



# The Women in Charles Dickens's Novel Oliver Twist

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

*Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens has always been one of my favorite books. It is a children's classic and I read it for the first time in second grade. Dickens began to pay attention to children that suffered because of a cruel society.<sup>1</sup> He had a rough and unhappy childhood, like many characters portrayed in his books. He was born in Portsmouth in 1812 and was the second child of the family. His father worked as a clerk in the Navy pay office but was going in and out of prison because he could not stay out of debt.<sup>2</sup> In 1824 Dickens was sent to work in a workhouse, just like *Oliver Twist*, while his father was locked up in the Marshalsea jail.

The *Morning Chronicle* was the beginning of Dickens' career. It began with *Sketches by Boz*, which was published in the *Morning Magazine* and the *Evening Chronicle*.<sup>3</sup> The *Sketches* became popular, and not long after *The Pickwick Papers* appeared.<sup>4</sup>

Dickens wrote in the Victorian era when women were supposed to be at home and perform domestic tasks. The Victorians admired women that were sexually pure and capable of self-sacrifice. To be poor was not easy in the Victorian era, especially not for the women that may have to prostitute themselves in order to survive. Dickens was well aware that these women were victims of society, poverty and men, and he criticized the cruelty of the Victorian society and peoples view of fallen women.<sup>5</sup> *Oliver Twist* is an example of such criticism. The women in the novel, Agnes, Rose and Nancy have different social standings and moral strengths. The aim of this essay is analyse the differences and similarities between

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<sup>1</sup> Dickens., 1994, preface

<sup>2</sup> Dickens., 1994, preface

<sup>3</sup> Dickens., 1994, preface

<sup>4</sup> Dickens., 1994, preface

<sup>5</sup> Dickens., 1994, preface

the female characters, their social status, and show that they all still adhere to Victorian ideals of womanhood.

## 2. BACKGROUND

### 2.1 Oliver Twist- the novel

*Oliver Twist* (or *The parish boy's progress*) is one of Charles Dickens' best-known works.

*Oliver Twist* was published in intervals, in portions of irregular length, from February 1837 until April 1839, in the monthly magazine *Bentley's magazine*, which Dickens was editing.<sup>6</sup>

The novel was published in full in the following year. Critics complained about the abrupt change in Dickens writing and the readers did not welcome “the graphic realism”<sup>7</sup> when *Oliver Twist* was published. His earlier writings portrayed the cheerful Victorian middle-class world of Mr. Pickwick, which is unlike *Oliver Twist* with its violence and criminals.

One reviewer called Dickens publication of *Oliver Twist*: “a perfect picture of the morals, manners, and habits of a great portion of English society”.<sup>8</sup> As a journalist Dickens witnessed the living conditions of the poor. Dickens' aim with *Oliver Twist* was to raise questions about the inhumanity of the workhouse systems, but also questions about the Poor Law Amendment Act in 1834 and its effects. The law forced people to live and work in the workhouses.<sup>9</sup> Page (1984) writes:

Dickens was to continue his attack on the inhumanity of the workhouse system: almost thirty years later, in his last completed novel, *Our Mutual Friend*, it is still a target.

But it is not the only topical aspect of this early novel;

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<sup>6</sup> Page., 1984, p. 83

<sup>7</sup> Page., 1984, p. 85

<sup>8</sup> Smiley., 2002, p. 2

<sup>9</sup> Bloom's., 2003, p. 32

indeed according to House, 'A novel could hardly have been more topical than *Oliver Twist*'<sup>10</sup>

## 2.2 Victorian class society

The Poor Laws were created by the Victorian middle-class. England was turning from an agricultural to an industrial nation. Victorian middle-class families gained more economical power when the nation was transformed. Money and family held a high status in the Victorian era. Being a prostitute was very low status in the society and the high class people saw prostitutes as a problem instead of giving them social support. Fallen women did not get a second chance in life.

Middle-class families saw work as a moral virtue. They also wanted to climb to a higher social ranking, to be a part of the English aristocracy had a high status in Victorian society. To be poor in this era was a sign of weakness. Workhouses were seen as charity. However, many poor people choose to die in the street rather than work and live in a workhouse with its terrible conditions.<sup>11</sup> Women had a particularly hard time making a living. *Oliver Twist* spends his first ten years in a workhouse as an orphan, mistreated, abused and belonging to the lowest class in society.

