

OLIVER TWIST: A BOY IN THE CITY

By Doctor Ourida AMRANI

*A mighty mass of brick, and smoke, and shipping
Dirty and dusky, but as wide as eye
Could reach, with here and there a sail just skipping
In sight, then lost amidst the forestry
Of masts: a wilderness of steeples peeping
On tiptoe through their sea-coal canopy;
A huge, dun cupola, like a foolscap crown
On a fool's head - and there is London Town !(1)*

125 years have passed since Dickens' death. Many years during which his work has undergone several fluctuations. Various critics and scholars have attempted to assess what is authentic in Dickens' fiction or have examined Dickens' overt opinions about art, politics or morality. In our study, we shall explore in details what he saw and encountered during his own life with a professional conscientiousness. In the imaginative universe of **Oliver Twist**, Dickens chose the story of a boy as the subject of his drama, partly to retrace the unforgettable

experience of his early youth when he was to face hard times in the blacking factory, and partly to show the society with the intention of bringing to notice crying scandals of his time. Here, we shall treat London, The City of Dickens, and see how a boy, Oliver, is involved in it.

1. LONDON, THE CITY OF DICKENS

About the City, William Cowper said:

"God made the country and man made the town."(2)

In saying this, William Cowper wanted to say that, in the beginning, man lived a simple life in a natural landscape as Adam and Eve, but thanks to men, or because of them, the history of the landscape changed by its buildings and the constructions of its houses. We passed from the birth of the landscape to the growing up of the town.

So, the town is the universe where symbolically material and industrial civilisation summed up. London, the city of Oliver counted at this time two million souls, many chimneys of factories, manufactures, steeples and masts. James Grant, in his book, **The Great Metropolis**, writes:

"In those houses and streets there are no fewer than two millions of his fellow-beings, and yet of this vast number, though now as bustling as if this world were to be their eternal home, there will not, in all probability, ere the lapse of a century, be one solitary individual whose body is not moldering in the dust."(3)

These crowded people and things are a stock image of the city. They are all connected to one another without knowing it, and yet separated from one another and living in isolation.

"London is like a newspaper" said Dickens. "Everything is there and everything is disconnected. There is every kind of persons in same houses but there is no more connection between the houses than between the neighbours in the lists of births, marriages and deaths."(4)

In his novel, Dickens describes a very specific part of London, the squalid one, with its inhabitants, its swarming world of thieves and criminals into which Oliver has been dragged and where he struggled to escape, being a perfect stranger among this peculiar population. Depravation, moral vices, mere dishonesty, bribery, all are present and characterize the London of Oliver. The East End, the docks and the wharves of Southwark are minutely described. It seems possible to follow the thieves' expeditions step by step and to find their dens in the worst slums, like White Chapel, Betwal Green, South Holbourne. Dickens describes the wharves in these terms:

"Grazy woody galley common to the back of half of a dozen houses, rooms so small, so filthy... wooden chambers thrusting themselves above the mud and threatening to fall into it."(5)

These "Rookeries" as these districts were called, harbored London's criminals, petty thieves, professional receivers of stolen goods operating regularly in the metropolitan area. In the East End, at Stepney, the Jewish receivers had created their own world particularly well described in chapter 26. London was also specialized in prostitution which shades into promiscuity.

In this town, Oliver was confronted to the hard realities of cold, foggy London. He is submitted to the miseries of London, its hunger and its distress.

"Bleak, dark and piercing cold, it was a night for the well housed and fed to draw round the bright fire and thank God, they were at home; and for the homeless, starving wretch to lay him down and die."(6)

Besides its association with coldness and distress, the city is properly associated with drinking.

Drinking is a great vice in London, because poverty is responsible for this

"Drunkenness, as a national horror, is the effect of many causes. Foul smells, disgusting habitations, bad workshops

and workshop customs, want of light, air, and water, the absence of all easy means of decency and health, are commonest among its common, everyday, physical causes."(7)

London, as a monster contained within itself a destructive growth. Darkness reigned in the suburbs of London and death triumphed on the poor, chiefly the poor people who were looking for a shelter.

