

“The Mischievous Ambiguity of the Word ‘Poor’”: Classification and Control in *Oliver Twist* and the New Poor Law

The New Poor Law of 1834 was strongly informed by an “overriding desire to classify and segregate”.¹ The triumvirate of Commissioners, who *The Times* referred to as ‘The Three Bashaws of Somerset House’, sought to target those who would “avail themselves of the mischievous ambiguity of the word *poor*”², namely the able-bodied unemployed, or ‘undeserving poor’ and punish them by a suspension of their rights. They were to be segregated both spatially, by enclosure in the workhouse, and morally, through a new taxonomy that would seek to stratify society.

Despite its name, the New Poor Law’s aim was not to eradicate poverty, rather to clearly demarcate the emerging middle classes from those either unwilling or unable to work. Indeed, the Royal Commission’s report stated that the Act was “intended to produce rather negative than positive effects”³ This was achieved through a Benthamite system of depersonalising bureaucracy, which sought to consider the indigent poor as a class, rather than as individuals. No case was viewed as being different from any other and personal circumstances would not be taken into account when deciding on relief. As Hadley writes, the workhouse test those applying for relief were forced to undergo was designed to reveal the true class, rather than true character of the individual.⁴

The fact that most labourers could expect to be indigent at some stage of their lives gave this class a shifting, protean characteristic which unsettled their social betters. Lees identifies the middle classes view of the poor as “strangers who menace the respectable through their disorderly lives.”⁵ The middle classes, on the other hand, presented no threat to the established order, and, what Perkin refers to as the “apotheosis of the entrepreneurial ideal”⁶, ensured that their position was secure. The then Prime Minister, Lord Grey, gave them a personal endorsement by suggesting that they should “associate the middle with the higher orders of society”⁷

This philosophy was cemented by the Reform Act of 1832 which enfranchised the £10 householders. Thompson sees this as the Whigs “driving a wedge between middle and working classes, buying off one with votes and representation and leaving the other isolated and weak, outside the pale.”⁸ Prior to 1832, social legislation, such as the

1 Furneaux, H. (2005). "Worrying to Death" - Reinterpreting Dickens, Critique of the New Poor Law in *Oliver Twist* and Contemporary Adaptations." *The Dickensian* 101: 213-224, p213

2 Great Britain Poor Law Commission, S. G. Checkland, et al. (1974). *The Poor Law Report of 1834*. Harmondsworth, Penguin, p395

3 Checkland, p341

4 Hadley, p92

5 Lees, p133

6 Perkin, p225

7 Thompson, p16

8 Thompson, F. M. L. and L. Francis Michael (1988). *The Rise of Respectable Society - a Social History of Victorian Britain, 1830-1900*. London, Fontana, p16

Factory Acts, sought to improve the conditions of the poor; the Reform Act, however, marked a watershed where Parliament sought to marginalise and then punish those who did not share middle-class values. Brundage argues that the new law was a way of maintaining the social and economic power of the landed elite.⁹

Dickens wrote *Oliver Twist* in 1837, just as the New Poor Law was being implemented in Southern England. Like many other authors, including Fanny Trollope, who referred to it as an “ill-digested law,”¹⁰ he was deeply concerned by the fact that the Act sought to replace moral values with economic ones – self-sufficiency becoming more important than inherent goodness. He vowed to oppose it “to the death”¹¹ and indeed continued attacking it in *Our Mutual Friend* nearly 30 years later. *Oliver Twist* formed a key part of the canon of anti-Poor Law literature. *The Times*, vehemently opposed to the Act, published the opening chapters in their entirety as part of their campaign to expose the inequity of the new legislation. Its editor, John Walter, and Dickens were alarmed by the new philosophy that viewed poverty as a crime and sought to imprison those who were, like Trotty Veck, ‘a little behind-hand with the world’.

