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**Research Question:** How does Charles Dickens exhibit the Victorian values and ideals of womanhood through the female figures in “Oliver Twist”?

“It is because I think so much of warm and sensitive hearts that I would spare them from  
being wounded.”

-Charles Dickens, Oliver Twist

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## Abstract

Charles Dickens is not considered only as the “ first great urban novelist in England”<sup>1</sup> but also as a social analyst and critic of The Victorian Age. According to Dr. Andrzej, *Oliver Twist* is studied as the first novel of Dickens that carries a social commentary of his following “Condition –of-England”<sup>2</sup> novels. this essay aims to explore the reflection of Victorian values and ideals of womanhood with references to certain social problems such as crime, child abuse, poverty and social hierarchy in the novel which can be accepted as a social document of its time. With this aim in mind, the question “How does Dickens exhibit the Victorian values and ideals of womanhood through the female figures in “*Oliver Twist*”?” is discussed.

This study is mainly based on the guidance of *Oliver Twist* as the primary source while some other secondary sources such as articles are referred to for the purpose of utterly perceiving and assessing expectations and roles of women in social context.

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<sup>1</sup> Diniejko, Andrzej. "Charles Dickens as Social Commentator and Critic." *Charles Dickens as Social Commentator and Critic*. N.p., 7 Feb. 2012. Web. 17 Feb. 2016.  
<<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/dickens/diniejko.html>>.

<sup>2</sup> Diniejko, Andrzej. "Charles Dickens as Social Commentator and Critic." *Charles Dickens as Social Commentator and Critic*. N.p., 7 Feb. 2012. Web. 17 Feb. 2016.  
<<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/dickens/diniejko.html>>.

To fully respond to the research question, this essay focuses on examination of the characterizations of Agnes Fleming, Rose Maylie and Nancy, likewise certain fictional Victorians' approach towards these female figures to interpret the exhibition of the Victorians' view on womanhood, including marriage, motherhood, household management, social life and manners in the respective social, cultural, and historical context. After studying the society and the characters in the novel, it is concluded that Dickens presents the status of women, the values and expectations of the society.

**Word Count: 299**

## I. Introduction

### i. View on Women in The Victorian Age

Since the beginning, genders have been ascribed certain roles, and expected to fulfil certain duties. Academicians such as Professor Lynn Abrams from the University of Glasgow and Professor Kathryn Hughes from the University of East Anglia have stated that women in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Britain were given “social responsibilities”<sup>3</sup> to fulfill in order to be respected in the Victorian society. There were also other notable expectations from women that didn’t take account of the social status of them. For instance, an ephemeral card was written anonymously with a verse titled as “Women’s Rights” that notified all women of their duties towards the Victorian society as they stepped into womanhood. The fourth stanza of the verse starts with: “*The Right to be a bright sunbeam/ In high or lowly home.*”<sup>4</sup> which implies that every woman without the consideration of her social class belonged to a home where she would be valued. The article, “Gender Roles In The 19<sup>th</sup> Century” written by Professor Kathryn Hughes acknowledges that women were prepared to play the role of “The Angel in The House”<sup>5</sup> which is a term for the ideal wife. Thus, the following question arises; was there a woman who was identified as ideal?

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<sup>3</sup> Abrams, Lynn. "Ideals of Womanhood in Victorian Britain." *BBC News*. BBC, 08 Sept. 2001. Web. 17 Feb. 2016. <[http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/trail/victorian\\_britain/women\\_home/ideals\\_womanhood\\_07.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/trail/victorian_britain/women_home/ideals_womanhood_07.shtml)>.

<sup>4</sup> "'Woman's Rights', a 19th Century Verse." *The British Library*. N.p., n.d. Web. 17 Feb. 2016. <<http://www.bl.uk/collection-items/a-19th-century-verse-on-womans-rights>>.

<sup>5</sup> Hughes, Kathryn. "Gender Roles in The 19th Century." N.p., n.d. Web. <<http://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/gender-roles-in-the-19th-century#authorBlock1>>.