"Midnight had come upon the crowded city. The palace, the night-cellar, the jail, the madhouse; the chambers of birth and death, of health and sickness, the rigid face of the corpse and the calm sleep of the child: midnight was upon them all."(8)

The first meeting with death gave Oliver a feeling of repulsion. In the slums of the city, death is all around. The city becomes a huge receiver(9) for bodies dead or alive.

Countless passages in the book associated death with the city. Oliver never ceased to shiver at the thought of death. This image took possession of him and haunted him during all his life. Death becomes a leitmotiv all along the story.

"Oliver seemed to enter in a new existence there... Hard by, was a little churchyard; not crowded with tall unsightly gravestones, but full of humble mounds covered with fresh turf and moss: beneath which, the old people of the village lay at rest."(10)

When the city is the place where one is crushed to death by the walls and the crowds or suffocated by the *closeness*, it can be compared to a prison and its citizens to prisoners.

Dickens' London is therefore unforgettable. This town presented to Dickens' a picture at once so convincing and so varied that he took it for the microcosm of the world. A microcosm of the world and of life and in **Oliver Twist**, the boy seems a lonely and insignificant atom immersed in an indifferent universe.

2. OLIVER'S LIFE IN THE CITY

The novel whose celebrity was essentially due to the central figure of Oliver was a symbolical work which evoked the plight of a boy in front of his destiny. In setting down this story, Dickens showed that the situation of the boy at this time was familiar. It was the tragedy of thousands of young boys in England. In this story, the trouble began with a forced marriage made to satisfy family interest. Oliver's father married by "*family pride and the most sordid and narrowest of all ambition...*"(11) The issue of this union was Monks, but later, separated from his wife, Oliver's father met Agnes Fleming's aunt the issue of that union was Oliver. Unfortunately, while Agnes was pregnant, Oliver's father died during a trip to Rome, for his business. Just before he died, his first wife and his son Harry learnt about his sickness and came to see him and while he was dying, they burned his will which bequeathed most of his property to Agnes and his expected child. A few years later, when Oliver grew up, Monks found him and wanted to pay Fagin, a thief, hundreds of pounds to drag him "*to the very gallows foot*", and also, he wanted to buy from Mr Bumble, the proof of Oliver's identity, so that without this evidence, Oliver, later, could not revendicate his stolen rights and could not know who he was in reality. All of Oliver's life was oriented without his knowing it toward the discovery of a world anterior to his life, a life where he could recover his lost identity and the happiness he had never known. Although, Oliver has been trained to rob, he is not born thief.

Oliver's life is recalled from the very first day and since this day, he was confronted to all the vicissitudes of existence. Being born in a poor house, Oliver first was an innocent child living like a thing or an animal inhabited by a will to live. "*He is a millstone, as I may say, round the parochial throat.*"(12)

Oliver was alone in this strange place, and a sense of his loneliness in the great wide world sank into the child's heart for the first time. "*I am a very little boy, Sir; and it is so - so - ... so lonely, Sir, so very lonely !*"(13)

Thrown by accident in this strange life, Oliver has followed his destiny. He became a corrupted boy thanks to or because of the cooperation of many persons who surrounded him, like Mrs Mann, Mr Bumble, Mr Gamfied, Mr. Sowerberry, Fagin, Sikes, and so on... He was the prey of these selfishmen and women. He was exposed to bad conditions. In the workhouse, Mrs Mann treated him very inhumanly.

She is the wicked jailer of the house and ironically Dickens spoke of the "*Good lady of the House*."(14)

Starving the poor to death, was the usual practice in the workhouses at this time hence Mrs Mann's philosophy was governed by her own interest and greediness. She was a vicious elderly woman, speaking with great affectation. She was a mere hypocrite who pretended kindness towards the starving children calling them "*dear children*"(15) when Mr Bumble, the beadle, an overseer of the parochial board unexpectedly came to visit the baby farm. Further, Dickens gave the counterpart of Mrs Mann, Mrs Earney, whom Mr Bumble will marry further on, in the novel.

