

BAIT AND  
TWIST:  
CRYSTALIZING  
CLASS IN  
DICKENS'S  
*OLIVER TWIST*

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# THESIS:

While Charles Dickens was a well-known champion of the poor and working-classes, his narrative, *Oliver Twist*, does little to combat the traditional class roles of the Victorian era. Instead Dickens works on solidifying the distinction between the upper and middle-classes from the working and lower classes. This is done through:

Oliver acting as a representative of both, middle-class virtue and as a projection of Dickens' own experiences

The strong emphasis of nature overriding nurture and environment

The presentation of class aesthetics

And the limited analysis of the Poor Laws and parish workhouses throughout the text



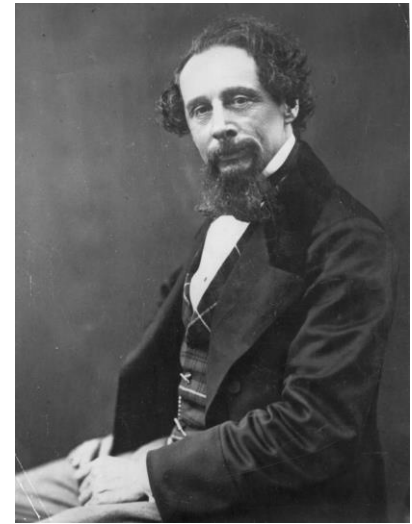
Oliver; *Oliver Twist*

## Shared life experiences between Oliver and Dickens:

- Similar middle-class backgrounds
- Pride of being part of the middle-class
- Desire to better themselves through class associations
  - Dickens- “[n]o words can express the secret agony of my soul as I sunk into this companionship; compared...my early hopes of growing up to be learned man and distinguished man, crushed in my breast...the shame I felt in my position” (Allen 82).
  - Oliver - “[a] minute ago, the boy had looked the quiet child, mild, dejected creature that harsh treatment had made him. But his spirit was roused at last; the cruel insult to his dead mother had set his blood on fire” (Dickens 38; Ch. 6).



Oliver; *Oliver Twist*



Charles Dickens

## The Poor Law of 1834:

- Lack of description and in-depth analysis of the Law and the implications of the law on the people, especially after Oliver leaves for London in Chapter Eight
- When questioned about his past, during the remainder of the book, Oliver only briefly goes over his history and does not draw attention to the hardship and horrors he faced while in a parish workhouse

# OLIVER AND THE INGRAINED MIDDLE-CLASS VIRTUE OF *OLIVER TWIST*:

- Oliver was the only “working” class character that received a happy ending
- Oliver was never tested or tempted throughout the story
- Oliver was never really a part of the lower or working-class and feels a subconscious connection to the upper and middle-classes
  - “It had been bright day, for hours, when Oliver opened his eyes; he felt cheerful and happy” (Dickens 71; Ch. 12) and “loveliness and virtue watched him as he slept. He felt calm and happy, and could have died without a murmur” (191; Ch. 30).

# NATURE OR THE “BLOOD-INHERITANCE” OF OLIVER:

Oliver, the Artful Dodger, and Mr. Brownlow; *Oliver Twist*

- There is an inherent goodness within Oliver that overrides any other character trait that he has
- This middle-class trait or virtue is so ingrained as a part of Oliver’s character that it even takes on a physical form. This aspect can be seen in Mr. Brownlow’s comments on Oliver’s appearance when he officially meets him for the first time upon Oliver waking up
  - “There is something in that boy’s face,” said the old gentleman to himself as he walked slowly away, tapping his chin with the cover of the book, in a thoughtful manner; “something that touches and interests me. Can he be innocent? He looked like—Bye the bye,” exclaimed the old gentleman, halting very abruptly, and staring up into the sky, “Bless my soul!—where have I seen something like that look before?” (Dickens 75; Ch. 11).



