

“Is Oliver dreaming?” Revisited: The Mystery of *Oliver Twist**

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1. Introduction

Few readers would disagree with the view that John Sutherland is one of the greatest contemporary connoisseurs of the English novel of the 19th century. His book *Is Heathcliff A Murderer?* firmly attests to his astuteness. In the book, there is an article titled “Is Oliver dreaming?”, in which he tries to explore the meaning of the most mysterious scene in *Oliver Twist*. In Chapter 34 of the novel, Oliver, the protagonist, falls asleep in Mrs Maylie’s summer house, and then in what seems to be a sleep-waking state, he sees Fagin and Monks, the villains, through the window. They disappear in an instant without leaving any footprint and other signs of their presence, and no matter how Oliver and his friends search for them, they cannot be found. After reviewing the earlier interpretations of the scene, Sutherland tries to explain it by using the theory of mesmerism, a therapeutic technique involving hypnotism. He views the whole scene as an example of “what the practitioners of mesmerism called ‘mental traveling’” (Sutherland 42). Although his argument is intriguing, I cannot agree with him, because it seems to me that his interpretation is based on a

* I would like to give my heartfelt thanks to Michael Jamentz, who not only checked my English, but also gave me many useful pieces of advice. But of course, all mistakes are mine.

misperception. He builds up his argument, saying that “Nor is the fact that the two men were actually at Oliver’s window confirmed later in the story” (Sutherland 38). But if we read the novel closely, we understand that Dickens later confirms the fact that they were actually there. It appears in Chapter 51, in which Mr Brownlow explains to Oliver and Rose Maylie the villainous plan of Fagin and Monks. According to his explanation, it has previously been arranged that so long as Fagin kept Oliver ensnared, he could have the money from Monks, but if the boy were rescued, he must refund the money. Then, “a dispute on this head had led to their visit to the country house for the purpose of identifying him” (381). The passage reveals that they had really come to Mrs Maylie’s country house. Unfortunately, not only Sutherland, but also many critics have ignored the passage when they dealt with the window episode.¹ In fact, by adding this explanation, Dickens may only have tried to make his story sound more plausible, as Masaie Matsumura suggests (Matsumura 46). But if we read the scene from the viewpoint that they had really come to the place, we can see in a different light, and in my view, it is more appropriate to do so.

In this paper, I would like to propose a hypothesis about the scene from the viewpoint that the two villains were actually at the window, and try to demonstrate it.

¹ As far as I know, among many critics who have explored the window episode, it is only Masaie Matsumura and David Paroissien who have paid due attention to Mr Brownlow’s explanation (Matsumura 46, and Paroissien 217, 278).

2. The Problems of the Sleep-Waking Scene

Before coming to the main argument, I would like to review the description of Oliver's sleep-waking state and grasp its main points. Captured by Fagin, the devilish ringleader of a gang of thieves, Oliver Twist has been trained as a thief. One day, Fagin orders Oliver to go to a country house with Sikes and Toby Crackit to commit a burglary. But due to Oliver's resistance, the burglary fails, and he is accidentally shot by a servant of the house. Mrs Maylie and Rose Maylie, the owners of the house, feel pity for him, and give shelter to him. Thanks to their kind help, he gets well, and lives happily with them. The incident occurs while he is staying at their summer house. One beautiful evening, he is reading a book near the window, and due to the heat and fatigue, he slowly falls asleep. First, we are told of the existence of a strange sort of sleep:

There is a kind of sleep that steals upon us sometimes, which, while it holds the body prisoner, does not free the mind from a sense of things about it, and enable it to ramble at its pleasure. [. . .] if we dream at such a time, words which are really spoken, or sounds which really exist at the moment, accommodate themselves with surprising readiness to our visions, until reality and imagination become so strangely blended that it is afterwards almost a matter of impossibility to separate the two. Nor is this, the most striking phenomenon incidental to

such a state. It is an undoubted fact, that although our senses of touch and sight be for the time dead, yet our sleeping thoughts, and the visionary scenes that pass before us, will be influenced, and materially influenced, by the *mere silent presence* of some external object. (246-247)

According to J. E. Cosnett, Dickens was very much interested in sleep and dreams, and read many medical books on them (Cosnett 264). Considering the fact, we can infer that this explanatory passage is based on the professional knowledge about dreams Dickens has obtained from medical books. Notice that in the latter half of the passage, the narrator emphasizes that while we are sleeping, parts of our brains are still waking, and our dreams are influenced by the external things near us. This is a very important claim, and I will specifically discuss it later.