Dickens *Oliver Twist* contains several themes, including prostitution, thievery and fencing. The characters in *Oliver Twist* can be divided into groups of good and evil.<sup>12</sup> The groups are very different from each other but they all have one thing in common, they struggle with moral issues. To have good morals and virtues was very important in the Victorian era, especially for women.

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<sup>10</sup> Page., 1984, p. 87

<sup>11</sup> Page., 1984, p. 86-87

<sup>12</sup> Page., 1984, p. 89

### 2.3 The spirit of the time – The Victorian view of women

Charles Dickens was a novelist of the Victorian Era (1837-1901), which is often characterized as a domestic age. *Oliver Twist* was written at the beginning of the era, when Queen Victoria and her femininity became an icon. She represented family, motherhood, and respectability.<sup>13</sup> The British middle-class women were at home taking care of the household and the family. Women also spent much time being pregnant but the image of a sexless woman was a part of the domestic ideologies.<sup>14</sup> These ideals kept women from the public sphere. Lynn Abrams (2001) writes:

These constructs kept women far away from the public sphere in most days, but during the 19<sup>th</sup> century charitable missions did begin to extend the female role of service, and Victorian feminism emerged as a potent political force.<sup>15</sup>

In the quotation above Abrams describes the ideology of British women in the Victorian era. It becomes clear that “the domestic sphere was a cultural expression of the female world”.<sup>16</sup> The ideal of domesticity became powerful not only in middle-class families but also among the working class. Men were expecting their wives to take care of the home. Men also wanted to be able to focus on their jobs to keep their salaries high.

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<sup>13</sup> [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/trail/victorian\\_britain/women\\_home/ideals\\_womanhood\\_01.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/trail/victorian_britain/women_home/ideals_womanhood_01.shtml)., 2010-04-28

<sup>14</sup> Ayres., 1998, p. 133

<sup>15</sup> [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/trail/victorian\\_britain/women\\_home/ideals\\_womanhood\\_01.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/trail/victorian_britain/women_home/ideals_womanhood_01.shtml) ., 2010-04-28

<sup>16</sup> [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/trail/victorian\\_britain/women\\_home/ideals\\_womanhood\\_01.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/trail/victorian_britain/women_home/ideals_womanhood_01.shtml) ., 2010-04-28

Early studies of women in the Victorian Era in Britain show that women were described as perfect ladies, well-behaved and with good morals.<sup>17</sup> Hamlett and Wiggins have written an article about Victorian women in Britain and USA, focusing on the history of Victorian women and their ideology. Hamlett and Wiggins (2009) write:

In Martha Vicinus's *Suffer and Be Still*, we encounter the 'perfect lady': dutiful and virtuous. Much like Welter's discovery of True Womanhood, Vicinus's emphasis on the perfect lady provided scholars with a foundation for interpreting Victorian femininity. The implications of the feminine ideal are that a standard narrative of Victorian women's experiences was established along with an image of female domesticity that influenced the adherence to the separate spheres model that has dominated the historiography of nineteenth-century women on both sides of the Atlantic.<sup>18</sup>

In the quotation above Hamlett and Wiggins describe how Vicinus's *Suffer and Be Still* illustrates the perfect lady. A true woman is dutiful and virtuous. *True Womanhood* by Welter quoted in Hamlett and Wiggins also describes women and their domestic ideology. Welter argues that women live in separate spheres from men and that this ideology is spread all over the world.

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<sup>17</sup> [http://pdfserve.informaworld.com.ezproxy.ub.gu.se/602095\\_791474801\\_916394788.pdf](http://pdfserve.informaworld.com.ezproxy.ub.gu.se/602095_791474801_916394788.pdf)., 2010-04-28, p. 8

<sup>18</sup> [http://pdfserve.informaworld.com.ezproxy.ub.gu.se/602095\\_791474801\\_916394788.pdf](http://pdfserve.informaworld.com.ezproxy.ub.gu.se/602095_791474801_916394788.pdf) ., 2010-04-28, p. 8

Dickens appreciated the portrayals of women as perfect ladies.<sup>19</sup> Holbrook (1993)

writes:

...so Dickens shows himself to be embroiled in the Victorian concept of Ideal Women, that innocent breastfountain who is totally deprived of all authenticity and freedom, who fails to find fault with her master sufficiently to escape from his tyranny.<sup>20</sup>

*Oliver Twist* was written in the time of idealized Victorian womanhood and all it stands for. Women were only supposed to be at home and perform “women’s work”.<sup>21</sup> Dickens’ vision of a perfect woman is a pure, sexless, intelligent and innocent being. He was obviously a man of the Victorian era but he also felt concern for fallen women.<sup>22</sup> In *Oliver Twist*, Dickens also depicts libidinal women.

