Loss of Childhood in *Oliver Twist*

Yusuke NOGIWA

Introduction

Oliver Twist, or, The Parish Boy's Progress (1837-39) is the second novel by Charles Dickens (1812-1870) and was first published between February 1837 and April 1839 in the magazine *Bentley's Miscellany*. *Oliver Twist* is composed of fifty one chapters. The main character, Oliver Twist is an orphan and grows up in a workhouse. He and his companions suffer an extreme hardship of starvation because of ill- usage and abuse by the parish officers. He, as a chosen claimer by the charity children, begs Mr Bumble to provide them with more food and he is as a rebel against their authority sold off and expelled to an undertaker as an apprentice. He subsequently escapes to London, where he finds "work" as a thief accommodated with free meals and free lodgings. Fagin and the boys teach Oliver how to steal. Oliver lives in the slum, but fortunately he ends up with the middle class life.

The British writer in the twentieth century, George Orwell (1903-1950) notes, "The truth is that Dickens's criticism of society is almost exclusively moral" (Orwell 5). But Dickens's real intention is not just to criticise good and evil of man but rather to address the corrupt aspects of the human society. This paper discusses Dickens's social criticism through his various types of childhood in the Victorian Age in *Oliver Twist*.

In order to help the poor there are legal supports under the Poor Law and the real condition in the workhouse is described as the background in *Oliver Twist*. Regarding the Poor Law in 1601 Daniel Pool discusses, "The original Poor Law dated from Elizabethan days and called for the overseers of the poor in each parish to provide relief for the poor, the sick, the aged and needy children." (Pool 356) In 1834, the Poor Law Amendment Act was passed and Daniel Pool explains it as follows:

> The New Poor Law of 1834 aimed at making the workhouses in which the poor were sometimes lodged extremely unattractive to what it imagined to be hordes of lazy and underserving poor. The consequent regimentation and grimness of life inside the workhouse soon became such as to make them a byword among the poor for misery. Under this new system, a central board of commissioners in London oversaw the work of local, elected boards of guardians that took the place of the overseers. (Pool 356)

In *Oliver Twist*, the workhouse under the Poor Law actually becomes a place providing

public entertainment for the poorer classes, or a free restaurant without any obligations to work. But with the Poor Law Amendment Act in 1834, the workhouse changed to a place to force the inmates labour along with an extremely poor living. The change of the Poor Law changed the life of the poor to the worse.

Spirituality of Oliver

Oliver is brought to a branch-workhouse immediately after his birth. When young children become nine years old, they are moved from the branch-workhouse to workhouse. Although the children receive abundant support from the Poor Law issued in 1601 in the branch-workhouse, the superintendent, Mrs Mann saves the expenses for her own profit. The parochial committee inspects the branch-workhouse regularly but the condition in the workhouse is forged for the occasion by them and the children are safely made to look clean and content as the notice of the inspection is given so that they can prepare before the inspectional day. Oliver and other orphans are the victims of exploitation of the benefit by the lack of proper administration. When Oliver becomes nine years old, he is moved to workhouse which is managed under the Poor Law Amendment Act. Oliver is pale, small and thin physically but has a good sturdy spirit. Apparently he is an obedient child to others described as follows, "The simple fact was, that Oliver, instead of possessing too little feeling, possessed rather too much, and was in a fair way of being reduced to a state of brutal stupidity and sullenness for life, by the ill-usage he had received." (31) Oliver's emotional expression is thin and sullenness because Mr Bumble who is the beadle abuses Oliver physically and psychologically. But he who originally has rich feelings disguises himself by controlling his feelings for his own defence.

Child Labour

In the workhouse, children are forced to work hard and live on a little diet under Mr Bumble's surveillance. The parochial committee shows their policy to Oliver as follows, "'Well! You [Oliver] have come here to be educated, and taught a useful trade,'[...] 'So you'll begin to pick oakum to-morrow morning at six o'clock,' [...]." (13) Children are forced to work hard in the name of education. R.E. Pritchard argues the Factory Law as follows:

> The Factory Act of 1809 set a minimum working age of nine and limited under-sixteens to a twelve-hour day, but this applied only to cotton mills; the 1833 Act introduced inspectors, compulsory schooling (of sorts) and limited under-eighteens to a twelve-hour day; the Ten Hour Act of 1847 limited women

> and young persons to a ten-hour day, but employers worked them in shifts to fit in with men working a fifteen-hour day. Acts in 1850 and 1853 limited the hours of all textile workers, who did ten and a half hours daily and seven and a half hours on Sunday. By the later 1870s, hours were generally further reduced, with many men not working on Sundays or Saturday afternoons. (Pritchard 144)