After this, the narrator focuses on Oliver's state as follows:

Oliver knew, perfectly well, that he was in his own little room; that his books were lying on the table before him; that the sweet air was stirring among the creeping plants outside. And yet he was asleep. Suddenly, the scene changed; the air became close and confined; and he thought, with a glow of terror, that he was in the Jew's house again. There sat the hideous old man, in his accustomed

corner, pointing at him, and whispering to another man, with his face averted, who sat beside him.

‘Hush, my dear!’ he thought he heard the Jew say; ‘it is he, sure enough. Come away.’

‘He!’ the other man seemed to answer; ‘could I mistake him, think you? If a crowd of ghosts were to put themselves into his exact shape, and he stood amongst them, there is something that would tell me how to point him out. If you buried him fifty feet deep, and took me across his grave, I fancy I should know, if there wasn’t a mark about it, that he lay buried there!’

The man seemed to say this, with such dreadful hatred, that Oliver awoke with the fear, and started up.

Good Heaven! what was that, which sent the blood tingling to his heart, and deprived him of his voice, and of power to move! There – there – at the window – close before him – so close, that he could have almost touched him before he started back: with his eyes peering into the room, and meeting his: there stood the Jew! And beside him, white with rage or fear, or both, were the scowling features of the very man who had accosted him in the inn-yard.

It was but an instant, a glance, a flash, before his eyes; and they were gone. [. . .] He stood transfixed for a moment; then, leaping from the window into the garden, called loudly for help.

(247-249)

This is the end of Chapter 34, and in the beginning of the next chapter, Oliver cries out “The Jew! the Jew!” (249). In response to his cry, Harry Maylie and Doctor Losberne appear, and search for the two villains. But their enthusiastic search is all in vain: “There were not even the traces of recent footsteps, to be seen. [. . .] There was the village in the hollow on the left; but, in order to gain that, after pursuing the track Oliver had pointed out, the men must have made a circuit of open ground, which it was impossible they could have accomplished in so short a time” (250). Harry says to Oliver, “It must have been a dream, Oliver” (250). But Oliver tenaciously protests, and his descriptions of the two villains are so vivid, and his attitude so earnest, that they believe him and continue their search on a larger scale. Inquiries are pursued, and servants are dispatched to ask questions about them at all the ale-houses in the region, but all searches are again fruitless. This is the full account of the incident.

The first question the scene naturally inspires in the reader is, “Is Oliver dreaming in the scene?” To put this in other words, “Did Fagin and Monks come to the house in person?” The views of the critics differ in this respect.²

² So many critics have written articles about the scene that it is impossible to name all of them, but I would like to mention some of them. Connecting the scene with the other sleep-waking scene of Oliver in Chapter 9, Steven Marcus argues that these scenes reflect Dickens’s famous trauma of having been forced to work at the Warren, the blacking factory, when he was a child (Marcus 369-378). J. Hillis Miller notes that the scene represents “the total insecurity of Oliver’s precarious happy state”(Miller 73). Quoting the scene,

But as I mentioned in the introduction, it is later explained by Mr Brownlow that they were really at Mrs Maylie's summer house.

Even though we understand that Fagin and Monks were actually there, there remain three questions, as Sutherland points out (Sutherland 38-39). How did Fagin and Monks find where Oliver was staying? How did they disappear so suddenly and mysteriously from the house? Why didn't they leave any trace of their presence? In order to fully interpret the scene, it is indispensable to solve these questions. In the following section, I would like to propose a hypothesis, which will settle those problems, and then try to verify it.