Dickens was well aware that prostitution was a social issue. He was fascinated by murders and prisons and his writing about Nancy’s murder in the novel “drove all the breath out of his body”.<sup>23</sup> Dickens had great sympathy for fallen and poor women and saw them as victims of society.<sup>24</sup> Holbrook writes:

All this is strange: but it especially illuminates Dickens’s problem with woman. There was within him some intense need to repeat compulsively that intense fantasy of an attack on the libidinal woman who has acted lover. He was

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<sup>19</sup> Ayres., 1998, p. 117

<sup>20</sup> Holbrook., 1993, p. 96

<sup>21</sup> Ayres., 1998, p. 117

<sup>22</sup> Bloom’s., 2003, p. 46

<sup>23</sup> Holbrook., 1993, p. 165

<sup>24</sup> Ayres., 1998, p. 115



angry with those who suggested that this obsession with acting out this fantasy might seriously damage his health. One might even say that this addiction to this horrific, sadistic fantasy of the assault on the phantom women of the unconscious killed him.<sup>25</sup>

The quotation above describes Dickens' relationship or feelings for libidinal women and their sexuality.<sup>26</sup> Women associated with murder seemed to appeal to Dickens. His relationship to libidinal women reflects his compartmentalized attitude towards women. Hoolbrook writes that Dickens' fantasies and appeal for libidinal women may damage his health because they are nothing but bad influence.

Simon Morgan's book *A Victorian Woman's Place: Public Culture in the Nineteenth Century*, raises questions about gender and the public sphere. Morgan (2007) discusses the women's involvement with culture and society and he is arguing that both women of middle and working class were consumers of culture and education. He wishes to show that Victorian women were involved in activities in the public sphere for example, they were members of cultural institutions and they were involved in politics and helped the poor. Morgan uses both middle-class and working-class women's diaries to prove his point.<sup>27</sup> Morgan (2007) writes:

...quantitatively and qualitatively, women were definitely second-class citizens in early nineteenth-century cultural societies.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Holbrook., 1993, p. 166

<sup>26</sup> Holbrook., 1993, p. 166

<sup>27</sup> Morgan., 2007

<sup>28</sup> Morgan., 2007., p. 69

Even though he shows evidence of women's activities outside the home, he again and again states that women did not live in the same public sphere as men.

...women were excluded from the management of institutions that were in the vanguard of the intellectual and environmental improvement of the town.<sup>29</sup>

This also shows that women were not a part of the public sphere in the same way as the men were. He states that there were few women involved in politics, and they were becoming fewer and more marginalized as the period progressed.<sup>30</sup> Other studies show that woman's intellectual powers were only used in church.<sup>31</sup> Women could define themselves in church without their husbands. They were often part of a social group consisting only of women where they could gain "moral support" and share "feminine understanding".<sup>32</sup>

John Ruskin's *Sesame and Lilies*<sup>33</sup> is a classic from the nineteenth century, describing the view of Victorian womanhood. It contains lectures and states how women should act and behave. Ruskin embraces conservative ideals of Victorian womanhood and is extremely influenced by the era. Ruskin discusses and critiques Victorian manhood and he thinks that women should act as moral forces to save men from stupidity but also save society from evil forces. He states that women have duties: to teach society and their men about moral issues and culture.

Ruskin argues that men have intellects that suit them for adventure and invention.<sup>34</sup> They are made to fight in wars and conquer the world: this is all in men's nature. A woman,

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<sup>29</sup> Morgan., 2007, p. 72

<sup>30</sup> Morgan., 2007, p. 136

<sup>31</sup> Ayres., 1998, p. 39

<sup>32</sup> Ayres., 1998, p. 39

<sup>33</sup> <http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext98/sesli10.txt>., 2010-04-28

<sup>34</sup> <http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext98/sesli10.txt>., 2010-04-28

however, should rule, not fight, and they are made to make great decisions and make order in society. Ruskin writes:

The man's duty as a member of a commonwealth, is to assist in the maintenance, in the advance, in the defence of the state. The woman's duty, as a member of the commonwealth, is to assist in the ordering, in the comforting, and in the beautiful adornment of the state.<sup>35</sup>

