

The Complex Progress of *Oliver Twist*: The Difference of Dickensian and Hogarthian Concepts of Life Stages

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In this paper, I examine some serial prints of William Hogarth called ‘progress’. The prints depict the moral ‘progress’ of the following characters: Idle and Goodchild in *Industry and Idleness* (Pl. A1-4); Moll Hackabout in *A Harlot’s Progress* (Pl. B); Rakewell in *A Rake’s Progress*; Tom Nero in *The Four Stages of Cruelty* (Pl. C1-4); and the young married couple in *Marriage à la Mode*. Each of Hogarth’s series tells a story that satirises the society and morality of the day. I focus on the relevance of Hogarth’s ‘progress’ to *Oliver Twist*, which is considered Charles Dickens’ first novel. As George Gissing explains, *Sketches by Boz* and *Pickwick Papers*, Dickens’ first two works, should not be regarded as novels:

Pickwick cannot be classed as a novel; it is merely a great book. Everyone knows that it originated in the suggestion of a publisher that the author of *Sketches by Boz* should write certain facetious chapters to accompany certain facetious drawings; it was to be a joke at the expense of Cockney sportsmen. Dickens obtained permission to write in his own way.⁽¹⁾

Since *Oliver Twist* is subtitled ‘Parish Boy’s Progress’, the ways in which Dickens’ novel resonates with Hogarth’s satirical prints is suggestive. The Dickens’ characters in *Oliver Twist* also recall the characters in Hogarth’s prints. As we can see common appearances in their works, we know that Dickens depended on Hogarthian techniques of ‘progress’ to some degree. However, it could be said that Dickens surpasses Hogarthian techniques by developing more complex characters in *Oliver Twist*.

In both description of ‘progress’, the nature of the character’s lives is suggested in the early stages of the work. In Hogarth’s case, most of the characters come to a degenerated end. *Oliver Twist* also begin by describing the hardship of the protagonist’s

early life. Hogarth's works are viewed as having elements in common with literature. As Fédéric Ogée observes, eighteenth century English novels often took a serial form:

. . . Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones*...were all originally published in the form of several short successive volumes and were all designed with a serial format—series of letters, of trips, of adventures, always relying on a meticulous dividing of time and plot into polarized sequences of significant moments, of cumulative chapters.⁽²⁾

Thus, the works of Fielding contain an aspect of 'progress'. They composed their stories of simple narrative. Hogarth's 'progress' contains the features seen in English literature more than in foreign countries' paintings. So, *Oliver Twist* should have something to do with Hogarthian 'progress'. Hogarth's series follows the lives of its protagonists, and from the first plate, their end is symbolically foretold. For example, the first plate of *A Harlot's Progress* depicts Moll Hackabout's arrival in London, where she is approached by a brothel owner (Pl. B). The image of a dead duck in a basket at the bottom right of the print predicts Moll's fate. By comparing Dickens' narrative style with Hogarth's, I argue the novelist also uses a predictive strategy to follow and foretell the progress of the protagonists in *Oliver Twist*. The device is partly seen also in *Oliver Twist*. To prove it, we have to compare Hogarth's 'progress' stories with Dickens'.

I begin with the character Nancy, who lives in the criminal underworld with Fagin and Sikes. In some respects, her life is similar to Moll in *A Harlot's Progress*. Nancy's words to Fagin reveal her back story: 'Civil words, you villain! Yes; you deserve 'em from me. I thieved for you when I was a child not half as old as this!'. She continues, pointing to Oliver, 'I have been in the same trade, and in the same service, twelve years since. Don't you know it?' (116) Later in the story, in order to find Oliver, who has been captured by the police, Nancy disguises herself as a respectable young woman. Her appearance is similar to Moll's as depicted in the first plate of *Harlot's Progress* (Pl. B). She wears: 'a clean white apron tied over her gown, and her curl-papers tucked up under a straw bonnet, —both articles of dress being provided from the Jew's inexhaustible stock' (89). Fagin makes her take a basket so that she looks like a normal girl. Not only does

Nancy recall Moll in the first print of Hogarth's series, readers can also guess her fate.

From the narrator's first description of Nancy's gin-soaked childhood, her life is obviously degenerate: 'Nancy, indeed, was not exempt from a failing which was very common among the Jew's female pupils; and in which, in their tenderer years, they were rather encouraged than checked' (190). Nancy's drinking recalls the young girls in *Gin Lane* (Pl. D). It shows the possibility which the fate of the young girls who are drinking gin is foretold by the image of a drunken mother whose baby is falling. This plate shows us that gin as a metaphorical item to demote human control and constrain the characters.

