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Female characters in Charles Dickens's
Oliver Twist

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I. Introduction

This essay deals with female characters in Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist*. It will be looked at Nancy and Rose Maylie who are the two main female characters in this novel. They are very different characters who indeed lead completely different lives. This essay will argue the following thesis:

“Rose and Nancy are described as two female characters who are very different and who lead completely different lives. Through this the contrast between the two women is emphasised.”

It is interesting to see how Dickens creates distance between the two women. With Nancy, Dickens created a very complex multidimensional character: Nancy is shown as a person with many faces and various moods while Rose is a monodimensional character, quite simple to describe. Rose is a woman with angelic features and does not seem to be from this earth.

II. The world and surroundings of Nancy and Rose Maylie

Since Nancy and Rose grew up under totally different circumstances, their lives took completely separate turns.

II.1 Nancy's world and surroundings:

Almost nothing is known about Nancy's background, her parents, or the reasons why she is with Fagin and Sikes. The only thing that is mentioned in the book is: “I thieved for you when I was a child not half as old as this”.¹ Nancy has been a thief for Fagin and Sikes since she was a child not half as old as Oliver. In the following Nancy considers thieving as her way of earning money and her way of living. “The cold, wet, dirty streets” (Ch.XVI,145) she feels to be her home. Nancy lives with Sikes in a dirty apartment in a run-down part of London. She is the prostitute of Sikes and has to obey him in every way. This becomes clear in the scene in which Nancy wants to go out at night to meet

¹ Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Popular Classics, 1994) Ch.XVI, 145. The following quotations, if not indicated differently, will be taken from the same book, therefore there will only be indications of chapter and page numbers following the quotation.

Rose, under the guise of want for fresh air, and Sikes does not allow her to go. He violently prevents her from going (Ch.XLIV, 416-418). Sikes does not act as a friend or relative towards Nancy. He actually mistreats her almost all the time and he does not value Nancy as a woman or a human being. He rather treats her like his dog. Nancy works for Fagin and she has to thief for him. When Oliver was taken on his first trip with the other thieves, in which he did not participate in the thieving, Nancy is sent to the police station to find out about him (Ch.XIII,110-112). This means that she even has to take great risks and danger upon herself by working for Fagin. Nancy is not satisfied with her life and her work for Fagin. This is shown in the outburst Nancy has against Fagin: She calls Fagin a “wretch” (Ch.XVI, 145) and makes him responsible for the fact that she ended up in the street and in her job where she will have to stay until she dies.

Nancy does not possess anything. She does not even have a last name. This phenomena appears several times throughout the novel.² Neither Agnes, Oliver’s mother, does have a surname nor Charlotte. Charlotte gains her surname after her marriage. This shows that women in the century of Dickens, did not have any status until they were married. Since Nancy never marries she never has a last name and through this she stays a fallen woman without identity.

In contrast, Rose has a last name which will be explained in the next section.

II.2 The world and surroundings of Rose:

Rose lives with a widow, Mrs. Maylie, who took her into her house when Rose was little. Rose is the sister of Agnes, who was Oliver’s mother. So Rose is Oliver’s aunt.

These relationships are slowly revealed throughout the novel.

Rose lives in happiness with her aunt, as she calls Mrs. Maylie. She leads a noble life and is thankful towards Mrs. Maylie for having been educated and raised by her. She also enjoys a very high standard of living in spite of her actually being an orphan. Rose is obedient to her aunt and has never caused her any trouble. Mrs. Maylie even gave Rose her surname and with this she gave Rose an identity. Rose is loved by the people who are in touch with her and she is a very easy-to-deal with woman. Rose leads an easy life. She enjoys to go for walks in the sun and she spends most of her time drinking tea and chatting with her aunt and Oliver.

² Ayres, Brenda, *Dissenting Women in Dicken’s Novels: The subversion of Domestic Ideology*. (Westport Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1998), 116.

Rose has in her future husband, Harry, a far more gentler and worthier companion than Nancy has found in Sikes. After refusing to marry the man who loves her, Rose finally changes her mind, because Harry adopts his whole life to Rose's views upon life. Comparing Nancy's relationship to Sikes, to Harry's devotion for his future wife it becomes clear that they differ in every possible way: Here Harry does everything to get the woman he loves while Rose does not make it easy for him and refuses to take him the way he was, while Nancy is totally depending on Sikes.

III. Differences and contrasts between Rose Maylie and Nancy

Nancy is a very complex character and it is not easy to display all her faces. Nancy is made known to the reader in various ways and different moods.

First of all, the narrator shows Nancy through the innocent eyes of Oliver. When Oliver first meets Nancy he describes her as "free and agreeable in (...) [her] manners" (Ch.IX, 78).

When Nancy has to go to the police office to find out about her "little brother" she plays her role perfectly and brings home far more information than Fagin and Sikes had ever dreamed of. This shows how quick witted and clever she is.