As Collins identifies, the prison “haunted [Dickens] like a passion”¹² His own inauspicious beginnings as the son of a Marshalsea debtor meant that he was preoccupied both with liberty and class, themes which dominate his novels. This led to Bagehot dismissing him as a “sentimental radical”, although Ackroyd counters that “he was a radical by reason of his own position in society, and his own determination to transcend it.”¹³ By making a child the focus of *Oliver Twist* he is able to explore how one finds a sense of self in an uncertain world where one is at the mercy of “the system”. [improve]

This paper will consider the modes of spatial and moral classification employed by the New Poor Law and the methods of control, including geography and architecture, adopted in order to maintain the system. It will also discuss how Dickens explores these themes in *Oliver Twist* and elsewhere and argue that he often reinforces the ideas and middle-class values on which they are predicated.

Although the Poor Law Commissioners sought to remove the “mischievous ambiguity of the word *poor*, they were less than consistent in the Report, repeatedly using the word ‘poor’ when they meant ‘pauper’. The labouring classes were far more fragmented than the upper echelons of society, and seasonal work meant that they could exist in a continuing cycle of subsistence and indigence. The Commissioners believed that by defining terms such as the “deserving poor” and the “undeserving poor”, they would force those seeking relief to choose which side they were on. Assistance would be provided only to those who submitted to the classification of “pauper”, thereby rescinding their freedom. The Poor Law guardians would, in Foucauldian terms, seek to

9 Brundage

10 Trollope, F. (2006). Jessie Phillips. Stroud, Nonsuch Publishing, p324

11 House, Madeline, and Storey, Graham (1965), Vol.1 of *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, Oxford, Clarendon, p545

12 Collins, p?

13 Ackroyd, p137

impose a normalising judgement, which would define their actions as abnormal and socially unacceptable. The threat of being thus categorised was supposed to regulate the able-bodied unemployed who exercised “an unclassifiable and thus dangerous temperamental independence.”¹⁴

Upon arrival into the world, Oliver is immediately classified as a bastard when the surgeon notes the lack of a wedding ring on his mother’s finger. Despite the fact that “it would have been hard for the haughtiest stranger to have assigned him his proper station in society,” his inauspicious birth ensures he is “badged and ticketed” as a pauper. Throughout the novel, there is conflict between characters who wish to reclassify him, and he is subjected to “incessant examination”¹⁵, reminiscent of the workhouse test. Connor argues that Brownlow and Monks compete to produce different narratives for Oliver.¹⁶ He passively accepts his different identities of Twist, White and Leeford as he is shuttled between different worlds.

This desire to classify was strongly characteristic of Bentham’s philosophy of Utilitarianism, which Disraeli referred to as ‘Brutilitarianism’.¹⁷ Bentham’s method of dealing with any problem of government or society was: “inquiry – report – legislation – administration – inspection.”¹⁸ Dickens was highly critical of such methods and parodies the practitioners by ironical referring to the Poor Law guardian as “very sage, deep, philosophical men”¹⁹, and describing the callous Mrs Mann as “a very great experimental philosopher”²⁰ Contrary to Bentham, he suggests both in the novel itself and in the postscript that social change should be effected through appealing to the moral senses, rather than by the establishment of bureaucratic institutions. Gissing felt that “we are made to perceive that, more often than not, ‘the law is an ass,’ and its proceedings invalid in the court of conscience.”²¹

Bentham was renowned for his obsession with facts and John Stuart Mill once rebuked him for being interested only in the question “Is it true?”²² Dickens answers him in the preface to *Oliver Twist*, suffixing his defence of Nancy’s character with the assertion that ‘IT IS TRUE’.²³ He abhorred this scientific view of the poor and addressed it throughout his writing. Mr Filer in *The Chimes* reduces the poor’s lack of entitlement to a “mathematical certainty”²⁴ and they are described as “mere scratches” in his calculations.

14 Hadley, p95

15 Miller, p?

16 Connor, S. (1989). "They're All in One Story: Public and Private Narratives in *Oliver Twist*." *Dickensian* 85: 3-16.