When we read *Oliver Twist* in detail, we cannot determine the fate of Nancy like those of Hogarth's characters. We can guess that her past is represented by her drinking, and her future is implied to be likely to be similar to Moll. Nancy's life is apparently orientated like Hogarthian characters. However, Nancy unlike Hogarthian characters takes actions of her own free will. She betrays her fellows later and is killed by Sikes. Unlike Moll, her life is not linear. She finds and visits Rose's house to save Oliver. After that, she goes back to the underworld. She loses her status as a villain. Therefore, Nancy no longer has vice nor virtue. All this suggests that the individual's thinking plays an important role in developing a story. Characters in this story develop in a more complex way unlike Hogarth's. Although we expect that she has something in common with Hogarth's characters when Nancy appears first in front of readers, this story confounds our prediction.

When considering cruel and violent characters, Sikes in *Oliver Twist* can be compared to Hogarth's Tom Nero in *The Four Stages of Cruelty* (Pl. C1-4). Tom's 'fortune is predicted in chalk on the balustrade wall'.⁽⁹⁾ When Sikes first appears, he has 'white shaggy dog, with his face scratched and torn in twenty different places' (86). The dog is abused by Sikes who continually kicks it. Tom also abuses a dog in the first print of Hogarth series. Tom's act of cruelty finally lead him to murder, and eventually, he is hanged at Tyburn. Sikes murders Nancy because she betrays him. After fleeing to the suburb, Sikes comes back to London only to find that there is no place there for him to hide. In an attempt to use rope to escape from the roof of his hideout, and Sikes loses balance and the rope coils around his falling body. Though Tom Nero is sentenced to

death, Sikes, who is not sentenced to death, is accidentally hanged. Although the rope in Sikes' story evokes Tom's fate depicted in the fourth print, Sikes' tale does not simply imitate Hogarth's prints.

As stated previously, when the characters in *Oliver Twist* first appear, the reader is given a hint as to what the future holds for them. However, they are more developed than Hogarth's allegorical one-dimensional figures. The characters in *Oliver Twist* have the power to control and orientate their lives, but Hogarth's characters, whose lives progress in a linear manner to illustrate a moral tale, depict a simple world of virtue and vice.

It seems that Oliver's life is different from the world of Hogarth's progress. Oliver's life is more complex, and, as a fully developed character, he cannot be reduced to one of Hogarth's stereotyped, flat, one-dimensional futures. Oliver grows up in a workhouse, an institution in which children experienced harsh and bitter living conditions. For example, a workhouse in St. Luke's Parish London accommodated fifty-three children from 1750 to 1755, but by the end of that period, all of them died.⁽⁴⁾ We can see scenes in which children are abused in a workhouse: 'a parish child who had been overlooked in turning up a bedstead, or inadvertently scalded to death when there happened to be a washing . . .' (5). Workhouse is a symbol of child's hardship. This institution seems to foretell Oliver's fate. Mrs. Mann, mistress of the establishment says that 'I'm obliged to keep a little of it in the house, to put into the blessed infants' Daffy, when they ain't well, Mr. Bumble.... It's gin. I'll not deceive you'(7). This passage illustrates that the degenerate conditions of alcohol and other abuse Oliver faced as a child does not auger well for his future.

Oliver subsequently becomes an undertaker's apprentice and again Hogarth's prints resonate with Dickens. The narrator of *Oliver Twist* states that 'an unfinished coffin on black tressels... stood in the middle of the shop', and 'Coffin-plates, elm-chips, bright-headed nails, and shreds of black cloth, lay scattered on the floor...' (29). Idle, a lazy apprentice in Hogarth's series *Industry and Idleness* in the third print (Pl. A-2) surrounded by skeletons, and sitting on a coffin, Idle is gambling with his friends. The scene foreshadows Idle's end, because the eleventh print depicts him in a coffin.

