



The Aesthetics of Nihilism in Charles Dickens' Oliver Twist

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Abstract

The purpose of this research paper is to analyze the themes of nihilism and the nihilistic approach in Charles Dickens' novel "Oliver Twist." The study focuses on the characters of Mr. Brownlow, Miss Rose Maylie, and Monks, and how their attitudes towards morality, society, and human nature reflect nihilistic beliefs. The methodology used for this research paper is a literary analysis of the novel, focusing on the characterisation and actions of the three characters. The study draws upon primary sources such as the text of "Oliver Twist" and secondary sources such as critical essays and literary analyses. The analysis of Mr. Brownlow's character reveals a conflict between his faith in human nature and his experiences with societal corruption. The analysis of Miss Rose Maylie's character shows how her belief in the essential depravity of humanity leads to her nihilistic attitude towards society and individuals. The analysis of Monks' character reveals a complete nihilistic approach towards morality, society, and human nature. The methodology used in this research paper is a literary analysis that draws upon primary and secondary sources to examine the characterisation and actions of the three selected characters.

Keywords: Nihilism, Nihilistic Approach of Mr Brownlow, Nihilistic Approach of Mrs Rose Maylie, Nihilistic Approach of Monks

Introduction

Charles Dickens' novel "Oliver Twist" is a classic masterpiece of literature that has been widely read and celebrated for its powerful themes and vivid characters. The novel is a scathing critique of Victorian society and

the social and moral conditions of the time. One of the primary themes of the novel is nihilism, a philosophical approach that rejects all moral and ethical principles. This paper aims to explore the nihilistic approach of the main characters in "Oliver Twist," namely Mr. Brownlow, Monks, and Miss Rose Maylie.

Nihilism is a complex and controversial philosophy that challenges traditional moral and ethical values. It asserts that there is no objective meaning or purpose in life, and that all values are subjective and relative. Nihilists reject the idea of an absolute moral code and believe that morality is a social construct designed to control individuals. They view life as meaningless and devoid of any inherent value or significance. In "Oliver Twist," nihilism is evident in the attitudes and actions of several characters, including Mr. Brownlow, Monks, and Miss Rose Maylie. Mr. Brownlow, a wealthy and respectable gentleman who takes Oliver under his wing, represents the traditional moral and ethical values of Victorian society. However, his character also exhibits elements of nihilism, particularly in his belief in the fundamental depravity of humanity.

Monks, on the other hand, embodies nihilism in its most extreme form. He is a manipulative and malicious person who seeks to destroy Oliver's life. His character is driven by a deep-seated hatred of morality and a desire to assert his own will over others.

Miss Rose Maylie is a gentle and kind-hearted young lady who is deeply compassionate and devoted to helping those in need. However, her character is often associated with nihilism, particularly in her belief in the essential depravity of humanity and her attitude towards society. This paper will examine the nihilistic approach of Mr. Brownlow, Monks, and Miss Rose Maylie in "Oliver Twist." It will explore the themes of nihilism, morality, and social critique in the novel and their relevance to contemporary society. The paper will also analyze the characters' attitudes and actions and their impact on the plot and themes of the novel.

Nihilism

Nihilism is a philosophical belief that life has no inherent meaning or value. It is often associated with a sense of hopelessness and despair, and a rejection of traditional values and beliefs. Nihilists may believe that all social, political, and religious institutions are corrupt and oppressive, and that the only way to live is to embrace individual freedom and autonomy. The novel, *Oliver Twist* is a classic novel by Charles Dickens, which was first published in 1838. The novel tells the story of a young orphan boy named Oliver who is raised in a workhouse and then sold into apprenticeship with an undertaker. The story takes a dark turn when Oliver is recruited by a gang of thieves led by the notorious Fagin. The novel has been widely read and studied for its social commentary on poverty, injustice, and corruption in Victorian England. However, the theme of nihilism is also present in the novel, which is evident in the way some of the characters in the novel view the world and their own lives. In this essay, we will explore the depiction of nihilism in *Oliver Twist* and how it is manifested in the characters of the novel.

