

The Contradiction in Humanity of Nancy in *Oliver Twist*

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Abstract

Oliver Twist is the second novel of Charles Dickens, who is the greatest representative of English critical realism in the nineteenth century. Nancy, although just plays a minor role in the whole story, is an important element and impetus for the improvement of the story. She is not as the same as other figures in the story that is either completely good or completely evil. She is both evil and good. She is always contradictory in her psychology. This thesis analyzes her contradictory psychology from different perspectives and concludes the reasons for her so contradictory psychology.

Key words: *Oliver Twist*; contradictory psychology; social environment

Introduction

Oliver Twist is the second novel of Charles Dickens, who is the greatest representative of English critical realism in the nineteenth century. In *Oliver Twist*, dozens of characters are well portrayed, including good and evil. Some characters are all good and can barely comprehend evil, such as Oliver, Rose, and Brownlow; and some other characters are all evil and can be barely comprehend good, such as Fagin, Sikes, and Monks. There is also a special character named Nancy who comprehends and is capable of both good and evil in the story. Nancy is a young

prostitute and one of Fagin's former child pickpockets. She also is Sikes's lover. She appears on the scene with the negative character image but acts things done by positive characters.

At first, Nancy helps Fagin kidnap little Oliver to the thieves' den with Sikes. Later, she protects Oliver from Fagin's beating. When Monks, Oliver's half brother, talks about how to occupy Oliver's heritage and makes him die, Nancy hears their talk. For saving Oliver, Nancy finds Miss. Maylie secretly and tells out all the things she knows at risk to her life.

It is hard to say Nancy is a good woman or a bad woman. Sometimes she acts good and sometimes she acts bad. She is a thief, even a prostitute. It is her who takes Oliver back to Fagin's den. However, it is also her helps Oliver escape from the devil.

Nancy grows up in the thieves' den from very young. She is under the control of Fagin and Sikes. There are so many things that she cannot decide.

Nancy's Contradictory Psychology in *Oliver Twist*

In *Oliver Twist*, each time when Nancy makes choice, she is brimming over with contradiction. This kind of contradiction depends on the nature of Nancy and the limitation of her life circumstance. She would like to be a good girl in her inner part. But she has to be a thief because of the hard life. She would like to live with a good life. But the circumstance which she was born in decides that she can only have such a suffer life. This is her concerned fate, which depends on the conception of social class. It also is the price for her perusing love.

1 Nancy's Contradictory Psychology to Her Life

Nancy is independent firm and tenacious, but sometimes she surrenders herself to following Fagin and Sikes. At first, the contradiction of Nancy is shown by her

nature. The most obvious contradictory expression is her detestation of the criminal lifestyle and inseparability from such kind of life. Nancy looks forward to a better life; however, she is chained to her present life and cannot be divorced from it easily.

1.1 Her Detestation of the Criminal Lifestyle

In her words, Nancy refers to her detestation of the criminal lifestyle one and another. She says her living place is damp and dirty. That is also what she thinks about her life. Nancy is a young prostitute and one of Fagin's former child pickpockets. The author does not tell how Nancy steps to so kind a life and what she suffers in such a life. We can imagine by Oliver's encounter and the words she says to Fagin.

When Oliver is taken to Fagin's den again after he runs away, Fagin is going to beat him up. Nancy stops Fagin in a mad way, she cries, "...I thieved for you when I was a child not half as old as this!" pointing to Oliver, "I have been in the same trade, and in the same service for twelve years since." "...it is my living, and the cold, wet, dirty streets are my home; and you're the wretch that drove me to them long ago; and that'll keep me there, day and night, till I die!" (Dickens 169) these words unfold Nancy's childhood and her present life to us. She becomes a thief possibly from she is just five or six years old. She is not able to distinguish what is good and what is bad at that age. However, she has no way out though she realized what she has done is crime. From her words, we can learn that Nancy hates her present life.

I am the infamous creature you have heard of, that lives among the thieves, and that never from the first moment I can recollect my eyes and senses opening on London Street have known any better life, or kinder words than they have given me, so help me God! Do not mind shrinking openly from me, lady. I am younger than you

would think, to look at me, but I am well used to it. The poorest women fall back, as I make my way along the crowded pavement.

(Dickens 426)

In their first secret talk, Nancy describes her life condition to Rose Maylie. She has been in the midst of cold and hunger, and riot and darkness, and even something worse than all from her cradle. In Nancy's mind, the alley and the gutter were her cradle, as they will be her death bed. We can imagine that how she hates her present lifestyle by such words she uses. Nancy always lives a drunken life. She may use wine to palsies herself. If she is clear in mind, she may realize what a bad life she lives. And that is what she wants to break away.

