

Hanged Sikes: The Image of the Public Execution in  
*Oliver Twist*

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Introduction

It is well known that Dickens admired William Hogarth and his paintings. As Paul Davis notes, *Oliver Twist* is regarded as 'a technical experiment in adapting Hogarth's visual conventions to the demands of prose narrative'.<sup>(1)</sup> So, this paper focuses especially on the objects Dickens used to imply death in *Oliver Twist* comparing with those in Hogarth's in plate 11 (see next page) of *Industry and Idleness*.

As to Sikes, a villain, Juliet John says that 'his surroundings and his imaginings comprise ... the objective correlative of his guilt and fear'.<sup>(2)</sup> But in her study the concrete examples have not been shown. In this paper, I will pick up three objectives: the surroundings with image of death, gin and the crowd. Sikes is surrounded by the objects implying death which remind us of the Tyburn Hogarth described. Gin is also used to represent crime and death in both Hogarth and Dickens. The scene Sikes surrounded by the crowd in Jacob's Island is quite similar to the Tyburn that Hogarth illustrated.

By analysing these three, we can understand Sikes's future death is alluded to from his first appearance. About the Sikes's last scene, it is said that 'Dickens' refusal to portray the scene at the scaffold was evidently principled and heartfelt'.<sup>(3)</sup> But when we analyse Sikes's last scene precisely, there we can find the effect of the metaphoric objects showing the reason he dies.

The IDLE APPRENTICE, (Extracted from Hogarth's)



### 1. The Surroundings

Sikes is the criminal who should be sentenced to death. The Sikes's serious crimes in Chertsey and against Nancy are different from Fagin's. Sikes has been controlling Fagin, his children and Oliver, and he makes them help him with his crimes. Sikes says to Fagin, 'You'll never have the laugh at me, unless it's behind a nightcap. I've got the upper hand over you, Fagin; ... if I go, you go; so take care of me' (104). We can recognize him as a more villainous and influential character ever appeared.

Sikes appears after the significant scenes of death by hanging. When Nancy is walking with Sikes and Oliver, she feels uneasy to hear the bell of church, and said to Sikes, 'Eight o'clock, Bill' (110). The bell 'Eight o'clock' is the time of 'the execution (held, by tradition, on Monday morning)'.<sup>(4)</sup> So Nancy says, 'I wouldn't hurry by, if it was you that as coming out to be hung, the next time eight o'clock struck, bill' (110). The bell reminds them of St. Sepulchre's, which stands 'in Bailey at the western end of Newgate Street', and at one time, it rang 'on the morning that criminals left Newgate on

their final journey to Tyburn for execution'.<sup>(5)</sup> From this description, Sikes worries about death by hanging and knows he has something to do with it.

Sikes is walking surrounded by the circumstances implying death. The sound of bell illustrates the Tyburn, where the criminals hanged before transferring the stage of gallows to the Newgate prison. The street he walks is around the Newgate Prison. They are walking at eight o'clock on Sunday night in Smithfield, where Newgate prison stands at a nearby site, and the sound reminds Nancy and Sikes of the time capital punishment executed at eight o'clock in the morning. The street they are walking and the sound of bell represent that their lives progress to a dangerous stage.

These scenes and the surroundings of Sikes remind us of the Hogarth's engravings of the series of *Industry and Idleness*. Dickens is famous for admiring the artist and his prints. People living in London at that time also might recall the public execution Hogarth had depicted when they read the scene of Sikes's accident.

We can see the public execution at Tyburn in the Hogarth's series of engraving titled the *Industry and Idleness*, which consists of 12 plates. The Plate 11 shows the scene in which the Idle apprentice is going to the gallows at Tyburn. In the mob, he is been carried with his coffin on a carriage to the gallows. The coffin is typical and metaphorical object predicting his death he may face. Two boys are trying to pick-pocket in the lower-right hand corner, and above them prostitutes are drinking the gin which is viewed as the sign of the deterioration of people. In the centre, a man is going to throw a dog at the Idle apprentice, the woman balladmonger is selling a ballad printed 'The Last Dying Speech & Confession of tho[sic] Idle', and the two men are fighting upon the infant on the ground. Surrounded by these people and objects, the Idle apprentice and the gallows are spotlighted in this plate.

