

Personal virtues and
social influences: the
presentation of
identity in oliver tw...



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Oliver Twist is a novel that evades easy categorisation; what begins as a political satire of the 1834 Poor Law morphs into a detective novel which in turn becomes a melodramatic thriller with a surprisingly tidy ending. While Dickens juggles contrasting tones in many of his novels, as one of his earlier works Oliver Twist has been particularly noted for consisting of “ a patchwork of genres” (Wood, 2014). Therefore, it is no surprise that for a novel which itself undergoes a series of identity crises, issues to do with identity become a reoccurring theme of the narrative. Indeed, our understanding of the social message of the novel rests upon the way in which Dickens frames identity. Strangely, for a novel which seems concerned with promoting the social message that the poor are not inherently morally inferior, Dickens presents an ambivalent picture of the nature of identity. This essay will address how Dickens presents elements of socially constructed and crowd identity while also reconciling this with ideas of innate goodness and morality. Perhaps the most well-known cultural staple from Oliver Twist is the eponymous hero, who has become almost synonymous with our idea of the orphan. Yet ironically it is this projection of an ‘ orphan’ identity that Dickens critiques within the novel, as characters constantly project their prejudices onto Oliver due to his parentless, low socio-economic status. It is only in the first chapter, whereby Oliver has not yet been clothed that he is free from constraints of societal identity, as Dickens states “ he might have been the child of a nobleman or a beggar”. This suggests that Dickens views class identity as something which is fluid and socially learned rather than inherent. The abuse Oliver faces in the workhouse and later on the streets of London is symptomatic of an unjust societal stigma faced by those on the bottom rungs of Victorian society, and ultimately this stigma revolves around a false

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conception that poverty correlates to inherent immorality. This was particularly pertinent in the aftermath of the 1834 Poor Law, which sought to lessen the cost of looking after the ever-growing number of paupers by establishing workhouses (May, 1987). They also wielded tremendous power to individuals such as that of Mr Bumble. Indeed, even Oliver's name is chosen by Mr Bumble: his nominal identity is given to him by the system that abuses him. Moreover, the superficiality of social identity is illustrated by how easy it is for one character to adopt another identity through the means of simply changing their clothes. For instance, Nancy's adoption of middle class attire completely alters the way society views her, allowing her the privilege of respect and trust amongst strangers who would otherwise have demonised her for her prostitute identity. Of all the characters in the novel it is Nancy who is perhaps the most complex, as she is – at least by Victorian standards at least – an immoral woman, yet she is also deeply sympathetic. While most of the characters in the novel fall into a label of either good, evil or comic, Nancy defies these labels. The reader empathises with her predicament, whereby her toxic upbringing has altered her identity to the point of no return. The contemporary reactions to Dickens' inclusion of a 'fallen woman' confirm the prejudice that was rampant within 1840s Victorian society, as even his friend John Forster attempted to discourage him from publication due to its taboo nature (Bowen). By providing a sympathetic platform for the identities of marginalised characters, and highlighting how these identities are, at least to an extent, socially constructed, Dickens' opens a dialogue on how the poor and vulnerable should be treated. While Dickens may see elements of class identity as learned, he also suggests that environment can alter the identity to the extent that it is irreversible or as <https://assignbuster.com/personal-virtues-and-social-influences-the-presentation-of-identity-in-oliver-twist/>

Nancy claims: “ I am chained to my old life”. Dickens uses her as an obvious foil to Rose, yet had her socio-economic situations been different it is possible that Nancy’s self-identity and ultimate fate would have also been different. Not only does Dickens describe how identity is constricted within a classist society, he also illustrates how individual identity can be lost to the crowd. A single accusation of stealing results in Oliver being chased by an angry mob, whose actions are portrayed in almost rhythmic lexis: “ pell-mell, helter-skelter, slap-dash”. The mob is depersonalising in its reduction of different facets of society into one antagonistic mass. The visceral reaction of the mob against Oliver highlights how illicit or transgressive identities threaten those who have conformed to their societal roles. Furthermore, in exploring the crowd mentality of *Oliver Twist*, the city of London cannot be ignored. The urban landscape plays a major role in the collective identity of Dickens’ characters. Oliver refers to the rancid urban setting of the slums he visits with Mr Sowerberry as having reduced its inhabitants to animalistic qualities; they are a part of the decaying landscape, even suggesting that they “ seemed so like the rats he had seen outside”. During the 19th century rapid industrialisation had driven many rural migrants to the cities resulting in cramped, squalid conditions, as historian Terry Trainor points out that in 1840s London “ one room living was the norm for working class families.” (Trainor, 2011) Despite this harsh reality, the idea of domestic bliss and the importance of the house was becoming increasingly popular during the 1840s, and thus home life became an intrinsic part of early Victorian identity. Dickens’ contrasts the decay of city life and “ men who have lived in crowded, pent-up streets, through lives of toil, and who have never wished-for change”, with the idealised pastoral setting where Oliver finally joins a <https://assignbuster.com/personal-virtues-and-social-influences-the-presentation-of-identity-in-oliver-twist/>

stable family unit. Therefore, it becomes clear that Dickens sees identity and environment as closely interlinked entities, with Dickens making an implicit link between urban sprawl and the spike in criminality and immorality. While it would at first appear that Dickens is arguing against the notion that people are inherently predisposed to crime, and that a mixture of prejudice and socio-economic stances lead those to crime, this message is undermined by Oliver's apparently inherent identity and the resolution of the novel. Despite growing up in a workhouse Oliver's lexicon is noticeably middle class.