From another angle Nancy is shown in her outburst against Fagin. Nancy seems to be full of passionate violence (Ch.XVI, 145f). In this outburst it is also shown how dissatisfied Nancy is with her life as a thief and a prostitute, how much she has to suffer, and how there is no way of escaping from it.

Very courageous Nancy appears, e.g. when she tries to help Oliver. Under great danger, even under the danger of her life, Nancy goes to meet with Rose and Mr. Brownlow. Mr. Brownlow is the person who took Oliver to his house after he had been caught by the police.

Nancy takes Rose and Mr. Brownlow to a place off the street before she talks with them. "I don't know what it is," said the girl (Nancy) shuddering, "but I have such a fear and dread upon me tonight that I can hardly stand." (Ch.XLVI, 429) Here Nancy expresses her feelings and fears and it seems as if she has some kind of providence of what will be following her deeds. Nancy is both, tough and vulnerable. Maybe she even has a notion of her death, which follows shortly after. Nancy is killed by Sikes when he finds out that she

has been talking to Rose and Mr. Brownlow. Sikes is so mad that he does not give Nancy a chance to talk to him again. He just comes to their apartment and kills her.

Still another aspect of her character is her loyalty and truthfulness towards her friends:

In spite of the bad treatment of Sikes and Fagin Nancy stays loyal to her criminal friends and she does not deny her dark history. This behaviour is based on her high personal values.

It is important for Nancy to be true to her friends and not to “turn upon them” (Ch.XLVI, 432). She is aware of the fact that she took the same courses as her companions and she does not want to surrender them to justice. Nancy even refuses the offer of Rose and Mr. Brownlow who want to help her to change her life and even present her with a chance for a new beginning somewhere else.

Her relationship to Sikes is not a very loving one. Nancy shows a dog-like devotion to Sikes and does not get anything in return except brutality and criminality. Nancy is aware that Sikes is not the right and the best man for her. Nancy tells Rose that young ladies like Nancy “set our rotten hearts on any man, and let him fill the place that has been blank through all our wretched lives” (Ch.XL, 376). This is pointing at the lack of love in their lives, and sometimes even in their hearts. It expresses very clearly how women without a name, without a husband, and without an identity are in fact without any value for society. There is left a “blank” space that has to be filled somehow. That is probably an other reason why Nancy hangs her heart on Sikes and clings to him no matter how bad he treats her.

Through her treatment and hard life Nancy seems to have been hardened. But she still shows very natural and humane features. The scene right after the recapture of Oliver presents this clearly. When the clock strikes eight, Nancy stops and remains to think of their fellow prisoners who have been caught and who will be hung the next day. Sikes calls her a typical woman who worries about things that are not worth worrying about. Nancy tries to hide her feelings in front of Sikes and reacts like this: “The girl burst into a laugh; drew her shawl more closely round her; and they walked away. But Oliver felt her hand tremble, and, looking up in her face as they passed a gas-lamp, saw that it had turned a deadly white.” (Ch.XVI, 137). In this paragraph Nancy shows compassion with her fellows. Here the reader does not have the feeling that Nancy is a typical outcast and a wicked woman with no feelings just thinking of herself. She shows great fear even though she tries to cover it from Sikes. Her hands tremble and she turns deadly pale. To cover this Nancy bursts into a laugh. Her strong speech does not reflect her inner feelings, which can

be seen by her trembling hands and her turning pale. It also points out how unsure and unsafe she must feel.

Dickens did a very complex work with Nancy. He created a multidimensional character and tried to present a good overview over Nancy's whole person instead of just presenting aspects of it.

In comparison to Nancy, Rose is a very flat and monodimensional character. Rose is the perfect woman of the Victorian age. Rose appears the first time in Chapter XXIX (p.260). Here she is compared to an angel and described as mild, gentle, pure, intelligent, noble, cheerful and happy. "Earth seemed not her element, nor its rough creatures her fit companions" (Ch.XXIX,260). Women like Rose were called "angels-in-the-house".. These are all aspects which do not exactly match the person of Nancy. Here is a great difference between the two women. Thinking of Dickens's time, it is not surprising that he elaborates Nancy's character more, being far more interesting for the Victorian reader, while simply matching Rose to the image of the ideal Victorian women.

In regard to Oliver Rose shows to be very compassionate:

"But even if he has been wicked", pursued Rose, "think how young he is; think that he may never have known a mother's love, or the comfort of a home, that ill-usage and blows, or the want of bread, may have driven him to herd with men who have forced him to guilt. (...) Oh! as you love me, and know that I have never felt the want of parents in your goodness and affection, but that I might have done so, and might have been equally helpless and unprotected with this poor child, have pity upon him before it is too late!" (Ch. XXIX, 265).

In this passage Rose really fights for Oliver and stands up for him. She tries to feel with him and through all this she feels even deeper how thankful she ought to be that her life and upbringing was so lovely and she expresses her thankfulness towards her aunt.