17 Newcome, p57

18 Perkin, p269

19 Dickens (1998), p10

20 Dickens (1998), p4

21 Dickens, C. (2004). *Oliver Twist*. New York, Norton, p422

22 Himmelfarb (1984), p9

23 Dickens (1966), pLVII

24 Dickens (1998), p113

²⁵ In *A Christmas Carol* the Ghost enquires of Scrooge “Will you decide what men shall live, what men shall die?”²⁶ He taunts him with earlier declaration that the poor should be consigned to prison or the workhouse. After his epiphany, Scrooge is convinced of the merits of paternalism, as opposed to institutional regulation of the poor.

The underlying theory of Utilitarianism was the Greatest Happiness of the Greatest Number, which suggested that if everyone were allowed to pursue their own path of happiness without state intervention, then general happiness would follow. Dickens examines the fallacies of this belief and demonstrates the ramifications of the Philosophy of Number One for Fagin’s gang. Putting himself first works in Fagin’s favour in so far as he survives Nancy and Sikes, but it doesn’t prevent his eventual demise. Connor discusses the parallels between the Utilitarians and the criminal underworld:

Both parties redefine terms as a means of maintaining (an illusion of) power over their referents. The motivation behind the thieves’ invention of a multiplicity of synonyms for hanging and death, which allowed them to preserve both psychological distance from and control over the concept, is identical to that impulse of the newly created boards of guardians to classify and segregate the poor, rendering them ‘safe’ through labelling.²⁷

One of the tenets of Utilitarianism was that “men become at length what they are forced to seem to be”²⁸ and this theme of determinism is a prevalent theme in *Oliver Twist*. The very name given to Oliver by Bumble indicates that he is doomed, ‘Twist’ being slang for hanging.²⁹ This is reinforced when the man in the white waistcoat declares “that boy will be hung.”³⁰ Indeed, the fact that he is taken away by Mr Sowerberry, the undertaker, suggests that he is as good as dead. The Sowerberrys’ servant, Charlotte, proclaims that Oliver’s type are “born to be murderers and robbers from their very cradle”³¹ and Grimwig hopes that Oliver won’t return from his errand to Mr Brownlow’s bookseller in order that his prejudices might be confirmed.

However, Brownlow seems to have a sense that Oliver is inherently good and declares that “there is something in that boy’s face.”³² Fagin can also discern it and attributes his ineptitude at thievery to this characteristic. He is “the Principle of Good surviving through every adverse circumstance” [find ref] Apart from Oliver, “characters are either appallingly comfortable with their roles or pathetically resigned to them.”³³ Nancy

25 Dickens (1998), p171

26 Dickens (1998), p58

27 Furneaux, p222

28 Hadley, p70

29 OED

30 Dickens (1998), p12

31 Dickens (1998), p47

32 Dickens (1998), p77

33 Miller, p5

proclaims “I am chained to my old life”³⁴ when Mr Brownlow exhorts her to start a new life. This fatalistic approach is echoed in *The Chimes*, where Trotty Veck declares “There is no good in us. We are born bad!”³⁵ and his New Year’s Eve dream realises Mr Filer’s prognosis that failure to adhere to Utilitarian principles will result in misery. Miller argues that “Dickens sees a coercive system where it was traditional only to see bad morals.”³⁶

Aside from the formal or philosophical approach, Hadley writes of this classificatory impulse being manifest also in the class-denominated theatres, with “spectators dispersed throughout the pit, boxes, and galleries according to their economic worth.”³⁷ Despite Dickens’ sympathy for Oliver’s plight, he fiercely denounced John Overs’ criticism of the class segregation at the Covent Garden theatre where he had helped him get a position as an odd job man. Dickens charged him with having “shewn a deficiency of that moral sense” and losing sight of his “true position”.³⁸