Ruskin refers to many great works in his lectures to prove his point in the quotation above. He writes that men cause catastrophes and that issues can only be solved by women who have high moral standards. He refers to Shakespeare's *King Lear* and his misunderstanding of his children and his impatient vanity.<sup>36</sup> Ruskin points out that only King Lear's moral daughter could save him from injuries of others. Furthermore Ruskin discusses Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. According to Ruskin, Romeo ruins Julia with his reckless impatience.<sup>37</sup> He is evil and destroys Julia's life. Ruskin sees Julia as an "unlessoned girl"<sup>38</sup> whom he claims dies because of the stupidity and stubbornness of her husband.

According to Ruskin a woman's place is in the home. There a man can protect his wife from the ill of society and all temptations from the outside. While the house is still ruled by the woman, she is protected from the terror going on in the public sphere.<sup>39</sup> Ruskin writes:

And wherever a true wife comes, this home is always round her. The stars only may be over her head; the

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<sup>35</sup> <http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext98/sesli10.txt>., 2010-04-28

<sup>36</sup> <http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext98/sesli10.txt>., 2010-04-28

<sup>37</sup> <http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext98/sesli10.txt>., 2010-04-28

<sup>38</sup> <http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext98/sesli10.txt>., 2010-04-28

<sup>39</sup> <http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext98/sesli10.txt>., 2010-04-28

glowworm in the night-cold grass may be the only fire at her foot; but home is yet wherever she is; and for a noble woman it stretches far round her, better than ceiled with cedar, or painted with vermilion, shedding its quit light far, for those who else were homeless.<sup>40</sup>

Here, Ruskin argues that it is at home woman have their power, when they rule the household. Ruskin describes the home as a sacred place, almost a temple for women. When women do not have a home, they are more or less useless and nobodies.

Domestic values influenced the women in the Victorian era, and the way they were supposed to act. Their duties were to support their husbands morally and emotionally. Women who could live up to these ideals were described as perfect ladies, beautiful, virtuous and innocent.

### **3. The female characters: differences and similarities between the women in *Oliver Twist*.**

The main female characters in *Oliver Twist* are Agnes, Nancy and Rose. Nancy and Agnes are both fallen and wronged women. Agnes is a fallen woman because of the “old story” which refers to a woman being pregnant and unwed. Nancy is also a fallen woman, not because of the “old story” but because of being a prostitute and a mistress. The unwed pregnancy is presumably just a matter of time. Agnes and Nancy would not have been approved of in Victorian society. Rose, however, is the perfect lady in the novel. Dickens describes her as an angel, a woman with good moral values and standards.

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<sup>40</sup> <http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext98/sesli10.txt>, 2010-04-28

## Agnes

Oliver Twist is born in a workhouse in 1830s England. Nobody knows his mother Agnes or even her name, and she dies shortly after giving birth to Oliver Twist. Her name is not revealed until the end of the book. Agnes is described as the fallen woman in Oliver Twist.<sup>41</sup> The nameless woman is a symbol and represents the unwed woman.<sup>42</sup> She was a mistress who got pregnant and the scandal of her being pregnant but not married made her die in disgrace. Before Agnes dies she prays and wishes for Oliver to know her name and not feel ashamed of her.<sup>43</sup> The very last words in the novel describe Agnes as a fallen woman:

‘AGNES’ there is no coffin in that tomb; and may it be  
many, many years, before another name is placed above it!  
But, if the spirits of the Dead ever come back to earth, to  
visit spots hallowed by the love – the love beyond the  
grave – of those whom they knew in life, I believe that the  
shade of Agnes sometimes hovers round the solemn nook.  
I believe it none the less because that nook is in a Church,  
and she was weak and erring.<sup>44</sup>

Agnes is described as “weak and erring” because of her pregnancy as an unmarried women.

Agnes is not described as Oliver’s mother until the end of the book. This indicates that she is a fallen woman, just like Nancy, but she has also been pregnant and unwed which makes her fall even more in the patriarchal orders.<sup>45</sup> Agnes is clearly sexually active even though she is not married, which puts her in the same role or sphere as a prostitute. To be

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<sup>41</sup> Ayres., 1998, p. 113

<sup>42</sup> Ayres., 1998, p. 114

<sup>43</sup> Ayres., 1998, p. 115

<sup>44</sup> Dickens., 1994, p. 511

<sup>45</sup> Ayres., 1998, p. 115

sexual, or show that you are sexual, when not having a husband, was not acceptable in Victorian society.<sup>46</sup> She is also clearly aware that she does not live up to the standards of being a good and moral woman. Agnes feels a lot of guilt and dies of shame in her loneliness.

