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ENG 218w

Charles Dickens' Corruption and Idealization Personified in *Oliver Twist*

In Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*, the depictions of corruption and virtue are prevalent throughout most of the novel and take the physical form in the city and the country. Oliver spends much of his time in London among criminals and the impoverished, and here is where Dickens takes the city of London and turns it into a dark and degraded place. Dickens' London is inherently immoral and serves as a center for the corruption of mind and spirit which is demonstrated through the seedy scenes Dickens paints of London, the people who reside there, and by casting doubt in individuals who otherwise possess a decent moral compass. Furthermore, Dickens' strict contrast of the country to these scenes further establishes the sinister presence of London. The country is the idealized setting for Oliver to retire to with his benefactors and their departure from London is necessary in order to stress the deep corruption.

The descriptions Dickens' paints of London vividly and frequently throughout *Oliver Twist* serve as precursor to Oliver's descent into the precarious situations and his exposure to corruption. Oliver's entrance into London for the first-time factors as the initial description that equates to a pattern Dickens will follow throughout *Oliver Twist*: "A dirtier or more wretched place he [Oliver] had never seen. The street was very narrow and muddy; and the air was impregnated by filthy odours" (Dickens 64). Dickens' description sets the scene that Oliver is descending into his first encounter with Fagin and his boy gang while also introducing how the,

“London streets are narrow, winding mazes that hold the continual possibility of threat or surprise” (West 54). The description is how Dickens builds a foundation for what is to come which is important to consider as it is from Oliver’s point of view because Oliver has been brought up in terrible environments. Considering Oliver has lived and worked in the poorhouse, where his conditions have been less than desirable, his first impression of London being the dirtiest and most wretched place he has ever seen follows a pattern Dickens has laid out; the more sordid the description, the more wicked the situation. This portrayal of London allows Dickens to juxtapose Oliver’s introduction to the country with his experiences in London, “Oliver, whose days had been spent among squalid crowds, and in the midst of noise and brawling, seemed to enter on a new existence there” (215). Dickens’ use of the country is to highlight the disparity between it and the city and to greater demonstrate just how debased London is in comparison. The country is the reverse of the city, not the opposite; it is not where the good people in the novel exist, but where they go to escape the city: “Men who have lived in crowded, pent-up streets, through lives of toil: and never wished for change...even they, with the hand of death upon them, have been known to yearn at last for one short glimpse of Nature’s face” (214-215). The descriptions of the city correspond often with Oliver being led through London towards or following an act of crime. When Oliver is abducted by the villains Nancy and Sikes, “They walked on, by little-frequented and dirty ways, for a full half-hour: meeting very few people: and those appearing from their looks to hold much the same position in society as Mr. Sikes” (110). Dickens’ descriptions perpetuate the idea that the corrupt reside in a habitat that mirrors their choices and that the inhabitants are the reason why London is this way. In the author’s preface, Dickens writes of the criminals, “to paint them in in all their deformity, in all their wretchedness, in all the squalid poverty of their lives; to show them as they really are...

would be a service to society” (4) a considerable comment as the preface was published thirty years after the novel and Dickens still felt it was necessary to “account for the dank and squalid scenes depicted therein” (Frederick 465). The descriptions serve to illustrate the conditions that the morally corrupt live in and Dickens directly links the two together in order to build an emphasis that London and its inhabitants coincide with one another.

Since Dickens’ descriptions of London allow him to illuminate the conditions that the nefarious individuals live in, a parallel between the citizens and the imagery of the city itself manifests. The initial portrayal Dickens’ makes of some of the people residing in London correlate with the images of the city itself, “where drunken men and women were positively wallowing in the filth; and from several of the door-ways, great ill-looking fellows were cautiously emerging: bound... on no well-disposed or harmless errands” (Dickens 64). As Oliver has mostly encountered people who mean him harm, his perception of the inhabitants of London is crucial; Oliver recognizes early that London is wretched and so are its people. Dickens is using Oliver as the marker for what is good, therefore making these descriptions even more exaggerated. Wherever Oliver is led, he is surrounded by unsavory individuals that are teeming the streets of London. Oliver first experiences the full wrath of London when he is perceived to be a thief for stealing Mr. Brownlow’s handkerchief, “‘Stop thief! Stop thief!’ The cry is taken up by a hundred voices; and the crowd accumulate at every turning... There is a passion for *hunting something* deeply implanted in the human breast” (74). The mob is the city of London in action, barely able to contain itself to hunt down a young boy. The crowd convenes again to condemn little Oliver when Nancy and Sikes abduct him, breaking him down and forcing him to relinquish his innocence, “overpowered by the conviction of the bystanders that he really was the hardened little wretch he was described to be” (108). Dickens is using the mobs as the life force