Indeed, Queen Victoria was considered an icon during her reign in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Britain. The article “Ideals of Womanhood in Victorian Britain” by Professor Lynn Abrams describes Queen Victoria as “the model of marital stability and domestic virtue. Queen Victoria’s marriage to Albert represented the ideal of marital harmony. She was described as the mother of the nation, and she came to embody the idea of home as a cosy, domestic space.”<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the Victorians’ idealizations of womanhood were formed portraying Queen Victoria as an example.

## ii. Victorian Women in *Oliver Twist*

*Oliver Twist* depicts the life and encounters of the orphan Oliver with other fictional characters in the Victorian Age when the social status of a woman was designating her role in the society. *Dissenting Women in Dickens’ Novels* by Brenda Ayres distributes the female characters in *Oliver Twist* into categories. One of the categories in the novel is a fallen woman from the middle-class as a result of the unfulfillment of her moral duties towards her family as Agnes had failed. Another case of a “fallen woman” is from the working class that is Nancy.<sup>7</sup> Contrarily, there is Rose Maylie the ideal woman who is approved by the Victorian society due to her good moral values.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the following research question is developed:

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<sup>6</sup> Abrams, Lynn. "Ideals of Womanhood in Victorian Britain." *BBC News*. BBC, 08 Sept. 2001. Web. 17 Feb. 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Ayres Brenda. 1998 “Dissenting Women in Dickens’ Novels” – The Subversion of Domestic Ideology. London, Greenwood press. p113.

<sup>8</sup> Vicinus, Martha. 1980 “The Perfect Victorian Lady”. Introduction. *Women in Victorian Age*. Ed. Martha Vicinus. London, Methuen p7-15.

**How does Charles Dickens exhibit the Victorian values and ideals of womanhood through the female figures in Oliver Twist?**

The question is approached by Agnes Fleming, Rose Maylie and Nancy in Oliver Twist that Dickens illustrates by the usage of metaphors and imagery. The attitudes towards these female figures that are depicted by symbolisms lead to the interpretation of the Victorian idealizations of womanhood which includes marriage, motherhood, household management, domestic duties, social life, norms and manners.



## II. Agnes Fleming

Agnes, a young girl who is introduced as owning “*The old story*”(p3) with “*no wedding-ring*”(p3) dies while giving birth to Oliver in a workhouse in the beginning of “*Oliver Twist*”. The usage of the phrase “the old story” means that Agnes was pregnant before being wed. The name of the young girl and her relation with Oliver isn’t clarified until the end of the novel where she is found out to be Agnes Fleming, the mother of Oliver. Throughout the novel Agnes’ name is only mentioned to reflect on her past actions. Therefore, the depiction of Agnes benefits the understanding of marriage and motherhood as aspects of Victorian values of womanhood.

The first aspect of the Victorian values of womanhood that is conveyed from the characterization of Agnes is motherhood. A Victorian woman had duties to fulfill in the name of her family. One of her duties was to step into the world of motherhood with one condition which was that the woman had to be wed for the acceptance of the society. Professor Lynn Abrams explains that “*In the 19th century for Victorians, motherhood domesticity and were portrayed as sufficient emotional fulfilment for women and many middle-class women regarded domestic life as a sweet vocation, a substitute for women's productive role.*”<sup>9</sup> An unwed woman’s bearing a child meant disgrace for her family and caused her to become an outcast in the society. For instance, it is explained that towards the end of the novel that Agnes had come from a middle-class family and just as any other Victorian woman she was expected to remain pure, to not be sexually active until she was wed. However, Agnes has fallen in love and become a mistress to a married man that makes her a fallen woman in the eyes of the society since such acts are not tolerated according to Christian beliefs that the

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<sup>9</sup> Abrams, Lynn. "Ideals of Womanhood in Victorian Britain." *BBC News*. BBC, 08 Sept. 2001. Web. 17 Feb. 2016.