We can see the Hogarthian contrast of virtue and vice in *Oliver Twist*. Unlike Idle, although Oliver is in a bad situation at the undertakers, he has more in common with

the moral exemplar represented by Hogarth's Goodchild. Another apprentice, Noah Claypole, abuses Oliver and the latter decides to escape to London. Although many country people came to London to find a new life, like Moll, they quickly fell in with degenerates. Filled with optimism ('London!--that great large place!... there were ways of living in that vast city'(50). Oliver travels to London, but actually, his prospects are hopeless. He believes in the illusion that Londoners have better lives, but soon encounters moral dangers. On his way to the city, Oliver meets Artful Dodger, a member of Fagin's gang who takes Oliver to their hideout at Saffron Hill. The narrator describes the setting as follows:

A dirtier or more wretched place he had never seen. The street was very narrow and muddy, and the air was impregnated with filthy odours. There were a good many small shops... children... were crawling in and out at the doors, or screaming from the inside. The sole places that seemed to prosper amid the general blight of the place, were the public-houses... Covered ways and yards... disclosed little knots of houses, where drunken men and women were positively wallowing in filth (55).

This squalid scene, which evokes Hogarth's 'Night' in *The Four Times of the Day*, provides the setting for the tribulations Oliver will encounter (Pl. E) and *Gin Lane* (Pl. D), where is 'the slum known as the Ruins of St. Giles... The Pawnbroker, Distiller, and undertaker are the only successful persons'.⁽⁵⁾ Dickens vividly describes the social conditions of the time: 'there were children in the rookeries who no longer had parents to kick them. The young learnt early that crime was to be their profession.... Thieving, pickpocketing and prostitution were recommended to them by the mistresses of many padding-kens'.⁽⁶⁾ The course of Oliver's 'progress' changes again as his returns to the underworld, first depicted in the workhouse of his childhood.

After the living with the Brownlows for a month, Oliver is taken to Fagin again because he made a detour on the way and meets Nancy and Sikes. The circumstances leading up to the meeting are telling. On the way to the bookshop to return Brownlow's books, Oliver meets Nancy, who is looking for him: when 'Oliver Twist...was on his way to the book-stall...he accidentally turned down a by-street which was not exactly in

his way;...and knowing it must lead in the right direction...' (106). Oliver strays from the right path. Dickens uses the bookshop to represent a high moral standard, but Oliver is taken in a wayward direction by Nancy and Sikes. The narrator describes a setting that forebodes evil: 'The night was dark and foggy. The lights in the shops could scarcely struggle through the heavy mist, which thickened every moment and shrouded the streets and houses in gloom' (107). As the 'heavy mist' and the darkness of the night surround Oliver, the reader suspects that his life is about to take a turn for the worse.

I pay attention to the scene in which Oliver is shot because that moment introduces the next stage of his journey. Sikes forces Oliver to rob a house, but Oliver is shot by one of the residents. Sikes helps the wounded Oliver to escape, but he quickly abandons him. Fortunately, Oliver is treated by the people living in the house. Unlike the linear development of Hogarth's characters, Oliver again lives in a world where the borderline between virtue and vice is blurred. Oliver's character is therefore informed by descriptions that evoke Hogarth's prints and satirical ideas of moral 'progresses'. However, unlike Hogarth's characters, Oliver grows up living in two worlds. Although the readers can see the device of 'progress' in play, Oliver's story does not always depict the typical dichotomy between virtue and vice that Hogarth loved.

According to the Hogarthian dichotomy, Oliver was destined to live an immoral life because he was born in a workhouse that symbolises moral and social degeneracy of the times. In Nancy's case, her act of betrayal is not equivalent to Moll's decline in *A Harlot's Progress*. *Oliver Twist* opposes Hogarth's prints, which suggests a purely linear progress. This story describes a more complex world in which virtue and vice coexist. As with Hogarth's prints, the lives of characters are shaped by the scenes in which they first appear. However, Hogarth's characters are not empowered by their own wills. Moll's progress is destined from the moment the bawd seduces her and Moll does not contest her fate. Idle is not rehabilitated either, and, like Moll, from the outset, he is surrounded by images that symbolically predict his ominous progress. It seems that the things confine him in the underground.

The symbolic imagery in *Industry and Idleness* are telling (Pl. A1-12): in the first print, there is a poster of Moll Flanders above his head which represents the human degeneration, there are coffin and skeletons which symbolises death in the third print,

exile in the fifth, a collapsing house and broken bed which also the image of deterioration in the seventh print, and the rope hung from the ceiling that suggests execution in the ninth print. The metaphorical things keep him to live in the underworld. Dickens does not always describe a linear progress of people's lives as Hogarth does. Oliver, though his stages are destined by Hogarthian progress, goes back and forth between the moral and immoral world. Finally, he comes to live a happy life.