Comparing the objects between Hogarth's plate and Sikes's surroundings, we can find the similar objects which make his life deteriorate. The pick-pockets, gin, prostitutes, ballad and fights also concern with the life of Sikes. We can imagine that the two boys picking pockets develop the life of vice, and finally trace the way of their progress like the Idle apprentice, who is going to be hanged. In this plate, even around the Idle apprentice, the objects meaning death are described.

The image of the scene Sikes dies reminds us of Tyburn that Hogarth created in his

engraving. The building Sikes is going to escape is also surrounded by those objects. Though the place of public execution moved from Tyburn to Newgate, the nature of it could not likely to change soon so much. So we can guess the scene he dies is very similar to the scene Hogarth described. Sikes and Fagin teach their children how to pocket-picking. Nancy as a prostitute triggers Sikes's fury because she uses gin with laudanum to sleep him. Neckerchief is an expression of the ropes which finally kills Sikes. Sikes, Nancy and Oliver walk hearing the bell which reminds them of the day when the hanging executes. Each of them compels Sikes to die. I will survey how the use of gin affects character's death next.

## 2. Gin

Gin is one of the causes of Sikes's death. The gin is available for the poor, and 'This was so common that there were shops that sold nothing else. It was as cheap as beer and was regarded as a cure-all, often used to keep babies quiet',<sup>(6)</sup> Nancy gives Sikes the gin with laudanum to make him sleep. After his sleeping, she is going to meet Brownlow. Sikes goes mad and kills Nancy when he knows her betrayal. The effect of the laudanum is described by the Sikes's words to Barney, 'There's Bill Sikes in the passage with nobody to do the civil to him; and you sleeping there, as if you took laudanum with your meals, and nothing stronger. Are you any fresher now, or do you want the iron candlestick to wake you thoroughly?'(158) It causes the strong drowsiness.

Sikes has known that the gin can be used as an object to kill persons. When Fagin brings the liquor to Sikes, he says to Fagin, "And mind you don't poison it ..."(87) As he says, it is used with food and drink. So, Nancy makes Sikes drink gin with laudanum. Sikes should have guessed gin has probably contains laudanum. Nancy dies because she used gin which represents crime and death.

Nancy's performance compels Sikes to murder. The murder forces him to escape from London and his companions, but eventually he kills himself by the accident. The accident also comes from the effect of gin Nancy uses. In Hogarth's engraving, prostitute betrays the Idle apprentice and because of this, the Idle apprentice has to be

changed. Sikes's death has the direct relation with gin Nancy gives him. When Nancy makes Sikes drink gin with laudanum, 'Mr Sikes being weak from the fever, was lying in bed, taking hot water with his gin to render it less inflammatory; and had pushed his glass towards Nancy to be replenished for the third or fourth time, when these symptoms first struck him' (296). Nancy uses gin, which is regarded as the metaphor of death in this story.

There is another case of using gin in order to kill a character. It appears in the scene in which old Sally, who took care of Oliver's mother, is in the death bed. '...old Sally was drunk; which, indeed was not unlikely; since, in addition to a moderate dose of opium prescribed by the apothecary, she was labouring under the effects of a final taste of gin-and-water which had been privily administered, in the openness of their hears, by the worthy old ladies themselves' (175). Gin is used as the item of killing the woman here after the opium is prescribed. Sally is influenced by not only the opium or laudanum effects, but also by gin. It is used for killing the woman. And this scene also shows the power of gin to kill humans. Gin itself is the item of the murder here.

