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## ‘The Blurred Mirror’: The Nancy Question in *Oliver Twist*

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### Abstract

Dickens’ early novels are replete with pictures of a squalid London life with its dingy lanes, shabby marketplaces and choking workhouses, which together put up a veritable spectacle of suffering. They mirror forth the drawbacks of a utilitarian society and the failure of the Poor Law in saving the orphans and castaways from going astray or turning into hapless preys to criminal gangs. What emerges from these novels is the sense of an unbridgeable socio-economic hiatus existing between the solvent moneyed class and the people belonging to the lowest rung of society, people who were considered beyond redemption. *Oliver Twist* very subtly seeks to explode this myth by allowing Nancy, a lowly and apparently insignificant character as well as a member of the so-called criminal community, play a pivotal role in disrupting the stasis in the existing socio-economic order. Gifted with humaneness rare in a woman of her status and possessed with an improbable desire to break free from bondage, she betrays her community and extends a narrative that runs counter to the ostensible motif of the novel. This paper seeks to explore Nancy’s role in dismantling the conventional social mores by problematising the term ‘criminality’ in the context of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

**Keywords:** Ambivalence, Community, Existential, Melodramatic, Humaneness, Discourse, Criminality, Otherness, Transgression

*It is useless to discuss whether the conduct and the character of the girl seems natural or unnatural, probable or improbable, right or wrong. IT IS TRUE.*

So wrote Dickens on Nancy in his 1841 Preface to *Oliver Twist*. The words carry the weight of his conviction as Dickens goes about dismantling the criticisms usually levelled against the 'realness' of Nancy. However, instead of fathoming her exclusiveness as a simplistic Morality paradigm of humaneness and philanthropism in a band of criminals who form 'a fragile, anti-social collectivity held together by anxiety, fear and mutual suspicion' (Pykett, 48), we will seek to project Nancy as an objective correlative for a different value system which is based on an apparent ambivalence besetting the Victorian ethos. While Nancy remains true to her identity as a petty criminal, beneath all her hysterical tantrums lies her desire to revolt against her community as reflected in her humane efforts to unshackle Oliver from entrapment. All her melodramatic antics, unlike elsewhere in Dickens, work, in effect, as a veritable ploy to manifest an existential spark, an unfulfilled desire for freedom from an inescapable reality. Nancy thus initiates a completely new discourse underscoring the narrative texture of the novel. It will be our endeavour to explore and unearth this motif from underneath the apparently melodramatic superstructure of the novel.

Dickens' early fiction which includes *Pickwick Papers* and *Martin Chuzzlewit*, is usually ambivalent about the interconnectedness of surface and depth. This ambivalence involves a whole body of binaries like externalisation and interiority, the real and the illusory, the plausible and the hyperbolic and so forth. Dickens' idealisation of humaneness has often been branded sentimental, especially in the context of the grimness of life in the dark underbelly of the Victorian society. Yet, even there we cannot overlook a sense of community, a collective identity, where such humane qualities try to filter in and help a whole body of relationships to burgeon and prosper (Williams, 65-6). Dickens' novels churn out illusions out of illusions and work out a discourse whose essence lies in a chain of melodramatic and often absurd incidents. This makes for a deceptive ambivalence of attitude which lends such incidents a curious doubleness of attitude, an ambiguity of sorts that in its turn subverts the apparently grotesque and melodramatic tenor of the theme itself. In this light, the common criticism levelled against Dickens' novels seems largely misplaced. However, we will return to this point later.

Very much a Newgate novel, *Oliver Twist* also falls in the comic tradition of subversive multi-voicedness, something akin to 'a comic-parodic reprocessing of almost all levels of literary language' (Bakhtin, 308). Far from being a bildungsroman, the novel is described as a 'paradoxical double-novel whose anti-narrative principle is as strong as its narrative impulse' (John, 136). It can be described as a blend of Barthes' 'text of pleasure', which allows for a representation of popular culture and the 'text of bliss', which implies a 'disruption of normal historical, psychological and linguistic set-up' (Barthes, 66). This amounts to a deceptive ambiguity, a 'genius of abstraction' (Marcus, 74), which permeates the thematic fabric of the novel.

