

# The spirit of Britishness in Charles Dickens' Book: *Oliver Twist*<sup>1</sup>

Paola Julie Aguilar Cruz\*

*English Foreign Language Teaching Program*

*Neiva, Colombia*

*paolaaguilarcruz@gmail.com*

## ABSTRACT

This paper will present in the first place a brief summary of the book *Oliver Twist*, so as to familiarize the reader with the text. Secondly, it will describe the meaning of Britishness from a social perspective and its role to link people from different backgrounds, as stated by Khan (cited by Johnson, 2007). Then, it will deepen in the role of faith to shape the ideal British citizen regarding the responsibilities that British people had with their fellows, taking into account Bunting's (Cited by Jhonson, 2008) perspective. Later, it will set the ideal of forming tolerant and respectful citizens as described by Cruse (2008). Finally, it will demonstrate the role of mutual help, pride and freedom encountered in

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<sup>1</sup> This analysis is based on the learning experience from the seminar on Literature in English I whose main objective was to portray a general view of the scope of literature through a brief analysis of three different dimensions and its relationship with the spirit of Britishness and Americanism. Yet, it is a comprehensive academic exercise of epistemological implications where learners are no longer passive consumers of information but meaningful producers of knowledge (Fernández, 2013).

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*Oliver Twist* (The Commission for Racial Equality, 2005; Gowie, M & Gregory, T, 2011; UKIP, 2010).

**Key words:** Oliver Twist, Britishness, British citizen, mutual help, freedom, faith, pride.

### INTRODUCTION

The following paper will depict some scenarios of the book *Oliver Twist* written by the well-known author Charles Dickens in 1838. These scenarios will be taken into consideration to describe how the spirit of Britishness is represented in this masterpiece. The setting in which Oliver Twist had to live becomes crucial to the reader's understanding of the influence of Britishness aiming to shape the ongoing ideal British citizen. Thus, the spirit of Britishness is embedded throughout the whole masterpiece to feature some of the main traits of the ideal citizen and the undesired citizen at the same time.

Before to tackle the issue on the spirit of Britishness, it is necessary to portray *Oliver Twist's* author. Charles Dickens was an English writer, social critic and a dreamer who is generally regarded as the greatest novelist of Victorian Period. When Dickens was very young, his father was sent to prison because he was unable to pay debts. As a result, all his family went to live with his father in jail. At the age of 12, Dickens was considered to have the appropriate age to start working. Consequently, he began to work in a factory. This was going to influence his writings later on his life, regarding the miserable, sad and poor conditions in which he had to work and the experiences he had to live in his early

ages. It is worthy to mention these aspects so as to have a broader idea of his writing style, the ideas he wanted to convey and the reality he presented in *Oliver Twist*.

Britishness can be seen as the interaction between people from different backgrounds, the shaping of a tolerable and respectful citizen. This paper focuses on Britishness regarded from a social perspective, in which human beings are major representatives of the spirit of Britishness. Throughout this paper, it will be argued and analyzed how Charles Dickens' book is a masterpiece that depicts the spirit of Britishness in terms of a social construct linked to faith, tolerance, respect, mutual help, pride and freedom.

#### BRITISHNESS IN *OLIVER TWIST*

This masterpiece shows how an orphan boy who lives in wretched conditions, is basically experiencing a series of mishaps, in the end gets what he deserved for being a straight, honest and authentic British citizen. This book shows the sordid lives that lower classes in London endured during Dickens' ages. The cruel and evil treatment that children were exposed to is also represented; children were taught as criminals, and almost all people were culturally taught that children lacked a soul. So, seen as donkeys, they were treated as adults pleased. Yet, those who behave well could reach the ideal citizen in terms of the ideal Victorian parameters.

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The spirit of Britishness is highly perceived in *Oliver Twist*, where upper social classes neglect the working proletariat. When it comes to talking about Britishness, it must be set off that Britishness should include in Khan's (cited by Johnson, 2007) words a "widening interaction between people from different backgrounds" (p.6). This interaction is not conceived in *Oliver Twist* as Khan would want, instead there is a derogatory treatment between both classes; in which the upper classes always predominated and treated the working classes poorly.

Britishness is conceived to be linked to a strong sense of responsibilities that British people should have. Among those responsibilities there is "faith" which for Bunting (Cited by Jhonson, 2008) is seen as "an essential underpinning for Britishness" (p. 11). She states that Britishness has to do with being faithful. She also claims that a British citizen must be the one who cares about the other and what happens in their surroundings. She adds: "we need to find a more ethical understanding of citizenship, one that recognizes our responsibilities to our fellow citizens". (p.11). The recognition of responsibilities can be seen in the following excerpt from *Oliver Twist* in page 78. In this excerpt Oliver is talking to Dick, one of his few friends, and he excitedly says:

'I [Dick] heard the doctor tell them I was dying,' replied the child with a faint smile. 'I am very glad to see you, dear; but don't stop, don't stop!'

