*Oliver Twist* Sample Mini-essay

In *Oliver Twist*, Dickens uses knowledge to demonstrate the benefits of orphanhood, as learning marks the end of possibility and certainty of life’s inescapable hardships.

From the start, Dickens uses *Oliver Twist* to break convention and class expectations. After claiming Oliver’s unfortunate birth is “the best thing” that could have happened to him, Dickens uses words like “inevitably” and “indubitably” to ironically combat the seemingly ironclad assumptions made about the poor’s natural inferiority (3). Without a family to care for him, Oliver is unaware of his unfortunate destiny, but “If he could have known…perhaps he would have cried the louder” (6). Oliver’s ignorance allows him the benefit of possibility with words like “If” and “perhaps” after finding his literal and metaphorical “voice” (4), a marked different from the narrators previous claims of “inevitabl[ity]” (3).

Oliver grows in chronology and character until his childhood is declared over at age nine. This coming-of-age is celebrated with unfortunate knowledge, as Oliver leaves “the only friends he had ever known” and learns of the “loneliness of the great wide world” (15). Despite suffering emotional and physical abuse at the hands of Mrs. Mann, it is this recognition that causes him to “burst into an agony of childish grief” (15, 14) as the “cottage-gate closed after him,” symbolically separating him from his childhood innocence and ignorance (14-15).

While this may mark the end of his “childish” crying, and Oliver continues to cry with each new epiphany (15). Upon learning about the board of bureaucracy and government, previously only knowing a “live board” (15), Oliver is “not quite certain whether he ought to laugh or cry” (15). This marks a transition from the natural, tangible, and comprehensible to the artificial, intangible, and incomprehensible—the true nature of society. Having “no time to think,” however, Oliver still has the potential to “laugh” at his new learning as things are uncertain, as he is not “quite” sure and does not have a “very” clear definition (15).

This hopeful uncertainty is short lived, as the board decides to continue his instruction. The leader immediately, and paradoxically, inquires and informs Oliver of the definition of an orphan. The man repeatedly begins statements with “You know,” as knowledge is of the foremost importance, and ends each question with an implied answer: “I suppose,” and “don’t you” (16). Though it is ridiculous that Oliver should know things “nobody had taught him,” the gentleman’s statements show that both question and answer are solely possessed by those in power, who are naturally superior, complementing their use of vocabulary as an oppressive tool (17). In response, Oliver attempts to seek knowledge and self, “inquir[ing]” about the definition of an orphan (16). This quest ends with “poor Oliver…weeping bitterly” (16), tying Oliver’s limited vocabulary to his “poor” emotional and monetary status and suggesting that he has once again experience a painful epiphany about reality, as “bitter[ness]” by definition can only occur after an unjust experience has been understood.

Oliver’s tears link his physical, mental, and emotional development as the story becomes increasingly bleak. As a newborn, Oliver “cried lustily” (6), having just triumphed in his fight with Nature. This is “lust[]” demonstrates a vigor and joy for life, as well as his physical health. At the beginning of his ninth birthday Oliver is able to “call” tears for his departure, understanding that this is the appropriate emotional response, and suggesting control over his emotions and destiny (14). Upon passing through the gate marking the barrier between childhood and adulthood, however, Oliver “burst[s]” into tears as he both learns and feels his lack of control over his destiny (14).