3. My Hypothesis: Both Dream and Reality

I said that I would like to construct my theory from the viewpoint that Fagin and Monks were really at the window. But it does not necessarily mean that Oliver was not dreaming. In short, my hypothesis is that Fagin and Monks really came to Mrs Maylies's summer house, but what Oliver saw and heard in the scene was a dream produced by the presence of the villains.

The window episode can be divided into five parts. First, Oliver feels that he is comfortably sleeping in Mrs

J. E. Cosnett states that "Dickens was aware of the phenomenon of sleep paralysis." He goes on to point out that sleep paralysis was first described by Weir Mitchell in 1878, nearly 40 years after publication of *Oliver Twist* (Cosnett 265). Quite recently, David McAllister sets up a new explanation: illustrating that the scene is based on Robert Macnish's *Philosophy of Sleep*, he argues that Dickens turned to Macnish's book in an attempt to understand his own nightly dreams of Mary Hogarth, his dearest sister-in-law (McAllister 14-15).

Maylie's summer house; second, he suddenly feels that he is in Fagin's den again; third, he overhears the conversation between Fagin and the strange man (Monks); fourth, he wakes up and sees the villains at the window for an instant; and lastly, he leaps out of the room, and cries for help. These are the main points of the episode. I want to draw the reader's attention to the sudden change of scenes from the first point to the second. Why does the scene change so abruptly and markedly? Through the narrator's voice, Dickens gives us a clue for solving the question. Remember that we are told by the narrator that "the *mere silent presence* of some external object" (247) can materially influence a dream. This means that a sleeper's dream is influenced by the objects near him. Sutherland states that those descriptions of Oliver's sleep match those of mesmeric experiments shown by Dr John Elliotson (Sutherland 43), but in my view, they correspond more closely with the dream theory prevalent at that time. For instance, we find a similar passage in *Philosophy of Sleep* written by Robert Macnish, an eminent Victorian scholar of sleep and dreams who is said to have greatly influenced Dickens's view of dreams. He says that when the slumber is not profound, "he may hear music or conversation," and "these impressions, caught by the senses, often give rise to the most extraordinary mental combinations, and form the ground-work of the most elaborate dreams" (Macnish 41).³ In a word, the passage

³ David Paroissien also notes the similarity between them, but he merely points it out, and does not fully examine the scene (Paroissien 217).

seems to suggest that Oliver's situation changes from peaceful rest to nightmarish vision because Fagin and Monks have actually come near him at this point. In other words, what Oliver sees is a dream produced by the fact that Fagin and Monks have come there.

There is circumstantial evidence to support this view. As I have noted in the previous section, it is said that Dickens was very interested in sleep and dreams and read many medical books. Among the many features of dreams, it seems that Dickens was particularly interested in what is called the "dreaming awareness of external events" (Winters 1001). Dreaming awareness means that even when a person is sleeping, he or she can perceive the presence of something nearby thanks to the waking part of the brain, and this sometimes produces a dream connected with the thing. We can infer Dickens's deep interest in the phenomenon from his letter to Dr. Thomas Stone, who contributed the article "Dreams" to *Household Words*, a weekly magazine organized by Dickens. After correcting the doctor's errors and stating his own theory of sleep and dreams, in the end of the letter, he particularly mentions the presence of "some waking and reasoning faculty of the brain" while sleeping (*Letters* 279), and recommends that Dr. Stone consider the feature in his article. Thus Dickens not only had deep interest in dreaming awareness, but also had ample knowledge concerning the phenomenon.

