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Oliver Twist

CHARLES DICKENS

COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

OLIVER TWIST

Charles Dickens

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WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Wordsworth Classics are inexpensive editions designed to appeal to the general reader and students. We commissioned teachers and specialists to write wide ranging, jargon-free introductions and to provide notes that would assist the understanding of our readers, rather than interpret the stories for them. In the same spirit, because the pleasures of reading are inseparable from the surprises, secrets and revelations that all narratives contain, we strongly advise you to enjoy this book before turning to the Introduction.

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INTRODUCTION

The tale of Oliver Twist is legendary in British culture. Everyone has heard of the little workhouse boy who asked the authorities for more. The novel was an instant success in the 1830s – even Queen Victoria read it soon after she came to the throne – and the story retained its popularity, on stage as well as in print, throughout Dickens's long career. To the horror-struck delight of his public in the late 1860s, he adapted Nancy's murder for his repertoire of dramatic readings, throwing so much energy into his performances that they were blamed for hastening his death. Today it is the film based on Lionel Bart's musical[1*] that has taken hold on the popular imagination. But the

1* *Oliver!* (1968), starring Ron Moody as Fagin. David Lean's black-and-white film (1948), with Alec Guinness as Fagin, was an important medium for the post-war generation and deeply controversial for its perceived anti-semitism. See Manning for a comparison of the murder scene in Lean and in Dickens's 1868 public reading. See Collins (1975) for Dickens's script of 'Sikes and Nancy'. See Collins (1975) and Ackroyd (pp. 1036–44) for a detailed account of Dickens's last reading tours.

* See the Bibliography (pp. xxiii–xxv) for full references to publications cited in the notes to the Introduction.

experience of reading *Oliver Twist* is unmatched by other media. We can well imagine why Dickens's text – funny, moving and thrilling by turns – made such an impact on his Victorian audience.

The pathos of Oliver's suffering and the violence of Nancy's death are only two of the tale's many contrasts. At one point the narrator likens the structure of his story to 'all good murderous melodramas, [which] present the tragic and the comic scenes in as regular alternation as the layers of red and white in a side of streaky, well-cured bacon' (p. 106). This streaky bacon analogy holds good for many dimensions of *Oliver Twist*. The plot opposes innocence and corruption, good and bad characters, middle-class and underclass cultures, country and city settings. The text is marked, as we shall see, by strikingly different modes of writing, as Dickens shifts rapidly between sentiment and sensation, storytelling and satire, murderous melodrama and dream.

Oliver Twist offers, like a traditional adventure story, 'a full, true, and particular account of the life and adventures of Oliver Twist' (p. 89), beginning in a grim workhouse with Oliver's birth and his mother's death. Since we are so familiar with the boy heroes of Dickens's later novels, we need reminding that to centre a whole work on a child's growing up was an innovation. The main thread of the plot unravels the secret of Oliver's birth, and ends with the orphan finding a new family and the inscribing of his mother's name on a memorial tablet. When a constable is told: 'It's a simple question of identity' (p. 192), the joke is that by this stage in the book the question of Oliver's identity has become anything but simple. The intricacies surrounding this mystery bring disparate characters together and provide the occasion for atmospheric scenes featuring Oliver's sinister half-brother Monks. However, it is not the desire to find the truth that draws the reader on; the answer has been all but revealed by Oliver's striking resemblance to his mother's portrait as early as Chapter 12. Indeed it is not even Oliver himself who consistently claims our attention. We get under his skin only at particularly frightening moments, and he otherwise functions most effectively as a symbol: initially, as a victim of the workhouse system and later, in a more abstract way, as Innocence uncorrupted by Experience. The energy of the novel comes from other sources: not least, from its mêlée of modes and its colourful cast.

