

Dickens' account of identity



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

While facets of Oliver's identity are indisputably innate, such as his morality and one dimensional goodness, the majority of his identity and that of those around him are socially constructed and enforced upon them. Oliver's own face, an attribute completely uninfluenced by society acts as a symbol of his childish purity and innocence. While essentially already labelled as a thief, Oliver's face is enough to convince Mr Brownlow otherwise. ' There is something in that face.' ' Can he be innocent?' Dickens's use of italicized ' Can' suggests the strength of the identity constructed and imposed upon the boy within the few hours of knowing him. The idea of this street thief's innocence is met with significant disbelief from a character who's used by Dickens's as the only voice of judgement, reason and wisdom. The juxtaposition between the innocence emanated by something as obvious and unmissable such as Oliver's face and the flimsy accusations of his guilt by the court expose the absurdity and absolute irrelevance of any socially constructed identities, especially those concocted in the trial scene yet also reveals their strength and prevalence.

Of course, Oliver's guilt cannot be decided on his face or looks but this line of argument could suggest the way in which utilitarian institutions such as the poorhouse or the court are overlooking or building over personality and identity. In both cases, Oliver's name was given to him, thereby constructed for him, ' Oliver Twist' then ' Tom White'. As a child and when sick, Oliver was unable to shape his own identity and so it was assumed for him. ' To name something is to begin to exercise control over it.' And so not only is Oliver's identity constructed but it is also enforced by utilitarians around him for example the identity of Oliver Twist given by Mr Bumble of the poor,

lowly and insignificant child is maintained through violence and verbal abuse. This begins to touch on one of the issues of the period following the industrial revolution, explained by Southey ' a system [manufacturing] of actual servitude... which destroys the bodies and degrades the minds of those engaged in it'. This is not a sentiment limited to the manufacturing industry and Southey goes on to refer to the class system as that of the ' feudal ages'. The identity of Oliver and other's like him are being crushed for personal profit, a crime also committed by Fagin, or by ignorance in a society flooding with capitalism and utilitarianism. This satisfies Juliet John's claim that Oliver Twist acts as a ' riposte to utilitarian philosophy.' It forms a social critique illuminating the extent to which identities created by stereotype and by society are stronger than any other even in front of a supposedly ' legal' system and the complete disregard for Oliver's identity as a person, commodified to little more than an object, as seen in his abusive past and sale to the undertaker. This also forms part of Dickens's social protest against the Poor Law amendment Act of 1834 and the practice of baby farming. This was utilitarian in essence as it became centralized, consistent and avoided raising taxes which would have been unpopular as sensed in Macauley's review. Upon entrance, it is described as a ' dirty court' although this forms part of a description of the appearance of the court it would not be unlikely to suggest that Dickens was also making a remark towards the legality, morality or respectability of the establishment. The setting of the grotesque and dirty building becomes a symbol of unjust repression of true justice and identity and so Dickens's social commentary also seems to extend to the institution of the legal systems as well as the poor law system. Interestingly, these institutions of care and justice which would supposedly

be inherently good have become corrupt, especially juxtaposed against the unmistakable inherent goodness of Twist.

However, that is not to say Oliver is the worst or only victim of socially constructed identities. Oliver already has far more of an innate identity by having a last name unlike Nancy, even though it was constructed by wider society. Like Oliver, Nancy's identity is mostly constructed by those around her but she suffers even more so that the identity imposed on her is that of being 'no one.' Far from the struggle of whether her identity is innate or socially constructed, her identity is largely ambiguous and to some extent non-existent (like many of Dickens's female characters.) Nancy is also a symbol of commodification, as a prostitute, she is entirely degraded to an object or tool by those around her. 'Nobody around here knows anything about you' Not only does Fagin use Nancy, she is also devoid of any identity or social presence. In a similar fashion to Oliver, her abuse leaves her without identity and in complete subservience to the wills and identities of others. Sykes' abuse seems to have left her with 'only one feeling of the woman left.' It appears the only remainder of her innate identity is her womanhood which is only the most basic fundamental of anyone's identity. She does however possess a strong constructed identity, constructed by her abuse, and that is of love and loyalty for Sykes. 'If I knew I was to die by his hand at last.' She completely conforms to her constructed identity, by Sykes and by society's view of prostitution, as an object to fulfill any will of a man. In fact, women as a whole in Oliver Twist seem to possess very little identity whatsoever. Miss Rose Maylie's identity also seems to be entirely socially constructed as unlike Nancy she adheres entirely to patriarchal conventions,