The same workload as factory workers are imposed on the children in confinement in the workhouse. Oliver who is nine years old is told to pick oakum twelve hours a day. To pick oakum is generally considered compulsory labour in prison. Also, children in the workhouse wear old calico robes which have grown yellow just like prison uniform. The children are constantly watched by the beadle just as prisoners and whereabouts are controlled by surveillance. The children are unconsciously obedient to the norm of the workhouse. The system of the workhouse actually forms "panopticon" which is discussed by Michel Foucault (1926-1984). In the workhouse, the typical diet of the inmates consists of three oatmeal a day, an onion a week and half a roll on Sunday. In this condition, to ask more food makes Oliver a dangerous outsider in the workhouse. As a result, Oliver is punished as the rebel who causes disorder. He is expelled and sold for five pounds as a slave labourer and is got rid of as a nuisance. He who is nine years old is not treated as a child but as a labourer. According to Henry Mayhew, child chimney sweepers in the Victorian Age are portrayed as follows:

> Thus boys of six were apprenticed -for apprenticeship was almost universal – as boys of eight, by their parents; while parish officers and magistrates consigned the workhouse orphans, as a thing of course, to the starvation and tyranny which they must have known were very often in store for them when apprenticed to sweepers. (Mayhew 346)

Oliver is sold off from the workhouse to an undertaker as a labourer and apprentice. In *Oliver Twist*, the parish apprentice actually means labour contract under which the master is allowed a training period to examine the child's capability of the work and sustenance with poor diet. Oliver is described at the undertaker as follows, "There's an expression of melancholy in his [Oliver] face, my dear [Mrs Sowerberry], [...] which is very interesting. He would make a delightful mute, my love." (38) From Oliver's melancholic expression he is regarded as mute. His sad expression is taken advantage of as a sign of mourning, therefore it does not work as his self-defence.

Noah Claypole is an apprentice as an undertaker. Although he has parents, his father is a drunken solider and his mother is a washerwoman. He despises Oliver as Noah is a

charity-child[1], whereas Oliver is a parish child, whose existence is legally acknowledged, theoretically taken care of by the law. Noah has a sense of humiliation of the fact that Noah is a charity student. He sees Oliver inferior to Noah and revenges the society by bullying weaker Oliver, unconsciously seeking the survival of the fittest by treating Oliver just as young Noah was treated badly by other children. For the poor and displaced London is a capital which provides minors with an opportunity of survival. Fagin offers Noah a community to become "like a gentleman" by joining the gang of the robbers saying, "'Live like a gentleman, -board and lodging, pipes and spirits free, -half of all you [Noah] earn, and half of all the young woman earns,' [...]". (357) Children are important resources to recruit labourers like adults in London underground market. Subsequently it may be an irony that Dodger is a person who makes Oliver's entry into London underground life with Fagin. Oliver is welcomed by Fagin's gang and "Oliver ate his share; and the Jew [Fagin] then mixed him a glass of hot gin and water, telling him he must drink it off directly, because another gentleman [Dodger and Bates] wanted the tumbler." (66) It is the first experience for Oliver to taste that his presence pleases people. But Fagin foresees Oliver's potential value as a labourer. Children under Fagin's household including Oliver are given alcoholic drinks as a gesture of treating them as proper workers. Dodger and Bates under Fagin not only drink but also smoke pipes, see public executions like grown-up Londoners. Under Fagin's management by giving alcohol and tobacco to the children who have never satisfied their hunger, he entices them to addiction of the body. Also despite the gang of robbers, to call the children 'gentleman' gives wrong dignity and upward hopes for respectability, and disguises the reality of the crime.

The labour under Fagin means pickpocket. Fagin, Dodger and Bates show Oliver how to pick as a play. Under Fagin's household labour and education are presented as follows:

> Oliver wondered what picking the old gentleman's pocket in play had to do with his chances of being a great man; but thinking that the Jew, being so much his senior, must know best, followed him quietly to the table, and was soon deeply involved in his new study. (72)

This quotation shows that Oliver has naïve respect to the senior. Under Fagin, the crime on the pretext of a new study, which means that the child who picks from old gentlemen is made to believe that what they are doing is something beautiful. Also, Oliver believes

[1] "Charity-child was a child attending a school founded by a wealthy private benefactor. Charity children often had to sit in conspicuous places in church and wear special badges and colored clothing that proclaimed their status. They were often unmercifully mocked by other children." (Pool 284)

Fagin's words, which is, that to pick creates a chance of becoming a great man. Using words like 'labour' and 'education', Fagin brainwashes the children and convinces them that picking is a sacred labour. According to Henry Mayhew, child thieves in the Victorian Age are the social problems of neglected children:

> [...] the incipient stage of thieving, when the child of five or six years of age steals an apple, or an orange, or a handful of nuts from a stall, or an old pair of boots from a shop door, and then traced the after-stages of more daring crime. There are thousands of neglected children loitering about the low neighborhoods of the metropolis, and prowling about the streets, begging and stealing for their daily bread. (Mayhew 273)

Thus stealing is initiated through relatively minor theft. Orphan children in London street are treated with the same labour ethic which values diligence, which is believed in the Victorian Age. In *Oliver Twist*, innocence of Oliver is apparently retained throughout his deteriorating experiences:

> Although Oliver had been brought up by philosophers, he was not theoretically acquainted with their beautiful axiom that self-preservation is the first law of nature. If he had been, perhaps he would have been prepared for this. Not being prepared, however, it alarmed him the more; so away he went like the wind, with the old gentleman and the two boys roaring and shouting behind him. (76-77)