This spatial classification extended beyond the theatre. The move from an agrarian to an industrialised economy had led to a high concentration of the poor in urban areas, thus rendering them more conspicuous. Despite the push to redevelop the area north of the City, notorious neighbourhoods such as Saffron Hill and Field Lane remained untouched. The middle classes were alarmed by their contiguity with the poor and Connor draws attention to the “...preoccupation with the surveying, mapping and regulation of social spaces that became so important a part of the various movements for reform in housing and sanitary conditions in the decade immediately following the publication of *Oliver Twist*.”³⁹

He goes on to say that “the regions of crime and poverty are clearly and carefully to be demarcated from the regions of goodness and middle-class respectability.”⁴⁰ This demarcation was carried out by Henry Mayhew, who categorised the poor themselves, and then continued by Charles Booth, who drew up a colour-coded map of the metropolis, clearly identifying the ‘two nations’ of black (vicious/semi-criminal) and yellow (upper-classes/wealthy).

Dickens sees this polarisation in terms of the city as place of danger, and the countryside as a pastoral idyll. Oliver pleads to be allowed to run away and die in the fields and is only able to recover from his ordeal when he is removed from the “menacing incomprehensibility of Victorian urban space.”⁴¹

34 Dickens (1998), p376

35 Dickens (1998), p111

36 Miller, p5

37 Hadley, p76

38 Smith, S. (1974). “John Overs to Charles Dickens: A Working-Man’s Letter and its Implications.” *Victorian Studies* 18: 95-217, p216

39 Dickens (1994), pxxix

40 Dickens, C. (1994). *The Adventures of Oliver Twist*. London, Everyman, pxxviii

41 Bratlinger et al, p303

“Who can describe the pleasure and delight: the peace of mind and soft tranquillity: the sickly boy felt in the balmy air, and among the green hills and rich woods, of an inland village!”⁴²

When Mr Brownlow sends him on an errand to the bookseller, Oliver takes an accidental wrong turn and is “dragged into a labyrinth of dark narrow courts.” This is Fagin’s domain and he is portrayed as a minatory figure, complete with horns and tail. He is repeatedly dehumanised and connected metonymically with the city streets. His lairs are often single rooms at the top of narrow staircases, heightening the sense of gothic nightmare of a “topography disorientating to characters and readers alike.”⁴³

Moretti argues that *Oliver Twist* sees the liberation of the City, as Fagin and his associates are driven eastwards, finally ending up in Jacob’s Island, which was “wholly unknown...to the great mass of its inhabitants.”⁴⁴ Whilst Dickens is highlighting the plight of the lower classes, he is also reinforcing the idea of spatial segregation. Significantly, Oliver is dragged westwards by the Maylies, and thus returned to respectability and his rightful sphere. It is though there is an unseen force organising the inhabitants according to their class. Nancy finds it impossible to cross London Bridge with Mr Brownlow, as the South Bank would be outside of her realm. He urges her to put herself beyond the reach of her associates “before the river wakes”⁴⁵, this personification suggesting that the Thames is acting as a border guardian and regulating the movements of the characters. Similarly, Fagin leaves no footprints on the ground when he comes to spy on Oliver in the country, as though he has no reality outside of his usual milieu.

Part of the objection to outdoor relief for the poor was that they were still able to roam freely and there was fear of the “social and spatial ambivalence that it represented.”⁴⁶ Poverty should be clearly visible and controlled, to act both as a deterrent and also to avoid moral contamination. It should be displayed in “fixed and determinate ways.”⁴⁷ Thus, discipline pervades society through the “carceral city”⁴⁸, both psychologically through the anthropomorphic landscape, and physically through a metropolis dominated by prisons and workhouses, designed to warn the poor that failure to accept appropriate Victorian values and attitudes would be punished by incarceration in one or the other.