1.2 She Cannot Break With Her Present Life

Such a criminal lifestyle makes Nancy sick. However, Nancy refused Miss. Maylie's help for giving her a better and safe life twice. Why Nancy acts so firm to stay in a sorrow life as a thief instead of getting away from all those dirty things? There are two reasons.

One reason is her love to Sikes. She cannot leave him. Nancy's love for Sikes exemplifies the moral ambiguity of her character. As she herself points out to Rose, devotion to a man can be "a comfort and a pride" (Dickens 431) under the right circumstances. But for Nancy, such devotion is a "new mean of violence and suffering" (Dickens 431). Indeed, her relation with Sikes leads her to criminal actions for his sake and eventually to her own demise. Nancy knows that clearly, but she still cannot leave Sikes and separate from her criminal life. That is the power of love, though it leads a bad consequence.

The other reason that Nancy cannot separate from her criminal life is her self-abacement. At the first time Nancy goes to visit Miss. Maylie, she feels ashamed. This kind of her feeling is shown by every word she says in the talk with Miss. Maylie. It is the self-respect that gives her courage to meet Miss. Maylie. However,

if she is not self-abased, it is not need to stress self-respect. During the second meeting with Miss. Maylie and Mr. Brownlow, Nancy so scares to stand under the light. She has been used to the damp, dark and dirty, just like her life. The light makes her nervous. She knows that woman like her would not get any kind word on the street. She could not imagine that how to be a lady any more. She has been chained with her present life.

2 Nancy's Contradictory Actions to Oliver

To little Oliver, it almost can be said that Nancy is the most important person who changes his life. It is Nancy who kidnaps Oliver from Mr. Brownlow, who may give Oliver a better life. It is also Nancy who saves Oliver's life from Monks' plot. What she does for Oliver in different period shows her contradictory psychology obvious.

2.1 The Bad Thing She Does to Oliver

After Oliver was arrested, by being thought to steal Mr. Brownlow, Fagin persuades Nancy to go to police station to find out what happened to him. Nancy dresses in nice clothing, and at the police station she pretends to be Oliver's distraught sister. She learns that the gentleman from whom the handkerchief was stolen took Oliver home with him. Then Nancy kidnaps Oliver on the way to the bookstall, and drags Oliver through the dark streets. Without question, what she does is crime. She helps the gang kidnap a helpless boy to the miserable world. She knows clearly that Oliver has no other way but to be a thief like her if she takes him back to Fagin's den. And that is her duty. She is a member of the thieves.

2.2 Nancy's Help for Oliver

Maybe little Oliver makes Nancy recall her suffering childhood and her merely goodness in the inner part, he gets Nancy's help over and over again.

After Nancy takes Oliver to Fagin's den, Oliver attempts to run away when the

gangs are talking. Sikes threatens to set his vicious dog, Bull's eye, on him. Nancy tries to stop Sikes, though Sikes scares to split her head against the wall. But Nancy still struggles violently with Sikes, she screams that she does not care for that. If Sikes makes Oliver to be torn down by the dog, he would kill her first. That is the first time Nancy saves Oliver at the risk of her life. Later when Fagin hits Oliver hard on the shoulders with the stick, Nancy rushes forward and seizes the piece of wood, throw it into the fire.

"I won't let you do it, Fagin!" she shouted, "You've got him again. Isn't that enough! Now leave him alone." (Dickens 167) "...now you've got the boy, you will turn him into a thief and a liar. Isn't that enough, without killing him too?" (Dickens 167)

She rushed at Fagin and would have hit him if Sikes had not held her arms so tightly that she could not move.

Nancy acts such a mad way that Fagin and Sikes are astonished by her. From Oliver, Nancy recalls the time of her when she was as young as Oliver. Nancy does not wish Oliver would suffer the sorrow as her, though it is her who takes Oliver back to the thieves' den. At this moment, her conscience pricks her. From then on, Nancy tries her best to shield Oliver all the time.

