

OLIVER TWIST

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Oliver Twist by Charles Dickens

Story *Oliver Twist* is a rags-to-riches novel fully exploiting the rich social-personal quality of the Victorian Era. Characters abound, as does a sharp portrait of the heartlessness of early industrial society. From this world emerges a life battered survivor, happily reunited to one of those few people—Mr. Brownlow—who truly value him, and with whom he can spend a quality aging.

Oliver was born in a workhouse, and spent the first nine years of his life in a down at the heels orphanage, from where he is transferred to an adult workhouse. After Oliver has been bullied by the others in the workhouse, he is apprenticed out to a local undertaker. Insulted by the undertaker's other apprentice, Oliver runs away, and sets off for London. On the outskirts of London, Oliver meets a boy of his age, who offers to take him, for shelter, to his boss, a career criminal named Fagin.

Fagin runs a ring of pickpockets, and Oliver is recruited, at once, to join them at their work. Horrified at the nasty jobs they are pulling off, Oliver escapes from the gang, just narrowly escaping arrest for the jobs. One man who has had his handkerchief stolen, Mr. Brownlow, struck by the resemblance of Oliver to a portrait painting of a young woman in his house, takes Oliver in, only to have his protégé stolen away again by two of Fagin's hustlers. Oliver is sent out on a burglary, is shot, and is taken in by a couple of fond ladies. (The beautiful adopted niece, Rose, falls for Oliver.) Fagin, unfortunately, is still on the track of Oliver; meanwhile we learn that Oliver's mother left a gold locket when she died. A mysterious accompanier of Fagin, one Monks, eagerly seeks out the locket in question, and destroys it.

Mr. Brownlow, who had befriended Oliver before, finds him again, and, scoping out the situation, confronts the mysterious Monks, on the possibility he will know something about Oliver's background. It turns out that Monks is Oliver's half-brother. (Their father, Mr. Leeford, had an affair with Oliver's mother.) Monks, we learn, has long been trying to make sure that Oliver does not receive his share of the inheritance owed him. Now aware of this backstory, Mr. Brownlow forces Monks to sign over Oliver's share to Oliver. In the end Fagin is hanged for his crimes, and Oliver goes on living happily with Mr. Brownlow.

Master of plotting, Dickens is at his best in revealing hidden identities—like that of Monks or Rose, with whom Oliver had been sheltering earlier, and who turns out to be the younger sister of Oliver's mother, thus Oliver's aunt. And as in these two cases, the revelation Dickens pulls off, like those Shakespeare (and Terence) pull off, is generally staged in the interest of morality and a noble resolution. We find out who Monks really is, only after we have seen what evil he is capable of; we learn only at the end that Rose is genetically placed to shepherd Oliver through the increasingly liveable paths of life.

Characters

Oliver is, and remains, an ingenu, always surprised by the rough customs awaiting him just down the road, always delighted at any sign of affection. We have to think he is both Dickens himself and a way for Dickens—who seems genuinely soft-hearted—to express his wonder at human survival power.

Fagin is an example of the oddly attractive rascal that Dickens is able to make out of real criminals. Fagin is a seat-of-the-pants crook, an organizer of orphan pickpockets, but not inherently violent—though he does egg Sikes on to the bloody murder of his former girlfriend, Nancy. Fagin is pitiable at death by hanging, though we hate him.

Mr Brownlow is a benign and generous man, who on two essential occasions befriends Oliver, and at the end adopts Oliver and settles down with him (and others) in the countryside.

Themes

Happy endings are a theme in themselves, and in constructing them Dickens shows himself to be a master optimist. As in the case of Oliver the protagonist frequently finds himself seriously disadvantaged by life situations, as was David Copperfield, in the eponymous novel in which another young lad is brought from poverty into high society.

Dysfunction in society. Dickens is known, of course, for his hard-hitting portrayals of the harsh society of early nineteenth century London. Oliver Twist--like David Copperfield or Tiny Tim in *A Christmas Carol*—comes up the very hard way, in a world antagonistic to children, and yet in the end he harvests attention and care from others.