

A Brief Analysis of the Character Nancy in Oliver Twist

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Abstract: *This paper delves into the character of Nancy from Oliver Twist, exploring the intricacies of her role and the nuances of her personality. Through an examination of Nancy's experiences, we trace the significant transformations within her psyche. This in-depth character analysis resonates with readers, illuminating the journey of a "female thief" who, although initially lost, ultimately finds redemption. Additionally, this exploration aids in understanding the societal context of her era.*

Keywords: *Oliver Twist, Nancy, character image*

1. Introduction

In Oliver Twist, Nancy's societal standing isn't particularly prominent, and her realm of influence seems limited. At first glance, she might appear to be a somewhat overlooked character. However, through Dickens's detailed characterization and careful plotting, Nancy indisputably plays a significant role in the narrative. A deep dive into Nancy's character not only provides clarity regarding the novel's plot development but also unravels the profound themes and emotional layers behind her persona. A comprehensive examination of Nancy's depiction is essential to truly grasp the essence of this masterpiece. This study seeks to lead readers towards a more profound understanding of Nancy's character, fostering a richer interpretation of Oliver Twist.

2. Female Characters in Dickens' Oliver Twist

Charles Dickens' attention to female characters is not an isolated focus. It's deeply intertwined with his upbringing, family experiences, and the societal background of his time. Dickens lived during the Industrial Revolution, a period that brought about tremendous change, but also highlighted many issues, including the unjust treatment of women. His novels are not only an exposure and critique of society but also a profound exploration of human nature. His foresight in portraying female characters is commendable.

In Oliver Twist, the diversity of female characters allows readers to view 19th-century British women from multiple angles. For example, Dickens portrays women struggling in materially deprived environments, showcasing their dignity, courage, and hope amidst adversity. On the other hand, women from the upper echelons, despite their material comforts, face challenges related to family, love, and marriage.

Such contrasts illustrate Dickens' deep reflection on the fate of women. He believed that women, irrespective of their social strata, should have the right to choose their own destinies. This perspective was undoubtedly progressive for its time, but through his female characters, Dickens depicts an ideal, fairer society.

Moreover, Dickens' interest in female characters is also influenced by his personal experiences. His mother, sister, and wife were significant women in his life, offering inspiration and motivation. Through his interactions with these women, Dickens recognized the crucial role women play both in society and family. Many of his fictional female characters are influenced by these real-life figures, lending authenticity and depth to his works.

Dickens' mother, a woman of strong will, deserves admiration even if her efforts to establish a better life weren't rewarded. Dickens' sister, despite enjoying more privileges at home, inspired him with her artistic talent and passion for life.

His wife was an indispensable figure in his life – a partner, friend, and muse. In Dickens' works,

female characters resemble her, epitomizing the resilient, brave, and loving women of that era.

Apart from these women directly linked to his life, many other female characters populate Dickens' novels. Whether they are benevolent or selfish, his portrayals are based on his keen observations of society and the times. He wanted to highlight the efforts of everyone trying to find their place, fighting for their dreams and lives.

In conclusion, Dickens is a "literary colossus", second only to Shakespeare (Cain, 2008: 1)^[1], his works present an authentic yet idealized world of women. Through these characterizations, he delves not just into women's fate and status, but offers a deep reflection and critique of 19th-century British society. This makes *Oliver Twist* more than just a great novel but a profound analysis of humanity and society.

3. Nancy: The Pure Starlight Captured from Life's Quagmire

When we delve into Dickens' original work to explore the images of "fallen women" who have been deeply eroded by life, Nancy undoubtedly stands out as a bright star, in sharp contrast to the portrayals of Charlotte and Bet. While external circumstances and her past might label her as "fallen", Nancy's spirit retains its innate beauty, kindness, and innocence, which is the embodiment of her unwavering "beauty".

Oliver Twist reveals the cruel treatment of a poor boy by various "philanthropists". It exposes the excessive brutality and degeneration of oppressors and their agents masquerading as philanthropists, and provides vivid descriptions of the impoverished and oppressed (Liu, 2007: 285-286)^[2]. Oliver, our young protagonist, repeatedly faced the adversities of a harsh environment throughout his early life. Yet, even in the direst situations, he maintained a heart of gold, never once being tempted or swayed by injustice. Nancy, a character in Dickens' *Oliver Twist*, is full of contradictions, which lead to the ups and downs in her life^[3]. Although her past and her surroundings tried to shape her into an indifferent, fallen woman, inside, she remains like a pristine crystal, radiating a clear and brilliant light. This resilient spirit is akin to a rock in a muddy swamp, surrounded yet untainted.