The novel denies Agnes and her name is not revealed until the end of the book. She does not have a “complete” name which indicates identity lost and not being married. The very last words in the novel describe Agnes as “weak and erring”.<sup>47</sup> It was only the women that could be weak and erring in the Victorian era. Men were not considered weak when they had affairs outside the marriage.<sup>48</sup> Society did not treat women and men equally. Oliver’s father did wrong when he cheated on his wife. He is excused only because of the fact that he is a man and because he is unhappy with his marriage.<sup>49</sup> But Agnes’ mistake does not make Oliver “came out of bad blood”.<sup>50</sup> The novel only expresses the disapproval of the sinful relationship Agnes had with Oliver’s father.

## Nancy

The second female character is Nancy. She is Fagin’s mistress and works as a prostitute. Nancy becomes a good person when she protects and saves Oliver as the novel develops. She has a warm heart. The Victorians did not accept women like Nancy.<sup>51</sup> She is described as a fallen woman but there is goodness in her:<sup>52</sup>

Society values gold and underrates brass, but brass has  
much more strength and practical use than does gold.

Translated, this means that society values the angel-in-the-

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<sup>46</sup> Ayres., 1998, p. 133

<sup>47</sup> Dickens., 1994, p. 511

<sup>48</sup> Ayres., 1998, p. 115

<sup>49</sup> Ayres ., 1998, p. 115

<sup>50</sup> Ayres., 1998, p. 114

<sup>51</sup> Ayres., 1998, p. 113

<sup>52</sup> Ayres., 1998, p. 120

house, but a woman like Nancy is much stronger of character and provides more practical service.<sup>53</sup>

Dickens depicts Nancy as brass, which is stronger and more practical than gold. This makes Nancy's character in the novel much stronger than the other women in it because she is energetic, active and efficient.

Nancy is a dissenting woman that falls outside the patriarchal borders and her character subverts domestic ideologies.<sup>54</sup> Nancy belongs to the working class in society which was the lowest class in society.<sup>55</sup> She is 16 years old and works as a prostitute. She is also Sikes' mistress and a member of Fagin's gang. Nancy is, however, a mixture of good and evil. She is with people that have a bad influence on her: she is living in Fagin's house and is Sikes's mistress. She decides to do good when she tells Rose about the plans that Fagin and Monks have for Oliver and this shows that she has a good heart.

Nancy is aware that she stands outside the patriarchal borders (Victorian qualities and domestic ideologies) as we can see when she talks to Rose in a distanced way:

Oh, lady, lady! 'she said, clasping her hands passionately before her face, 'if there was more like you, there would be fewer like me, -there would –there would!'

'Sit down', said Rose, earnestly. 'If you are in poverty of affliction I shall be truly glad to relieve you if I can, - I shall indeed. Sit down'

'Let me stand, lady, ' said the girl still weeping, 'and do

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<sup>53</sup> Ayres., 1998, p. 120

<sup>54</sup> Ayres., 1998, p. 129

<sup>55</sup> Ayres., 1998, p. 113

not speak to me so kindly till you know me better. It is  
growing late. Is – is that door shut?<sup>56</sup>

Nancy is eliminated from encompassing domestic ideologies.<sup>57</sup> Nancy calls Rose lady, which indicates that she has much respect for her. Nancy thinks the world would be a better place if there were only women like Rose. She feels like she does not belong to the era or even the world.

She is portrayed as a victim of the environment she is living in. Nancy belongs to Sikes, and she feels that she cannot survive without him. Sikes mistreats and abuses her, but she cannot leave him because she has no family and nowhere to go. This indicates her weakness even though she is described as brass in the novel. Nancy is aware that Sikes is not a good man for her, she states it several times in the novel. If she were not living in Fagin's house with the rest of his gang members, however, she would be forced to live in a workhouse.

Nancy acts like she is much older than she really is and even though she is confused about right and wrong, she is a dominating woman in the novel.<sup>58</sup> Several times, she protects Oliver from Fagin's gang. Nancy acts as a surrogate mother for Oliver although she is only 16 years old.<sup>59</sup> She nurtures and helps Oliver. This makes her a good person but she falls out of the patriarchal order because she is not a real mother or a wife. She improves her character which makes her one of the good people in the novel.

