

Pettie Perkins

Critical Essay Assignment

The Dress and Address of the Female Characters in the Novel

Oliver Twist

English 333

Critical Theory

Prof. L Buchholz

The novel "Oliver Twist" is the subject of my analysis and was written by Charles Dickens. The women in the novel and how their manner of dress and address associates them with their societal class and status. Dickens portrays the women in this novel as not only symbols of how he views the society, but how he views the government at that time. The patriarchal society views of the women and how their dress and address placed them into particular roles and status classes and there was an actual place in society for women who wanted to uphold the Victorian societal social structure for domesticity. First we must define a few terms: upper-class, middle class, the working class, woman, and lady.

The Victorian society was divided into nobility upper class, middle class and the working class. The upper class were the Aristocrats, Dukes and other families working in the Victorian courts. The Upper Class were privileged with power, position, and better living conditions. The Upper Class designation was usually inherited from a royal bloodline. The Middle class consisted of shopkeepers, businessmen, bankers, doctors, merchants, clerks and etc. They, the Middle Class, "worked with letters and figures and wore morning coats, stiff white collars and top hats." (Picard) The Working class were those that worked with their hands or worked for others. There were the poor who were under the working class who working in workhouses or became household workers for others. "Lady" was a designation bestowed on the Upper class because it was the counterpart of a "Lord." "Woman" was used to refer to the females of the Middle class. The *Englishwoman's Review* and the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* were published for middle-class women to learn how to make home a "haven" for their

husbands. Later on in the nineteenth century, the terms became somewhat synonymous. "Early studies of women in the Victorian Era in Britain show that women were described as perfect ladies, well-behaved and with good morals." (Abrams) The model of 'True Womanhood' that emphasized a woman's need for 'piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity'. (Welter, 'The Cult of True Womanhood', p. 152.)

There are twelve women in this novel and they are all different and portray a different light and status in the Victorian society. The characters are Agnes Fleming, Rose Fleming Maylie, Mrs. Thingummy (Old Sally), Mrs. Mann, Mrs. Maylie, Mrs. Corney (Mrs. Bumble), Charlotte, Mrs. Bedwin, Monks's Mother, Mrs. Sowerberry, Bet and Nancy.

Agnes Fleming is Oliver Twist's birth mother. She was the daughter a retired naval officer and that carried a lot of status in this time. She fell in love with a man named Mr. Leeford. They had relations and Agnes became pregnant. Agnes went to a workhouse so that her family would not look down upon. The surgeon who attended Oliver's birth and Mrs. Thingummy did not know from where she came and admonished her in her passing for not having a wedding ring and giving birth. In Victorian times, it was not a great time to be involved in extra-marital affairs and mixing relations without the approval of your family to a man who was married to another woman and with child was not heard of and would lower society's view upon her family. Was it noble of her to die in a workhouse that was filled with paupers and not allow her family to know that she gave birth to a son is a debatable question. It looks amicable upon a family to take in a child. Since Oliver was considered an orphan and in distress at the first meeting, the

family wanted to save a child from the street life. To provide an orphaned child a home and proper Victorian upbringing was a privilege and that is what Agnes' family was trying to do before they learned that he was a part of their family by blood. It was highly favored when a child was given a better position in life no matter how the child was treated when they were kicked out of a workhouse and placed in homes to be apprenticed. Agnes' "shoes were worn to pieces;" (Dickens 3). The description of her shoes would make someone think she was poor; however, notice that her first and last name appear in the novel.

Rose Fleming Maylie is Agnes Fleming's sister, raised by Mrs. Maylie. A beautiful, compassionate, and forgiving young woman, Rose is the Victorian model of virtue in the novel. She does not have a moment when she is out of dress or ever portrays anything other than virtue within the novel. After she is summoned one evening by Nancy, she converses with Nancy like they are of the same stature and posture. Rose's age is told to be seventeen. She was well-mannered and intelligent. Again as we see, Rose's name is provided.