‘Yes, yes, I will, to say good-b’ye to you,’ replied Oliver. ‘I shall see you again, Dick. I know I shall! You will be well and happy!’

‘I hope so,’ replied the child. ‘After I am dead, but not before. I know the doctor must be right, Oliver, because I dream so much of Heaven, and Angels, and kind faces that I never see when I am awake. Kiss me,’ said the child, climbing up the low gate, and flinging his little arms round Oliver’s neck. ‘Good-b’ye, dear! God bless you!’

This last paragraph really moves readers’ hearts. It is just miserable that very young boys such as Dick knowing who was about to die, spoke in this manner, as if he really wanted to go to heavenly regions. This shows how Bunting’s words are implied since Oliver feels deeply worried about his friend. Certainly, Oliver does not want Dick to die, because he expresses that he wants to see him well and happy. Thus, the citizen that recognizes their responsibilities to their fellow citizen is completely embodied in the figure of Oliver worrying about his close friend.

Faith is another issue that Bunting talks about. The following excerpt describes well this aspect: “I [Oliver] am running away. They beat and ill-use me, Dick; and I am going to seek my fortune, some long way off. I don’t know where” (p.40). In this fragment, Oliver is talking to Dick. Oliver is escaping from the wretched conditions in which he lived, because he has faith that everything is going to change some time and that his

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lifestyle is going to be different. He never gives up even when circumstances are unbearable. He wants to seek his fortune in another place where everything changes, in which he may accommodate himself to the ideal faithful British citizen. Faith is the explanation of why Oliver, even with all the adversities he underwent, still, he struggles to survive, to have better life conditions, and to stop being part of that miserable world in which he was destined to live.

On the other hand, Britishness is seen in terms of Cruse's (2008) when it comes to shaping a citizen who is tolerant and respectful, and who is not indifferent to the adversities that others may endure. This is represented in chapter XII of the book, when once proved that Oliver did not steal Mr. Brownlow's handkerchief, Mr. Brownlow invites Oliver to stay at his house to care about him in the best possible way. Mr. Brownlow is described as a gentleman in the city where events take place. When they come home, he asks an old lady to be in charge of Oliver. Later, a doctor goes there to check if Oliver is getting better. The doctor says to the old lady:

You may give him [Oliver] a little tea, ma'am, and some dry toast without any butter. Don't keep him too warm, ma'am; but be careful that you don't let him be too cold; will you have the goodness?' (p.125)

In this excerpt the comprehensive citizen to whom Cruse (2008) refers to is Mr. Brownlow, who worried about Oliver and his health, even when he does not know Oliver

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very well, he assigns two people to be in charge of him. Mr. Brownlow is not indifferent to the adversities that Oliver has had to face, instead, he embodies the ideal citizen that this trend of Victorian Britishness wants to form.

Accordingly, Oliver claims: 'You're very, very kind to me, ma'am,' (Dickens, 1838, p. 127) after being cared for by the old lady. He seems to be very happy and thankful for the support he has received. It was one of the few times in which Oliver has been offered this kind of help. He was accustomed to the wretched treatment from older people he had met so far. This demonstrates the British tendency of the people depicted in the masterpiece to start seeing their fellows as equals and that through tolerance and respect, a new British generation represented in Oliver might experience and taste welfare. Also, Oliver's attitude, always positive, paved the way to the ascending ideal citizen. There starts the transition between the tendency of Victorian Britishness and the spirit of Britishness as the hope and regent of a better British Society based on goals, ideal, values, principles, self-respect, enthusiasm and courage.

Mutual help is also visible in *Oliver Twist*, and in the exploits he had to confront. The Commission for Racial Equality (2005) deals with this topic from a social point of view, regarding the role that mutual help has in society. This entails to analyze the spirit of Britishness in the way the evil acted during the story, and also the compassion that was felt between the few ones who were good people. Thus, Britishness has to do with the fact of creating a citizen that likes cooperating with others and not working in isolation. However, there were some times in which Oliver did not feel that this spirit of Britishness proposed

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by The Commission for Racial Equality was completely aimed, as in the following excerpt from the book:

“So lonely, sir! So very lonely!’ cried the child [Oliver]. ‘Everybody hates me. Oh! sir, don’t, don’t pray be cross to me!’ The child beat his hand upon his heart; and looked in his companion’s face, with tears of real agony.”(p.42).

There, the author is explicitly describing the way the child of the epoch felt. One should remember that during that period in England most of the children were treated in a very wretched way by some adults. This shows that mutual help was not a share give to all citizens. Children were taught as animals without souls. Adults had the “task” of educating them by hitting, kicking and striking them, so that those kids, if survived, heavily learned to be respectful, worth adults. The British man of that epoch was a man who imposed and ruled over the unprivileged ones. The masterpiece evidences how profound the lack of mutual help among young and adults was to build a prosperous empire.

