

Spring 2014

She's Dogging Him

Ana Curtis '15

Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.imsa.edu/spring2014>

 Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Curtis, Ana '15, "She's Dogging Him" (2014). *2014 Spring Semester*. Paper 5.
<http://digitalcommons.imsa.edu/spring2014/5>

This Junior Award Winner is brought to you for free and open access by the Award for Excellence in Expository Writing at DigitalCommons@IMSA. It has been accepted for inclusion in 2014 Spring Semester by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@IMSA. For more information, please contact pgarrett@imsa.edu, jean@imsa.edu.

Ana Curtis

Dr. Hancock

Victorian Fiction

12 April 2014

She's Dogging Him

It should come as no great surprise to readers of Victorian fiction that Charles Dickens makes great use of symbolism in his stories. This practice proves especially useful for his serialized stories, like *Oliver Twist*, where he uses criminals, including prostitutes like Nancy, to make an overall political point. At the time of this novel's publication, prostitutes were looked down upon, sometimes as sub-human, and Dickens, though largely sympathetic to Nancy, takes this degradation a step further by directly comparing her to an animal. In *Oliver Twist*, Sikes's dog acts a surrogate for Nancy, experiencing similar treatment from Sikes and, eventually, the same death. Dickens uses descriptors and the idea of ownership to make this surrogacy clear, thus illustrating his idea of prostitutes as victims of circumstance.

Nancy and Sikes's dog are described similarly by both Dickens himself and characters within the story. When readers of *Oliver Twist* are first introduced to Sikes, they find that he is accompanied by "a white shaggy dog, with his face scratched and torn in twenty different places," that is apparently quite used to Sikes's brutality and content to remain at his side (Dickens 98). Nancy is re-introduced a few pages later when she is convinced to go in search of Oliver. This convincing is done mainly by Sikes, who asserts from the beginning that she is "just the very person for it," and that "she'll go," far before she agrees to do it (101). His confidence that she will do as he says and his abuse of her imply a certain degree of ownership, and her response, to eventually do as he tells her to, implies that she is used to it. Here Dickens shows that she is

almost as completely subservient to Sikes as the dog. The comparisons continue when Nancy and the dog, named Bull's-eye, are described similarly by characters within the story. On page 148, Jack Dawkins, otherwise known as the Artful Dodger, praises the dog by saying that "he wouldn't so much as bark in a witness-box, for fear of committing himself" (148). Only a few pages later, Sikes comforts Fagin with the assurance that Nancy "ain't one to blab" (158). In both cases, this description is used as praise proving trustworthiness, which is a strange description to be used on a dog. However, use of this description makes perfect sense if it is being used to indicate a degree of humanity in its object. Dickens emphasizes both doglike traits in Nancy through her incredible obedience to Sikes and humanlike traits in the dog through use of descriptors like that of trustworthiness. These descriptors link the two closer and closer together.

Both Nancy and Bull's-eye are more closely linked to Sikes than to any other character, and his attitude toward and treatment of them is remarkably similar. It is established fairly early in the story that Nancy and Sikes are intimate through clues like Sikes's jealousy of Oliver when Nancy is kind to him (125) and the rather glaring fact that the two share a bed (395). The dog is literally owned by Sikes, but this question of literal and figurative ownership does not make much of a difference between him and Nancy in Sikes's opinion. For instance, when Nancy breaks out against the gang's treatment of Oliver after his kidnapping, Sikes tells her to keep quiet "with a growl like that he [i]s accustomed to use when addressing his dog" (132). This is a direct connection between Nancy and the dog, for it literally shows an example of Sikes treating his woman the way he treats his dog. Readers continue to find that Sikes treats his dog and his woman in the exact same way: violently. During Nancy's outbreak, he threatens to "split [her] skull against the wall," among other such things, if she does not cease struggling with him, and is

near fulfilling his promise when Fagin enters (130). Similarly, he fights with Bull's-eye in the pub when waiting for Fagin and is at the point of killing him before Fagin intercedes (117). Here there is a resemblance in not only attitude and treatment but also storyline.

During Sikes's escape from London after his murder of Nancy, Bull's-eye acts as the dead Nancy's phantom. After finding out about Nancy's betrayal of the gang, Sikes rushes back to his room, where she lies, beats her despite her pleas of him to "stop before [he] spill[s] [her] blood," (396) and eventually seizes "a heavy club and str[ikes] her down" (397). Murdering her truly sets him apart from the others in the gang, who have mostly committed milder crimes. It haunts him as he flees from London, accompanied only by Bull's-eye, who here takes on the aspect of Nancy. When Sikes leaves the town, he feels that there is a "ghastly figure following at his heels," a phantom of the woman he has murdered (402). No specific descriptions are given of this figure, and soon after it is mentioned, he attempts to kill Bull's-eye, ostensibly because he might lead to Sikes being recognized and arrested. The dog is the only real being accompanying Sikes on this journey and can thus be the only physical embodiment of this phantom. Attacking Bull's-eye, who has always been loyal to him, reflects not only Sikes's fear of Nancy's phantom, embodied in the dog, but also an attempted repeat of her murder. Nancy, always faithful to Sikes, has already been murdered, and now Bull's-eye, so loyal that his presence implies that of Sikes, is attacked. Only the failure of Sikes to actually kill Bull's-eye separates the two attempts.

The loyalty of Nancy and Bull's-eye to Sikes is what leads to both of their deaths. When Rose offers Nancy deliverance from her life of crime, deliverance that Nancy desperately yearns for, she chooses not to accept because she is "drawn back to [Sikes] through every suffering and ill usage" (337). This action leads to her death directly; Nancy does not take Rose's offer and is murdered by the man she gave up her deliverance for as a result. Similarly, Sikes's death frees

his dog from all of the violence and abuse inflicted on him by his master. Bull's-eye has a hope of a future without Sikes, but gives it up when he tries to join himself with his dead master by "collecting himself for a spring [and] jump[ing] for the dead man's shoulders" (428). He misses and falls into a ditch, "turning completely over as he [goes], and striking his head against a stone," which results in his death (428). Bull's-eye's fate is a direct result of his devotion to Sikes and his need to constantly be near him, just as Nancy's death is a direct result of her need for Sikes. Their tragic endings both reflect fatal faithfulness and act as reflections of one another. The dog's death is simply a reiteration of Nancy's death, driving home the point that the two are in essence the same.

It becomes clear early in *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens that the characters Nancy and Bull's-eye are parallel characters. In the Victorian age of moral novels, Dickens uses his comparison of the two characters as social commentary, noting Nancy's relegation to a "pet" belonging to Sikes through his use of a dog as a surrogate for her. Nancy and Bull's-eye are subjected to similar treatment from Sikes and descriptions that lower her to the status of an object of ownership and raise him to near human level. The resemblances continue to their deaths, both caused by their intense devotion to Sikes. The many resemblances between the plot, descriptions, and deaths of Nancy and Bull's-eye show that the dog is a symbol for the woman. It is an unfortunate but fitting comparison given Nancy's status as a prostitute in the highly moralistic era of Victorian fiction.

Works Cited

Dickens, Charles. *Oliver Twist*. Ed. Philip Horne. New York: Penguin Classics, 2002. Print.