States of consciousness in Oliver Twist

Four different words in the two nature passages point to this page: consciousness, influence, reflections, and vision. What draws these words together is the idea of consciousness as an internal power or faculty affected by, but also shaping, our perception of the external world.

In an earlier passage of the novel (chapter 9), the narrator describes Oliver in a liminal state of consciousness between sleeping and waking:

“Although Oliver had roused himself from sleep, he was not thoroughly awake. There is a drowsy state, between sleeping and waking, when you dream more in five minutes with your eyes half open, and yourself half conscious of everything that is passing around you, than you would in five nights with your eyes fast closed, and your senses wrapt in perfect unconsciousness. At such time, a mortal knows just enough of what his mind is doing, to form some glimmering conception of its mighty powers, its bounding from earth and spurning time and space, when freed from the restraint of its corporeal associate.”

In much of Oliver Twist, Oliver can be found sleeping: at the farmhouse, at Brownlow’s residence, in the pickpocket’s den. When he’s not sleeping, he’s awake or fainting from disease or fatigue. Sleep is often viewed as a vulnerable act, where the weight of the world is cast aside. Oliver’s most peaceful moments would be while he’s asleep, where he doesn’t have to see his pitiful surroundings and how bad his life truly is. Dickens never mentions him dreaming, aside from the quote above, where most of the dreaming was done while he was more or less lucid and aware.

Oliver also hovers in a state of half consciousness when he is wandering aimlessly. Physically he is so exhausted that he simply staggers of unconscious of where he is going or what is there, but trying to reach something better than his immediate lifestyle. Mentally and emotionally he does not really know why he wanders, he is just compelled to try to find something better. This state of half consciousness is very different from the dream world he enters in sleep, because in sleep he is stationary. The uncertainty of movement and destabilization of his life seems to drive him from consciousness.

In William Wordsworth’s ode the speaker suggests that because of his consciousness of mortality, he is able to appreciate the simple things he enjoyed as a child, such as nature. He refers to his childhood as a time “apparelled in celestial light, [in] the glory and freshness of a dream.” This concept of REM in Dickens’ novel creates a new perspective for the reader. If one is familiar with renowned psychologist Sigmund Freud he or she would most likely have heard of his Interpretation of Dreams. Freud suggests that all actions are performed by individuals at least on some level by the unconscious. (It is necessary to note that the unconscious is different than the subconscious in that it is never accessible to the conscious mind.) He also believed that in order to live in a civilized society one must often repress the drives which would be considered unacceptable. These impulses must be released in some way, often surfacing in our dreams as we sleep.

Applying these concepts to Oliver provides a very atypical response. Oliver often escapes the squalor in which he is forced to live by sleeping. At one point Dickens writes: “The boy stirred, and smiled in his sleep, as though these marks of pity and compassion had awakened some pleasant dream of a love and affection he had never known. Thus, a strain of gentle music, or the rippling of water in a silent place, or the odour of a flower, or the mention of a familiar word, will sometimes call up sudden dim remembrances of scenes that never were, in this life; which vanish like a breath; which some brief memory of a happier existence, long gone by, would seem to have awakened; which no voluntary exertion of the mind can ever recall.”

These dreams seem to delineate that Oliver is different than most people, entirely pure and good. If we imagine a young boy, well raised in respect to morals and ethics we may find that his dreams consist of thievery and lies, the very things his unconscious knows are unacceptable. However, when we look at Oliver, who has been forced to partake in questionable acts, we find that his dreams are of the opposite nature. This suggests that since Oliver grew up with elders whom discouraged his happiness, he now finds it unacceptable to feel content while he is awake. This creates a whole new angle for the reader to analyze Dickens’ text. If Oliver has suffered so greatly that his psychosis is responsively so different from that of the majority of the population, we are able to sympathize with him on a much higher level.

Thus Dickens introduces a metaphor based on light when talking about human nature as either inherently Good or Evil. Some see the real light which is pure and good, but also “delicate.” There are those that see only the “sombre colours” however, meaning that they view nature a primarily dark force. But Dickens places the two views, or types of light, into a hierarchy; he calls the darker tones a “reflection” of the purely good and bright colors. Of course, by calling the idyllic light “delicate” he is indicating how it is easily corruptible, which is a running theme of Oliver Twist.

By introducing a light metaphor, the reference to vision at the end of the passage then has important implications in terms of consciousness. Perhaps since we know how easily light is broken up into the color spectrum, we often do not even consider how all light comes from white light, and needs to be divided, or corrupted by way of reflection. The “clearer vision” then requires using the same thought process in regard to human behavior. Oliver is the one example of pure light, and he is therefore the best example of true human nature.

Beyond the actual dream scenes, Oliver Twist is imbued with a surreal atmosphere. After Oliver wakes up to find Fagin and Monks at the window and a search is conducted, no physical evidence of them ever being in the vicinity is found. A similar mistake is made on Oliver and Mr. Losberne’s trip to London. Shortly after leaving, Oliver is sure that he spots the house that he and Syke’s stayed at while planning the burglary. Mr. Losberne bursts in the house upon an aged cripple and finds that the inside of the house does not match up with Oliver’s description. Like Fagin and Monks inexplicable disappearance, this occurrence is never fully explained. These scenes suggest an inconsistency that is really only possible in dreams.