Another aspect which reveals the power of the raisins spirit of Britishness is Pride. According to Wind-Gowie, M & Gregory, T. (2011): “British people understand the positive role of pride as a motivator and signifier of positive behavior”. British people are supposed to feel proud of their Empire and of having been born there. Nevertheless it does



not totally apply in *Oliver Twist* masterpiece because at the very beginning of the book the author writes:

“Oliver cried lustily. If he could have known that he was an orphan, left to the tender mercies of church-wardens and overseers, perhaps he would have cried the louder” (p.6)

Oliver states that if he had the chance of knowing that he was going to be sent to a parish house, he would have cried the louder, which means, he would wish not to be born. This implies that Oliver was not proud of being born in his country, because he knew that the conditions in which he was going to live were very poor. Also, Dickens shows through this excerpt an example of how pride was represented in Mr. Bumble who was the beadle and one of the first persons in charge of Oliver:

“He was in the full bloom and pride of beadlehood; his cocked hat and coat were dazzling in the morning sun; he clutched his cane with the vigorous tenacity of health and power. Mr. Bumble always carried his head high; but this morning it was higher than usual” (p.96)

In this excerpt, Mr. Bumble embodies the ideal British citizen who is proud of having the power he has and of being born in the United Kingdom. Pride is represented as a motivator for Mr. Bumble in the sense he is happy for having the social position he has. Also, he always shows to carry his head high, which is a major trait of pride as well.

Britishness, in terms of freedom is not seen in *Oliver Twist* either. According to UKIP (2010): “Britishness can be defined in terms of belief in democracy, fair play and freedom, as well as traits such as politeness” (p.6). However, at the epoch in which Dickens wrote his masterpiece, freedom was not conceived as it is conceived nowadays. Instead, freedom was more a right to choose that upper social classes counted on. Lower social classes did not totally have the real opportunity to be free. It is the case of Oliver, who had to obey the authorities that he was assigned to.

Additionally, freedom of speech was not considered with the complexity it demands. In Dickens' masterpiece, one discovers the difficult path to follow by those who needed a voice to sue and complain in order to get relief; instead they are penalized and their lives are painfully harmed. For instance, when Oliver was in the workhouse and he wanted to complain because he was very hungry. Oliver stated: ‘Please, sir, I want some more.’ (p.11). However, this food was not for him because the authorities said that the food

they have given to him was enough. Britishness as a principle of social and speech freedom is absent in Dickens' masterpiece.

## CONCLUSION

The rising of the spirit of Britishness is constantly present as a port destiny to be reached by the ideal Oliver in Dickens' masterpiece. From the way Dickens depicts surrealistic scenarios to the way he describes people's behaviors of the Victorian age. During that period, there was a need of writing the harsh reality of events that took place in people's everyday lives. Thus, as the well-known writer Charles Dickens had to confront a difficult life in his early ages, he captured the most wretched and miserable conditions that a young and poor boys as Oliver experienced during a fluctuating era of rural to urban, industrial milieus.

As *Oliver Twist* shows vividly the conditions in which people struggle to live, it can be argued that Dickens is basically and fiercely criticizing certain and specific aspects of the Victorian tendency of the elite Britishness. These aspects include: the greed and hypocrisy that the wealthy citizens showed and the lack of freedom for disfavored classes. However, Dickens does not discriminate that there existed honest people as Mr. Brownlow and Oliver who embody the tolerant citizen that the crown searched. Dickens plays with

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good and evil, representing good as the ideal raising new citizen and evil as the declining citizen who do not represent the ideal citizen of the empire.

The spirit of Britishness was taken into consideration as the interaction among people from different backgrounds, the fact of being faithful linked to responsibilities, the creation of a tolerable and respectful citizen, mutual help, pride and freedom. In which according to the government, a person could be worthy to be called British if they had certain aspects and characteristics that were deepen before during this paper.

To sum up, *Oliver Twist* captures the incredibility and extraordinary vitality of life in the cities of that era somehow. Moreover, Dickens' book is a historical masterpiece that gathers all the conflict and misfortunes that the lower class was sent to suffer during that epoch. The perspective of Britishness played a decisive role in constructing an ideal citizen with values and duties with their fellows, this aimed to improve the squalor, immorality and deprivation that the population was forced to endure. *Oliver Twist* contributes to understand the model of human being that was conceived during those times in terms of the rising spirit of Britishness.

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Paola Julie Aguilar Cruz is a current student of the bachelor in English at Surcolombiana University in Neiva-Colombia. She holds a technical degree in English from Academia Iberoamericana de Idiomas, and she has been working as a research assistant in the research group called "COMUNIQUEMOS" at