This ambiguity underscores Nancy's role in the novel. Nancy is not 'exactly pretty', but looks 'quite stout and hearty', apart from being 'remarkably free and agreeable in her manners' (Dickens, 57). This studiously cultivated bearing and mien, added to her consummate skill as an eavesdropper and an expert in histrionics, bears out her standing in the community. She is a fallen woman, a prostitute to be precise, but the debasement of her standing is paradoxically wedded to two features which are unique in their juxtaposition, her love for Bill Sikes, her murderer, and her humaneness as she stands by Oliver through thick and thin while remaining allegiant to her community. This ambivalence has been addressed by critics and commentators in diverse ways, some of them uncharitable, some appreciative. Of the latter, one comment requires more attention than others. Michael Slater singles out Nancy as the 'only character' through whom Dickens seeks to explore 'female nature' (Slater, 21). Simplistically viewed, Nancy's femininity tends to redeem her status as a fallen woman. Dickens himself, in an authorial observation, comments that there is 'something of the woman's original nature left in her still' though she seems loath to 'betray a feeble gleam of the womanly feeling which she thought a weakness' (Dickens, 262). This dichotomy makes Nancy an interesting case in point. A woman from 'the alley and the gutter' (Dickens, 263), Nancy feels that she 'must have gone too far to turn back' (Dickens, 307) and thus betrays a pronouncedly deterministic streak in her nature, in this process hardly concealing a sigh for having knuckled down to the inevitable odds stashed against her. Yet she remains staunchly devoted to her 'home' which "I have raised with the work of my whole life" (Dickens, 307), the 'home' which, however, provides an ironic counterpoint to her efforts, "the cold, wet, dirty streets are my home" (Dickens, 105). To her, giving up her associates entails a breach of the community code, a transgression of the laws of collective community. Nancy is caught in the binaries of 'nature and nurture, self and society' (Hardy, 33). When Dickens speaks about 'original nature', he echoes the Victorian ideal of the 'true woman', who was deemed 'submissive, fragile and sexually pure' (Tyson, 106), in a typically patriarchal social order. If Nancy is able to retain vestiges of such femininity, especially in her attitude towards Oliver, she also emerges as a rebel. Not only does she act against her community, she also explodes the Victorian myth of a docile Other, an 'inessential' human being who 'never becomes the essential' (deBeauvoir, 18) to challenge the lopsided social matrix. The lacuna that existed in the heart of the Victorian ethos was the lack of a rebellious spirit and a defiance of authority which relegated the Victorian 'woman' to the role of an 'Object', and Nancy becomes the face of this rebellion, who exerts her free choice to stow Oliver away from Fagin's community. Her hysterical fits bordering on schizophrenia are, contrary to much of contemporary criticism, semiotic manifestations of her protest against the repressive social order. Her hysteria may be the result of extreme emotional neurosis, and at times tends to become overtly melodramatic, but it also tends to manifest 'transparency over privacy, expression over repression' (John, 109-10). The criticism levelled at melodrama as antithetical to the spirit of a novel (Hadley, 119) can be countered by the fact that melodrama often resonates with a carnivalistic spirit which is a pointer to the novel's inclusiveness of mass sentiments central to any art form. In this light, Nancy's outbursts are multi-

layered: her histrionics camouflage her revolt against society as well as her own community as both thwart the genuine right to freedom for people who are reckoned outcasts.

