

Charles John Huffam Dickens:

Born in Portsmouth, Dickens left school at age 12 to work in a **boot-blackening⁽¹⁾** factory when his father John was jailed in a debtors' prison. Dickens pioneered the serial publication of narrative fiction, which became the dominant Victorian mode for novel publication, edited a weekly journal for many years; wrote several novels, novellas, hundreds of short stories and more. He campaigned vigorously for children's rights, education and other social reforms. In this regard I would like to tell you about his second novel: *Oliver Twist* (or *the Parish Boy's Progress*).

The novel was first published in monthly instalments in the magazine *Bentley's Miscellany*, originally intended to form part of Dickens's serial, *The Mudfog Papers*.

As an early example of the social novel, it unromantically portrays the sordid lives of criminals and exposes the cruel treatment of the many orphans in England in the mid-19th century. Dickens emphasizes and denounces child labor, domestic violence, the recruitment of children as criminals, and the presence of street children. It is likely that Dickens's own experiences as a youth may have been inspired the story considering he spent two years of his life in the workhouse at the age of 12 and for that he missed some of his education.

Oliver Twist is born into poverty and misfortune, raised in a workhouse in a town some 70 miles from London. The children working there receive very little food. When Oliver asks for more gruel is removed from the workhouse and put in solitary confinement; he is flogged every day. Then Oliver is taken as an apprentice by Mr Sowerberry, an undertaker. One day, his jealous co-apprentice, insults Oliver's mother and an enraged Oliver attacks him. When he is punished, Oliver runs away to London to seek a better life. When in London meets a gang of **juvenile pickpockets⁽²⁾** led by the elderly criminal Fagin who trains orphan boys as pickpockets. Oliver innocently begins Fagin's training, but when he goes out with two other boys and sees them stealing a handkerchief from an old gentleman named Mr Brownlow, he realizes the truth. While the other boys escape, Oliver is pursued, formally arrested and tried.

Mr. Brownlow takes him home and cares for him. As Oliver recovers, Brownlow and his housekeeper notice that Oliver resembles a woman depicted in a portrait hanging in Brownlow's home.

Worried that Oliver might incriminate him and his gang, Fagin sends a young woman named Nancy and her abusive lover, the robber Bill, to abduct Oliver and bring him back to Fagin's lair.

Fagin forces him to participate in a burglary planned by Bill but everything goes wrong; while Bill is worried that Oliver might incriminate him and his gang, Fagin sends a young woman named Nancy and her abusive lover, the robber Bill Sikes, to abduct Oliver and bring him back to Fagin's lair. Fagin forces him to participate in a burglary planned by Sikes but everything goes wrong; while Bill escapes, Oliver, after having been wounded, ends up in the care of the people he was supposed to rob: Miss Rose and her guardian Mrs Maylie.

A mysterious man, known only as "Monks", teams up with Fagin, to prevent Oliver from learning of his past. Nancy, racked with guilt for her role in Oliver's kidnapping, secretly

spies on them and passes the information on to Rose Maylie, who tells Mr Brownlow. Following Fagin's orders, one of his boys follows Nancy and discovers that she meets with Mr Brownlow and Rose for the sake of Oliver's welfare.

Fearing that Nancy has betrayed him and Bill, Fagin passes the information on to Bill, who beats Nancy to death in a fit of rage and goes into hiding.

When recognised by an angry mob and attempts to flee. Going to Fagin's hideout, he learns that Fagin has been arrested. When the mob catches up to him, he tries to escape over the rooftops by winging on a rope, but while he is about to loop the rope about himself losing his balance in the fall, the looped rope catches him around the neck and hangs him.

Mr Brownlow has Monks arrested and forces him to divulge his secrets: he is actually Oliver's half-brother and had hoped to steal Oliver's half of their rightful inheritance. Brownlow begs Oliver to give half his inheritance to Monks and grant him a second chance, to which Oliver happily agrees. Monks emigrates to America, but squanders his money, relapses into crime and dies in prison. Fagin is arrested and sentenced to the gallows. The day before his execution, Oliver and Mr Brownlow visit him in Newgate Prison and learn the location of the documents proving Oliver's identity. Rose Maylie turns out to be Oliver's maternal aunt. Oliver lives happily as Mr Brownlow's adopted son.

In *Oliver Twist*, Dickens mixes grim realism with merciless satire to describe the effects of industrialism on 19th-century England and to criticise the harsh new Poor Laws. Oliver, an innocent child, is trapped in a world where his only options seem to be the workhouse, a life of crime symbolised by Fagin's gang, a prison, or an early grave. From this unpromising industrial/institutional setting, however, a fairy tale also emerges. In the midst of corruption and degradation, the essentially passive Oliver remains pure-hearted; he steers away from evil when those

Poverty and social class

Poverty is a prominent concern in *Oliver Twist*. Throughout the novel, Dickens enlarged on this theme, describing slums so decrepit that whole rows of houses are on the point of ruin. In an early chapter, Oliver attends a pauper's funeral with Mr Sowerberry and sees a whole family crowded together in one miserable room. This prevalent misery makes Oliver's encounters with charity and love more poignant. Oliver owes his life several times over to kindness both large and small.

Allegations of antisemitism

Dickens has been accused of portraying antisemitic stereotypes because of his portrayal of the Jewish character Fagin in *Oliver Twist*. Paul Valley writes that Fagin is widely seen as one of the most grotesque Jews in English literature, and one of the most vivid of Dickens's 989 characters.

- 1- A "boot-blackening factory" refers to a factory that produces boot blacking, also known as shoe polish or boot polish. These factories were common in the 19th century and beyond, and were often located in cities like London. One notable example is Warren's Blacking Factory, where a young Charles Dickens worked.
- 2- juvenile pickpockets = Borseggiatori minorenni