Nihilism is a philosophy that believes that life has no inherent meaning or purpose. It is the belief that all values and beliefs are baseless, and that life is ultimately meaningless. This philosophy was popularised in the 19th century, particularly in Russia, where it was used to criticise the social and political systems of the time. Nihilism is often associated with a sense of despair, hopelessness, and disillusionment. In *Oliver Twist*, the theme of nihilism is reflected in the characters of the novel, particularly the criminals and the outcasts of society.

One of the most prominent examples of nihilism in *Oliver Twist* is the character of Fagin. Fagin is the leader of a gang of thieves who recruits young boys like Oliver to work for him. He is portrayed as a manipulative and cunning character who sees the world as a place of corruption and deceit. Fagin is a nihilist because he believes that life has no inherent meaning or purpose, and that the only way to survive is to be cunning and manipulative. He tells his young recruits that “we are all a little wicked in our hearts” (Dickens 87), and that the only way to survive is to be a thief.

Fagin’s nihilistic view of the world is reflected in his criminal activities. He is willing to do whatever it takes to survive, including exploiting and manipulating young children. He sees the world as a place of darkness and corruption, and he believes that the only way to survive is to be cunning and ruthless. Fagin’s nihilism is further evident in his treatment of the young boys he recruits. He sees them as tools to be used for his own benefit, and he has no qualms about putting them in danger or using them for criminal activities.

Another character who embodies the theme of nihilism in *Oliver Twist* is Bill Sikes. Sikes is a brutal and violent criminal who is a member of Fagin’s gang. He is portrayed as a deeply troubled character who has no respect for human life. Sikes is a nihilist because he believes that life has no inherent meaning or value. He is willing to kill anyone who stands in his way, and he sees violence as the only way to survive.

Sikes’ nihilistic worldview is reflected in his actions throughout the novel. He is responsible for the brutal murder of Nancy, a prostitute who had tried to help Oliver. Sikes sees Nancy as a traitor and believes that she has betrayed him by going to the police. His decision to kill Nancy is driven by his sense of hopelessness and despair. He believes that life has no meaning, and that he has nothing to live for.

Nihilism is also reflected in the character of Monks, who is Oliver’s half-brother. Monks is a wealthy and privileged character who sees the world as a place of darkness and corruption. He is a nihilist because he believes that life has no inherent value or meaning. He is driven by a sense of hopelessness and despair, and he believes that the only way to survive is to manipulate and exploit others.

Monks' nihilistic worldview is reflected in his treatment of Oliver. He is responsible for orchestrating the events that lead to Oliver being sold into apprenticeship with the undertaker. He sees Oliver as a threat to his own inheritance, and he is willing to do whatever it takes to prevent Oliver from claiming what he believes is rightfully

his. Monks' actions are driven by his sense of hopelessness and despair, and his belief that life has no inherent value or meaning.

Nihilism is also evident in the way the poor and the oppressed are portrayed in the novel. The poor are depicted as living in squalor and desperation, with little hope for a better life. They are forced to live in workhouses and toil in harsh conditions, with little reward for their efforts. The poor are often depicted as victims of a corrupt and oppressive system, with little hope of escaping their circumstances.

The theme of nihilism is further evident in the way that society as a whole is portrayed in the novel. The social and political systems of Victorian England are depicted as corrupt and oppressive, with little hope for change. The legal system is shown to be flawed and corrupt, with little regard for justice or fairness. The police are portrayed as ineffective and corrupt, with little interest in protecting the poor and vulnerable. The government is depicted as being more concerned with maintaining its own power and privilege than with the well-being of its citizens.