Victorians attached importance to as the majority of them was Christian. In the Bible it reads, “because of the temptation of sexual immorality each man should have his own wife and each woman her husband.” (English Standard Version, 1 Corinthians 7,1-5)<sup>10</sup> which clarifies that a sexual intercourse except marriage would be a mistake. As a result of her mistake, “She was found lying in the street. She had walked some distance, for her shoes were worn to pieces; but where she came from, or where she was going to, nobody knows.”(p3) even though she had a family and a home before. The use of imagery in which creates the image of a weary girl in torn clothes who is about to collapse in the street indicates that she is homeless and was probably rejected by her family. Moreover, it can be implied that the girl was punished and had to pay for her shame by living a miserable life on the streets and eventually dying without having the privilege to experience motherhood. In conclusion, the characterization of Agnes and the description of the consequences of her mistake in which she has ended up living on the streets reflect that marriage was obligatory for a woman who wished to experience an esteemed motherhood in the Victorian society.

Secondly, the concept of marriage directed at a woman and its value for the Victorians is exhibited by the usage of symbolism for the description of the aftermath of Agnes’ wrongdoing. A Victorian woman could not earn forgiveness of the society if she made an unapproved decision according to the society and her punishment lasted even after her death. Dickens describes a tomb named after Agnes even though her tomb is not with the rest of her family but in a grave near the workhouse. “Within the altar of the old village church there stands a White marble tablet, which bears as yet but one word: Agnes”(p480) sets a bittersweet image because it is a humane act to pity Agnes and to dedicate a tomb but the fact that she is not fully forgiven as her tomb is away from her family cannot be ignored.

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<sup>10</sup> "What Does the Bible Say About Premarital Sex (Sex Before Marriage, Sex Without Marriage)?" *What Does the Bible Say About Premarital Sex?* N.p., n.d. Web. 17 Feb. 2016. <[http://www.christianbiblereference.org/faq\\_premaritalsex.htm](http://www.christianbiblereference.org/faq_premaritalsex.htm)>.

Furthermore, the consequences that come with the mistake that Agnes has made in the Victorian Era by failing to resist an intercourse with her lover before marriage is signified in the last passage of the novel. “*There is no coffin in that tomb*”(p480) shows that the body of Agnes is nowhere to be found. The tomb represents the Victorian society that excludes the coffin which in this case is Agnes. So, the coffin symbolically indicates that Agnes could never utterly be pardoned and accepted by the Victorians. By the portrayal of the aftermath of Agnes’ death the importance of marriage in a Victorian women’s survival in the Victorian society is understood.

Lastly, Dickens’ diction while Agnes is described as “*weak and erring*” (p480) sums up the general view of Victorians’ of an unacceptable act of a woman. The unacceptable quality of Agnes’ act can be understood as Dickens reflects on Agnes’ wrongdoing by depicting how Agnes’ family fled “*goaded by shame and dishonour*”(p343) after Agnes’ pregnancy is revealed to their community. Dickens’ word choice “shame” and “dishonour” implies that Agnes’ mistake is beyond measure to be forgiven. To conclude, the portrayal of Agnes’ actions and their results by the usage of literary devices such as imagery and symbolism contributes to the comprehension of the Victorian expectations of womanhood.

### III. Rose Maylie

Rose Maylie is “*The younger lady in the lovely bloom and springtime of womanhood if ever angels be for God’s good purposes enthroned in mortal forms, they may be supposed to abide in such as hers.*”(p245-246). The imagery that Dickens uses indicates that Rose seems to be a young woman at the “springtime” of her youth meaning that she is just starting her adulthood. Dickens’ diction and the usage of the word “lady” connotes respect which is an appropriate title for Rose as she possesses every quality that is expected of a respected middle-class woman. Additionally, Dickens by the usage of a metaphor prefers to contrast Rose with an angel in the form of a mortal who is sent from God for only good purposes. Therefore; Rose is portrayed as the angelic figure who is on her way to become a well-behaved, innocent and perfect lady. Evidently, the Victorians valued women who were virtuous and sexually pure. Thus, Rose’s characterization and the depiction of her relations with other figures demonstrate the norms of the society as aspects of Victorian ideals of womanhood.

