

HUNGER FOR LIFE IN OLIVER TWIST NOVEL

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Abstract

This novel focusing on 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.^[14] The apparent plague of poverty that Dickens describes also conveyed to his middle-class readers how much of the London population was stricken with poverty and disease. Nonetheless, in *Oliver Twist*, he delivers a somewhat mixed message about social caste and social injustice. Oliver's illegitimate workhouse origins place him at the nadir of society; as an orphan without friends, he is routinely despised. His "sturdy spirit" keeps him alive despite the torment he must endure.

Most of his associates, however, deserve their place among society's dregs and seem very much at home in the depths. Noah Claypole, a charity boy like Oliver, is idle, stupid, and cowardly; Sikes is a thug; Fagin lives by corrupting children, and the Artful Dodger seems born for a life of crime. Many of the middle-class people Oliver encounters—Mrs. Sowerberry, Mr. Bumble, and the savagely hypocritical "gentlemen" of the workhouse board, for example—are, if anything, worse. On the other hand, Oliver—who has an air of refinement remarkable for a workhouse boy—proves to be of gentle birth. Although he has been abused and neglected all his life, he recoils, aghast, at the idea of victimising anyone else. This apparently hereditary gentlemanliness makes *Oliver Twist* something of a changeling tale, not just an indictment of social injustice.¹ Oliver, born for better things, struggles to survive in the savage world of the underclass before finally being rescued by his family and returned to his proper place—a commodious country house

Introduction

Oliver Twist is born into a life of poverty and misfortune, raised in a workhouse in the fictional town of Mudfog, located 70 miles (110 km) north of London.^{[11][12][8]} He is orphaned by his father's mysterious absence and his mother Agnes' death in childbirth, welcomed only in the workhouse and robbed of her gold name locket. Oliver is meagerly provided for under the terms of the Poor Law and spends the first nine years of his life living at a baby farm in the 'care' of a woman named Mrs. Mann. Oliver is brought up with little food and few comforts. Around the time of Oliver's ninth birthday, Mr. Bumble, the parish beadle, removes Oliver from the baby farm and puts him to work picking and weaving oakum at the main workhouse. Oliver, who toils with very little food, remains in the workhouse for six months. One day, the desperately hungry boys decide to draw lots; the loser must ask for another portion of gruel. This task falls to Oliver himself, who at the next meal comes forward trembling, bowl in hand, and begs Mr. Bumble for gruel with his famous request: "Please, sir, I want some more".

A great uproar ensues. The board of well-fed gentlemen who administer the workhouse hypocritically offer £5 to any person wishing to take on the boy as an apprentice. Mr. Gamfield, a brutal chimney sweep, almost claims Oliver. However, when Oliver begs despairingly not to be sent away with "that dreadful man", a kindly magistrate refuses to sign the indentures. Later, Mr. Sowerberry, an undertaker employed by the parish, takes Oliver into his service. He treats Oliver better and, because of the boy's sorrowful countenance, uses him as a mourner at children's funerals. Mr. Sowerberry is in an unhappy marriage, and his wife looks down on Oliver and misses few opportunities to underfeed and mistreat him. He also suffers torment at the hands of Noah Claypole, an oafish and bullying fellow apprentice and "charity boy" who is jealous of Oliver's promotion to mute, and Charlotte, the Sowerberrys' maidservant, who is in love with Noah.

Wanting to bait Oliver, Noah insults the memory of Oliver's biological mother, calling her "a regular right-down bad 'un". Enraged, Oliver assaults the much bigger boy. Mrs. Sowerberry takes Noah's side, helps him to subdue, punch, and beat Oliver, and later compels her husband and Mr. Bumble, who has been sent for in the aftermath of the fight, to beat Oliver again. Once Oliver is sent to his room for the night he breaks down and weeps. The next day Oliver escapes from the Sowerberrys' house and later decides to run away to London to seek a better life.

Nearing London, Oliver encounters Jack Dawkins, a pickpocket more commonly known by the nickname the "Artful Dodger", and his sidekick, a boy of a humorous nature named Charley Bates, but Oliver's innocent and trusting nature fails to see any dishonesty in their actions. The Dodger provides Oliver with a free meal and tells him of a gentleman in London who will "give him lodgings for nothing, and never ask for change". Grateful for the unexpected assistance, Oliver follows the Dodger to the "old gentleman's" residence. In this way Oliver unwittingly falls in with an infamous Jewish criminal known as Fagin, the gentleman of whom the Artful Dodger spoke. Ensnared, Oliver lives with Fagin and his gang of juvenile pickpockets in their lair at Saffron Hill for some time, unaware of their criminal occupations. He believes they make wallets and handkerchiefs.

Soon, Oliver naively goes out to "make handkerchiefs" with the Artful Dodger and Charley Bates, only to learn that their real mission is to pick pockets. The Dodger and Charley steal the handkerchief of an old gentleman named Mr Brownlow and promptly flee. When he finds his handkerchief missing, Mr Brownlow turns round, sees Oliver running away in fright, and pursues him, thinking he was the thief. Others join the chase, capture Oliver, and bring him before the magistrate. Curiously, Mr Brownlow has second thoughts about the boy – he seems reluctant to believe he is a pickpocket. To the judge's evident disappointment, a bookstall holder who saw the Dodger commit the crime clears Oliver, who, by now actually ill, faints in the courtroom. Mr Brownlow takes Oliver home and, along with his housekeeper Mrs Bedwin, cares for him.