One of the main arguments of the anti-Poor Law campaigners was that the workhouses in which the poor were forced to receive relief were far worse than the prisons, thus suggesting that indigence was a crime. The people were morally obliged to be self-

42 Dickens (1998), p253

43 Bratlinger et al, p303

44 Dickens (1998), p403

45 Dickens (1998), p375

46 Dickens (1994), pxxix

47 Dickens (1994), pxxx

48 Foucault, p 307

sufficient. *The Times* demanded “why not at once have the boldness to declare poverty ‘penal’?”⁴⁹ and Disraeli declared “it announces to the world that in England poverty is a crime.”⁵⁰ In *Oliver Twist*, the workhouse orphans are described as being “juvenile offenders against the poor laws”⁵¹ and Oliver is further punished for the egregious act of being hungry:

“For a week after the commission of the impious and profane offence of asking for more, Oliver remained a close prisoner in the dark and solitary room to which he had been consigned by the wisdom and mercy of the board.”⁵²

Oliver’s progress is continually punctuated with loss of freedom, in the workhouse, as an apprentice, and as a member of Fagin’s gang, in what Miller describes as a “single experience of incarceration.”⁵³ At the end of the novel, despite the fact that he is released from institutional bondage, this is only through submitting to the rules and regulations of middle-class respectability.

Dickens repeatedly asserted that prisoners enjoyed a better standard of living than paupers and the labouring poor:

“We have come to this absurd, this dangerous, this monstrous pass, that the dishonest felon is, in respect of cleanliness, order, diet, and accommodation, better provided for and taken care of, than the honest pauper.”⁵⁴

The idea that the ‘honest pauper’ was deemed to be beneath the ‘dishonest felon’ was developed in *Little Dorrit*, where the convicted fraudster William Dorrit patronises Mr Plornish, who visits from the local workhouse, his lowly status clearly identified by an ill-fitting uniform. Dickens adopted a polarised view of the pauper and the felon, placing them at opposite ends of the moral spectrum. He favoured the tedium of the treadmill for prisoners so they would be “badged and degraded”, rather than the learning of a trade, and saw recidivism as a moral failing, rather than as a consequence of the lack of alternatives to crime.⁵⁵ This despite the fact that there were reports of the poor deliberately committing offences so they would be subjected to the more lenient regime of the prison, rather than the inhumanity of the workhouse. *The Book of the Bastiles* contains accounts of children “whose destitute parents, rather than encountering the persecutions of a Whig workhouse, permit them to become habitual thieves.”⁵⁶

49 *The Times*, 25 February 1834, p2

50 Himmelfarb, G. (1994), p133

51 Dickens (1998), p4

52 Dickens (1998), p15

53 Miller, p4

54 Dickens, C. (1995). *A Walk in the Workhouse* in *Sketches by Boz*. London, Penguin, p241

55 *Selected Journalism*, p407

56 Furneaux, p?

Assistant poor law commissioner James Kay had announced that “our intention is to make the workhouses as like prisons as possible,”⁵⁷ in order to deter the undeserving poor. The objection of authors like Dickens and Trollope was that there were very few of the supposedly able-bodied unemployed in what became known as the ‘bastiles’. Berry describes the Mudfog workhouse as “swept miraculously clean of the able-bodied indolent that so dominate the poor law Report.”⁵⁸ Indeed, they became institutions for housing those least capable of helping themselves, such as orphans, the sick, and the elderly. By the 1860s only 5% of workhouse inmates comprised the able-bodied employed.⁵⁹

The justification for the low standard of living provided by the workhouses was that it should not be an easy option for ‘those who will not work’ and should be worse than that of the common labourer. Only in this way could the dishonest poor be prevented from depleting public funds. The *Report* declared that “the only protection for the parish is to make the parish the hardest taskmaster and the worst paymaster that can be applied to,”⁶⁰ and the provisions of the new law were in response to “a common remark among our paupers that they live better in the house than they ever lived before.”⁶¹ The authorities clearly believed the workhouse life too easy, rather than accepting that the plight of the typical labourer was particularly harsh. Dickens parodies this idea in *Oliver Twist*, describing the workhouse as “a tavern with nothing to pay” and a “brick and mortar Elysium”.⁶² The dilemma faced by the pauper was whether to be “starved by a gradual process in the house, or by a quick one out of it.”⁶³