Nancy's predicament is that she is committed to her community; yet she refuses to be treated as an 'Object' by the co-members of the community. Intriguingly, her defiance makes for a 'refractive view of the psyche', which involves a 'decentering psychological approach' (Kucich, 381-406), thus problematising her role in the novel. She strongly foreshadows Martha Endell in *David Copperfield* though they are temperamentally different. She forms part of Dickens' agenda in presenting women, generally reckoned 'fallen' in the Victorian society, as individuals capable of rising above the mire they have been immersed in. Martha is fallen, and her fallenness may be due to her moral turpitude, but she is redeemed in the end when she is finally able to find a footing in the socially recognised class. Martha is perhaps the only 'fallen' woman in the pages of Dickens to have gained some sort of social footing and has escaped the stigma of the 'stereotypical' brand. Nancy, however, remains suspended in a kind of void she cannot escape. Ostensibly viewed, it is almost a passive, acquiescent existence, which she has been forced to accept, something which is not uncommon in Dickens' novels. But she appears to be in a strange conundrum, an inescapable one, which is aggravated by the binaries of her situation. Her passion for Sikes pins her to this abyss; yet she manifests a desire to escape, "... let us both leave this dreadful place" (Dickens, 313). This proposal bodies forth her desire for emancipation from the nether world, an extension to the centre of another entity hitherto elusive to her. It involves an ontological search for identity, a desperate search for the essence of her existence. A network of images more than adequately externalises her essential situation. Nancy's rendezvous with Rose takes place at midnight on the steps leading to the dark river flowing under the Surrey-Middlesex bridge. The atmospheric murkiness becomes surcharged with forebodings when Nancy conjures up a phantasmagoria of horrid images – 'Horrible thoughts of death and shrouds of blood on them', a 'coffin' suddenly looming on the page of a book (Dickens, 302) and so on. Such images, reflections of a fragmented entity totalise into her eventual murder by Sikes and finally into her 'widely staring eyes, so lustreless, so glassy' (Dickens, 318). The opacity of Nancy's eyes describes the draining of all interiority, but leaves a profound and horrifying impact on Sikes. The impact is impressionistic because Sikes interiorises the vision which pits him face to face with a reality, he is loath to recognise. The melodrama involved here deceptively works out the complex ambivalence underscoring the entire sequence of incidents. The vision of Nancy's lifeless eyes works out a complex ethics in Sikes, who even throws in his lot with others while being engaged in the humane act of fire-fighting. Nancy's death puts in perspective a kind of human connectedness that ironically underpins the brutality of a murder. Her eyes, while implying the frozenness of death, act as a veritable objective correlative triggering a whole sequence of actions which determine the outcome of the novel. Nancy's death is a milestone, a thematic crux which also sets in motion the disintegration of Fagin's gang. A member of Fagin's community, Nancy tries to figure out a zone without dismantling the community she represents. In the perspective of the time she represents, this zone is more a symbol of aspiration than a

tangible reality. That allows us a foray into the conception of this community which remains at the centre of the novel.

This community, which is at best held together by a common bond of criminality, is an interesting case in point, for at one level these criminals are social determinants who might claim a place in the Althusserian Ideological State Apparatus, an institutional representation in which everyone has a role assigned to them. Beyond any question of class escalation, they remain 'interpellated' (**Althusser, 41**) into a defined group of individuals (called 'subjects' by Althusser) who are yet related to the very politics of living in a structured society. They are 'subjects' because they stand in a fixed relation to society where they move in order to draw sustenance. It is a groove they are pinned to, which determines their identity. Seen in this light, Nancy works as an objective correlative, ready to wreck the determinism existing in the traditional class structure, waiting to disrupt this structure by helping Oliver out of this mess. This defiance of and efforts to escape the social tenets lend her something of the Sartrean status of a 'being-in-the-world' (**Priest, 178**). Nancy knows that once branded, she cannot overstep the stringent parameters of her class. Yet she does not hesitate to breach discipline. She is desperate to assert herself, even though this rebellion is aimed at emancipating someone other than herself.

Dickens' London is a space split into mapped out zones defined by rigidly stratified class ramifications. His novels present a veritable cartography: a labyrinthine space peopled with motley crowds. It can be called a palimpsest of images which never get completely erased, but keep on coming back in repetitive cycles. However, these novels often convey a similar import, which is one of confusion and uncertainty and often becomes symptomatic of the then Victorian malaise. Oliver loses track of his peregrinations within the squalid parts of London as he is continually tossed about and shunted from one place to another in the midst of the 'fugitive and the infinite' (**Baudlaire. 9**). He becomes part of a bewildering multiplicity which is paradoxically replete with a sense of confinement. There is the constant threat of being engulfed by a huge mechanism of unfathomable proportions, of losing his identity, and Oliver unknowingly becomes party to the activities taking place around him. The workhouse finds its parallel in the world where Fagin and his associates rule the roost. Within a hugely stratified space Oliver seems to have been interpellated so much so that he runs the risk of being stigmatised as a criminal without being one. It is very much in this space that Nancy moves about with a greater show of conviction apparently to get over the 'inertia of these limitations' (**Kucich.11**). Her ontological status has the same kind of ambivalence which can be traced to the thematic motif of the novel. Thus, Nancy voluntarily opens out to Rose Maylie, but remains loyal to her community. It is a kind of transgression which Nancy commits with impunity.

