Exercises at pages 339-341 + analysis

Comprehension

* What information are given about Oliver?

Oliver Twist is introduced as a fragile, poor and unhealthy boy through a physical description.

* What do you think “the establishment” is?

I think the establishment is an institution where poor people lived and worked (“work houses”).

* Where are the children?

They are in the establishment, more precisely in a room waiting for dinner.

* What do the children do after they have finished eating? Are they happy with their food?

After they finished eating, they polish their bowls with their spoons and they suck their fingers, since the rations are insufficient.

* What do the children decide to do? What does Oliver do?

The children organize a council: they decide to ask the master for more food and it falls to Oliver Twist. As a consequence, Oliver rises from the table and asks the master.

* What are the reactions of master, beadle and board?

Their reactions are negative: there is a general start, the assistants are paralyzed with wonder, while Mr. Limbkins is angry.

Interpretation

* What is your reaction to the story?

Reading the story, I feel saddened and glum because of children’s terrible life conditions.

* Focus on the main features of Dickens’ style..

Reading the text I can find examples of contrasts (Oliver’s poverty VS the master’s prosperity; the hungry boy’s comic description (lines 28-32), in opposition to Oliver’s tortures of slow starvation), hyperbole (the description of the shining bowls) and repetitions (the initial repetition of Oliver’s age, in order to highlight the extraordinary circumstance in which a child is compelled to live).

* What type of narrator does Dickens use? What characterizes it?

Dickens uses the third person limited narrator, since he doesn’t know more than the reader does. The third person narrator is characterized by the third-person verbs and by an objective vision of the story.

**Analysis**

The extract is taken from Charles Dickens’ Oliver Twist (1837-1838) and it focuses the reader’s attention on the terrible life conditions in an establishment during the Victorian Age.

The first piece of information given by Dickens is Oliver Twist’s physical description: he’s a nine-years old fragile, week, poor and unhealthy boy, who is dying of starvation. The intelligent reader immediately recognizes two narrative techniques frequently used by Dickens, that is exaggeration and the grotesque: he ridicules the child’s situation in order to make a precise mental image of poverty possible.

It follows the description of the dining room: it is a large stone hall with a copper at one end, out of which the master and two women serve the meals with a large spoon.

The mess is ridiculous and insufficient and the children suffer the tortures of slow starvation and misery. Therefore, one day, Oliver is compelled to ask the master for more food: his reaction is negative and cruel, since he says “that boy will be hung”.

In order to describe and, at the same time, criticize the terrible work and life conditions during the Industrial Revolution, Dickens makes a great use of language, functional to his aim: thanks to narrative techniques such as contrasts, hyperboles, repetitions and the grotesque, he manages to show a real image of the Victorian society, ridiculing situations to make them bearable.