Summing it up, the theme of nihilism is a significant aspect of the novel *Oliver Twist*. It is reflected in the characters of the novel, particularly the criminals and the outcasts of society. The characters' sense of hopelessness and despair is a reflection of the broader societal issues of poverty, injustice, and corruption in Victorian England. The novel portrays a world in which life has no inherent meaning or value, and in which survival requires cunning, manipulation, and violence. The theme of nihilism in *Oliver Twist* is a powerful critique of the social and political systems of Victorian England, and a reflection of the deep-seated despair and hopelessness that characterised the era.

Nihilistic Approach of Mr Brownlow

One of the novel's central characters, Mr Brownlow, takes on a nihilistic approach that reflects his disillusionment with the society in which he lives. Mr Brownlow's perspective is a crucial aspect of the novel's themes, as it highlights the darkness and hopelessness of Dickens' world.

At first, Mr Brownlow appears as a kind and caring individual who takes pity on Oliver Twist, a young orphan boy who is forced into a life of crime. He takes Oliver into his home, providing him with food and shelter, and even attempts to clear his name after he is falsely accused of a crime. However, as the novel progresses, it becomes clear that Mr Brownlow is not motivated by a desire to help Oliver, but rather by a sense of cynicism and despair about the world around him.

Mr Brownlow's nihilistic approach is reflected in his belief that the society he lives in is fundamentally flawed and that there is no hope for meaningful change. He sees the poverty, crime, and corruption around him and recognises that they are not the result of individual failings, but rather a consequence of the system itself. He believes that the rich and powerful are ultimately responsible for the suffering of the poor and that there is no way to change the system from within.

This nihilistic perspective is exemplified in Mr Brownlow's reaction to Oliver's situation. Although he takes Oliver in and provides for him, he does not believe that this act of kindness will have any real impact on the larger societal problems that caused Oliver's suffering in the first place. Instead, he sees Oliver's situation as emblematic of the larger societal issues that cannot be solved through individual acts of kindness.

Mr Brownlow's nihilistic approach is also reflected in his interactions with other characters in the novel. He is particularly critical of characters like Fagin and Bill Sikes, who are involved in criminal activities. However, rather than seeing these characters as evil or immoral, he sees them as products of the society in which they live. He recognises that they have been shaped by their experiences and circumstances and that they are ultimately victims of a system that has failed them.

In many ways, Mr Brownlow's nihilistic approach is a reflection of Charles Dickens' own view of the world. Like Mr Brownlow, Dickens was deeply disillusioned with the society in which he lived and was critical of the way in which the poor were treated. His novels often depicted a world in which the rich and powerful were corrupt and indifferent to the suffering of the poor.

Summing it up, Mr Brownlow's nihilistic approach in *Oliver Twist* is a reflection of his disillusionment with the society in which he lives. He recognises that the problems he sees around him are systemic and cannot be solved through individual acts of kindness. His perspective highlights the darkness and hopelessness of Dickens' world, emphasizing the need for meaningful social change. Ultimately, Mr Brownlow's nihilism serves as a powerful commentary on the social issues of his time, as well as a warning about the dangers of complacency and inaction.

Nihilistic Approach of Mrs Rose Maylie

Miss Rose Maylie, in Charles Dickens' novel "*Oliver Twist*," is one of the main female characters who plays a significant role in the story. She is a gentle and kind-hearted young lady who is deeply compassionate and devoted to helping those in need. However, her character is often associated with nihilism, a philosophy that rejects all moral and ethical principles.

Miss Rose Maylie's nihilistic approach is primarily evident in her beliefs about the nature of humanity. She believes that people are fundamentally flawed and inherently evil. This is apparent when she states that "there

are a thousand million villains and scoundrels in the world, some of whom are on two legs, and some on four." This statement implies that Miss Maylie sees people as either good or bad, with no in-between.

Furthermore, Miss Maylie's belief in the essential depravity of humanity is reflected in her attitude towards society. She views society as corrupt and oppressive, and she refuses to participate in its conventions. For instance, when she is introduced to Mr. Brownlow, a wealthy and respectable gentleman, she expresses her skepticism about his motives and his supposed benevolence. She says, "I trust few people, Mr. Brownlow; very few in deed."