Human life is a strange conundrum: man desires death as much as he wants to live. It does not simply imply 'the rupture of the discontinuous individualities' (**Betaille.19**), but rather man's desire to adopt measures which amounts to death within life itself. This is a paradoxical and, in a way, fascinating wish to break free from the inertness and 'stasis' of isolation in a confined life. More than any release of tension 'whose release is felt as pleasure' (**Freud. 57**), it is a way of manifesting a release from suppression born out

of a feeling of confinement. It is tantamount to a kind of freedom which does not mean putting an end to the physical life. It is rather a kind of revolt which does not necessarily fructify into freedom per se, but consists in a kind of satisfaction in doing something better, which has not been attempted so long (**Fink. 35**). It is a drive for wriggling out of an imbroglio even at the expense of failure at another level. It is akin to the concept of the Lacanian 'death drive', which holds that we are 'not driven towards death, but by death' (**Homer. 89**), towards 'any experience, however painful', which is, however, freed of the 'trauma and void of the real' (**Ragland-Sullivan. 94**). In the Dickens world, such steps can be extreme to the point of being violent as the instances of Nancy and to an extent Bill Sikes tend to reflect. Her violence has urgency, a brutal assertiveness, which, while it transgresses the laws of her community, compromises them in many regards. In her support it can be said that Nancy does not adore her community nor does she expect amelioration of her lot. She never fantasises about a total transition from her state to a better social standing because she is fully aware of the impossibility of that venture. Her so-called revolt is against the total nullification of her existence as an individual who is capable of better and more humane things. At the same time, she has unmixed hatred for the upper-class gentry of her time: "...why aren't those who claim to be God's own folks as gentle and kind as poor wretches?" (**Dickens. 304**) Her empathy for Oliver is a symbolic manifestation of her desire for a release from the entrapment of her squalid existence as well as of her assertion as a person capable of such release. In Lacanian terms, she is propelled by a death-instinct which she prefers to being a mute sufferer. Ironically, it recoils on herself resulting in her death, but it sets in motion an inverted process involving Sikes's death. Nancy's violence can be termed an existentialist protest against a claustrophobic and deterministic world, a backlash, which falls back on herself to disturb the equipoise of her psychic world. Her instance makes *Oliver Twist* more than a melodramatic narrative or a typically early Victorian document. Nancy can deceptively simulate attitudes. There is a perplexing juxtaposition and contrast between her individuality and her interiority which impacts on others. On the one hand, her hysterics act as a perfect ploy to disorient her associates while on the other, the glassiness of her eyes after she is murdered by Sikes acts as a signifier for the murder of concealed passions and remains to hound him till the end. Nancy stands at the cross-section of two cultures: one, gross and corrupting, the other, upwardly mobile and ostensibly more refined. Nancy's attempts at liberating Oliver from her community are more than mere tokenism. Since she has willfully committed herself to this task, she has burned the bridges, and she knows it. She inhabits a limbo teeming with people who have lost their identity. Her appeal to Sikes for an escape to a better world makes it apparent that her surrender of the will-to-live is a cushion over her inchoate, but impossible, desire for a better social standing. But this point needs further illustration.

The *aporia* which surrounds Nancy can be explained if we consider her behavioural inconsistencies, which are symptomatic of a psychic turmoil raging underneath the exterior. This is manifest in her aggressive demeanour, her failure at reaching her desired point of arrival and her vituperative outbursts against her community as well as against the so-called mobile Victorian capitalist bourgeoisie. Her entire discourse may be attributed to the way she shakes off her 'defences' to distance herself from her 'daily life' and her

'history' (**Lacan.11**). This act results in a kind of psychic disequilibrium that affects the world outside just as it often threatens to be self-destructive. As Lacan puts it, in case of individuals of similar kind such 'aggressivity gnaws away, undermines, disintegrates' and 'leads to death' (**Lacan.12**). Here Lacan seems to have Freud's idea of 'death drive' in mind, in which a person betrays uncontrollably aggressive intents which often tend to become suicidal. Even though Freud's theory does not throw much light on the position of Nancy, there is little doubt that her acts reflect her abjuration of what we have called her will-to-live. This act is paradoxically a desperate move to give up her ways of life and live on her own terms, which entails an amount of risk to her life and her death in the hands of Sikes only accentuates this factor. She gropes for identity of some kind, an ontological thrust for coming to terms with life which has to be lived if she wants to return to a semblance of mainstream life. The fact that this hypothetical state is largely a mental construct makes Nancy's search for identity an improbable proposition.