Some of *Oliver Twist*'s constituent genres are identified in the next section, but it takes no specialist knowledge to recognise in the opening pages that we are in the presence of a virtuoso. The narrator's stance is humorous, even when describing the baby's fight for life, but a serious view of the human condition underlies the satire. That the birth of a child could be construed merely as 'a new burden . . . imposed upon the parish' sets up reverberations that bring the workhouse regime under immediate moral scrutiny. A small phrase like 'item of mortality' reduces

a baby to a statistic and simultaneously reminds us that mortality is fundamental to the human condition. The cocktail of the reader's responses is further stirred by such juxtapositions as the mother's melodramatic death ('She imprinted her cold white lips . . . gazed wildly round . . . and died') and the drunken midwife's comic indifference. Only a matter of a few paragraphs into the narrative, we know we are in the hands of an assured and versatile writer.

Oliver Twist's characters are another driving force of the fiction. Dickens never loses sight of the workhouse set with whom the story so promisingly begins. He keeps up an unremitting attack on bullies like Mr Bumble and Noah Claypole, even linking them into the darker London plot, but continues to milk many of their later appearances for maximal comic effect. The superb scene where Mr Bumble woos Mrs Corney (Chapter 23) exploits a range of comic modes, starting with the bitterly ironic contrast between the selfish enjoyment of creature comforts by the workhouse matron and the parish beadle, set against the suffering of wretches appealing for winter relief. 'Antiporochial weather', Mr Bumble terms it, speaking in the interests of parish rate-payers and officials, as he intransigently imposes a cruel system on the poorest parishioners.[2] Such serious matters speedily give way to the hilarious sight of Mr Bumble courting his lady by moving surreptitiously closer around the circumference of the tea-table; but a satisfactory finale to his seduction is in turn rudely disrupted by a knocking at the door. Enter the harbinger of Death, as in a medieval morality play, in the form of a 'hideously ugly' old woman. Unconcerned by the proximity of the Grim Reaper, Mr Bumble closes this theatrical interlude with a secret dance of satisfaction, exposing to us, the audience, the naked self-interest behind his marriage proposal. Nevertheless, our feelings may be unexpectedly mixed when we encounter a henpecked and emasculated Mr Bumble in ensuing episodes, deprived of the beadle's cocked hat which had been so much a part of his former identity. Glee at his come-uppance may be fleetingly mitigated by sympathy for his plight, and certainly by regret for the deflated pomposity which had been such a rich source of humour.[3]

Ultimately it is not the Bumbles but the underworld characters who dominate the narrative. All readers are struck by their vitality (and the relative impotence of Oliver's saviours, the Brownlows and Maylies), a response vividly recorded in 1906 by G.K.Chesterton:

> [T]he smoke of the thieves' kitchen hangs over the whole tale, and the shadow of Fagin falls everywhere. The little lamp-lit rooms of Mr

2 For the system of outdoor relief, see endnotes 2 and 105.

3 See Kincaid, Chapter 3 (pp. 50–75), on Mr Bumble's downfall.

> Brownlow and Rose Maylie are to all appearance purposely kept subordinate, a mere foil to the foul darkness without.[4]

In terms of the plot, it is predictable that Oliver will be rescued from the hands of Fagin and Sikes, but at a deeper imaginative level his deliverance is incredible. Murder and the macabre lurk in London's depths, and so much darkness would surely snuff out that little candle of goodness that is Oliver Twist.

Fagin's dens are places of evil, but also of high spirits, strong emotions, clashes of temperament and partnerships in crime. Before the end of the book, Dickens has the task of destroying any positive images of the gang, manoeuvring the villains through their betrayal of Nancy beyond the reach of the reader's sympathy. The trail is laid early: while the main thread of the plot leads backwards to Oliver's origin, the villains' likely end is foreshadowed by insistent allusions to Newgate and the noose. The tale darkens rapidly with a swift sequence of bloody murder, haunting and hanging. We are as fascinated by Fagin's final madness as if we were among the baying crowd by the gallows. It is hardly a comforting close. Oliver may have reached apparent security, but murder will surely haunt his dreams - and ours - when the last page has been turned.