that of the feminine, delicate and motherly figure. Her innate identity seems to match the socially constructed ideal of identity which poses the question, does she have any innate identity at all? Her personality and identity seems entirely socially constructed, even the ending gives her the socially constructed identity of the young and happily married woman. This is argued as the influence of the death of Dickens's sister, who's devastating loss led Dickens to create a range of idealized, young women. Therefore her identity is further limited as it was hardly even Dickens's intention to give her any sort of identity, her role is only that of an archetype and idealized stereotype.

On the contrary, characters with more agency such as Fagin and the Artful Dodger have identities that seem to be more innate. Dickens's *Oliver Twist* with its anti Semitic resonances seem to imply that the socially constructed identity of the Jew, that of the miserly criminal, is the identity that is innate in Fagin. Unlike Maylie, who under patriarchal circumstances is more likely to have adapted her innate personality to match that which society expects of her, Dickens seems to imply that certain social views of Jews were correct and naturally inherent to Jews. Dickens confirmed this anti Semitic sentiment saying ' that the class of criminal almost invariably was a Jew.' Dickens's also taps into traditional grotesque imagery of Jews as the antichrist or killers of young innocent children with the objects of the jewels and the bread knife which serve as symbols of criminality and danger. ' Oliver could see that the knife quivered in the air.' The verb quivered not only gives the knife a sense of movement and tension which suggests danger but also mirrors the vulnerability and fear of young Oliver. Dickens really does elevate Fagin's

identity to that of the worst constructed ideas about Jewry doing the Victorian era. The Artful Dodger, throughout the courtroom scene, fails to conform to the identity constructed and labelled upon him by the judge. Instead, his identity, although essentially a lie, is defined by his innate wit and humor. He does not succumb to the stereotype imposed on him at all. His repetitive questioning and exclamatory sentences create a sense of confidence in his identity and pride even when it is at its most threatened. 'I'm an Englishman ain't I?' 'Where are my privileges?' He is entirely certain of his identity, even though it may be false "“spectable circle of acquaintance”. His pattern of speech, starkly contrasted against the formal language of court 'A pick-pocketing case, your worship.' is a reminder of his innate class identity. Whereas Oliver switches easily between his middle class and criminal life through the changing of his clothes, the Dodger is a completely consistent character which does not change regardless of which circle of society he resides in. Perhaps, however, his inevitable being found guilty symbolizes an inability to stay true to your own innate identity and that perhaps the identity constructed by wider society will always win and takeover in the end. It is likely the judge had made up his mind about the Dodger's guilt before even considering the case at hand.

To conclude, the extent to which characters' identities are socially constructed seems very dependent on Dickens's own personal views. Oliver's own limited identity filled with feelings of alienation and sadness seem to stem from Dickens's years in the blacking factory, both Oliver and Dickens never really accepted their unfortunate beginning in life and struggled with forming their own innate identity. While Oliver's identity was

mostly constructed, his innate goodness and morality is so prevalent it overshadows and overcomes all identities forced upon him. ' The boy had firmly resolved that whether he died or not, he would make one effort to to dart upstairs from the hall' in order to warn the people Sykes would have him rob. This decision was made in ' short time' reminding us that Oliver's innate and natural response is always goodness even if it risks his life. Moreover his firm resolve shows a remarkable strength of character despite his hardships and determination in the face of possible death. Therefore, Oliver's overarching identity, although his class, job, home or parentage may change is entirely innate.

Works Cited

Econlib. org. (2017). Macaulay, Southey's Colloquies on Society | Library of Economics and Liberty. [online] Available at: <http://www.econlib.org/library/Essays/macS1.html>

John, J. (2006). Charles Dickens's Oliver Twist. London: Routledge.

Vanden Bossche, C. (1991). Carlyle and the search for authority. Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press.