

Oliver Twist

It is not surprising that the novel that is probably Charles Dickens' most famous was first met with such controversy. Many Victorian readers believed that the violent and upsetting content of the novel was not appropriate for middle-class readers, but Dickens wrote the biting satire *Oliver Twist* to attack the same public policies regarding the poor that his own family was forced to endure. The novel's main character—the young orphan Oliver—is born in a workhouse and then “raised” in London's criminal underworld. Despite these harsh circumstances, Oliver remains an uncorrupted and virtuous child who is a victim of circumstances rather than his own moral failings. Although Dickens sought to show in Oliver “the principle of Good surviving through every adverse circumstance and triumphing at last,” as he notes in the 1851 preface to the third edition, two of the most engaging and complex characters in the novel turn out to be the prostitute Nancy and the juvenile pickpocket known as the Artful Dodger. Consequently, the heart of the novel lies within this problematic and sometimes false tension between purity and corruption.

Discussion Questions

1. **NOVEL TO FILM:** In this film version of *Oliver Twist*, Oliver seems to act alone as he courageously asks for more gruel; however, in Dickens' original novel, Oliver is pushed into the action by his desperate workmates. Why do you think the director Coky Giedroyc chose to portray Oliver as acting alone? How are viewers' perceptions of Oliver shaped by this pivotal scene? (Read this scene in Chapter 2 or in the University of Virginia's e-text version of *Oliver Twist* at etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/DicOliv.html. Click on Chapter 2 and scroll down to read pages 14–16.)
2. Does Oliver feel more at home with Fagin and his gang of boys than he did at the workhouse or at Sowerberry's shop? Contemporary scholars point out that gangs provide some young people with a sense of belonging or identity they cannot find elsewhere. Do you think Oliver fits this profile of a “gang member”?
3. Why does Nancy return Oliver to Fagin even though she knows that he will suffer in such an environment? Do Nancy's later actions in defense of Oliver somehow make up for her previous actions? How is Dickens' development of Nancy more complex than his portrayals of other characters in *Oliver Twist*?
4. How does the greed of Mrs. Corney and Mr. Bumble jeopardize the fate of Oliver? Is the nature of their thievery any different than the thievery of Fagin and his gang?

5. Fagin was referred to as “the Jew” almost 300 times in the novel *Oliver Twist*, and Dickens’ portrayal of his character is commonly regarded as reflecting the anti-Semitism that was prevalent in Victorian England. Do you think that filmmaker Giedroyc perpetuates these prejudices and stereotypes or does she portray a more sympathetic character? In the film, how does Fagin’s refusal to renounce his faith shape viewers’ final impressions of him?
6. Dickens could have chosen to make Oliver the poor, orphaned son of parents who were also poor, yet he did not. Why do you think he gave Oliver an upper-class background? What message about poverty, if any, do you think Dickens was trying to convey?
7. Compare the musical *Oliver!* with the novel or this film adaptation. Which do you like best and why? Why do you think this story has such timeless appeal?

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