Finally, I will consider two symbolic scenes in which Oliver's life is not at all Hogarthian. The first is where Oliver is depicted between a bookshop and a pawnshop. The second is where Oliver takes a nap in Rose's house and sees a vision of Fagin. Oliver's appearance in these scenes at first recalls the Hogarthian dichotomy, and these resonances are captured by Cruikshank's illustrations of *Oliver Twist*. Cruikshank's illustration visualises the scene in which Oliver strays between a bookshop and the pawnshop opposite (Il. 1). Oliver's position is placed in a Hogarthian dichotomy of virtue and vice respectively symbolised by the two types of shops. When Oliver takes a nap, he sees Fagin over the window near which he sits, but the evidences they come to Oliver are not discovered (Il. 2).

In the scene in which Oliver sees Fagin when he takes a nap at the window, it is not made clear by the narrative whether the incident is a dream or reality. The narrator explains that Oliver 'was in his own little room....And yet he was asleep. Suddenly, the scene changed....There sat the hideous old man, in his accustomed corner, pointing at him, and whispering to another man, with his face averted, who sat beside him' (256). However, the dream, although an ambiguous phenomena, actually prevents Oliver from returning to the criminal underworld. The narrator comments that 'reality and imagination become so strangely blended that it is afterwards almost a matter of impossibility to separate the two' (225). Oliver's vision of Fagin is so vague that he is saved from returning to a life of crime. Oliver's life illustrates the crucial differences between Dickens' novel and Hogarth's prints. Though these scenes seem the typical descriptions of Hogarthian dichotomy, Oliver's next stage is not decided here. At last, Oliver is saved and lives a happy life after both events. Unlike Hogarth's progress, this story shows us both virtue and vice simultaneously. Oliver's present situation does not predict his end.

This story does not follow the Hogarthian storyline by making use of a linear idea of 'progress'. As Oliver encounters various situations in life, the reader cannot determine whether he belongs to a world of vice or virtue. Oliver's story consists of five stages. In the first stage, he is born in a workhouse and grows up at the undertakers. In the second stage, he is entrapped by Fagin and almost pressed into service as a pickpocket. In the third stage, he is temporarily cared for by Brownlow. In the fourth stage, Fagin and Dikes force Oliver to commit a robbery. Finally, Oliver is saved by Rose and lives in her house. In each of stages, there is a change in the situation as the story unfolds. We can see the Hogarthian device of moral progress in each stage, but the technique does not entirely control the story. Although, Kalicoff remarks, 'Dickens's novel indicts uncaring and dangerous social environments and the qualities of human nature that create them'⁽⁷⁾ like Hogarth, this novel is largely free of Hogarthian perceptions. The character's lives in Hogarth's prints have nothing to do with the will of the individual. The grim symbols of gin and coffins that surround them determine the outcome of their lives. However, the characters in *Oliver Twist* retain their individuality and take actions to resist the tendency of the Hogarthian dichotomy and linear lives. Hogarth's characters are simple moral stereotypes while Dickens' depicts more complex characters. They also act as if they control the storyline and develop a different view of Hogarth's prints.

Notes:

Text: Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

- (1) George Gissing, *Charles Dickens* (London: Blackie & Son, 1903), P. 43.
- (2) Frédéric Ogée, 'Aesthetics and empiricism', in *The Dumb Show*, ed. by Frédéric Ogée (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1997), P. 183.
- (3) Roland Paulson, *Hogarth's Graphic Works* (London: The Print Room, 1989), p. 149.
- (4) Liza Picard, Dr. *Johnson's London* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2000), P. 98.
- (5) Paulson, p. 147.
- (6) Donald Thomas, *The Victorian Underworld* (London: John Murray Ltd, 1998), P. 47.
- (7) Beth Kalicoff, *Murder and Moral Decay in Victorian Popular Literature* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1986), P. 50.



[A-2]



[A-4]



[A-1]



[A-3]



[B] The first plate of *Harlot's Progress*



[C-1] First



[C-2] Second



[C-3] Cruelty in Perfection



[C-4] Reward of Cruelty



[D] *Gin Lane*



[E] 'Night' of the Four times of the Day



II - 1



II - 2