The aspects of Victorian idealizations of womanhood that are disclosed from the characterization of Rose and the exhibition of her relations with certain figures are the social life and marriage. First of all, Rose benefits from acquiring a last name “Maylie” that implies she belongs to a family which is a momentous leap for a woman to be ranked as respected in the Victorian society. The remuneration of obtaining a title as a “respected woman” is that the woman has the contingency to choose the man to marry in which Rose takes the time to contemplate the proposal from Harry. Nevertheless, once the status of being a respected woman is attained, the pressure of pursuing the title initiates.

The fate of Rose changes after the revelation that she is in fact the sister of Agnes who is known to be an impudent and disgraceful woman. As a result, Rose reflects on the circumstances as “*there is a stain upon my name which the world visits on innocent heads*”(p229). Obviously, Rose doesn’t want her reputation to ruin any innocent near her.

She has to make a choice to save her title as a notable woman because she can't be the woman who destroys the dignity of her surrounding. Hereby, this influences Rose to become determined to reject the marriage proposal of Harry as she is concerned that her family's infamous reputation will stain his name. Despite being patriarchal, the Victorian society respected women seem to be able to determine their own paths in life. Rose who is considered a respected woman has the opportunity to make her own choices. Dickens empowers Rose by giving her a free will to make a choice alone. It can also be stated that, the scandal of a sister can alter the fate of the younger sibling in the Victorian society as the family is held accountable for not taking precaution of such degradation.

Furthermore, the dialogue between Mrs. Maylie and Harry illustrates the Victorian viewpoint of marriage. Mrs. Maylie believes that, "*if an enthusiastic, ardent, and ambitious man marry a wife on whose name there is a stain, will sordid people upon his children.*"(p292). Mrs. Maylie clearly doesn't put love as the essential part of marriage but suggests that the title pursued by the couple. Fortunately for Rose Harry refuses to abandon her even if it could lead to the downfall of his career. Harry chooses love over status and declares, "*If my world could not be yours, I would make yours mine; that no pride of birth should curl the lip at you, for I would turn from it.*"(p462). Harry confesses his unconditional love for Rose stating that he would choose her over a title. Harry's expectations from marriage seem to just be love. Therefore, Harry forms the idea that not all Victorians are the same and their expectations from the women differ. The characterization of Rose develops the portrayal of the responsibilities of a respected middle-class woman and the depiction of her relations with figures such as Harry, Mrs. Maylie and her sister Agnes shape the conceptualization of marriage as an aspect of the Victorian ideals.

The last aspect of the Victorian expectations from a middle-class woman is manners that is cognisable by the description of Rose's behavior towards other figures. As mentioned earlier the "Women's Rights" comprised the expectations of a woman in the Victorian Age. The first stanza of verses reads, "*The Right to be a comforter/ When all comforts fail*"<sup>11</sup> which is interpreted as the Victorian women needed to be beneficial especially towards the troubled minds. Thus, they were expected to have humanitarian manners. Rose is considered as the angel without wings of the Maylie house. The main reason behind Rose distinguished as an "*angel*"(p246) is her utmost good morals, innocence and belief in the goodness of others. Her approach towards Oliver is admirable as she is the first person in the Maylie house to believe his story.

Furthermore, when Nancy visits the Maylie house while all of the servants look at her derogatorily, Rose claims, "*I am very sorry if any one has behaved harshly to you*"(p350) to Nancy that no one has ever said to her. Rose's kind gesture towards Nancy indicates her acceptance of Nancy having feelings just as any other human. Most importantly, Rose listens to her without prejudice. As explained, the display of the conversations between Rose and certain figures represent the ideal manners of a Victorian woman.