In regard to Nancy Rose appears to be like an angel, too. Rose's appearance as an angel is emphasised by the dark parts of Nancy's character. "It's never too late for penitence and atonement!" (Ch.XL, 375), Rose says to Nancy. Rose wants to save Nancy and she wants her to repent. In the passage right after this Rose asks Nancy to think once again if she was not able to turn away from wickedness and misery and she offers Nancy to help her to escape from her situation and her misery. Again Rose shows compassion. It is shown how gentle and kind she is. Rose is not in any way arrogant or an elitist, even though there is a huge difference between the two women. This is strengthened by the description of their outer appearance. Rose wears nice clothes and Nancy rather wears rags. The servant of the

hotel where Rose stays when Nancy meets her the first time, wanted to refuse Nancy to see Rose. But Rose just accepts Nancy the way she is and even asks her to her room.

These passages are convincing that the narrator is right to describe Rose as an angel. Her want to protect a poor, helpless child which depends on her or her want to lead a fallen woman like Nancy to repentance are all tasks and habits an angel should have.

For Oliver, Rose is like a sister: “Not aunt,” cried Oliver,(...) “I’ll never call her aunt – sister my own dear sister,...” Rose is the woman who taught Oliver how to love and how to be loved. She is very caring and loving. Oliver wants Rose to be his sister, which indicates an even closer relationship than an aunt might have to him.

Mrs Maylie describes Rose as “the perfect sacrifice of self” (Ch.XXXIV, 310). This expression underlines the description of Rose being like an angel. Even Nancy calls her the “angel lady” (Ch.XL, 375).

Rose does not seem to be very earthly. She hardly ever makes any mistakes or changes her moods. She is loved by everyone around her and valued highly by those who meet her. The relationship between Rose and Mrs. Maylie is very loving. They both care for each other and there is never a harsh word or a bit of wrath between them. This relationship is the closest Rose has and it shows a great difference to the closest relationship that Nancy has. Nancy’s closest relationship is that to Sikes which surely is not a nice one.

For Oliver she is kind of a hero, for others she is a helper – an angel!

Her function in the plot is to show a contrast to Nancy and to show the differences between these two women and how the surrounding has great impact on the way of life somebody leads. Here the motive of the angel versus the fallen angel can be seen. Rose being the angel and Nancy being the fallen angel who still has something “good” in it.

“Brass can do better than the gold what has stood the fire” (Ch.XXXIX, 369), comments a wise housemaid about Nancy. If Nancy is considered as “brass” by the people Rose surely is considered as “gold”. This sentence though puts brass higher than gold and by this inverts those values. By this inversion the text questions and complicates the ideal construction of a woman in this time. A woman should be judged by her values and identified as an individual and not after her outer appearance. “Society values gold and underrates brass, but brass has much more strength and practical use than does gold.”³ This means that society rather looks after the “angel-in-the-house” and values people like Rose more than people like Nancy even though a woman like Nancy is much stronger and a far

³ Ayres, Brenda, *Dissenting Women in Dicken’s Novels: The subversion of Domestic Ideology*. (Westport Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1998), 118.

more human character. She provides more courage and help than Rose does. Nancy even brings the sacrifice of her own life in order to save the one of Oliver. Both women like Oliver very much and try to save him and help him to a better life. Rose cares for Oliver but she does not have to bring a sacrifice as big as Nancy does.

Since Dickens presents Rose as the great angel and Nancy as a prostitute there is a great distance created between the two women in the text. Nancy passionately states: “if there was more like you, there would be fewer like me, -there would – there would!” (Ch.XL, 371).

Nancy knows how she ought to be but she also knows that she won't have a chance to get there without denying her criminal friends and she is not ready to do this. Nancy also knows that women like Rose are valued highly and it is probably the wish of every woman during these times to meet those requirements. Because of the fact that Mrs. Maylie has provided Rose a home, a lovely upbringing and an education Rose is able to be an “angel-in-the-house” and to meet the requirements of society, while Nancy has been denied by all of them.

VI. Conclusion

In this essay it has been shown that the two main female characters in Charles Dickens's Oliver Twist are very different and that they were created very differently in order to show and to emphasise their contrasts.

Nancy is described as a very complex character with different moods and faces. She is the true heroine of the novel because she gives her own life to save young Oliver Twist. Nancy stays loyal to her criminal friends and by this sticks to her values. She lives a hard life and does not get any love from the man she loves.

Rose Maylie in comparison is a very monodimensional character. She is described like an angel rather than a human being. Rose is loved by everybody and accepted by society. She is loving to everybody and she hardly ever changes her moods. Earth does not seem to be the place where she belongs to. As the “angel-in-the-house” she is accepted and valued by society.

With Nancy, Dickens managed to create a multidimensional character who presents a person as a “whole”. Dickens does not only show aspects of Nancy but delivers all her faces. Nancy seems very human. She makes and has mistakes and on the other hand she is also a person that can find sympathy by the reader while it surely is really hard for the reader nowadays to find himself in the person of Rose. This novel reflects very clearly what great impact surrounding and education have on the way of life a person leads or has to lead due to his/her background.

V. Bibliography

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