She reacted and acted in the same selfish manner, and the dialogue between Mr Bumble and this matron about paupers, was the perfect illustration of their narrow and base mentality. The second experience of Oliver was his "*selling*" for "*five pounds*"(16) to any man or woman who wanted an apprentice. The poor born child in the workhouse is then "*let*"(17) to tradesmen and manufacturers. Here, Dickens clearly stated the fact that one of the evils of society was the exploitation of a child. He presented Mr Gamfield, the chimney-sweeper, a cruel and insensitive master who admits that "*young boys have been smothered in chimneys before now*."(18) He is a mere brute without any scruple at the idea of a child's death, because of a hard and dangerous work. But no generalisation can be made as Mr Sowerberry, the undertaker is not seen with such a dark eye. Although Oliver has to sleep under the counter among the coffins, he is well fed and not badly treated by his master.

Here, "the undertaker, pushed him down a steep flight of stairs into a stone cell, damp and dark, forming the ante-room to the coal cellar, and denominated 'kitchen' ".(19)

So, the personality of Oliver was moulded in a sort, to the dimensions of this small closed universe where he spent his infancy. Thus, he was like a prisoner and he tried to adapt himself to the milieu. The black colour and the bad smells which reigned in the depths of the different houses he had lived, were part of his universe. They seemed to be the symbol of the wicked world dominated by the image of the wicked mother and the wicked father(s) here, represented by Mrs Mann, Mr Gamfield, and Mr Sowerberry. In these houses, the situation

was depressing. It gave to Oliver an additional dose of what Mrs Mann had inflicted on him. He had suffered a good deal and was perpetually black and blue by kicks and blows. This experience had a disastrous effect upon him and was to leave a deep ineffaceable mark on his boyish mind. For the second time in his life, he was brought up into direct contact with a world of suffering.

These early experience of poverty and want was no to be lost on the man Oliver. He passed indifferently from institution to institution "brought up by hand." (20) The most striking person that Oliver contacted was certainly Fagin, the thief. Oliver lived with Fagin and all the thieves in the reputed area of Saffron Hill, where the main occupation was the stolen handkerchief trade. Fagin's lodging where Oliver is dragged seems overcrowded with the ridiculous huge quantities of handkerchiefs as well with other small objects such as watches, purses...

"This world is wholly incomprehensible to Oliver. The exterior confusion of sights and sounds was matched by an interior bewilderment. Oliver's state of mind as prisoner of thieves in these underground interiors is usually that of semi-conscious anxiety. He has little awareness of understanding of his plight." (21)

Fagin was said to be taken from real life and to be based on the famous Jewish fencer, Ikey Salomon, although, we can now deny his affirmation, but this method of employing and training boy-pickpockets were standard practice and the way Fagin invented games to corrupt the boys was very realistic. IF Fagin doesn't manage to turn Oliver into a good thief, his pupils, young cunning boys such as the Dodger, Tom Chiting or Charles Bates bushing around him are real experts. Their job as it was described to Noak Claypike, the charity boy who took refuge in London, after having robbed his master, offered a rich range of activities from pocket-picking to house-breaking or other mean practices such as snatching women's reticules or stealing money from young errand boys.

Oliver, among the thieves is in fact totally excluded from the life of protected security he desires. Living in close relation with these pitty thieves, Oliver found the brutal force of blood thirsty criminals such as

Sikes, the house-breaker. Sikes has no human feeling and is more like a devilish creature. He is one of these *"insensible and callous natures that do become at last, utterly bad."*(22) Sikes will die hanging on the rope that he used to escape. Hanging is the inescapable destiny in **Oliver Twist** of all those who attempt to live outside the world of honest men. It is Oliver's destiny too. When in the book, the *"gentleman in the white waiscoat"*(23) predicts of Oliver *"I know that boy will be hung"*(24), Oliver, for the first time suffocated by fear and since that, he was obsessed with this fear of being hanged. Monks, Oliver's half brother will fall back into a corrupted life too. All these characters who surrounded Oliver show a cheeky defiance to law and Dickens characterized them as totally corrupted.