Kate Flint, while speaking about what she calls the 'cracked mirror' concept in Dickens's work (**Flint.29**), refers to the way society can be seen and analysed from diverse angles. The Victorian class structure, with all its show of orderliness, was essentially a huge sham the way it brutally marginalised a segment of the populace. The spectacle is a study in contradiction as such. The so-called upward mobility advocated by the votaries of the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century society, was largely corroded by an undertow of squalor and corruption. Fagin's community in *Oliver Twist* thrives in a decrepit underworld, a veritable cesspool of ills of all kinds. Nancy is aware of this fragmentation as much as she knows she has to confront this reality in whatever ways she can. Her determination to protect Oliver grows out of her ability to juxtapose Oliver's reliance on her with her recognition of her acute lack of resources to make it happen. Nancy makes for an interesting case study of what can be called intersubjectivity. Oliver's helplessness rubs off on her to gauge her entrapment and eggs her on to go against all odds. Her tryst with death while she goes about her job has all the trappings of melodrama, but it posits her in the midst of a tumultuous change-over. In what a commentator calls her 'dialectic of expenditure' (**Kucich.89**), Nancy's hysterics are largely counterbalanced by the way she is able to churn out the 'human' side of Sikes, a longtime associate in her community.

This brings us to Nancy's murder by Sikes. Sikes is more brutally expressive than Carker in *Dombey and Son* or Rigaud in *Little Dorrit*. His murder of Nancy starts an inverted process. Though it is debatable whether this murder can be called 'more metaphysical, less literary and less morbid' (**Bayley.92**), there is little doubt that the incident prepares for a counter-narrative pattern which makes apparent how important Nancy's existence is in relation to a man like Sikes, who is given to violence. Nancy's death dismantles the predictable mores of her own community which stands affected, in however farfetched a way, by her absence. It effectively diffuses any singularity of meaning and brings about a change in the dialogic structure vis-à-vis her standing in her community because it does not involve two specific individuals, but ranges further to involve a whole body of community kinship. Nancy's presence is felt all the more hauntingly by Sikes because of her absence, a paradox, which can well be judged in the light of the Bakhtinian 'otherness'. Consciousness according to Bakhtin, involves a dialogism within the Self itself, which is reflected in its

interaction with its own 'Otherness', the 'dialogically decomposed or detotalized' (**Ponzi. 2**) part of its identity. The Self has its 'Other', which finds its expression through its embodied interconnectedness with the others in the world at large. Dissolution of the body is thus tantamount to a fissure with whoever was connected with it. Nancy's death, interpreted in this light, makes an indirect, but telling statement on this interconnectedness. It apparently severs her bond with her community, but keeps the dialogic process alive by placing it on another level. Sikes' attempt at escape after he commits the murder is as much an attempt to escape from the nightmare of the act as an effort to obliterate his identity, the 'other' which is embedded in himself. His apparently humane act before his death should not be called melodramatic nor is it a consciously redemptive act nor should we detect any ethical process involved in it. It is largely a psychological process, a terror unleashed by the frozenness of the dead Nancy's eyes. That insensate glare creates a kind of psychic disorder within Sikes which seems to strike at the root of his identity as a ruthless individual, an exteriority he has all along projected about himself, a hallucinatory form which is 'more constituent than constituted' (**Lacan.3**). The spectacle of Sikes being chased by a belligerent mob puts in perspective a fracture in the dialogic structure. It will be wrong to hint towards a total breakdown of the community he represents – he remains throughout an Althusserian 'subject' –, rather it mirrors forth a refracted projection of the glassiness of Nancy's eyes. Its opacity acts as a silent pointer towards the topsy-turviness in her community, the anomaly that problematises the generally accepted notion about criminals and the community they represent. Throughout her stay in the novel, Nancy can be said to have imitated death the way she puts her life at risk by violating the codes of her community, yet remaining within its ambit. This ambivalence underpins the entire discourse which lends *Oliver Twist* a different dimension than what usually goes with it. Nancy transcends all gender specific rigidities and places Dickens' novel in the midst of a discourse involving criminality and rigid class ramifications. Nancy's is a curious instance of self-sacrifice and philanthropism mingled with a streak of wistfulness for an escape from her inhuman bondage. Maggie Tulliver in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* sacrifices Stephen for another woman he loves. It is paradoxically freedom for Maggie who is spared a loveless life. Nancy, a member of the so-called underworld, remains in a 'limbo', outside the pale of the so-called healthy social milieu. Meursault in Camus' *The Outsider* lives on the fringes and nonchalantly goes to the scaffold as a disinterested 'outsider': "I looked up at the mass of signs and stars in the night sky and laid myself open for the first time to the benign indifference of the world" (**Camus.117**). Nancy is aware of the fact that she is beyond redemption in the face of the supreme indifference of the world which does not look beyond the accepted mores, the taboos which have got deeply entrenched in the social ethos. Her act of helping Oliver get away from the nether world is not any improbable attempt at class escalation. She works towards an end, that of keeping Oliver stigma free, and she succeeds to a large extent.

