendship, manner, and appearance. Nancy keeps the company of burglars, has no parents, makes a living on the streets, and

wears a “ red gown, green boots, and yellow curl-papers” (Dickens 138).

Evidence of her deteriorated and wicked life is visible through her relationship with Fagin, an evil and cruel thief. Nancy’s inapt and coarse language and behaviors depict her ignorance and lack of education.

Concurrently, Dickens reveals Nancy’s possession of a sense of embarrassment and remorse over her notoriety. She gives the reader the impression that her disgraceful life may be due to other reasons beyond her control.

Dickens uses Nancy to display human characteristics like courage, kindness, moral consciousness, and fear. The complex nature of Nancy’s emotions comes about because of her internal struggle with good and evil. Initially, Dickens illustrates these character traits through Nancy’s meeting with Oliver and then through Nancy’s decision to give up her life for him to save him from Sikes and Fagin. Even though she originally agrees to the whole plan of kidnapping Oliver, she later shows her true feelings of compassion for Oliver after his capture. Nancy displays her anger when Fagin attempts to strike Oliver with a club. Her emotive temperament and her internal conflict result in her outburst against Fagin and her pity for the orphaned lad.

Therefore, her moral integrity, friendliness, and fondness result in her unwillingness to kidnap Oliver and her ultimate empathy towards him.

Dickens utilizes Nancy to dispel successfully the decadent image of a typical woman, who is a social outcast, through his illustrations of Nancy’s handling of Oliver. Oliver is able to return to a normal life due to Nancy’s act of rescuing him from Fagin’s violence. This leads to Oliver’s attachment to Nancy and consequently trust develops between them. Oliver, a boy without

a family, is finally able to have a sister in Nancy. Later in the story, Nancy takes the risk of facing the wrath of her accomplices by plotting Oliver's rescue. Dickens writes about this strength in character in Nancy when he says, " something of the woman's original nature left in her still."

According to Dickens, in an effort to seek refuge for Oliver, Nancy meets with Rose, who lives in an affluent area of the town. Rose agrees to the request (360). Even though their difference is evident, this expresses that the two friends hold the same belief in principles of goodness and purity. Rose is almost angelic with her traits of good nature, purity, and innocence; she has the affection of Harry and his aunt, Mrs. Maylie. Conversely, Nancy lives in a ruthless world where she has never known any kind of affection in her life. Even though they come from different worlds, they are fundamentally the same in nature. Oliver gets his freedom from his pretend-sister Nancy. He gets shelter from Rose who Dickens reveals later on to be Oliver's real aunt. Therefore, Dickens is able to show successfully Nancy's goodness and purity through her affection towards Oliver and the fact that she rescued him from the cruelty and evilness of Sikes.

Dickens uses Nancy to show the possibility that women, who are social outcasts like prostitutes, can find salvation and go back to a normal life. Eagleton argues that through his descriptions of Nancy, Dickens shows that her degraded and poor life is not a hindrance to her rescue and forgiveness (152). In the chapter where she meets Rose, Nancy denounces herself and feels mortified in being an " infamous creature" (Dickens 362). These reflections about her own shame and dishonesty in front of Rose show Nancy's candid approach. This display of honesty reveals her as an upright

and honorable character.

Her death, in particular, represents a symbolic way of purifying herself. Her brutal murder in the hands of her lover is a representation of her suffering and unfair circumstances. She meets death while on her knees and removes a handkerchief given to her by Rose, holding it up high she mutters, “ one prayer for mercy to her maker” (Dickens 423). Rose’s white handkerchief is emblematic and represents the values of forgiveness, pity, and kindness. The transition of values from Rose to Nancy serves as a sort of redemption and finality to Nancy’s life. Consequently, Nancy’s death is Dickens’ way of transforming Nancy from the prostitute and outcast to a pure girl with honorable qualities.

The importance of Nancy to the structure of the story is to show that sometimes reasons that are beyond control are responsible for the type of life an individual lives. Compared to Rose, fate dealt Nancy a bad hand. While both of them were illegitimately born, Rose ends up getting Mrs. Maylie’s care and love while Nancy gets the scourge of the streets. She is a mere victim of circumstance as the loss of her parents and her acquaintances with thieves are not sufficient to explain her miserable life. Dickens uses this unfortunate fate of nature to examine and put to perspective the issues of societal and ethical deterioration. This helps the reader to see how wickedness is born, raised and relates to society. Through Nancy, Dickens is able to draw a picture of an outcast with a conscience. Not only does Dickens display her humanity and decency, he also illustrates the evils associated with stereotyping and redemption of a fallen woman. Additionally, Nancy’s character is very vital to the story since it

forms a basic structure through which the main character, Oliver, survives and unites with his aunt, Rose.

Works Cited

Dickens, Charles. *Oliver Twist*. Irvine: Saddleback Educational Pub., 2010. Print.

Eagleton, Terry. *The English Novel: An Introduction*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2013. Print.