of a larger corrupted system, London. Outside of London, the poor are described much differently: “The poor people were so neat and clean, and knelt so reverently in prayer, that it seemed a pleasure, not a tedious duty, their assembling there together” (216). Although described as poor, the country folk represent the lifestyle that is the antithesis to the citizens of London, “outside the city can men define their own worth and dignity as human persons whereas in the gloom of the tenement world they sink almost inevitable to the contemptible animal level” (Duffy 414). The inhabitants of the city and the people of the country are Dickens’ embodiment of each individual place respectively and by strictly defining the two, Dickens exaggerates their differences. Oliver is oppressed by London and its inhabitants, and the good he embodies is only recognized among a select few in the novel. Mr. Brownlow recognizes the good in Oliver, but like the city oppressing and striving to corrupt, it further reaches out to taint Mr. Brownlow.

Dickens is showing the full extent of London’s reach and corruption by subjecting Mr. Brownlow to doubting and eventually casting Oliver aside. Mr. Brownlow acts as a liberator for Oliver but not before Mr. Brownlow is tested many times. The court, one of the most powerful entities in London, silences the good intentions of Mr. Brownlow and further tries to deter him from exonerating Oliver, “With many interruptions, and repeated insults, Mr. Brownlow contrived to state his case... and expressing his hope that, if the magistrate should believe him... [Mr. Fang] would deal as leniently with [Oliver] as justice would allow” (Dickens 78). Despite Mr. Brownlow relaying his testimony to the court, it is not until the book-stall keeper rushes in as witness to keep Oliver from three months hard labor. Dickens uses this scene to highlight the stark difference between a morally virtuous individual and the oppression of London. Mr. Brownlow is further subjected to the doubt of others when Mr. Grimwig visits, “I saw [Oliver] hesitate. He is deceiving you, my good friend” (101). Mr. Grimwig unknowingly plants a seed of

distrust in Mr. Brownlow so that when Mr. Bumble comes to relay his account of Oliver's life, Mr. Brownlow is forced into acquiescence. Mr. Brownlow relays to Mrs. Bedwin that Oliver is an imposter, "“Never let me hear the boy's name again”" (124), fulfilling the cycle of doubt that starts at the book-stall. Dickens not only uses this scene as a moment of failure for Mr.

Brownlow but as a success to the cycle in the society that perpetuates doubt, depravity, and destroys innocence: "Dickens is attacking an entire society in which emotional oppression replicates itself into a network of scorn and hatred, corrupting "impartially" the highest and the lowest" (Lankford 21). The use of books is a common theme Dickens uses in conjunction with Brownlow. The book-stall is where Oliver meets Brownlow, Brownlow steals a book in the process, and Oliver is abducted when trying to return books for Mr. Brownlow. In the city, literature associates itself with crime; the quest for knowledge is halted. Brownlow makes a promise to Oliver that Oliver can read his books and perhaps, become a writer (Dickens 97). Dickens uses this promise as a cornerstone to Brownlow and Oliver's relationship. In the country, Brownlow keeps the promise of sharing the wonder of literature with Oliver by, "filling the mind of his adopted child with stores of knowledge" (359). Only in the country does Dickens use literature as knowledge for young Oliver. In light of this, the only way that Oliver and Mr. Brownlow are able to leave behind the corrupt city is to retire to the country. The Maylies are Oliver's ultimate salvation from the city as, "they are identified with a conventionally pastoral countryside... and they are in no way part of, or responsible for, the atrocious society shown in the early chapters" (Slater 514). The country is the retreat from the city, a much-needed escape for Oliver that Dickens uses to amplify the deep-rooted corruption inside of London.

London uses its people as extensions of its corruption, from the court system, to the general population, down to the criminals. The system runs deep inside of London and

individuals who are to represent innocence and good intention are victims of this system.

Dickens develops London as a center for all the wrong in the world of *Oliver Twist*. The country is the reverse of the city and acts as the sanctuary that Oliver ultimately retires to, a necessary salvation for young Oliver. The juxtaposition of country and city aids Dickens in building a dark society that needs a peaceful counterpart; a place where Oliver can ultimately call home, that suits him and fosters his moral aptitude. Dickens' idealization of the country and the menacingly portrayed London takes on new meaning when all things are considered, not simply their distinguished differences but their support of each other in the novel.

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