This brings us round to the central point of the discourse in *Oliver Twist*: the ambivalence lying at the core of the plot pointed up through the instance of Nancy. It is not the delineation of a 'fallen' woman that is the central motif of the plot: it is rather a rupture in the network of the band of people commonly labelled 'criminals' caused by Nancy's surreptitious efforts to help Oliver out of the quagmire rather than induct him



into the network and strengthen it. It is simplistic to state that her protection of Oliver was a redemptive act given the fact that she was initially responsible for Oliver's ill fate. What she does is subvert the process extant in her community: recruiting juvenile faces and grooming them for a long 'career'. Her protection of Oliver is a veritable example of thwarting such exercises and can be called a silent rebellion against the criminal hierarchy. There is an inherent implication of a socio-economic hiatus between the class Nancy thinks Oliver belongs to and the lowest stratum she occupies in society. She knows the absurdity of her being accepted as a good Samaritan should she give herself over to be subjected to penal measures adopted against her. As a prostitute (though Dickens never uses the word), she does not expect to fall within a 'closed milieu of delinquency' (**Foucault. Power.42**) patronised by the 'system' under which Noah Claypole and Charlotte turn into informers. Instead of trying to reform the 'delinquents', the system takes care to 'regroup them' for 'economic or political ends' (**Foucault. 42**). In that milieu, the idea of a rake being reformed through punishment is a chimera because in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century, crime was 'one of those fine arts', in which the criminal played 'a sort of game on equal terms with the police' (**Foucault. 46**). Nancy's refusal to toe the line of Claypole and Charlotte extends a statement on such a nexus which rests on a paradox. Nancy stands at a crossroads of complex choices: protection of Oliver, turning the tables on her own people and surrender to the nexus. She chooses the first one, and though she does not openly challenge her fellow members of her community, she definitely creates a split there by her act of doing something honest out of her sweet will. There is a hint of betrayal in her apparently transgressive activity, but that only betrays the existential streak in her approach to life. Nancy's desperation in her efforts to keep Oliver out of harm's way is the essential fallout of the selfless exertion of her will and determination to have her way against all odds staked against her in a world riven with anomalies.

Victorian England was an agglomeration of disparate cultures, where against the clout of the power-wielding machinery, prostitutes were poor women 'engaged in inappropriate (deviant) behaviour', and the same idea has percolated into the works of the later historians who treat them as little more than 'social anecdotes' (**Walkowitz.105**). However, there is no denying the fact that prostitution in the Victorian world was rampant though a large part of it was limited to the comparatively lower strata of society where women with dire financial condition flocked for survival albeit for different and often contrasting reasons. Just as some sought to break free of the 'pressures and strict control of the normative patriarchal family' (**Walkowitz.20**), some others tried to cope with the growing demands of urbanisation that resulted in a 'population of impoverished people concentrated in cities competing for what little low-wage work existed' (**Clement. 213**). There are graphic descriptions of street-roaming prostitutes who rubbed shoulders with thieves (**Mayhew. 273**), and took this life without qualms out of sheer economic necessity. In this scenario, it is not difficult to determine the stratum Nancy belongs to in this hierarchical order. She is reckoned a 'fallen woman', but in the mid-nineteenth century England, this 'fallen' status did not necessarily betoken prostitution. A fallen woman in the Victorian novels, though not particularly in the limelight, often proves central to the narrative. In a novel of 'recovery' (**Cohen. 17**), which *Oliver Twist* very much is, the fallen

woman often is responsible for the recovery of others though she herself remains terribly ‘trapped’ and her ‘fallenness is assimilated to the narrative itself’(Anderson.9) keeping her rivetted to where she is if not hurling her further down. It is ironic that though her recovery proves impossible, her ‘exposure’ pushes others ‘to their limits’ (Cohen.17). Nancy fits into this situation to a great extent. She is sometimes clubbed together with a handful of such ‘fallen’ characters who are sentimentalised, but that interpretation, very much conventional by nature, does little to throw light on her narrative. In a world split into highly segmented economic clusters, her efforts to fight for a just cause make for a paradigm shift in the commonly accepted notions about the criminal world.