To sum up, Dickens' expressionism of marriage, norms, social life and manners as aspects of the Victorian values of womanhood through the characterization of Rose creates the image of an ideal woman of the Victorian Era.

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<sup>11</sup> "'Woman's Rights', a 19th Century Verse." *The British Library*. N.p., n.d. Web. 17 Feb. 2016. <<http://www.bl.uk/collection-items/a-19th-century-verse-on-womans-rights>>.

#### IV. Nancy

Nancy introduced as the “*infamous creature*” (p362) pursues her life among thieves and criminals. Oliver describes Nancy as “*remarkably free and agreeable in manners*” (p57) because she stands alone without a family. As she doesn’t have a family by her side, Oliver assumes that she is an emancipated person without any attachments or responsibilities towards anyone. When the fact that Nancy grows up without any compassion and love is considered Oliver’s thoughts seem reasonable. The characterization of Nancy allows the reader to comprehend the manners of fallen woman yet a Victorian woman. Additionally, household management which is an aspect of the Victorian ideals of womanhood is observed when Dickens describes the relationship of Nancy and Bill Sikes.

Firstly, Nancy’s protective and motherly nature towards Oliver shows the expected role of any women in the society. The Victorian women were expected to take responsibility at a young age and step into womanhood fast. For fallen women this happened faster as they were left all alone by the society. “*They were excluded from society; the fallen woman was doomed to earn her living on the streets all by herself.*”<sup>12</sup> Nancy seems to be mistaken as an adult. She seems to be aware of her grown up appearance as she explains, “*I am younger than you would think, to look at me, but I am well used to it.*”(p263) when it is revealed that she is just sixteen years old. A woman in Nancy’s status was expected to be deprived of any maternalism as she couldn’t afford a safe home for a child. However, Nancy lives among the Victorians so it wouldn’t be irrational to say that she is aware of some of the expectations from women which included nurturing. Hence, Nancy’s maternal instincts at age sixteen is observed from her approach towards Oliver as an older sister and sometimes a

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<sup>12</sup> Nead, Lynda. *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1998. p139

mother. She even stands up to Sikes when he tries to hurt Oliver: "*The child shan't be torn down by the dog, unless you kill me first.*"(p135) which is an act of instinct to protect the younger.

Another relationship that demonstrates Nancy's manners which leads to the understanding of the differences of the Victorian view and expectations of fallen women and middle-class women is between Nancy and Rose. Brenda Ayres suggests that, "*Society values gold and underrates brass, but brass has much more strength and practical use than gold.*"<sup>13</sup> which indicates that a woman who obeys the ideals of the Victorian society is valued just as much as gold and a prostitute is not appreciated however, they should be considered stronger as they are survivors. They are abandoned by the society and have to survive on their own. The lowest a woman could fall in the social class had she become a prostitute as Nancy. The existence of social class led to Nancy confront with the obstacles in her life alone.

Nancy has grown up on the streets and raised by a gang which forces her become fearless. On the other hand Rose is valued as gold in the society and has been raised by a middle-class family that provides her support and she is never left alone. Hence, Nancy has learnt to stand on her feet and so she doesn't hesitate to help Oliver on her own which is considered as a "dangerous mission." She even tells Rose to get help from a man to save Oliver. She is said to be "*stronger than Rose because she does not need a man to complete a dangerous mission.*"<sup>14</sup> Therefore, the difference of Victorians' view of womanhood of a middle-class woman and a fallen woman is distinguished.

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<sup>13</sup> Ayres, Brenda. *Dissenting Women in Dickens' Novels- The Subversion of Domestic Ideology*. London: Greenwood press,1998. p120.

<sup>14</sup> Ayres, Brenda. *Dissenting Women in Dickens' Novels- The Subversion of Domestic Ideology*. London: Greenwood press,1998.p120.