# MIDDLE- CLASS AND UPPER CLASS INGRAINED NATURE CONTINUED

Other upper and middle-class characters are constantly portrayed in a positive light, and are shown to be exceptionally kind, empathetic, and thoughtful:

- Rose Maylie
- Harry Maylie
- Mr. Brownlow

The actions and manners of these characters are contrasted with those from the lower and working-classes, who are depicted as cruel and violent. Such characters include:

- Fagin
- Sikes
- Noah



## THE PRESENTATION OF CLASS AESTHETICS:

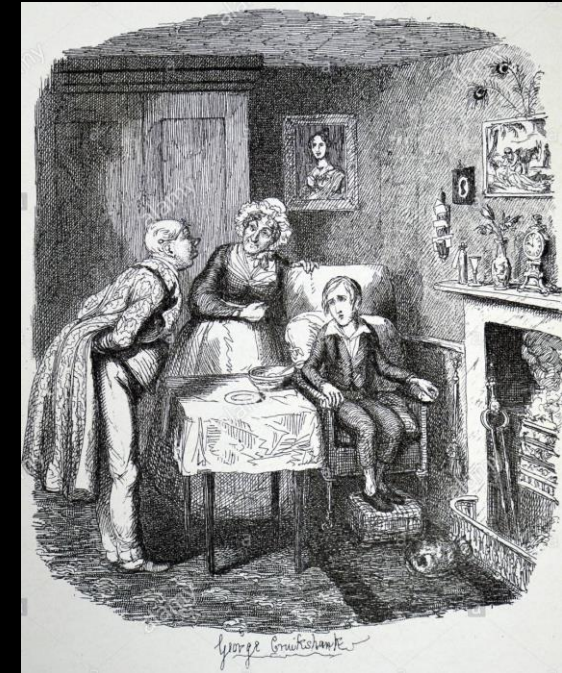
- Oliver, and other middle and upper-class characters are shown as kind and caring as opposed to the violent natures of the working and lower-classes, as illustrated by Sikes, Fagin, Noah, and others.



Fagin, Oliver and the crew; *Oliver Twist*

- An inherent beauty and virtue found within the environmental descriptions of the middle and upper-classes versus the dark, maliant atmosphere of the working and lower-class areas

Mr. Brownlow and Oliver; *Oliver Twist*



Sikes' Description: "very soiled drab breeches,.... a dirty belcher handkerchief round his neck: with the long frayed ends of which he smeared the beer from his face as he spoke. and two scowling eyes"

(Dickens 91-92; Ch. 13).



Sikes and  
Bulls-eye;  
*Oliver Twist*



Rose's Description: "She was not past seventeen. Cast in so slight and exquisite a mould; so mild and gentle; so pure and beautiful; that earth seemed not her element, nor its rough creatures her fit companions"



## ENVIRONMENT:

### Mr. Brownlow's Home:

The coach rattled away, *over nearly the same ground as that which Oliver had traversed when he first entered London in company with the Dodger;* and, turning a different way when it reached the Angel at Islington, stopped at length before a neat house, in a quiet shady street near Pentonville (Dickens 69; Ch. 12, emphasis added).

### Fagin's Home:

Covered ways and yards, which here and there diverged from the main street, disclosed little knots of houses, where drunken men and women were positively wallowing in filth; and *from several of the door-ways, great ill-looking fellows were cautiously emerging, bound, to all appearance, on no very well-disposed or harmless errands. Oliver was just considering whether he hadn't better run away,* when they reached the bottom of the hill. His conductor, catching him by the arm, pushed open the door of a house near Field Lane; and drawing him into the passage, closed it behind them (Dickens 51; Ch. 8, emphasis added).

# UNEQUAL DISTRIBUTION OF JUSTICE:

The middle-class villains are not as harshly punished as the lower and working-class villains:

- Mr. Monks - part of the middle-class; he lives and moves away with a bit of his half brother's money
- Sikes- part of the working and lower-class; he dies
- Fagin- part of the working and lower-class; he is hanged



Monks, *Oliver Twist*



“IF THEREFORE WE READ THE NOVEL AS THE STORY OF  
OLIVER TWIST, RATHER THAN AS A DOCUMENT ON  
CRIME AND POVERTY, WE MUST ACKNOWLEDGE THAT  
THE SOCIAL FABLE IS FAR FROM SUBVERSIVE; IT DOES  
NOT DISTURB ORDER, IT IS A RETURN TO ORDER”  
(SADRIN 41)

## WORKS CITED

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