Nancy hears the talk between Fagin and Monks, and she becomes perturbed. Monks wants Oliver to be made into a hardened thief, and he schemes to give Oliver a bad reputation, so that he can claim their family's full inheritance. Then he even plots to make Oliver die. After knowing that, Nancy makes a decision of saving Oliver. She also makes herself standing in a more dangerous situation. Nancy uses laudanum to make Sikes fall asleep, so she can go out to find Rose Maylie. Nancy tells all the things she knows about Oliver to Miss. Maylie, and hopes Rose can help Oliver break away from dangerous. Fagin pays much attention on Nancy as he notices she acts too nervous these days. Fagin lets Noah follow

along back Nancy when she goes to the meeting with Miss. Maylie and Mr. Brownlow. He instigates Sikes to kill Nancy after knowing Nancy revealed their secret plot. It is concerned that Nancy is died from saving Oliver. Nancy refuses to deliver up Fagin because it is Fagin who makes her surviving though that is a bad life. And Nancy protects Sikes from the punishment of law because she loves this man; she could not live without him. However, what makes Nancy help Oliver separate from the dirty world with her life? It is the goodness that existed in her heart. She does not hope little Oliver lives a life just like her in the future.

3 Nancy's Contradictory Emotion to Fagin

3.1 Nancy's Detestation to Fagin

Fagin is the main antagonist in the story. "The Jew" takes Oliver under his wing and tries to make a pickpocket out of him. He is a powerful crime leader who has affection for only money and will kill anyone who stands in his way. He takes in homeless children and trains them to pick pockets for him. Nancy is one of Fagin's former pickpockets. Fagin trust Nancy because she follows him for a long time and she always did good job. Nancy does everything that Fagin requires though she would not like to do. She is under Fagin's control and she is very sick of working for Fagin. She hates him.

".....I thieved for you when I was a child not half as old as this!" pointing to Oliver, "I have been in the same trade, and in the same service for twelve years since." (Dickens 169) ".....it is my living, and the cold, wet, dirty streets are my home; and you're the wretch that drove me to them long ago; and that'll keep me there, day and night, day and night, till I die!" (Dickens 169)

This is an indictment of blood and tear. From these words we can imagine a miserable childhood. Oliver is only about ten years old, and Nancy is oppressed to be a thief no more than five years old and has done this for twelve years. If she

does not obey Fagin's order, she will be maltreated as Oliver. Compared with Oliver, she has a more miserable childhood. It is imaginable that how many nightmares happen on this girl's life. Nancy thinks all of her misfortune is Fagin's fault. If he does not cheat her and make her become a thief, she may die in a young age without suffering that painful life.

3.2 Nancy Refuses to Deliver up Fagin

Devil as Fagin is, and worse than devil as he has been to Nancy, Nancy will never deliver up Fagin. For one reason, Nancy is afraid that will involve Sikes in it. For another reason, Nancy has led a bad life as Fagin has led. And there are so many people who have kept the same courses together. Therefore Nancy will not turn upon them who might---any of them---have turned upon Nancy, but did not, bad as they are. Though Nancy lives among a group of vicious people for such a long time, she still remains a piece of kindness in her heart. She will not want to hurt anybody especially the people she lives together with. She has no way out to be a thief for the hard life. But she will never to be a murder, though that man deserves it. Nancy acts that thieves have their code of honor. From her firmly refusing for deliver up Fagin, we can see that Nancy is a girl with strong emotion. As Fagin treats her bad, she does not want to see him to be hung. Nancy protects Fagin and others who in the thieves' den in her own way, because she lives with those people for a long time. She wants to seek a good way to save Oliver which without any harm to her group.

4 The Reason of Nancy's Contradictory Psychology

4.1 Social Environment's Influence

England in the 1830s was rapidly undergoing a transformation from an agricultural, rural economy to an urban, industrial nation. In the extremely stratified English class structure, the highest social class belonged to the "gentleman," an

aristocrat who did not have to work for his living. The growing middle class had achieved an economic influence equal to, if not greater than, that of the British aristocracy. Many members of the middle class were anxious to be differentiated from the lower classes, and one way to do so was to stigmatize the lower class as lazy good-for-nothings.

Victorian society interpreted economic success as a sign that God favored the honest, moral virtue of successful individual's efforts and, thus, interpreted the condition of poverty as a sign of the weakness of the poor individual. The poor were naturally destined for lives of degradation and desperation. Living in such a society, although Nancy hopes some difference will happen on her, the society is hard to make her dream come true.

4.2 Human Nature's Influence

Goodness is an attribute of human nature. Everyone has a warm heart in her inner soul. For such kind of her nature, Nancy saves Oliver regardless the life of herself. Although she lives in a bad environment with the gangs, and she has done something as crime, she still remains a bit of goodness. This kind of goodness is so powerful that it changes many people's fate to what they deserve.