Mrs. Thingummy is also known as "Old Sally". Mrs. Thingummy is an old woman pauper who acts as nurse during Oliver's delivery. She steals a locket from Oliver's dead mother, which holds the key to his identity. This is the first time we see and address of a Mrs. in this story; however, this changes to Old Sally after it is realized that she committed a crime in stealing the locket. She was no longer referred to as "Mrs. Thingummy" after she passed.

Mrs. Mann is the parental superintendent of the juvenile workhouse where Oliver is raised. Mrs. Mann, "The elderly female was a woman of wisdom and experience; she knew what was good for children; and she had a very accurate perception of what was good for herself. So she appropriated the greater part of the weekly stipend to her own use, and consigned the rising parochial generation to an even shorter allowance than was originally provided" (Dickens 4). She half-starves the children in her care because she concerns herself with her own financial care instead of children left in her care.

Mrs. Maylie is a kind, wealthy older woman, the mother of Harry Maylie and adoptive "aunt" of Rose. She is the owner of the mansion and has a very high standing in her community. She has a penchant for taking in orphans.

Mrs. Corney is the supervisor of the workhouse where Oliver is born. She is callous and materialistic. She marries Mr. Bumble. Since she is already the supervisor of the workhouse, she does not allow her husband to take over. Since she has remarried, she still has status; however, she takes a package from Old Sally once belonging to Agnes, and sells this information to Monks. This small crime causes the Bumbles to lose their social station and, eventually, to wind up in the poorhouse they once managed. Mrs. Bumble keeps her "Mrs." because her husband is still alive and with her and they are both reduced to working in the workhouse that they made miserable for a lot of people over the years.

Charlotte is the Sowerberrys' maid. Charlotte eventually steals money and leaves the Sowerberry's home to run away to London.

Mrs. Bedwin is Mr. Brownlow's kindhearted housekeeper. Mrs. Bedwin is a motherly figure and that works in Mr. Brownlow's home.

Monks' Mother is an heiress who lived a decadent life and alienated her husband, Mr. Leeford. Her name is never mentioned.

Mrs. Sowerberry is the wife of Mr. Sowerberry. Mrs. Sowerberry is a termagant has a strong dislike for Oliver, and treats him accordingly. She also takes Noah Claypole's side in an argument when Noah was actually the instigator.

Bet is a prostitute that works for Fagin and also knows Nancy. The description that was provided for them is that "They wore a good deal of hair, not very neatly turned up behind, and were rather untidy about the shoes and stockings. They were not exactly pretty, perhaps; but they had a great deal of colour in their faces, and looked quite stout and healthy. Being remarkably free and easy with their manners, Oliver thought them to be very nice girls indeed. Which there is no doubt they were. [Oliver Twist, p.68]"

Nancy is a young prostitute and one of Fagin's former child pickpockets. Even though her background is and has been a criminal lifestyle, she is one of the most ethical and virtuous characters in the novel even though she has to change her really dirty clothes to dirty clothes to go into the aristocratic portion of society. Her noted appearance was only "replied by a look of virtuous disdain..." [Oliver Twist, p.320] "This allusion to Nancy's doubtful character, raised a vast quantity of chaste wrath in the bosoms of four housemaids, who remarked, with great fervour, that the creature was a disgrace to her sex; and strongly advocated her being thrown, ruthlessly into the kennel." [Oliver Twist, p.320] Because of her dress the servants of the household even

looked down on this character. "The girl's life had been squandered in the streets, and among the moist noisome of the stews and dens of London, but there was something of the woman's original nature left in her still;" [Oliver Twist, p.320] Dickens' words provide a character trait shift after Nancy and Rose Maylie have a conversation. Dickens has Rose respond to Nancy compassionately and it is something that Nancy is not use to because of her societal status.

As seen in the descriptions of the women some have full names and some have addresses to show their marital status and some just have a first name, Dickens uses this to show their status in society. Upper and Middle class women are addressed with a "Mrs." The young ladies that are considered as a part of the Upper class have their first and last names used. The women that are in the lower class are provided a nickname or just a first name. Using this separation technique provides reader to relate to certain characters and shows the importance of the character's worth in Victorian era.

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