Nancy does not get any recognition at all when she ignores her own safety by telling Rose the plans that Fagin and Monks have for Oliver. She sacrifices herself so that Oliver can be saved. Nancy just strengthens her moral standing, from being an evil character, she

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<sup>56</sup> Dickens., 1994, p. 371

<sup>57</sup> Ayres., 1998, p. 123

<sup>58</sup> Ayres., 1998, p. 135

<sup>59</sup> Ayres., 1998, p. 120



becomes a good and moral person. Nancy is stronger because she does not need a man to complete a dangerous mission. She knows what needs to be done in difficult situations. Nancy understands the mechanics of the middle-class system and she tells Rose to get a man to help her to save Oliver.<sup>60</sup>

Sikes murders Nancy when he finds out that she has been talking to Rose. It may be her passion that kills her, the passion to be a good and moral person. Unfortunately she does not get a fair chance to prove that she is a morally upright woman. It is Rose that gets all the attention when Oliver is saved but it is because of Nancy he is saved from Fagin and Monks.

## Rose

The third female character is Rose. Rose is also an orphan just like Oliver. She was adopted by Mrs. Maylie when she was a young girl. Rose is described as an innocent and perfect girl:

She exemplifies all the attributes of the “mould”: she is young, beautiful, frail, mild, gentle, pure, ethereal, intelligent, sweet, pleasant, charming, coy and blessed. She even possesses the right physiognomy (“intelligence...stamped on her noble head”), and she is performing domestic tasks, adorning both table and self for the gratification of others. The “blessed” spirits give her approval. Even Nancy calls her the angel lady.<sup>61</sup>

She lives up to Victorian values, which means she is acting like a woman should act in the spirit of the time. She is pure, gentle and beautiful. The other women in the novel call her

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<sup>60</sup> Ayres., 1998, p. 120

<sup>61</sup> Ayres., 1998, p. 118

angel, and, indeed, Rose Maylie is the angel-in-the-house of the novel.

Rose is an ideal woman of the Victorian era, innocent, sexless and pure. She becomes an orphan when her father dies but is adopted by Mrs. Maylie. Mrs Maylie nurtures her and gives her an identity. Rose has a last name, which Nancy and Agnes are missing. This indicates that, unlike the other women, Rose has an identity and belongs to a family. It also indicates power, power to make important decisions in life, for example she has the power to resist marriage, or when she does marry a man she does not have to lose her last name which indicates, as mentioned above, a strong identity.<sup>62</sup> She can make decisions and does not have to follow a man like the other women in the novel.

Rose is clearly a symbol of the Victorian ideals. She is young, pure and beautiful, with good moral standards. She is described as gold with its unique qualities. Her angelic qualities seem to correspond to the Victorian ideals of women.<sup>63</sup> Rose is surrounded by good people, especially compared to the other women in the novel. She is surrounded by people that keep her in the “proper domestic sphere”.<sup>64</sup> Ayres writes: “More accurately, the good people surround her and contain her within a proper domestic sphere so that she will never be a social misfit like Nancy and Agnes”.<sup>65</sup> Rose is in an environment that strengthens her personality and self-confidence. She is a woman that knows what she is worth, and that makes her powerful. She is also a woman that spreads happiness and goodness with her angelic character.

The environment is important to the female characters in *Oliver Twist*. Unlike the other women in the novel, Rose is surrounded by good people who make her innocent and pure (not sexually active). There is no mention that Rose is sexually active in the novel,

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<sup>62</sup> Ayres., 1998, p. 117

<sup>63</sup> Holbrook., 1993, p. 168

<sup>64</sup> Ayres., 1998, p. 124

<sup>65</sup> Ayres., 1998, p. 124

therefore she is seen as a pure woman not destroyed by the ills in society. Rose corresponds to the domestic ideologies and the “rules” on how to be a good woman.

Rose is the heroine of the novel because she is the one that saves Oliver’s life. When she is told what Fagin and Monks are planning to do with Oliver, Rose cries out “But what can I do”.<sup>66</sup> Rose does not know what to do with the information she receives but becomes the hero anyway because she forwards the story to a man, Mr. Brownlow.<sup>67</sup> Rose could not save Nancy’s life or Oliver’s by herself, she requires a man to help.