Indeed, Dickens wrote episodes of dreaming awareness in many novels. According to Warrington Winters, Dickens was particularly interested in "using this

dreaming awareness of external events for purposes of plot” (Winters 1001). Winters demonstrates that Dickens used this phenomenon from his first work *Sketches by Boz* to the last one *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. The followings are some examples: in “Early Coaches” in *Sketches by Boz*, the protagonist hears the sound of a hammer in his dream, which reflects the real sound of knocking; in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, Montague Tigg’s dream is affected by the presence of Jonas Chuzzlewit; in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, Jasper’s dream derives from the fact that he is unconsciously aware of “the rusty spike on the top of the post” of the bed in which he is lying, and Durdle, the comic drunkard, is remotely aware of the removal of his keys while sleeping (Winters 1001-1003). Among them, the example of *Martin Chuzzlewit* is especially apt. In the novel, Montague Tigg, a blackmailer of Jonas Chuzzlewit, who is later murdered by the blackmailed, has a strange dream. When he travels with Jonas, he instinctively fears that Jonas is plotting to kill him. They occupy adjoining rooms in a hotel, and he dreams of the door which separates the two rooms. In his dream, he sees that no matter how he tries to fasten the door, it is easily broken, and “the creature on the other side” (MC 615) is approaching him. Importantly, while he is sleeping, Jonas really opens the door and comes to Tigg’s room. When Tigg sees in his dream that a strange creature is gaining on him through the door, Jonas Chuzzlewit is in fact approaching him. He wakes up “to find Jonas standing at his bedside watching him. And

that very door wide open”(MC 616). It is evident that what Jonas does greatly affects Tigg’s dream. Thus Dickens was strongly interested in the phenomenon of dreaming awareness of external things, and utilized it in many works. It is hardly surprising that Dickens describes Oliver’s dreaming awareness in the window episode.

Furthermore, though the window scene seems to be peculiar, we find a scene very similar to it in *Little Dorrit*. In the novel, Mrs Tickit, the Meagleses’ housekeeper and cook, in the sleep-waking state like that of Oliver, sees Tattycoram, a runaway girl. While she is sleeping, she thinks that she sees the girl at the gate, but when she blinks her eyes, the girl suddenly disappears, and even when she rushes to the spot where the girl stood, she can see no sign of her. Hearing of this incident, Arthur Clennam thinks that Mrs Tickit must have been dreaming, but soon after this, he is surprised to find out that the girl is really in the city. Later, it is confirmed by her own words that she really came to see Mr Meagles’s house. In many respects, the scene resembles the window scene in *Oliver Twist*, but surprisingly, very few critics have paid attention to the fact.⁴ It seems to me that Dickens used the same pattern of dream again, and the most logical explanation of the scene is that Mrs Tickit dreamed of Tattycoram because she was actually near her. After the episode, seeing Tattycoram in the city, Arthur secretly follows her, and the story goes on. We see here and in the

⁴ As far as I know, only Colin Williamson notices the similarity between these scenes (Williamson 227).

previous examples that Dickens utilizes characters' dreaming awareness to drop a hint of things to come.

It is true that these pieces of evidence are circumstantial, but since there are many similar examples, it is more than probable that the window episode in *Oliver Twist* is also an example of the type.

On the basis of this hypothesis, I can explain the window scene as follows. Due to the heat and fatigue, Oliver falls asleep by the window. Though he is sleeping, some part of his brain is awake, so he is aware that he is in Mrs Maylies country house. But at this moment, Fagin and Monks come to the house to see Oliver, and their proximity influences him so much that he dreams that he is still in Fagin's den. In the dream, he hears a conversation between Fagin and Monks produced by the real conversation between them. We must note that the narrator does not say that Oliver actually hears their words, but merely says that "he thought he heard the Jew say," "the other man seemed to answer," and "The man seemed to say this" (247). These expressions convey an impression that Oliver does not physically hear the words but apprehends them in his dream. Since Monks's words sound very fierce, Oliver wakes up with a start. He thinks that he has woken up soon after he heard Monks's words, but the fact is that he has not. As shown in "Dreams" and *Philosophy of Sleep*, it was well known that a sleeper's sense of time easily becomes distorted (Stone 569, and Macnish 63).⁵ For instance, though a sleeper