As for Nancy, the prostitute who lived there, Dickens isolated her from the other characters. She became the allegory of woman made victim and was quite unreal. If Dickens has singled her out, from the other animals for gentle treatment, it is because of his strong belief in the reclaiming of prostitutes women led to prostitution because of economic circumstances. Dickens had a certain respect for prostitutes because they were miserable and unhappy. In this corrupted world, all the thieves were in constant fear, not only that someone in the outside world will observe and identify them but that they will be observed and betrayed by one of their numbers. Nancy, the prostitute, was spied on by Fagin's boys. Her betrayal of the thieves was thus discovered and her death was brought about. When Oliver escaped, he was rapidly recaptured by Fagin's gang. During this short escape, Oliver had a brief glimpse of the world of honest people. His new emprisonment apparently was merely a repetition of all the interiors he had already known.

Finally, he was saved by Mr Brownlow, and when he awaked to find himself in a kind of world, there was an interval of unconsciousness between, followed by a period of serious illness. All his past life seems a nightmare from which he had finally awakened.

"Weak, and thin, and pallid, he awoke at last from what seemed to have been a long and troubled dream."(25)

Oliver had at last what he wanted. The search of authentic identity. For him, it was enough to find his parents or substitutes for them [Mr

Brownlow and Rose Maylie] and to enter into a paradisiacal state recalling the unity of child and parent in earliest infancy.

CONCLUSION

This study had attempted to trace the development of the life of Oliver Twist in a big city, London, and has shown the sufferings he had submitted. We have also given a description of the town in Dickens's Time. It has been a vivid picture of the bad conditions and man's inhumanity towards the working class.

Oliver Twist is the symbol of the oppression of the poor. It is a realistic description not to be taken as a document but as a reality of its own. London appeared with its winding and dark streets, but there was in the pages of the book a constant appeal to sensibility. Dickens wanted to arouse our feelings. There is a nightmarish atmosphere showing the grim sinister side of existence. As we have seen, the story was spent mostly in the slums and the holes of thieves and criminals.

Dickens' London, a too large inhuman city with its dangers is unforgettable. When he looked at the city, he had the attitude of a child and he had all the terrors of a child. He could look on ugliness, infirmity, poverty or death, chiefly death of wretched families, shivering with cold and languishing with hunger. The novel has been viewed as the transformation of the real world of Dickens' experience into an imaginary world with certain special qualities which revealed Dickens' vision of things. Dickens had a deep knowledge of life of the poor, and he did not conceal the ugly and sordid side of life. He exposed misery coming from the industrial society.

The big abuse in **Oliver Twist** was the 1834 *Poor Law* which proved that poverty was expensive to the state. Dickens wanted to point out that one was better fed and better off in prison than in a workhouse. Dickens directly criticized the social system. All the descriptions of the system and of London life acquired an undeniable power which met Dickens' moral purpose. He denounced in **Oliver Twist** the practice of the capitalist system. This criticism was made directly through the acting of hypocrits of selfish and stubborn characters. Such an issue was the working of the new poor law discussed in the first fifty pages with indignant irony or the vile treatment of paupers by the governmental officials.

Hypocrisy and wicked morals concern the top officials as well as the underlyings. It was an historical fact that all the corrupted parish officers were not turned out with the reform act of 1834. Hence, the unfaithful deposition of the obsequious Mr Bumble to the board where parishioners reached and denounced the bad treatment in the workhouse was as abject as the prearranged visit of the board to the farm in order to keep its conscious clear of all the abuses occurring there daily, just as he spoke of "*Mrs Mann's philosophy*." (26) Dickens bitterly describes the members of the board as "*sage, deep philosophical men*." (27) In describing the ill practices, of the board, the parish of the board, the parish officer's moral baseness, the egoism of employers, Dickens strongly attacked the utilitarian society and its legislative system. But the most striking image of life, Dickens gave us in **Oliver Twist** was certainly that of London with its worst districts and its corrupted population.

Dickens played the role of the moralist as he wanted to bring to light the close link between physical plight and moral corruptions. Many descriptions punctuated the whole novel. For example, the description of Fagin's den on Scaffron Hill in chapter XV:

"In the obscure parlour of a low public - house, in the filthiest part of little Scaffron Hill; a dark and gloomy den, where a flaring gas-light burnt all day in the winter time, and where no ray of sun ever shone in the summer." (28)

Further on, he depicts Jacob's Island where Fagin's gang tried to hide itself:

"In such a neighbourland, beyond Dockhead in the borough of Southwark, stands Jacob's Island surrounded with a muddy ditch, six or eight feet deep and fifteen or twenty wide when the tide is in, once called Mill Pond, but known in the days of this story as Folly Ditch." (29)

Dickens played also the role of the journalist. He created a convincing and accurate picture of the London underworld and to describe his natal town, he used the eye, the ear and the nose. The town

evoked a claustrophobical mood and throughout the book, Dickens commented on the loneliness of the city and its darkness. Dickens has a visionary power to describe the town in seeing it as a monster.

