

OLIVER TWIST

Charles Dickens

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.

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.

Themes

Happiness. 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. 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.

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.

MAIN CHARACTERS

OLIVER (Open)

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

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.'

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.

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.**

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?

FAGIN (disagreeable)

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?