Oliver stays with Mr Brownlow, recovers rapidly, and blossoms from the unaccustomed kindness. His bliss is interrupted when Fagin, fearing Oliver might tell the police about his criminal gang, decides that Oliver must be brought back to his hideout. When Mr Brownlow sends Oliver out to pay for some books, one of the gang, a young girl named Nancy, whom Oliver had previously met at Fagin's, accosts him with help from her abusive lover, the robber Bill Sikes, and Oliver is quickly bundled back to Fagin's lair. The thieves take the five-pound note Mr Brownlow had entrusted to him, and strip him of his fine new clothes. Oliver, shocked, flees and attempts

to call for police assistance, but is dragged back by the Artful Dodger, Charley, and Fagin. Nancy, alone, is sympathetic towards Oliver and saves him from beatings by Fagin and Sikes.

In a renewed attempt to draw Oliver into a life of crime, Fagin forces him to participate in a burglary. Nancy reluctantly assists in recruiting him, all the while assuring the boy that she will help him if she can. Sikes, after threatening to kill him if he does not cooperate, puts Oliver through a small window and orders him to unlock the front door. The robbery goes wrong and Oliver is shot by people in the house and wounded in his left arm. After being abandoned by Sikes, the wounded Oliver makes it back to the house and ends up under the care of the people he was supposed to rob: Mih

Oliver Twist is the story of a young orphan, Oliver, and his attempts to stay good in a society that refuses to help. Oliver is born in a workhouse, to a mother not known to anyone in the town. She dies right after giving birth to him, and he is sent to the parochial orphanage, where he and the other orphans are treated terribly and fed very little. When he turns nine, he is sent to the workhouse, where again he and the others are treated badly and practically starved. The other boys, unable to stand their hunger any longer, decide to draw straws to choose who will have to go up and ask for more food. Oliver loses. On the appointed day, after finishing his first serving of gruel, he goes up and asks for more. Mr. Bumble, the beadle, and the board are outraged, and decide they must get rid of Oliver, apprenticing him to the parochial undertaker, Mr. Sowerberry. It is not great there either, and after an attack on his mother's memory, Oliver runs away.

Oliver walks towards London. When he is close, he is so weak he can barely continue, and he meets another boy named Jack Dawkins, or the artful Dodger. The Dodger tells Oliver he can come with him to a place where a gentleman will give him a place to sleep and food, for no rent. Oliver follows, and the Dodger takes him to an apartment in London where he meets Fagin, the aforementioned gentleman, and Oliver is offered a place to stay. Oliver eventually learns that Fagin's boys are all pickpockets and thieves, but not until he is wrongfully accused of their crime of stealing an old gentleman's handkerchief. He is arrested, but the bookseller comes just in time to the court and says that he saw that Oliver did not do it. The gentleman whose handkerchief was taken, Mr. Brownlow, feels bad for Oliver, and takes him in.

Oliver is very happy with Mr. Brownlow, but Fagin and his co-conspirators are not happy to have lost Oliver, who may give away their hiding place. So one day, when Mr. Brownlow entrusts Oliver to return some books to the bookseller for him, Nancy spots Oliver, and kidnaps him, taking him back to Fagin.

Oliver is forced to go on a house-breaking excursion with the intimidating Bill Sikes. At gun point Oliver enters the house, with the plan to wake those within, but before he can, he is shot by one of the servants. Sikes and his partner escape, leaving Oliver in a ditch. The next morning Oliver makes it back to the house, where the kind owner, Mrs. Maylie, and her beautiful niece Rose, decide to protect him from the police and nurse him back to health.

Oliver slowly recovers, and is extremely happy and grateful to be with such kind and generous people, who in turn are ecstatic to find that Oliver is such a good-natured boy. When he is well enough, they take him to see Mr. Brownlow, but they find his house empty—he has moved to the West Indies. Meanwhile, Fagin and his mysterious partner Monks have not given up on finding Oliver, and one day Oliver awakens from a nightmare to find them staring at him through his window. He raises the alarm, but they escape.

Nancy, overhearing Fagin and Monks, decides that she must go to Rose Maylie to tell her what she knows. She does so, telling Rose that Monks is Oliver's half-brother, who has been trying to destroy Oliver so that he can keep his whole inheritance, but that she will not betray Fagin or Sikes. Rose tells Mr. Brownlow, who tells Oliver's other caretakers, and they decide that they must meet Nancy again to find out how to find Monks. They meet her on London Bridge at a prearranged time, but Fagin has become suspicious, and has sent his new boy, Noah Claypole, to spy on Nancy. Nancy tells Rose and Mr. Brownlow how to find Monks, but still refuses to betray Fagin and Sikes, or to go with them. Noah reports everything to Fagin, who tells Sikes, knowing full well that Sikes will kill Nancy. He does. Mr. Brownlow has in the mean time found Monks, who finally admits everything that he has done, and the true case of Oliver's birth.

Sikes is on the run, but all of London is in an uproar, and he eventually hangs himself accidentally in falling off a roof, while trying to escape from the mob surrounding him. Fagin is arrested and tried, and, after a visit from Oliver, is executed. Oliver, Mr. Brownlow, and the Maylies end up living in peace and comfort in a small village in the English countryside. 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.

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