Oliver, the hero, was the profoundest expression of Dickens creative talent. He seemed to be preoccupied all along with an attempt to achieve an equilibrium between the being and the becoming of Oliver and his quest for selfhood. The story deals with the gradual drawing of his consciousness that he is really a good man, an honest man: he has found his foster parents.

On this vast subject about the city of London in Dickens' town and Oliver's life in the city, Dickens' main purpose is a moral one, going along with the fact that he wrote a so novel. His preface to **Oliver Twist** was very revealing of that matter and he said that what he wanted to do was "*to attempt at something which was needed and which would be a service to society.*"(30)

He wanted to improve existence conditions acquainted with social sufferings and wanted changes. His story contained an explicit and implicit teaching.

His christianity made him an optimistic reformer. Dickens was also a powerful satirist. Georges Eliot praised "*His power of rendering the external traits of our town population.*"(31).

Footnotes

- (1) - Byron, *Don Juan*, Canto X, IXXXII.
- (2) - William Cowper, *The Task*, BK. I, 1. 749.
- (3) - James Grant, *The Great Metropolis*, 2 vols (New-York, 1837, I, 19).
- (4) - Charles Dickens, *Works* Ed. Mrs Russell Barrington, 10 vols, London, 1915, III, 84-85.
- (5) - Charles Dickens, *The Adventures of Oliver Twist*, George Cruikshank, London, Oxford, University Press, 1970, Chap. L, p. 406.
- (6) - Ibidem, XXIII, p. 176.
- (7) - Collected papers: *The Nonesuch Dickens*, London, 1937, Vol. I, 157.
- (8) - Charles Dickens, *The Adventures of Oliver Twist*, George

- Cruikshank, London, Oxford, University Press, 1970, Chap. XIXI, p. 370.
- (9) - Charles Dickens, *Hard Time*, London, New Oxford Illustrated Dickens, London, 1947-48, BK.I., Chap. X, p. 63.
- (10) - Charles Dickens, *The Adventures of Oliver Twist*, George Cruikshank, London, Oxford, University Press, 1970, Chap. XXXII, p. 253.
- (11) - Ibidem, Chap. XLIX, p. 398.
- (12) - Ibidem, Chap. IV, p. 26.
- (13) - Ibidem, Chap. IV, p. 29.
- (14) - Ibidem, Chap. II, p. 6.
- (15) - Ibidem, Chap. I, p. 6.
- (16) - Ibidem, Chap. III, p. 24.
- (17) - Ibidem, Chap. III, p. 24.
- (18) - Ibidem, Chap. III, p. 17.
- (19) - Ibidem, Chap. IV, p. 30.
- (20) - Ibidem, Chap. II, p. 4.
- (21) - J. Hillis Miller: *Charles Dickens, The World of His Novels*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachussetts, 1965, p. 46.
- (22) - Charles Dickens, *The Adventures of Oliver Twist*, Preface to the third edition, p. X.
- (23) - Charles Dickens, *The Adventures of Oliver Twist*, George Cruikshank, London, Oxford, University Press, 1970, Chap. III, p. 23.
- (24) - Ibidem, Chap. III, p. 23.
- (25) - Ibidem, Chap. XII, p. 83.
- (26) - Ibidem, Chap. II, p. 9.
- (27) - Ibidem, Chap. II, p. 9.
- (28) - Ibidem, Chap. XV, p. 111.
- (29) - Ibidem, Chap. L, p. 406.
- (30) - Charles Dickens, *The Adventures of Oliver Twist*, Preface to the third editon, p. XI.
- (31) - George Eliot, *The Natural History of German Life*, reprinted in the Essays of George Eliot, Ed. Thomas Pinney, London, 1963, p. 271.