The second aspect of the Victorian values that can be observed from the relationship between Bill Sikes and Nancy is the women's place at home. A Victorian woman had a duty towards her husband regardless her place in the social class. Nancy is inarguably not the ideal woman in the eyes of a Victorian but she still takes care of Bill Sikes as if he owns her, beyond than a husband role: "*Such a number of nights I've been patient with you, nursing, and caring for you, as if you had been a child.*"(p251). The women in the Victorian Era were dependent on men and Nancy as a mistress could not leave Sikes: "*I cannot leave him now. I could not be his death.*"(p364). This demonstrates the Victorian woman's idea of love, loyalty and dependency on the man. She refuses to betray him although she could live a better life without him.

The forgiveness of the Victorian society was not earned easily but women were still given second chances even though their redemption would result in their death. Nancy who regrets her service to Fagin's gang knows her mistakes in life which is why she utters "*one prayer for mercy to her maker*"(p423) before her death. Clearly, Nancy wants redemption before her death as she cries for mercy. She asks for forgiveness of God as she wants peace in her afterlife that she does not have during her lifetime. The use of imagery and symbolism in the description of Nancy's murder implies that the salvation of a fallen woman was her death: "*drew from her bosom a white handkerchief-Rose Maylie's own- and holding it up, in her folded hands.*"(p419). Nancy dies while holding the item that once belongs to a girl who is summoned as the "*angel lady*"(p353) and now she is the one holding the handkerchief. The handkerchief is a symbol given to Nancy as a sign of approval of her identity and her past. Rose has given it to Nancy because she has noticed the inner beauty of Nancy instead of just classifying her as a fallen woman.

Consequently, although Dickens implies that her lost purity returned to Nancy through her death, he seems to show that a fallen woman could not fully be forgiven. A reason for this

claim is that Dickens doesn't give any credit to Nancy for saving Oliver's future by emancipating him from Fagin and Monks' evil plan against him by reporting them to Rose as she is caught and killed before she can be rewarded. This leads to Rose being the savior and Dickens even rewards Rose as she turns out to be the aunt of Oliver. He declares his compassion towards Rose: "*I'll call her my own dear sister that something taught my heart to love so dearly from the first.*" (p463). Oliver sees Rose as his hero and shows his gratitude towards her while Nancy is not even mentioned. This indicates that a fallen woman just as Nancy could never truly redeem her moral degradation and become a woman as Rose who is described as "virtuous predominant and moral excellence in the novel."<sup>15</sup>

To sum up, Dickens by using imagery reflects that although a fallen woman, Nancy still bears deep inside certain Victorian values such as acting on maternal instincts and a woman's place is her home because she has responsibilities for her man.

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<sup>15</sup> Reed, J.R. Dickens and Thackeray: Punishment and Forgiveness. Ohio: Ohio University Press,1995. p78.

## V. Conclusion

Regardless of the fact that it is a novel focusing on the encounters of Oliver with other fictional figures, Dickens presents the status of women in the Victorian Era, the values and expectations of the society and relations of women from different classes, the roles of women in different social classes. When the research question: **How does Charles Dickens exhibit the Victorian values and ideals of womanhood through the female figures in Oliver Twist?** is examined it can be concluded that Dickens' usage of literary devices such as metaphors, imagery and symbolisms illustrate female figures and the attitude towards them interprets efficiently the Victorian conceptualization of womanhood. The story of Agnes indicates the necessity of marriage in experiencing motherhood according to the Victorian values. The diction of Dickens in illustrating Rose depicts the reward of pursuing a life as a "lady" as she is given a "happy ending" and a title as the hero of Oliver. The imagery that is used to show the relations of Nancy with Sikes and Oliver exhibits the Victorian expectation that a woman had to serve, comply with and comfort her spouse and take good care of children.

Lastly, it can be endorsed that the characterizations of Agnes, Rose and Nancy lead to the understanding that they are not just minor characters that support plot and the adventures of the protagonist, but are representatives of stereotypes of the Victorian women who are portrayed in various social status.

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