Given that the standard of living of the labouring poor was already woefully inadequate, the only way the authorities could make the workhouse ‘less eligible’ was through further classification and segregation. The buildings were often based on a quadrilateral arrangement, dividing the inmates into: aged and incompetent; children; able-bodied females; and able-bodied males. The guardians “kindly undertook to divorce married people”⁶⁴ by separating couples and families, thus creating the very antithesis of the Victorian domestic ideal. The poor were treated as though they had no ‘natural, social, nor domestic feelings’,⁶⁵ and Carlyle referred to reformers as ‘rat-catchers’ who wanted to reform the law on the principle that if paupers, like rats, were made miserable enough, they would soon disappear.⁶⁶

57 Roberts, D. (1963). "How Cruel Was the Victorian Poor Law?" *The Historical Journal* 6(1): 97-107.

58 Berry, p46

59 Thompson, p351

60 Checkland, p119

61 Checkland, p114

62 Dickens (1998), p10

63 Dickens (1998), p10

64 Dickens (1998), p11

65 Richardson, p147

66 Himmelfarb (1984), p12

This becomes a leitmotif in *Oliver Twist*, with the workhouse orphans being described as “voracious and wild with hunger” and one boy threatening to eat another.⁶⁷ They are later mirrored by the rats in the kennel who are “hideous with famine”, and the pauper family who Oliver visits are “so like the rats he had seen outside.”⁶⁸ Conversely, once Oliver is restored to middle-class respectability, he is described as “completely domesticated”⁶⁹ and thus free of his feral associations.

Other than making the workhouse less appealing, the principle of segregation was also designed to have a contraceptive effect. Pauperism was seen as a disease which could be perpetuated through reproduction and the “pauper host”⁷⁰ could be destroyed through barring contact between the sexes and feeding them on a restricted diet. The authorities frowned upon the “male who failed to produce, but was nevertheless capable of reproduction.”⁷¹ He was to be discouraged from having a family, as in this way he could conform to the ideal of the independent male labourer who would support the burgeoning economy without demanding anything other than subsistence wages in return. His desperation to avoid the workhouse would ensure his acceptance of minimal remuneration.

This view of the poor as commodities continued after death. The Anatomy Act of 1832, passed at the same time as the Reform Act, conferred upon the Government the right to appropriate the bodies of paupers from the workhouses and hospitals and sell them to the medical schools for dissection, a fate hitherto suffered only by hanged murderers. Thus “what had for generations been a feared and hated punishment for murder became one for poverty.”⁷² If the indigent sought relief from the parish, they thereby rescinded all human rights and subjected themselves to state control. As Bumble declares “what have paupers to do with soul or spirit? It’s quite enough that we let ‘em have live bodies.”⁷³ Jeremy Bentham was involved with both the drafting and parliamentary passage of the Bill, demonstrating that the spirit of Utilitarianism was to pervade all aspects of life and death.

Such discipline was designed to produce ‘docile bodies’: “bodies that not only do what we want but do it precisely in the way that we want.”⁷⁴ Bumble’s downward trajectory demonstrates this idea when he becomes a docile body, firstly at the hands of Mrs Corney, and secondly as the inmate of the workhouse of which he was formerly master. Despite his antipathy to the workhouse system, he sees it as a fitting punishment for Bumble’s attempt to promote himself through his parochial position and economically

67 Dickens (1998), p11

68 Dickens (1998), p38

69 Dickens (1998), p255

70 Berry, p38

71 Berry, p29

72 Richardson, R. (2001). *Death, Dissection and the Destitute: The Politics of the Corpse in Pre-Victorian Britain*. London, Weidenfield & Nicholson, pxv

73 Dickens (1998), p51

74 Foucault, p138

advantageous marriage. The segregation and control of the workhouse would ensure that paupers were submitting to their subservient status. As Foucault states, “the body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body.”⁷⁵

For Bentham, the principle of subjection inhered in his idea of the Panopticon – the “intelligence of discipline in stone.”⁷⁶ He described it as “a mill grinding rogues honest and idle men industrious” by which “the Gordian knot of the Poor Laws” would be “not cut, but untied, - all by a simple idea of Architecture!”⁷⁷ This building would be used for both prisons and workhouses, thus further equating poverty with crime.