⁵ Indeed, Dickens describes this phenomenon of sleep in *Little Dorrit*. We are told that Arthur Clennam falls asleep "without the

may think that he has taken a voyage for a year in his dream, he will find that he merely slept for ten minutes when he wakes up. Oliver's case is a reverse of this pattern: though he thinks that he has awoken instantly, it actually took much time to be awake from this sleep. The figures of Fagin and Monks that Oliver saw through the window were a mere afterimage of his dream, and this is the reason why they disappeared instantly. In reality, they had already run away from the place while Oliver was sleeping, and this time lag enabled them to flee from the place without leaving any footprint or trace of their presence. Fagin is a very cautious man, and we have learnt of his quickness already in Chapter 13: no sooner does he hear Oliver has been carried to a gentleman's house, than he quickly orders his thieves to move to a different hiding place, and safely escapes from one den to another. It is not difficult for such a quick, shrewd man to leave a place, destroying evidence of his presence, if he has sufficient time.

This hypothesis solves two questions the scene raises. But the question of how they found the place where Oliver stayed remains. In fact, the answer to this question is closely related to the reason why Dickens describes Oliver's dreaming awareness in the window scene. Critics have so far presented three possibilities. Colin Williamson says that it is connected with a strange episode in Chapter 32. Traveling with Dr. Losberne, Oliver comes across what seems to be Fagin's den, and they (especially

power of reckoning time, so that a minute might have been an hour and an hour a minute" (*Little Dorrit* 768).

furious Losberne) try to examine the house. In the house, they find a hump-backed man, who denies any connection with Fagin and Sikes, and loses his temper over the doctor's intrusion. Williamson hypothesizes that this hump-backed man was in league with Fagin, and thanks to this man's information, Fagin discovered the place Oliver was staying, and thus appeared at the country house (Williamson 227-229). Acknowledging Williamson's hypothesis as "attractive," Sutherland states that Fagin could have easily found the place if he had used an acute thief like the Artful Dodger (Sutherland 41). On the other hand, Paroissien argues that since Oliver accidentally met Monks at the village near the summer house in Chapter 33, it must be Monks that secretly followed Oliver and found his residence (Paroissien 208). It is impossible for the reader to decide which hypothesis is right, and at the same time, it is pointless to do so. Dickens did not intend to inform the reader how the villains found the residence but merely to suggest they were capable of discovering it for themselves. At this stage of the novel, it is not clear whether they have really come to Mrs Maylie's summer house, and considering the whole situation, the reader is inclined to believe that they were merely a part of Oliver's dream, and they did not come to the spot. However, those suggestions present to the reader the possibility that they had really come there, and make him doubt that Oliver was dreaming. In a word, by putting the reader into the state of uneasy suspense, Dickens impresses him with Fagin's devilish power.

In the novel, Dickens tries to give the reader an impression that Fagin is a devil-like character. He is called “the merry old gentleman” (58), which is a traditional nickname for the devil (Paroissien 99). Besides, when he appears for the first time, he carries a toasting fork in his hand, which is the very image of the devil. Not only his appearance, but also his deeds are devilish. We are told that he has sacrificed many of his thieves for his safety, and for this reason, he makes Sikes kill Nancy, the girl who has informed against him. The reason why Dickens makes effective use of Oliver’s dreaming awareness in the window episode is that he wants to emphasize the devilish image of Fagin.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to interpret the most mysterious scene of *Oliver Twist*. I claim that the scene is an example of Dickens’s description of dreaming awareness. Dickens was particularly interested in the idea that there is a waking part of a sleeper’s brain, and that this can produce a dream connected with the surroundings. Furthermore, in many novels, he describes what appears to be the same phenomenon. In *Little Dorrit*, he even describes a scene very similar to the window scene of *Oliver Twist*. Although there is only circumstantial evidence, it is probable that the window episode of *Oliver Twist* is another example of the same type.

In describing the mysterious scene, Dickens cleverly employs the phenomenon of dreaming awareness because

he wants to underline the devilishness of Fagin. At this stage, since there were no footprints or signs, most readers would be apt to think that Oliver was dreaming. However, Dickens often suggests that Fagin may have come to the place, and the reader cannot be certain whether the villains were really at the window or not. By dropping those tiny hints, he sets the reader who is inclined to think that Oliver was merely dreaming on edge. Those hints give the reader an impression that Fagin is a devil who can make the impossible possible.

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