Mrs Mann, the marron of the branch-workhouse, also uses gin as the medicine for the children and infants when they would not stop crying. The risk using gin is shown here. She explains, 'it's what I'm obliged to keep a little of in the house, to put into the blessed infants' Daffy, when they ain't well ...', and she says, 'I couldn't see 'em suffer before my very easy ...'(7) Gin gradually increases the rabidity.

Gin has the some associations with poverty, corruption and death. Hogarth describes it in the Gin Lane printed in 1751. It shows us the connection between gin and death. The terrible effect of gin is described in this plate. A baby is forced to drink it by its mother on the right hand edge, on the upper right, a man is hanging, another man is lying on a hand barrow seems to die soon, and a woman is laid in a coffin in the centre of this plate.

When Fagin's children play a game of whist in the den, they prepare for a 'gin-and-water for the accommodation of the company' on the table (178). When Nancy is drunk, 'a wholesale perfume of Geneva which pervaded the apartment, afforded strong confirmatory evidence of the justice of the Jew's supposition ...' (190) We can understand they are encouraged to drink gin by Fagin. Henry Fielding dealt with the

bad effects of gin, and in 1750, he 'published an *Inquiry* into the increase of London robberies and attributed them to gin drinking'.<sup>(7)</sup> From the eighteenth century, gin is seen as the vice, and the effect continues to nineteenth century.

In *Oliver Twist*, gin is described as the metaphorical object representing death. *The Gin Shop* in *Sketches by Boz*, shows gin; 'Gin-drinking is a great vice in England, but poverty is a greater; and until you can cure it, or persuade a half-famished wretch not to seek relief in the temporary oblivion of his own misery, ... gin-shops will increase in number and splendour'.<sup>(8)</sup> This is because the gin forces us to imagine the vice, poverty and death.

### 3. The Crowd

Crowd described in Dickens and Hogarth works has the power to promote crimes and deaths. Though Sikes dies by the accident, the scene in which many people pay attention to Sikes reminds us of the public execution. Public execution at Tyburn and Newgate prison is mentioned in the conversation between Fagin and his children in his den. Fagin asked his children, '... whether there had been much of a crowd at the execution that morning?' (61) As Fagin says, crowd also means the working place of pick-pockets. There is also the place the prisoner is hanged.

The scene of Sikes's death reminds us of public execution with crowd. Sikes's death surrounded by curious crowd is a reminder of the image of the public execution at Tyburn or the Newgate prison. Just before few hours of Fagin's hanging, 'A great multitude had already assembled; the windows were filled with people, smoking and playing cards to beguile the time; the crowd were pushing, quarrelling, joking' (411). The crowd is an attribute of the death of criminals, and we can recognize the power of the crowd described:

Of all the terrific yells that ever fell on mortal ears, none could exceed the cry of the infuriated throng. Some shouted to those who were nearest to set the house on fire; others roared to the officers to shoot him dead. ... 'Twenty

guineas to the man who brings a ladder!'

The nearest voices took up the cry, and hundreds echoed it. Some called for ladders, some for sledge-hammers; some ran with torches to and fro as if to seek them, and still came back and roared again; some spent their breath in impotent curses and execrations; some pressed forward with the ecstasy of madmen, ... and all waved to and fro, in the darkness beneath, like a field of corn moved by an angry wind, and joined from time to time in one loud furious roar. (388)

As the crowd Hogarth describes in the *Industry and Idleness*, Dickens's crowd also consist of distinctive characters. When Dodger and Bates finish their work and come home, Fagin asks them 'whether there had been much of a crowd at the execution' (61), The two boys were the member of the crowd then. In fact, 'Public executions outside the Newgate ... attracted throng of unruly witnesses, reaching as many as 100,000 on occasions'.<sup>(9)</sup>

The crowd Dickens describes attracts attentions of the readers. Antony E. Simpson, an expert in social and legal history, remarks 'Dickens' description of the crowd is quite different from that given ... by other accounts. In the eyes of Dickens, the crowd is uniformly badly behaved. No account is given of the class composition of the crowd, but the implication is given that it comprised the worst elements of society'.<sup>(10)</sup> In 1831, six years before this novel was written, the spectators about 30,000 of the execution assembled, and 'A great many persons were maimed and bruised at the executions, and the moment the murderers were turned off, the barriers between the gallows and Ludgate Hill were simultaneously broken asunder and torn up by the crowd'.<sup>(11)</sup> This novel describes the crowd as the metaphor of crime, death and execution.