The panoptic principle marked a departure from bodily punishment and a move to “reach the inaccessible mind through the body”⁷⁸, or mental regulation. This way the paupers would be ‘humbled’ rather than ‘hurt’. Such a position of ‘carceral subjectivity’ would induce in the inmate a state of “conscious and permanent visibility”⁷⁹ which would transcend the physical institutions and be “diffused in discourses and practices throughout social fabric. An unseen but all-seeing surveillance.”⁸⁰

Thus surveillance would act as a normalising judgement, enabling the people to become self-regulating. The presence in the community of the workhouse itself would serve as an embodiment of this principle. Mrs Greenhill in *Jessie Phillips* speaks of “that bare-faced monster of a Union Poorhouse, which seems to glare upon us with its hundred eyes from what used to be the prettiest meadow in the parish.”⁸¹ These eyes also haunt Sikes after his brutal murder of Nancy. They are “an uncanny mechanical policeman”⁸² reminding him of his crime and indicating that he has set himself outside of societal norms.

Bentham’s panoptic vision was not based on central surveillance, rather citizens were encouraged to regulate one another. This is reflected in Fagin’s desire to control the “enclosed criminal world” through a network of espionage. What he fears more than anything is “illicit narrative, in the form of tale-telling.”⁸³ The gang members spy on each other and are eventually dispersed when Oliver escapes and acts as a conduit to retribution. Fagin is hanged, the fate with which Oliver is continually taunted, and the Artful Dodger and Monks are transported, excluded from the society whose norms they have transgressed.

75 Foucault, p26

76 Foucault, p249

77 Collins, P. A. W. (1962). *Dickens and Crime*. London, Macmillan, p18

78 Hadley, p96

79 Foucault, p199

80 Miller, pviii

81 Trollope, p35

82 Bowen, J. (2000). *Other Dickens - Pickwick to Chuzzlewit*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, p93

83 Connor, p?

Armstrong describes Nancy as working on the side of ‘legitimate authority’ and she “exercises a panoptical power that sees deep into the hearts of men and from whose gaze they cannot hope to escape.”⁸⁴ Sikes thus becomes “the principle of his own subjection”⁸⁵ and consequently unconsciously carries out his own execution. Society itself appears to judge him when the multitudes turn out to hunt him down: “It seemed as though the whole city had poured its population out to curse him”. They are the “thousands of eyes glittering and illuminating the scene about him”. Similarly, when Fagin is finally captured he is “surrounded by a firmament, all bright with gleaming eyes.” In Foucauldian terms, the whole social body becomes a field of perception with thousands of eyes posted everywhere.⁸⁶

Such mock trials occur throughout the novel, with the crowds judging Oliver when Nancy claims to be his sister. They also begrudge him the right to breathe when he is wrongfully apprehended for pickpocketing. There is a clear division between the judicial methods employed by the crowds and the middle-class characters. Whilst the mob hands Oliver over to the police officer and ultimately the magistrate, Mr Brownlow, as arbiter of middle-class standards and respectability, puts Monks on trial himself, calling on the Bumbles as witnesses. This desire to adopt what Miller refers to as an “extralegal”⁸⁷ method also occurs earlier when Mr Losberne persuades the Maylies not to involve the police officers Duff and Blathers, thus “holding the police to their place on the periphery” of the middle-class world.⁸⁸

This world is not supervised by the law and “the work of the police is superseded by the operations of another, informal, and extralegal principle of organisation and control.”⁸⁹ The middle classes are ‘liberal subjects’ rather than ‘docile bodies’ and the respectable family is self-regulating. The controlling institutions were only for the “delinquent milieu.”⁹⁰ Dickens’ correspondent, John Overs, exposes the fallacy that the New Poor Law would be economically beneficial by writing “what the Rate Payers have saved therefrom they have been mulcted of to pay the Police.”⁹¹