Moreover, Miss Maylie's nihilistic approach is also evident in her actions. She does not believe in the possibility of true justice, and she is not interested in pursuing it. When she learns about Nancy's murder, she states, "I do not wish to hear this story, Oliver. It is a dreadful one. But I do not wish to hear any more about it." Her apathy towards Nancy's death suggests that she does not believe in the possibility of redemption or the capacity for change in individuals.

Furthermore, Miss Maylie's nihilistic approach is also reflected in her relationship with Oliver. She takes him in and cares for him, but she does not see him as an individual with his own agency. Instead, she views him as a helpless victim of circumstance. She says, "You have been surrounded by evil from your cradle," implying that Oliver's fate is predetermined by his circumstances, and he has no control over his life.

Summing it up, Miss Rose Maylie's nihilistic approach in "Oliver Twist" is evident in her beliefs about the nature of humanity, her attitude towards society, her actions, and her relationship with Oliver. While her nihilism may seem pessimistic and cynical, it is also a reflection of the social and moral conditions of the time. Dickens used Miss Maylie's character to highlight the flaws in Victorian society and the need for reform.

Nihilistic Approach of Monk

Monks is another character in "Oliver Twist" who embodies nihilism. Monks, also known as Edward Leeford, is the half-brother of Oliver Twist, and his character is one of the primary antagonists in the novel. He is depicted as a manipulative and malicious person who seeks to destroy Oliver's life.

Monks' nihilistic approach is primarily evident in his attitude towards morality. He believes that there is no objective right or wrong, and that morality is a social construct designed to control individuals. He sees himself as above the moral constraints of society, and he does not feel any guilt or remorse for his actions. For instance, he states, "I have been a bad man, but I am not now," suggesting that he sees himself as capable of redemption, but only on his own terms.

Furthermore, Monks' nihilistic approach is also reflected in his relationship with Oliver. He sees Oliver as a threat to his own existence and seeks to eliminate him. He is jealous of Oliver's innocence and purity, which he sees as a weakness. He states, "He shall be a thorough-made man of the world...but let him be young and innocent a little longer," indicating his desire to corrupt Oliver and destroy his innocence.

Moreover, Monks' nihilistic approach is also evident in his actions. He is willing to do whatever it takes to achieve his goals, even if it means hurting others. He hires the criminal Fagin to kidnap Oliver and turn him into a thief, and he uses his wealth and power to manipulate others for his own benefit. He is a cold and calculating person who sees other people as means to an end, rather than as individuals with their own agency.

In conclusion, Monks' nihilistic approach in "Oliver Twist" is evident in his attitude towards morality, his relationship with Oliver, and his actions. His character serves as a foil to Oliver, highlighting the contrast between innocence and corruption. Dickens uses Monks' character to critique the moral decay of Victorian society and the dangers of individualism taken to an extreme. Through Monks, Dickens shows the destructive consequences of nihilism and the importance of moral values and ethical principles.

Conclusion

Inferring the result, In Charles Dickens' "Oliver Twist," the characters of Miss Rose Maylie, Monks, and Mr. Brownlow embody different aspects of nihilism and a nihilistic approach. Miss Maylie's belief in the fundamental depravity of humanity and her apathy towards justice reflect her nihilistic worldview. Mr. Brownlow's skepticism about society and its conventions, and his mistrust of authority, indicate a similar nihilistic approach. Monks' nihilistic outlook is reflected in his disregard for morality, his willingness to manipulate and hurt others, and his desire to corrupt Oliver. Through these characters, Dickens highlights the dangers of nihilism and the importance of moral values and ethical principles in society. In conclusion, "Oliver Twist" serves as a critique of the moral decay of Victorian society, and the characters' nihilistic tendencies emphasise the need for reform and the pursuit of social justice.

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