Oliver is grown up in the master-slave system in the workhouse but does not have a chance to learn the axiom of self-help. Moreover he does not realise the serious consequence of picking Mr Brownlow's pocket, followed by his arrest and trial. At that time persons who commit a crime are punished regardless of their age. Little children are prosecuted like adults, and are even hanged on the gallows. Mr Fang who is the police magistrate passes the verdict to Oliver as follows, "He [Oliver] stands committed for three months, -hard labour of course." (84) Oliver is sentenced hard labour for three months. According to Philip Horne, the situation of hard labour for three months sentenced to Oliver is that: "Fang appears to apply a maximum sentence under the 1824 Vagrancy Act (for loitering in a street 'with intent to commit a felony'), thus avoiding the need for a jury trial." (Horne 499) Thus the prison labour is also imposed on Oliver.

Fagin talks to himself, "Clever dogs [children Fagin keeps]! clever dogs! Staunch to the last! Never told the old parson [police officer] where they were; never peached upon old Fagin. [...]." (67) He trains children and teaches discipline to make them loyal to him. He boasts that even if the children under his control were to be hanged on the gallows, they would not betray him. He calls the children 'dog' and it implies the children's absolute

submissiveness and loyalty to him. On the other hand, 'dog' means "informer" and "traitor" and may predict Fagin's eventual destiny.

Nancy has been taken into Fagin's custody for twelve years since she was four or five years old. She who is seventeen years old now is Sikes's lover and is also working as a prostitute to bring him money, which strongly implies that she is a victim of child sexual abuse. Henry Mayhew argues the prostitution in the Victorian Age as follows:

> Every art is practiced, every scheme is devised, to effect this object, and when an innocent child appears in the streets without a protector, she is insidiously watched by one of those merciless wretches and decoyed under some plausible pretext to an abode of infamy and degradation. No sooner is the unsuspecting helpless one within their grasp than, by a preconcerted measure, she becomes a victim to their inhuman designs. She is stripped of the apparel with which parental care or friendly solicitude had clothed her, and then, decked with the gaudy trappings of her shame, she is compelled to walk the streets, and in her turn, while producing to her master or mistress the wages of her prostitution, becomes the ensnarer of the youth of the other sex. (Mayhew 211-212)

Thus vulnerable street children are exploited by adult and they are engaged in sexual market as a sex slave, unable to escape this condition. Nancy sinks into this condition. She discloses her situation to Rose:

> 'I [Nancy] am the infamous creature you [Rose] have heard of, that lives among the thieves, and that never from the first moment I can recollect my eyes and senses opening on London streets have known any better life, or kinder words than they have given me, so help me God! [...]' (333)

She describes herself as a sexual slave. She is a street child who cannot even receive the benefits of the Poor Law, and is the victim who cannot live only to stay at the bottom of society unlike Oliver. David Paroissien argues that to be a prostitute for young girls who belong to the lowest of society is a kind of labourer as follows:

> Just like juvenile criminality child labour in general – although a very example, prostitution of young girls can be counted under the label of child labour as well – the two principal factors which were forcing young girls to work in the streets were extreme poverty and parental abandonment. (Paroissien 238)

To become a prostitute for young girls who are the poorest and are abandoned by their parents is the only means that is left to them for survival like the example of Nancy.

Conclusion

Ruth Richardson discusses the exploitation of orphans as follows, "At the lowest and

least defended end of the social pecking order is the orphan child: starved, punished, used as cheap labour, provoked, inveigled, and kidnapped, used as a tool by criminals, his identity stolen [...]." (Richardson 279) The orphan child is generally destined to live at the lowest bottom of society and he/she is treated as a labourer and therefore they effectively become an agent in order to implement crime. The life of the poorest children fully reflects the criminal intent of adults. Oliver wins the destiny unlike other street children who do not have their childhood and by sheer fortune he comes to be affiliated into a respectable life of middle class. In the large city like London, abandoned children are exploited and deprived of their childhood as Nancy, Dodger and Bates, but in the case of Oliver, he rather strangely sustains his childlike qualities. John O. Jordan examines the image of Dickens's children as follows, "It is hard to imagine Oliver Twist ever grown up, but the examples of Nell, Amy Dorrit, and Jenny Wren all point to what Malcolm Andrews calls the theme of "the grown-up child""(Jordan 96) In *Oliver Twist*, the others except Oliver are grown-up children. Suffering the hardship, Oliver as the main character never loses his innocence. The consequent two meaning of *Oliver Twist* seems to illustrate the reality of the Victorian society and as Peter Coveney argues, it could be said that "As a novel *Oliver Twist* is unachieved." (Coveney 128), *Oliver Twist* may have a fault, considering the credibility of the character of Oliver, however, it has fairy tale qualities as it suggests a 'little fairy'. "Twist" means "zigzag", which is to move forward by making sharp sudden turns first to the working class life from the workhouse and Fagin household and then to the middle class with Mr Brownlow. The criticism which Dickens suffers may be attributed to two aspects which are reality of the Victorian society and unreality that Oliver remains his innocence of the novel.

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