Dickens thus segregates the characters both physically and morally, with the middle-class sphere demarcated from the underworld of poverty and criminality. Dickens was a member of the same lower-middle class as many of his readers⁹² who were “perhaps eager for fictional forms which might mythologically confirm their newly-won and

84 Armstrong, N. (1987). *Desire and Domestic Fiction – a Political history of the Novel*. New York Oxford, Oxford University Press, p184

85 Foucault, p202

86 Foucault, p214

87 Miller, p7

88 Miller, p2

89 Miller, p3

90 Miller, p4

91 Smith, p203

92 Myers et al, p135

precarious sense of social and political legitimacy.”⁹³ As Myers points out, at 2s 6d, *Bentley’s Miscellany*, in which *Oliver Twist* was serialised, would have been unaffordable for the Artful Dodger or Charley Bates. It was aimed at the market between them and Brownlow.⁹⁴ The question is, then, “not *what* does the novel mean, but for *whom* does it mean?”⁹⁵

Dickens exposes the cruelties of the New Poor Law through the experiences of a young helpless orphan. However, he does not offer any solution to the inherent social problem. Resolution occurs only when Oliver is transposed from poor to middle class, and is thus no longer ambiguous. His progress epitomises the bourgeois dream of promotion through the social ranks. Yet, his acceptance into the Brownlow/Maylie family, and therefore respectability, is through patronage rather than by any action on his part that challenges the established order. Although Dickens appears to be championing the cause of the poor, he is not suggesting that they actually do anything to alleviate their condition. Hillis Miller argues:

So powerful is Dickens’ fear of suggesting that the alienated hero should take matters into his own hands that he accepts a denouement which emphasises the infantile passivity of his hero.⁹⁶

Indeed, Dickens demonstrates the consequences of the poor taking matters into their own hands in his next novel, *Barnaby Rudge*.

The political function of *Oliver Twist*, then, is to offer the middle-class reader moral, rather than economic, values. The novel becomes an aesthetic object to improve its reader. Dickens is demarcating both himself and his reader from poor characters in order to confirm their respective statuses. As Orwell suggests:

As soon as he comes up against crime or the worst depths of poverty, he shows traces of the “I’ve always kept myself respectable” habit of mind.⁹⁷

For Dickens, men like his working-class correspondent John Overs were either “objects of pity, needing guidance, to be repaid with gratitude; or of guilt, used to bring the upper classes to a sense of their responsibilities”.⁹⁸

This appeal went unheeded, as the New Poor Law, remained in place for the remainder of the century. Despite some significant modifications, such as reinstating outdoor relief in [year], there was no consideration given to improving the conditions of the labourer, rather than lowering the standards of the pauper. This would have been unbenthamite.

93 Connor, p16

94 Myers, R. and M. Harris (1993). *Serials and their Readers, 1620-1914*. Winchester, St. Paul's Bibliographies, p135

95 Myers et al, p135

96 Hillis-Miller, p?

97 Collins, p?

98 Smith, p217

There was a “failure of the reformers to consider the perspective of the poor themselves” and the authorities “continued to consider the poor as a means in their own social planning rather than as an end in themselves.”⁹⁹ That this policy was ineffective is evidenced by the fact that the number of unemployed rose and the amount of poor relief increased from £4 million in 1836 to £5.2 million in 1842.¹⁰⁰ The underlying assumption was that anyone who really wanted a job could find one if given no other alternative.

The New Poor Law forced the indigent poor to decide between pauperism and therefore ‘carceral subjectivity’, or membership of what were becoming known as the working classes, thereby subscribing to a philosophy of ‘self-help’ and rescinding their right to state assistance. As Himmelfarb argues, the word ‘poor’ was ambiguous because the reality was.¹⁰¹

99 Gagnier, R. (2000). *The Insatiability of Human Wants: Economics and Aesthetics in Market Society*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, p224

100 Newsome, p44

101 Himmelfarb (1994), p141

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