Nancy's encounter with Oliver was a turning point in her life. It illuminated the long-sealed aspirations in her heart for a better life, cleansing and rejuvenating her soul. Oliver's innocent gaze and sincere words slowly melt the hardened facade Nancy has built, kindling her yearning for a joyous life. As time progresses, this force of goodness took precedence in her heart, propelling her out of adversity. Consequently, Nancy chose to bravely step forward, becoming Oliver's steadfast protector, determined to give him a true sense of "home" at any cost.

This transformation isn't instantaneous, but throughout the original text, we vividly witness Nancy's journey from a silent bystander to a courageous advocate, ensuring Oliver's rightful happiness. All this emanates from Nancy's constant, benevolent heart. Her "beauty" lies not just in her appearance but more so in her indomitable spirit and relentless pursuit of a better life.

3.1 The Essence of Morality and the Radiance of Humanity

The Victorian era is considered the peak period of the British Industrial Revolution, during which the economy and culture developed rapidly. In the 1830s, Great Britain underwent a swift economic transformation, shifting from an agricultural economy to an industrial one based in cities^[4]. Given her environment and societal backdrop, Nancy's trajectory seemed predestined. Pressured by both family and society, she became an apprentice to Fagin from an early age, deeply ensnared in a den of vice and a life of crime. Yet, though immersed in such circumstances, her essence was never fully assimilated into that profound darkness. Much like the lotus flower emerges unstained from the mud, Nancy epitomized purity amidst impurity.

When Oliver first encountered Nancy and Bet, he could sense an inherent innocence in Nancy that was difficult to mask. The Nancy in Oliver's eyes, "though not graceful, had a blush on her cheeks that hinted at a natural simplicity and kindness. Her thick curls and not-so-neat shoes made her stand out even more." Oliver's intuition told him that this girl before him was unique at heart.

Subsequent events further attested to Nancy's inner goodness. When she discovered the true intentions behind Fagin and Sikes' plot to deceive Oliver back into their den of iniquity, her heart was overwhelmed with shock and remorse. The conscience and kindness that had been buried under years of dust awakened fully. She fiercely confronted Fagin and his associates, becoming Oliver's guardian

angel. When Oliver recklessly tried to escape the room, Nancy swiftly restrained him, ensuring he was not further harmed. When Sikes wanted to release the dogs on Oliver, Nancy bravely stepped in, doing her utmost to prevent the impending tragedy. And once again, when Fagin maliciously raised a club to strike Oliver, Nancy did not hesitate to shield the innocent boy.

Though Nancy's past cast a long shadow, and for a long time, happiness and a beautiful life seemed so out of reach for her, her moral compass never shattered. Whenever she witnessed the innocent harmed, she unflinchingly chose to stand with the vulnerable, offering aid without hesitation. This is her true self – the kind heart concealed beneath a fallen facade. It is the most beautiful part of her, and simultaneously, a brilliant ray of light within the darkness.

3.2 The Embodiment of Decisiveness and Wisdom

Life at the bottom rungs of society was fraught with peril and complexity, and amidst this stood Nancy, a fragile figure, battling daily challenges. Being in such a setting does not imply that her destiny was sealed. On the contrary, life's myriad challenges had honed Nancy's wisdom and decisiveness. Not only does she possess a kind heart, but she also demonstrates an ineffable strategic and quick-witted nature, which constantly allowed her to find slivers of hope for herself and Oliver.

Recall the time when, in search of Oliver, Nancy portrayed a distraught sister seeking her lost brother. She melded into the role so seamlessly, it was nearly impossible to discern the facade, indicative of how adeptly she leveraged her environment to confront challenges. Yet, this is merely the tip of the iceberg of her brilliance.

The most gripping moment was when she became aware of the imminent danger to Oliver, who was once again on the brink of being thrust into boundless darkness. An almost maternal love and concern drove her to resolve that she would save Oliver at any cost. In order to gather crucial information, Nancy dared to venture deep into the lion's den, meticulously disguising herself to blend with the night. Cloaked and donning a soft hat, she glided like a shadow over the skirting boards, deftly avoiding Fagin's cunning gaze and stealthily weaving through the dark recesses of the room to eavesdrop on their clandestine conversation.

To convey the vital information she had gleaned to Miss Rose, Nancy exhibited her exceptional intelligence. She resorted to using an opiate to plunge the ever-watchful Sikes into a brief stupor. Having eluded Sikes' grasp, she successfully met with Miss Rose.