It is a strange, but inescapable reality in the midst of a state of flux in a crime-ridden world where the inroad of utilitarian values has done little to obviate the firmly entrenched belief that it is impossible to part with a squalid past. It is difficult to overlook the irony behind Fagin’s utterance, “In a little community like ours... we have a general number one” (Dickens. 284), by which he implies the sameness in their attitudes as they remain inescapably part of their own world. It is impossible to imagine anybody parting company with this community, “so mixed up” they are “together and identified in our interests” (Dickens. 284). These words have clear echoes of Benthamite utilitarianism: “There is a natural harmony of interests: each person’s interest is part of the general interest, and the general interest is in each person’s interest” (Harrison. 267-8). Dickens is most definitely satirising the utilitarian doctrine through the words of Fagin, and the positing of Nancy in the midst of such a well-entrenched ideology clearly subverts its basic tenets. In *Oliver Twist*, the Nancy narrative foregrounds a discourse, a deceptively ontological discourse, which problematises the very concept of living an ostracised existence, more so for a woman of Nancy’s stature, who can little dream of going up the ladder, or, at least make herself heard. Suspended between the limbo she wants to desert, but knows she cannot, and the freedom she craves, but knows she cannot attain, Nancy yet emerges as the exception in her own closed community. In the Victorian world, women like her knew that their ostracisation was inevitable and final because of their profession, and often chose to assert themselves in whatever way they could (Fuchs.677). Nancy’s transgression of the laws of her community is a desperate manifestation of defiance. She dies, but her death affects her community in no uncertain ways. Sikes’ horror at the sight of her still eyes and his subsequent attempts to escape very much epitomise his own fear of himself as well as his attempts to escape from himself. Nancy’s words, “I have been true to you, upon my guilty soul I have” (Dickens. 313), resonate along the passage of his escape. The antithetical combination of ‘true’ and ‘guilty’ is particularly significant here. Nancy is unequivocally attached to Sikes, but the word ‘guilty’ leaves scope for ambiguity. Does she feel guilty of transgression or does she rue her decision to have adopted the life she has led? Before her death, she pines for ‘better lives’ for both of them and asserts with conviction, “It is never too late to repent” ((Dickens. 313). Nancy’s remark strongly reflects the condition and mindset of a section of the prostitutes during the time she represents. Their dominating attitude and pronounced self-assertiveness were sometimes a ploy to conceal the weakness existing underneath. It was often an attempt to suppress a fond past and a wistfulness that can never be revisited: their ‘days of innocence’ and their

essential corollary, ‘an intolerable sadness—a sadness which springs of remorse’ (Mayhew. 288). That leaves us in little doubt about Nancy’s predicament. In her desire for escape from “this dreadful place” lies her existential craving for a life beyond her scope as well as her none-too-suppressed revolt against the community she has been a member of. It is not difficult to miss the fact that Nancy is in a quandary: she is alternately confident, acerbic, considerate and sad.

It is a cliché that Dickens’ early fiction is all about workhouse atrocities, absurd situations, improbable plots, exaggerated emotions and a strange kind of humour ranging from the grotesque to the melodramatic to the pathetic to the satirical, something he used as an instrument to unfold the many layers of the Victorian society. Ostensibly viewed, there is a fair sprinkling of all these features in *Oliver Twist*, and the novel might pass as yet another document of the squalid existence of the Victorian underbelly. But the Nancy narrative with all its ambivalence and emotional trappings stands out as what Foucault called an ‘incorporeal discourse’, a ‘never-said’ (Foucault. *Archeology*. 27), which is but ‘a hollow that undermines from within all that is said’ (Foucault. *Archeology*. 28). It is a deceptive literary ploy which appears to cushion over the ruptures that exist underneath, but ends up exposing them. It is absurd to assume that Nancy has been able to explode the myth of criminality. It is equally absurd to take Nancy as a crusader against criminality. Working with the stigma of being a prostitute, she seems to challenge the established notions of the Victorian world about criminals. The very act of saving Oliver from being another member of that community disrupts the hierarchical order especially because she comes from the lowermost rung of that community. Her suppressed craving for freedom coupled with the realisation of the impossibility of its attainment can be said to be projected through her treatment of Oliver.