When Harry proposes to Rose, she is worried for her reputation. Her moral standards, beliefs, and angelic character may be threatened. It is important for Rose to have a husband that has good reputation when going out in the public sphere. She is looking for someone that can treat a woman well and protect her from bad people or experiences.<sup>68</sup> Mrs. Maylie is also concerned for her family’s reputation if Rose marries Harry. Rose refuses Harry, but he does not give up. He gets rid of his wealth so that he can be in the same social class as Rose. This indicates that he is willing to give up his life for her, but also how powerful a woman can be with her angelic character and Victorian ideals: an “object of pure admiration”.<sup>69</sup>

### **Social status and adherence to Victorian ideals**

Agnes is a mistress and dies in a workhouse after giving birth to Oliver. She is a victim of the “old story”<sup>70</sup> She is also, like Nancy a fallen woman and belongs to the lowest social class in society. Being a mistress, becoming pregnant while unmarried is seen as a serious sin.<sup>71</sup> She dies in the workhouse by herself because she does not want to bring her family shame. Agnes

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<sup>66</sup> Dickens., 1994, p.

<sup>67</sup> Page., 1984, p. 92

<sup>68</sup> Holbrook., 1993, p. 168

<sup>69</sup> Ayres., 1998, p. 119

<sup>70</sup> Ayres., 1998, p. 127

<sup>71</sup> Ayres., 1998, p. 113

is described as “weak and erring”<sup>72</sup>. But there is a turn in the novel that makes her more valued as a Victorian woman: when she sacrifices herself and dies alone in the workhouse rather than bringing shame to her family because of her actions as a mistress. Men in the Victorian era were not accused always of doing something wrong when cheating. Agnes carried the shame alone and decided it would be better to die than destroy a family reputation.

Nancy is a strong women and she is described as “brass” in the novel.<sup>73</sup> She is a mistress and a prostitute which means that she is sexually active. The way Nancy talks and acts in the novel indicates that she is uneducated and poor. Nancy is a fallen woman and she is a part of the lowest social class in society, but she is also a victim of the society and cruelty of people surrounding her.<sup>74</sup> She dies at the end of the book. It is symbol that fallen or wronged women, belonging to the lowest class in society in the Victorian era, had a hard time to start a new life or get a second chance.<sup>75</sup> Nancy shows good morals when she helps Oliver survive in the hard environment of Fagin and his gang. She is self-sacrificing and risks her own life and safety when she helps Oliver. Self- sacrifice was valued in the Victorian era but it could not redeem social standing. Knowing what is good and evil is also something that was valued by the Victorians. Nancy has an inner conflict of what is good and evil and as the novel develops she does all the right things. Nancy is the reason why Oliver can return to a normal life. Unfortunately it does not make her gain social status.

Rose is clearly an example of the Victorian ideals. Women were only supposed to be at home and perform a “women’s work”.<sup>76</sup> Rose is an orphan just like Oliver but was fortunately saved and adopted by Mrs. Maylie. Rose is innocent, pure and sexless, she is described as angelic in the novel. Rose has high status in society because of her good behavior

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<sup>72</sup> Dickens., 1994, p. 511

<sup>73</sup> Ayres., 1998, p. 118

<sup>74</sup> <http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext98/sesli10.txt>., 2010-04-28

<sup>75</sup> [http://pdfserve.informaworld.com.ezproxy.ub.gu.se/602095\\_791474801\\_916394788.pdf](http://pdfserve.informaworld.com.ezproxy.ub.gu.se/602095_791474801_916394788.pdf)., 2010-04-28, p. 8

<sup>76</sup> Ayres., 1998, p. 117

and her respected family. She knows what she is worth and stays out of trouble. Rose loves and takes good care of Oliver when he is wounded. She also sacrifices her comfort to save Oliver. She is unlike the other women in the novel surrounded by good people and she is the only woman alive in the end of the novel.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

Nancy, Rose and Agnes are three characters that differ from each other. They all have different social standings and moral strengths. Nancy, a fallen woman, that works as a prostitute sacrifices her life so Oliver could live. Rose, the perfect lady, is generally self-sacrificing, nurtures and saves Oliver's life. Agnes, Oliver's mother, dies alone in a workhouse after giving birth to Oliver and sacrifices herself to her family's reputation. They all have different living conditions and different destinies but they all represent goodness and modesty. Despite their differences and social status in society they also share a capacity for self-sacrifice and self-abnegation which the Victorians valued in women.

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