When Oliver is mistaken for a thief at the book shop, curious crowd runs after him. The crowd 'no sooner heard the cry, and saw Oliver running, than, guessing exactly how the matter stood, they issued forth with great promptitude; and shouting 'Stop the thief!' and 'the cry is taken up by a hundred voices' (67). This scene makes us understand that the crowd is 'the worst elements of society'. The crowd is described as the metaphor of crimes in this story. After the chase of the crowd, Oliver has a terrible



fever, but Brownlow saves him. Though Sikes manages to escape the crowd, he fails and dies in front of it. Hogarth describes the crowd precisely to let us understand that it has much to do with the crime and death. The crowd plays an important role as a metaphor of the public execution in this story. In *Oliver Twist*, like the Hogarth's print, there are crimes and deaths are described in the crowd in which Dodger and Bates go to pick-pocket, and from which Oliver runs away. And there, Sikes dies.

### Conclusion

As I have stated, Sikes is always surrounded by the objects implying death from his first appearance. He lives in the surroundings which compel him to commit crimes, murder and die. We know he is afraid of hanging and the Newgate prison and tries to avoid them. He knows the objects surrounding him imply death. Nancy makes him find that the objects and gin have a strong relation of his death. So, Sikes has to kill Nancy to vanish the fear of his death.

Hogarth also used the objects as the metaphor of deaths and crimes. Sikes's surroundings remind us of Hogarth's *Industry and Idleness*. We can see the image of crimes and death in plate 11. In this plate, pocket-picking and fight which concern with crimes are also described. But they happen in the crowd, so I focused also on it. In their works, we can find Dickens and Hogarth had a view that the crowd had a power to promote crimes and deaths. Like the Idle apprentice, Sikes has to die because he is surrounded by the crowd.

I examined the reason why Sikes died like the prisoners sentenced death by hanging. In fact, the readers of this novel foresee his death from his first appearance because they know that he is surrounded by the objects representing crimes and deaths. Considering his surroundings, he deserves to be hanged in front of the crowd as in the public execution.

### Notes:

Text: Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

- (1) Paul Davis, 'Imaging *Oliver Twist*: Hogarth, Illustration, and the Part of Dickens', *Dickensian*, vol.82 (1986), 158-176 (p. 158).
- (2) Juliet John, *Dickens's Villains* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 118.
- (3) Antony E. Simpson, *Witness to the Scaffold* (Lambertville: The True Bill Press), p.141.
- (4) Philip Collins, *Dickens and Crime* (London: Macmillan & Co Ltd, 1965), p. 42.
- (5) David Paroissien, *The Companion to Oliver Twist* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992), p. 150.
- (6) Michael Paterson, *Voices from Dickens' London* (Ohio: David & Charles, 2006), p. 202.
- (7) *The London Encyclopaedia*, ed, by Ben Weinreb and Christopher Hibbert, rev.edn (London: Macmillan, 1995), p. 317.
- (8) Charles Dickens, *Sketches by Boz* (Strand, London: Penguin Classics, 1995), p. 220.
- (9) David Paroissien, *The Companion to Oliver Twist* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992), p.107.
- (10) Antony E. Simpson, *Witness to the Scaffold* (Lambertville: The True Bill Press), p. 129.
- (11) Walter Thornbury, *Old and New London* (London: Cassell and Company, Limited), p. 455.