Indeed, the infamous line " please, sir, I want some more", while being a radical act of defiance, is almost painfully polite, especially when contrasted with the Artful Dodgers colloquialisms. Even if it did not transpire that Oliver was related to the Maylies, the dissonance between his social environment and his mannerisms would be reason enough to accuse Dickens of patronisation of the working classes. Indeed, much like contemporary thinkers such as Carlyle who labelled the working classes " wild inarticulate souls", Dickens writes with a prejudice which is ironic considering his reputation as a defender of the working class (Carlyle, 1839). Crucially, the fact that Oliver does turn out to have descended from a middle-class background only confirms that the novel is, at least to some extent, what critic John Carey calls " a hymn to the purity of the middle-class soul".

Oliver's identity remains middle class and static throughout, with Dickens contradicting his previous suggestions that social identity was purely superficial. It could also be argued that Dickens is guilty of the unjust social labelling which he attempts to critique. The very names of his fictional characters are infamous for their " character revealing" nature (Paroissien,

2000, p80), for example Mr Bumble's name derives from the word <https://assignbuster.com/personal-virtues-and-social-influences-the-presentation-of-identity-in-oliver-twist/>

bumptious, reflecting his arrogant persona (ibid). Therefore, while within the diegesis of *Oliver Twist* the reader may be implored to look beyond the social confines of a name or label, Dickens himself thrives on this caricature-aesthetic. This is most evident in his depiction of Fagin as the epitome of anti-Semitic stereotypes, indeed he is referred to mainly in the novel as “the Jew”. While Dickens himself claimed that “I have no feeling towards the Jewish people but a friendly one” (Hartley, 2012). Fagin’s whole persona is defined by his cultural identity and his apparent unchangeable physiognomy. Indeed, Dickens was a contemporary of Johann Kaspar Lavater who argued that physical traits were intrinsically linked to traits of character. This not only contradicts the idea of identity being a social construct, it also questions whether a character such as Fagin can even be held morally responsible if he is inherently immoral. To complicate matters further, Oliver’s own angelic beauty is noted by the middle-class characters, such as Rose and Mr Brownlowe in the novel who, with little inspection, are able to determine Oliver’s true nature through observation of just his face. For an author that is so concerned with the use of art as a vehicle for social change, his prejudiced presentations of identity have the potential, by his own artistic philosophy, to be socially damaging. As a contemporary review at the time enthused “Mr Dickens characters, as all the world knows, pass their names into our language, and become types” (Anon. 1971). It is important to note that Dickens’ portrayal of identity in *Oliver Twist* is not consistently socially progressive, indeed characters such as Fagin are both regressive and damaging. Ultimately even if we are to accept that Dickens’ conception of inherited identity does not lessen the social message of the novel, the problem of Oliver’s actual characterisation remains. Ironically for a figure

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that has become this iconic within popular culture – resulting in the novel being the most screen adapted Dickens novel of all time (John, 2010) – Oliver lacks personal growth or a distinct identity that is separable from his own moral goodness. Critic J Mullan asserts that “ the orphan is above all a character out of place, forced to make his or her own home in the world,” yet Oliver does not even meet this basic criterion. He remains a protagonist who lacks both agency in the main machinations of the plot nor does he possess a distinct voice. His eventual comfortable position with the Maylies comes about due to the work of other characters, such as Mr Brownlowe. Other than his fight with Noah Claypole, Oliver demonstrates little active resistance, in contrast to side characters such as Nancy who both propel the plot forward and yet possess identities that are more morally complex. The case can even be made Bill Sykes’s dog displays a higher level of emotional complexity and tangible identity than protagonist Oliver, who faints and cries his way through the entire plot. Perhaps a better way of exploring Oliver’s self-identity is to treat him as a narrative device rather than a realistic depiction of an individual. Oliver was described by Dickens himself in the 1842 introduction to the 3rd edition as “ good surviving through every circumstance”. In this context, he becomes more of an entity that allows the reader to understand the moral complexities of London through the lens of an innocent. What makes Oliver’s story interesting is his interactions with the characters around him. As critic Ruth Richardson astutely puts it, Oliver Twist is a “ modern fairy-tale” which deals mainly in dualities of good and evil while at the same time being relevant to contemporary Victorian society (Richardson, 2012). The way in which Oliver is treated because of his assumed identity as an orphan, irrespective of his self-identity, remains a

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potent criticism of the treatment of the poor. Arguably it invites the middle class Victorian mother or father to consider the treatment of their own child if they were to be brought up in similar social conditions, helping to ignite a social consciousness against the cruelties of a corrupted system unable to deal with the most vulnerable in society. Bibliography

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