

# Gender inequality in oliver twist



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

In what is arguably his best known work, Charles Dickens addresses the blatant gender inequality that ran rampant in the 1800s. *Oliver Twist* confronts the disheartening public view of not only women in lower social classes, like Nancy, but also the stereotypes placed on the actions of women in the upper classes, such as Rose and Mrs. Bedwin. Though he may exemplify this inequality through several female characters and their interactions with their male counterparts, Dickens is one of the first to paint these women as at least somewhat conscious beings who are capable of some thought process. He approached his female characters with an attitude of change from their "roles." Instead of seeing England as "a patriarchal model which reserved power and privilege for men," (Marsh) he chose to give his female characters more of a role in their own lives, allowing them to develop as actual figures rather than slump in the background, at least in his literature. However, Dickens was well aware of the expectations of women in 19th century England: he knew that women were considered "physically weaker yet morally superior to men" and that they were considered to be "best suited to the domestic sphere" (Hughes). By accepting these stereotypes, Dickens is able to both prove them wrong and to write strong female characters who are capable of handling issues such as prostitution, loyalty, family, and injustice. He is clear, however, that *Oliver Twist* does not take place in a fairytale version of England, writing other characters as they would be in the set time period.

Gender inequality in *Oliver Twist* cannot be discussed without raising the adjacent issue of social inequality. Though upper class women were not treated as equal to the men in their lives, they at least received an education

and were spoken to with some level of respect, unlike their lower class equivalents. Even when providing valid and important information Nancy is treated with little to no respect, being told “ I will not suffer the young lady to go any farther. Many people would have distrusted you too much to have come even so far, but you see I am willing to humour you,” by Mr. Brownlow (Dickens 491). He is clearly favoring Rose, the “ young lady”, by not making her “ go any further”, while at the same time disrespecting Nancy, someone who is obviously part of the lower class, by speaking about distrust. Though Mr. Brownlow may have an actual reason to make this judgment, since Nancy was late to their initial meeting, he is largely basing his judgment on her social status and her “ occupation.” True to the time period, Brownlow believes that Nancy is a disease ridden prostitute, and sees her as “...the shadow that haunted the well-run middle-class home” (Hughes). In this same passage he continues to question Nancy about their location: “...for what purpose can you have brought us to this strange place?” (Dickens 491) Nancy, not the complete idiot Brownlow believes her to be, is well aware that Fagin or Sikes could be watching if they were to speak “ where it is light, and there is something stirring...” (Dickens 491) as Brownlow keeps suggesting. However, even as Nancy voices these concerns, speaking of “...horrible thoughts of death, and shrouds with blood upon them...” and believing she “...saw ‘ coffin’ written in every page of the book...” (Dickens 492) Brownlow refuses to listen, citing her imagination and stating that coffins pass him often as well. Furthermore, by accompanying Rose to this meeting Brownlow is acting as if she cannot handle herself alone at night. Mr. Brownlow is not considered a “ bad” character, but his actions involving Nancy and Rose make us question his opinion of women, and whether or not he finds them

capable of anything. This is not saying that he thinks they are lacking intelligence. But does he believe that women are capable of completing anything without at least partial assistance from a man?

Dickens was no stranger to prostitution and the issues that revolved around it, but not in the “ normal” way of being a customer. He was responsible for cofounding the Magdalen House, preparing former prostitutes for a new life in Australia; even though he was not the first to try to reform prostitutes, he at least knew that they were not the only cause of the “‘ problems’ associated with prostitution” (Hughes). This reasonably assures some balance in his writing, as does the fact that he lived a life similar to Oliver’s, working in Warren’s blacking factory due to his father’s bad debt and living in Portsmouth, a city on the south coast of England (BBC News). His credibility is now evident not only because of his childhood, but also because of the imagery within his writing and how it coincides with England’s environment at this time. Each scene is expertly described to make the reader feel as though they are with Noah at the Thames, watching “... necessarily unseen by any others on the stairs who chance to be above him, if only a step...” (Dickens 490). Then, just a moment later, they are with Nancy, hearing the “ something so uncommon in her manner...” and having “ the blood chilled within him” (Dickens 492). Dickens is sure to immerse his reader in these surroundings and not allow the reader to leave until the story is over. This concurs with Dickens’s master use of syntax, defined as the way in which linguistic elements are put together to form constituents. Though his detailed descriptions may be attributed to the fact he was paid by the word, it does not mean he didn’t use his words well. His descriptions

of locations as well as characters are incredible, and image inspiring; “he has a lurking walk...his eyes are sunk in his head so much deeper than any other man’s...his lips are discoloured and disfigured with the marks of teeth...” (Dickens 496). These are only partial descriptors, yet Charles Dickens creates an entire character. This character is already shady, but it is easy to picture him slipping into shadows and disappearing without issue, all from portions of Dickens’ descriptions.

Charles Dickens was by no means a modern feminist; in fact, there are accusations of him abusing women and cheating on his wife with multiple younger partners. His belief that women should be angels of the house could never coincide with feminist ideals. However, his writings gave feminists a platform to argue against the blatant gender inequality in nineteenth century England. His vibrant descriptions of the brutal behavior towards lower class women, compared to the simple disrespect seen by their upper class counterparts, portrays both the gender inequality and the social inequality within such detrimental distinctions. Dickens was well aware of the social stigma surrounding prostitutes and the “ problems” they faced, but still chose to remain accurate to the time period and to create a strong, lower class character who, in the end, helped bring Oliver happiness at the expense of her own life.

Citations: Marsh, Jan. “ Victoria and Albert Museum.” , Online Museum, Web Team,[email protected]Victoria and Albert Museum, n. d. Web. 12 Oct. 2015. Hughes, Kathryn. “ Gender Roles in the 19th Century.” British Library. British Library, n. d. Web. 12 Oct. 2015. “ Charles Dickens (1812 - 1870).” BBC

News. BBC, n. d. Web. 13 Oct. 2015. Dickens, Charles. “ Chapter 1, 41-48.”

Oliver Twist. New York: Knopf, 1992. N. pag. Print.