*Oliver Twist*, despite its melodramatic trappings and exaggerations, is in many ways Dickens’ ploy to explore the so-called Victorian underworld and bring out the rumblings among the inhabitants. The novel very subtly deconstructs the nuances of the life lived here and exposes the apparent disequilibrium existing in the stratified structure of this society. It makes a statement about humanness and the role it plays in dismantling the apparently rigid structure, mainly through a character who defies this order and from the most despicable position even in her community plays a talismanic role in giving Oliver back his rightful position in society. The hiatus between the two worlds exists, but the split is prominent, creating overlapping zones in which the dominance of Fagin as the kingpin is challenged and Bill Sikes emerges as a murderer. But there is desperation in Sikes’ subsequent actions, his very attempt to escape his own identity plays up the apparent disintegration in the criminal community. Nancy’s absence, more than her presence, leaves in its wake a welter of disturbing and conflicting circumstances, which, more than exposing this disintegration throw into relief the lopsidedness of the common perception of the Victorian ethos. The conventional idea was about a society split into two parts occupying two sides of a social divide: the staid upper middle class and the squalid lowermost rung. The gap was unbridgeable in spite of the upswing in the fields of trade, commerce and industry because many of the welfare schemes for the poor and the lowly were considered a

sham, a veneer over the darkness lurking beneath. There was a school of critics which criticised Dickens for what they considered Dickens's attempts to romanticise Fagin's community as an alternative to highly individualistic world of the so-called respectable bourgeoisie. To them, such a community did not exist as a group held together by a common bond, but as a group expected to be 'criminalised' (Musslewhite. 184). The fact that Oliver has been treated as a victim of the Poor Law of 1834 is further exacerbated by the stigma of being inducted as a member of the most reprehensible community and especially for his proximity with Nancy. Nancy's philanthropism in bringing Oliver back to where he actually belongs puts in perspective the lopsidedness of the social order and questions the rigidity of its class ramifications.

*Oliver Twist* is more than a typical social document. It allows us a glimpse into a territory where all spaces overlap, the social codes are rendered meaningless and a fragile structure stands exposed. But more than anything else, it projects through the struggles of an apparently insignificant and socially ostracised character the anomalies that underpin all the so-called melioristic schemes of the Victorian England. *Oliver Twist* is rightly not considered a social document the way *Hard Times* is called one, but it does offer a statement on one of the truisms about human nature and the question of identity: 'Dignity, and even holiness too, sometimes, are more questions of coat and waistcoat than some people imagine' (Dickens.233). The Nancy question in *Oliver Twist* is not about the futility of a humane, but lowly character, in her attempts to transcend her status. It is about the exposure of a social malaise, of the human tendency towards never questioning a value system based on crass class discriminations. There is a passionate intensity about Nancy's thoughts and manners, which singles her out from the group she represents. The sense of shame and regret, is yet mixed with pride, 'the vice of the lowest and most debased creatures no less than of the high and self-assured' (Dickens.262), when she defines her status in remarkably poignant language, "The poorest women fall back when I make my way along the crowded pavement" (Dickens. 263). Her bitter address to Rose Maylie, who was never 'in the midst of cold and hunger, and riot and drunkenness' and enjoyed the lopsided benefits of the utilitarian England, points up the abyss, the 'alley and the gutter', where Nancy has remained 'from my cradle' (Dickens. 263). Her decision not to abandon her community for the sake of Bill Sikes may sound unrealistic, but at another level, it points towards the intransigent social codes, which do not approve of the return of a person like Nancy to mainstream life. Nancy churns up these issues and raises many an uncomfortable question about the actual hiatus between the criminal community and the normal world.

*Oliver Twist* is more than a typically early Dickensian tale about a boy's passage through darkness back to where he actually belongs. Beyond its palpable setting, it speaks of a strange hinterland where all the social layers overlap and the anomalies underlying the class structure stand exposed. The novel, never considered a social document, uses the Nancy subplot as a tour de force to play up the rigidity of the Victorian class structure and the intransigence of the laws, ostensibly promulgated to help the cause of the working class. Debasement or moral turpitude of any kind remained an irredeemable vice in the Victorian

Age and beyond the jurisdiction of any such law. Nancy's philanthropism is an ironic pointer to such anomalies, but has little value whatsoever in a world riven by such contradictions. The mirror says it all; only, the view remains blurred!

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