

OLIVER TWIST

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Oliver Twist (in Dickens, *Great Expectations*) **Open**

Overview *Oliver Twist* was the second novel published by Charles Dickens; it came out in serial publication over a two year period between 1837 and 1839. The story is about a poor orphan, who starts out his life in a workhouse, then falls in with a criminal gang, and who makes his way through one contretemps after another—cruelty, mistreatment, imprisonment, illness—to an ultimately happy condition. The novel is also the story of the Industrial Revolution in England, and of the many agonies it brought for the poorer classes in Britain.

Character An early title of the novel, *The Parish Boy's Progress*, plays off of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, and like that classic tracks the odyssey of an innocent soul like the narrator's through a world which is fallen. As a prime victim for criminals, like Fagin and Sikes, Oliver is forced to enter the criminal world, but always as an unwilling victim. His typical response is the horror he felt, when sent on a pick pocketing job by Fagin, to see the crooks abuse an elderly gentleman. Oliver remains sweet, throughout it all, and comes on as fully deserving what he eventually gets, a long happy life with his savior Mr. Brownlow.

Parallels The rags to riches theme has abundant parallels in the oldest folklore, in the tales of Cinderella (oldest Chinese version, 9th century A.D.), or Aladdin, the young upstart from the city streets in the Arabic tale from *The Thousand and One Nights*. That is the beginning of a rags to riches theme which has twisted its way through western culture, as we see from a random list like this: the Roman Emperor Diocletian (244-311 A.D), who rose from a humble family in the provinces, and worked his way to the top by way of the military; in the 12th century Genghiz Khan was born into a family which soon found itself impoverished, and with many children, so that the young Genghiz had to struggle for all he got; many centuries later, Andrew Carnegie (b. 1835) grew up in crushing poverty but went on create the United States Steel Empire;

Illustrative moments

1 Abused Orphaned by his mother's death, Oliver is brought up on a 'baby farm,' under harsh conditions-- barely fed, worked hard, constantly bawled out. At this point he is moved to a workhouse. He quickly grows aware of the hard life he seems condemned to. A typical hardship is the lack of food. The other boys in the workhouse ask Oliver to represent them, in requesting seconds on gruel, which Oliver does—only to find himself thoroughly beaten and tossed in solitary. 'For a week...Oliver remained a close prisoner in the dark and solitary room to which he had been consigned by the wisdom and mercy of the board.'

2 Passive Oliver soon gets used to being the surprised victim of circumstances, in which he is just a pawn. The workhouse master is glad enough to find another employ for his not exceptionally strong work-lad, Oliver, and is delighted to find a new post for Oliver as an undertaker's assistant. Oliver is mute with acceptance, having no idea what this new choice might be. 'He heard the news of his destination in perfect silence...and was led away to a new scene of suffering.' Oliver sheds tears, as he marches along to the undertaker's establishment.

3 Gullible Oliver finally flees his squalid setting in Northampton—for there, seventy miles from London, he had been raised—and heads for London. The last straw had been insults to his mother, in the wake of which he had attacked another boy in the workhouse, and been desperately beaten. On his way to London, Oliver falls in with what turns out to be a gang of pickpockets, masterminded by a Jew named Fagin. Oliver believes they make wallets and handkerchieves, until he is brought up harshly by seeing these guys stealing a handkerchief from an old gentleman, Mr. Brownlow. **Oliver starts to wake up big time.**

4 Open-minded Mr. Brownlow turns out to be a benefactor for Oliver, who responds vigorously in Mr. Brownlow's house. It is the first time Oliver has known kindness or comfort. 'They were happy days, those of Oliver's recovery...after the noise and turbulence in the midst of which he had always lived...' Mr. Brownlow, an intellectual and writer, introduces Oliver into his study, and shows him his vast collection of books. Upon being questioned Oliver agrees he is fascinated by books, especially as he might be able to sell them. Oliver finds himself in mature company, and shows how ready he is to show off his finer nature.

Discussion questions

How does Oliver keep his head above water, during the struggles of his childhood? Is it religious faith? The influence of others? Will-power?

Were we prepared to find Oliver so susceptible to Mr. Brownlow? Had Oliver, from early in life, the potential for being a true gentleman?

Does Dickens, as a social critic, use Oliver as an abstract example of rags to riches, or is Oliver a full-blooded and convincing literary character?