Nancy, a woman radiating wisdom between the lines, is not merely a background character in Dickens' narrative. She is the embodiment of wisdom, courage, and strategy, a warrior in life and an irreplaceable heroic figure in our hearts.

3.3 The Pursuit and Perseverance of Love

Love, an emotion often celebrated for its purity, has a unique definition in each person's heart. In Dickens' works, we witness the pure and sublime love between Harry and Miss Rose, a romanticized portrayal of the emotion. In stark contrast, however, is Nancy's unwavering devotion and sacrifice for Sikes, a tale of love riddled with contradictions, conflicts, and sacrifices.

Nancy, a girl from the social underbelly, was ensnared by a tragic fate from a young age. A profound secret was buried within her: her boundless love for Sikes. This love transcended mere affection for another, representing a deep emotional dependency and yearning for warmth. This can be discerned from her words: "Even if Sikes were sentenced to death, she'd willingly loiter around his enclosure in the freezing snow, without a shawl, until her strength waned." This relentless devotion, almost bordering on blind fervor, showcases the depth and resolution of Nancy's love.

Yet, life was anything but kind to Nancy. Despite her deep love, Sikes responded with coldness and cruelty. He often brutally assaulted her, showing no emotional attachment and merely seeing her as a pawn in his criminal ventures. For Nancy, her love journey resembled a path strewn with thorns, filled with pain and despair. Still, she steadfastly clung to her belief that love was the sole anchor in her life.

When she learned of the opportunity to escape this agonizing environment and begin afresh elsewhere, her heart underwent numerous tumultuous battles. Mr. Brownlow and Miss Rose opened another door for her, one brimming with hope and opportunities. However, the chains of her feelings for Sikes bound her tightly. Unable and unwilling to let go, she eventually chose to return to the familiar, albeit painful, surroundings.

The most tragic culmination was yet to come. Nancy, filled with contradictions and conflicts but unyieldingly committed to love, was cruelly deprived of life by the very man she deeply adored. This not only mocks her perception of love but also offers a profound reflection on the societal context. Nancy's fate, intertwined with her views on love, undoubtedly serves as a pivotal chapter in Dickens' exploration of the intricate relationship between human nature and society.

4. The Duality of Nancy's Character in *Oliver Twist*

Oliver Twist is not just a literary masterpiece by Charles Dickens; it also serves as a reflection of 19th-century British society. Within its pages, the character of Nancy stands out as both an embodiment of contradictions and a representative deeply influenced by her societal context. Amidst the turbulent and transformative backdrop of 19th-century England, Nancy represents the myriad challenges and struggles faced by women of the lower classes.

To begin with, Nancy's upbringing paints a vivid picture of the quintessential urban life of the underprivileged in that era. The fog-laden streets, the indifferent crowds, and the bustling yet chaotic city life set the stage for her tragic fate. From an early age, Nancy found herself mired in a world filled with chaos, crime, and temptation. Those around her, including Fagin and Sikes, were not merely her "companions". They acted more as puppeteers in her life, ruthlessly using her, propelling her into one nefarious act after another.

However, Nancy's soul was not entirely lost. There remained an innate yearning for goodness and beauty within her. This aspiration wasn't a consequence of external influences but rather sprung from the depths of her heart – a natural pursuit of light. Even as life thrust her into its darkest corners, her spirit retained a measure of purity and brightness.

Yet, Nancy also played the role of a perpetrator. Confronted with countless choices, she chose compromise for the sake of survival. Deep down, she was aware of the immorality of her actions, but her circumstances rarely allowed her the luxury of truly independent decisions. Especially when faced with Oliver, "a pale thin child, somewhat diminutive in stature, and decidedly small in circumference" (Dickens, 1982: 4)^[5], an embodiment of innocence, her inner turmoil intensified. This inner conflict served as a dialogue between her and her circumstances, her destiny, and herself. She was simultaneously a victim and a wrongdoer; both innocent and complicit.

In summary, Nancy's character poignantly unveils the fate of lower-class women in 19th-century British society. Her narrative is one of survival, choices, and destiny. Each decision she made mirrors the challenges and compromises of her time. Next, we delve into an analysis of the roots of her benevolence and malevolence.

4.1 Roots of Benevolence

Nancy's character is a rich tapestry of contrasts, embodying both goodness and malevolence. Her profound sense of goodness wasn't accidental but was deeply ingrained in her very nature. Even though she was raised amidst crime and wickedness, her heart had always clung to an aspiration and yearning for goodness. This trait emanated from her astute discernment between right and wrong and her introspection about a past life that was under someone else's control.