Nancy regards Oliver as a poor little child like her. She knows that Oliver would be on the same way with her if he lives with the gangs for a long time. That is a suffer life. She just wants to protect Oliver from this suffer. It is her human nature to lead her do this.

5 Nancy's love to Sikes

Nancy has contradictory emotion to Oliver and Fagin, but she is completely loyal to Sikes. It is her love for Sikes that makes her cannot separate from criminal life. Love should be a sweet thing for girls, but it is sorrow for Nancy.

Sikes is a brutal professional burglar brought up in Fagin's gang. He is almost

twice older than Nancy. The author doesn't tell how Sikes monopolized Nancy, but we can imagine. Such a merciless, ruthless, heartless, cruel, brutal, selfish man with cold-blood, he gives nothing to Nancy but violence. However, Nancy is dead set on him.

When Sikes and Nancy drag Oliver to Fagin's den, they see some people are hung on gallows. Nancy says to Sikes,

I wouldn't hurry by, if it was you that was coming out to be hung,
the next time eight o'clock struck, Bill, I'd walk round and round
the place till I dropped, if the snow was on the ground, and I hadn't
a shawl to cover me. (Dickens 161)

That is the first time Nancy expresses her love and loyalty in the book, but Sikes does not care about it at all.

As she knows she would die of evil if she comes back to Sikes, Nancy refuses Miss. Maylie and Mr. Brownlow's help for a good and safe life. The reason is Sikes. Nancy cannot leave that brutal man not even to be saved from the life she is leading then. For such a man, Nancy resigns every future hope and the certainty of immediate rescue. Nancy insists to draw back to Sikes through every suffering and ill-usage, if she knows she was to die by his hand at last, and true it is. At her last minute, Nancy still insists her love. She persuades Sikes not to kill her for him, and for their future. She persuades Sikes to repent and forget how they lived. She wishes to use her love to move him. But she fails. Sikes beats her to death. It is a woman's love expression to a man, although the man is such a vicious person. In her pitiful life, she cannot find any other comfort besides giving her broken heart to a man and being loyal to him. As a woman, love is highest spiritual support. Where Nancy lives determines who loves. In her world she has no choice besides being loyal to a man in her way.

Nancy's love to Sikes is never mixed up with any other element. Her love to

Sikes is just like every good woman's sincere affection to her husband. The world in which Nancy lives is interweaving with suffering and darkness. Nancy is miserable, wretched, tragic and sorrowful, but she has no regret about being faithful to the man she loves. Nancy's love is pure and sincere as all the human beings have. It is never to be filthy though it comes down in the lowest rung of the world. It even can be said that it is the instinct of love that saves Nancy's goodness. Finally Nancy is killed by the man who she loves. But we can say, the spirit of Nancy frees her from this sorrow world and flies to the heaven where no darkness and death has.

Conclusion

In *Oliver Twist*, Dickens presents the everyday existence of the lowest members of English society. He goes far beyond the experiences of the workhouse, extending his depiction of poverty to London's squalid streets, dark alehouses, and thieves' dens. He gives voice to those who had no voices, establishing a link between politics and literature with his social commentary.

Throughout the novel, Dickens confronts the question of whether terrible environments he depicts have the power to "blacken [the soul] and change its hue for ever." By examining the fates of most of the characters, we can assume that the answer is that they do not. Certainly, characters like Sikes and Fagin seem to have sustained permanent damage to their moral sensibilities. Yet even Sikes has a conscience, which manifests itself in the apparition of Nancy's eyes that haunts him after he murders her. Most telling of all is Nancy, who, though she considers herself "lost almost beyond redemption" (Dickens 431), Ends up making the ultimate sacrifice for a child she hardly knows.

Although most major characters in *Oliver Twist* are either paragons of goodness, like Oliver and Mr. Brownlow, or embodies of evil, like Mr. Bumble,

Fagin, and Sikes, Nancy's behavior spans moral extremes. Most other "good" characters we meet are good because they have no firsthand experience with vice and degradation. Nancy knows degradation perfectly well, yet she is good.

Nancy is like a rose blossoming in winter. It is a rose with thorns. Blossoming in winter, it decides its short life. She lives in an adverse environment, which is full of crime and guilt, but she remains her goodness in such a world. In her short life, we see the rose blossoming in the end. Despite the cold weather, it blossoms then withers. Although she only blossoms for a very short time, she remains people's endless respect and thinking. In this material society, we will feel puzzled when we face all kinds of attraction. We hope we can make right choice as Nancy no matter how many obstacles we meet.

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