

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

FAGIN

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Fagin (in Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*) **disagreeable**

Overview Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* (serialized 1837-39) is a bold rags to riches tale, in which we are immersed in the raw texture of life on the streets in contemporary industrial London. Through lucky accidents, Oliver—who begins his life in poverty, and who earns his early living the rough way, in a workhouse, before apprenticing to an undertaker—eventually finds his way to romance and riches—, but en route he suffers many indignities, none worse than those inflicted by 'the Jew,' Fagin, who is a classic pickpocket, with a special talent for recruiting street kids into the petty crime business.

Character Fagin is a melodramatic character—boldly drawn like Scrooge, and bursting with a few attributes: greed, guile, cynicism, unscrupulousness. (Like Scrooge, for instance, Fagin is heavily and repetitively drawn.) He is a street smart petty criminal—his specialty is pick pocketing—and he makes his money by that trade and by organizing street urchins to work for him. (The New Industrial Revolution in England had generated any number of these homeless kids on the streets of London.) All along, thanks to Dickens' dashing melodrama, we may feel a soft spot for Fagin, and in end, when he is awaiting hanging, our heart strings are tugged.

Parallels The Jew has had a mixed reception in English literature. Already in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, (1387-1400), *The Prioress' Tale* recounts a horrifying murder of a Christian child by Jews. Both Marlowe and Shakespeare, in the Renaissance, move Judaism into dark dramatic places, Marlowe in his *Jew of Malta* (1589) portraying a psychopathic Jew, Shakespeare, in *The Merchant of Venice* (1596), giving us a Shylock the money lender, who was prepared to take his interest in the form of human flesh. A fine counter balance, to these earlier texts, is George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876), in which there is fascinating discussion of nineteenth century Jewish currents of thought, including proto-Zionism and Kabala.

Illustrative moments

Distinctive Fagin is a photograph of Fagin, someone we know before we read the book, and Dickens excels at sketching in all the sartorial and environmental clues needed to bring Fagin to life. 'It was a chill, damp, windy night when the Jew, buttoning his great coat tight around his shriveled body, and pulling his collar up over his ears...' We learn from such a portrait. This unsensuous man of criminal business does not go for the pleasure principle—the body is 'shriveled.' He is one with the clammy island world he lives in—hunched like Sherlock Holmes, a century later, into the mystery of the night.

Nasty Dickens is a master of small touches by which character is revealed. 'The Jew again bade her good night, and bestowing a sly kick upon the prostate form of Mr. Sikes while her back was turned, groped downstairs.' How better or more succinctly could nastiness be portrayed? Look at the ingredients: 'prostrate,' 'back was turned,' 'groped.' Every element of covert nastiness is indicated, toward the woman—who is mocked behind her back—and toward Mr. Sikes, kicked while he is down. 'Groping' suggests the furtive and 'let's get out of here' mode, by which Fagin slinks away from any presence to the above scene.

Demonic Fagin is drawn, overdrawn, melodramatic—and it works! We trace his physiognomy as though it were a portrait in action, done in the broadest strokes: 'a long silence ensued, during which the Jew was plunged in deep thought, with his face wrinkled into an expression of villainy perfectly demonized.' A frozen portraiture! Appearance is sufficient to indicate character, here, so that every time Fagin reappears, a few tag lines, indicating the man's expression, suffices to summon up the personality at work. Dickens, increasingly aware of the anti-Semitic stereotype he

had created, attempted in later versions of the novel to expunge many of the references to 'the Jew,' but had by that time, already, made an irreversible contribution of his own to the modern typology of anti-Semitism.

Sinister Fagin gives no evidence of pedophilia, even in a Dickensian form, and yet he is conscious of wiles he needs in order to muster his young charges. Oliver is dear to us, as the story advances, and Dickens makes Fagin a sinister father figure to this kid we love: 'the Jew, smiling hideously, patted Oliver on the head, and said, that if he kept himself quiet, and applied himself to business, he said they would be very good friends yet.' Fagin, of course, is interested in Oliver only for Fagin's own concerns, making money off of stolen loot on the street.

Discussion questions

Dickens was much criticized for what many took to be an anti-semitic portrait of Fagin. To compensate, Dickens later removed a great many references to 'the Jew.' Do you feel his original portrait of Fagin is anti-semitic?

Is Fagin a convincing street figure, or is he overdrawn and exaggerated? Is he too bad to be convincing?

Does Oliver ultimately gain and learn from his contact with Fagin? Has Fagin some good to offer the boy?