Looking back at Nancy's developmental years, we don't see a childhood bathed in sunshine and warmth. Instead, it was cloaked in the dark shades of a life in thievery. Stepping onto the path of crime at just five, Nancy's life commenced in the dimly lit alleyways and under the looming shadow of Fagin. Growing up in such an environment, she quickly developed a sense of judgment about life, recognizing that her world was anything but normal. Even though she emerged from this milieu, she never accepted it as a standard way of life. In her heart, real life was meant to be filled with moments that are warm, peaceful, and radiant.

As Nancy matured, Sikes took Fagin's place, becoming the new "master" in her life. While the guardian figure shifted, for Nancy, she remained that same little boat, tossed around by the tumultuous waves of fate. Nancy never truly had autonomy or the power to choose. Her destiny seemed to be forever chained, always tethered to that realm of darkness.

Yet, it was precisely this life of manipulation and confinement that made Nancy value the scant moments of goodness and beauty in life all the more. Buried deep within her soul was a longing for light and love. Even though immersed in shadows, the star of benevolence in her heart had always

shone brightly, guiding her way. Her clarity about wickedness strengthened her resolve to pursue and uphold that intrinsic kindness she holds deep within.

4.2 Origins of Malice

In Nancy's journey through *Oliver Twist*, her involvement in numerous transgressions is evident. A crucial point to note, however, is that she wasn't the architect of these misdeeds but a participant thrust into these circumstances. This distinction is vital to understanding the depths of her psyche. She didn't commit these acts out of malice or personal gain but out of life's coercion and an inescapable fate.

Nancy possessed a fundamental moral compass; she discerned right from wrong. Yet, in the hostile environment she inhabited, she lacked genuine agency. She was deeply ensnared in Sikes's grasp, a man who once brutally harmed her, yet she paradoxically developed feelings for him. This wasn't a straightforward emotional shift; it was a form of escapism for Nancy. In a situation where she could not choose or resist, she opted for evasion: avoiding acknowledging wickedness, refraining from contemplating it, and even shirking her own conscience. This escapism, in fact, served as the root of her malicious actions.

When Fagin and Sikes conspired to exploit Oliver again, Nancy experienced a profound internal turmoil. She sincerely wished for Oliver to break free from this darkness and lead a genuinely happy life. However, when faced with their threats and enticements, even as the echoes of her inherent goodness screamed in protest, Nancy, for the sake of self-preservation and to escape the immediate tormenting interrogations, ultimately capitulated. She divulged information about Oliver to them, an act that was not just a display of her vulnerability but, more so, a testament to her perpetual flight from life's challenges.

From these incidents, we witness a Nancy heavily dictated by fate and long subjected to the whims of others. Her malevolent actions weren't birthed from her core, but from omnipresent fear and evasion, and the overwhelming shackles of life.

5. Conclusion

The name Nancy in *Oliver Twist* shines brightly like a radiant star. Under Dickens' masterful strokes, she emerges as one of the most captivating female figures in the novel. She isn't merely a fictional character, but a concrete representation of the fate encountered by many women in that bleak capitalist era. From her childhood to adulthood, Nancy's life remained tightly bound by circumstances and destiny, seemingly foreshadowing her inescapable tragic end.

Undoubtedly, Nancy's fate was a product of her societal backdrop, intrinsic qualities, and external surroundings. Within the confined and shadowy nooks, Nancy embodied both a victim and a reflection of many individuals from that epoch. Whether it's her resignation towards life or her emotions for a complex character like Sikes, Nancy offers readers a glimpse into a soul's steadfast commitment and struggle for love and goodness amidst dire straits.

Dickens' *Oliver Twist* not only crafts characters like Nancy but also mirrors the societal realities of the era through every individual in the story. From the pure-hearted Miss Rose to the cunning wickedness of Fagin, and the wisdom and benevolence of Mr. Brownlow, each character elucidates the battle between good and evil. This not only amplifies the novel's artistic allure but also provides readers with a deeper insight into that period.

It's worth emphasizing that while *Oliver Twist* presents readers with a microcosm of English society, especially in its revelation of reality^[6], critiques many dark aspects of its historical context, Dickens perpetually retains faith in human goodness. Through the novel, he showcases the strength of love and kindness to readers, aspiring for people to uphold innate benevolence when confronted with societal injustices and darkness, thus radiating warmth. This profound insight into humanity coupled with the pursuit of social justice encapsulates Dickens' core values as a distinguished literary figure.

In summary, Dickens' *Oliver Twist* stands not only as a sharp critique of its contemporary society but also as a timeless reminder. It prompts us to stay true to our roots, cherish the value of every life, and endeavor to mold a more equitable and kind-hearted society.

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