The Genre

So far, I have talked of *Oliver Twist* in the form you now have it: as a continuous piece of fiction bought and read as a whole, or in other words, a 'novel'. But Dickens did not set out to write a novel, and his first audience did not read it as if he had. We can respond to the text more directly if we position ourselves, as far as we can, in the cultural scene of the 1830s. Such a genre as 'the novel' did, of course, already exist, and in 1836, as the rising star of the extraordinarily successful serial *The Pickwick Papers*, Dickens came to an agreement with leading publisher Richard Bentley for two three-volume novels, though he had never written one before. He had already published four instalments of 'Oliver Twist' in *Bentley's Miscellany*, the monthly magazine for which he was now editor, before it occurred to him that it could count as one of his two promised novels.[5] The work came out in twenty-four monthly instalments (1837–9), appearing in standard three-volume novel format when the serialisation was nearly finished. Just before the novel version appeared, one reviewer was still puzzled by its genre:

4 p. 87

5 See 14 July 1837 to Richard Bentley, *Letters*, I, p. 284, and Agreement with Richard Bentley for Two Novels, 22 August 1836, *Letters*, I, pp. 648–9.

> The romance, novel, history, or narrative, or whatever else it may be called, of 'Oliver Twist', is assuredly an invention *per se*. It bears no sort of resemblance to any other fiction, looking like truth, with which we are acquainted.[6]

The first instalment in *Bentley's Miscellany* gave no indication that it was more than a satirical piece of two or three episodes, an extension of the short *Sketches by Boz* with which Dickens had begun his career. It was most obviously an intervention in the topical controversy over the New Poor Law and the regime which had imposed a meagre diet on all workhouse inmates.[7] Dickens clearly intended his tale to provoke outrage, and went on in subsequent chapters to attack other disgraceful practices – the apprenticing of children to chimney sweeps, pauper funerals, incompetent magistrates – and the utilitarian philosophy underpinning such institutionalised abuses.[8] *Oliver Twist* shares not only the targets of fellow journalists' campaigns, but also some of their rhetorical tricks. The threat of violence to Oliver echoes the motif of child murder found in anti-Poor Law writing of the 1830s.[9] In pamphlets, this device could operate in sensational or satirical modes, just as in *Oliver Twist*'s workhouse chapters, where Dickens is at one moment pulling out all the emotional stops to arouse sympathy for an innocent child and at the next mounting a heavily ironic attack on the wickedness of Bumbledom.

When Oliver runs away to London, the plot takes a new turn, sign-posted from the start by the story's sub-title 'The Parish Boy's Progress'. An exemplary tale of an industrious apprentice, or a Dick Whittington fairy story, might have ended speedily with Oliver's rescue by a benefactor who would assist his rise in the world. But the entrance of the Artful Dodger on the road to London points in a different direction, to the episodic encounters of traditional rogue fiction and to fashionable genres dealing with the city underworld.[10] Indeed, Dickens's willing appropriation of stock characters, emotionally charged dialogue and cliff-hanger chapter endings demonstrates that he was not above taking his cue from the crudest melodrama and sensational fiction.

6 *Atlas*, 12, no.598, 5 November 1837: 713, quoted Chittick, p. 90. This section is indebted to Chittick (Chapters 4 & 5), Paroissien (1992), Patten, Smith, Tillotson and Wheeler.

7 See endnotes 2 and 21.

8 See endnote 20.

9 Forthcoming publication by Josephine McDonagh (Birkbeck College, University of London)

10 Rogue (or picaresque) fiction has a long tradition, including the Elizabethan *Unfortunate Traveller* by Nashe. Eighteenth-century fiction about criminals, including Fielding's *Jonathan Wild*, took a new form in the 1830s' Newgate novel, produced by such authors as Dickens's friend Harrison Ainsworth; see Hollingsworth. On the text's explicit references to *The Newgate Calendar* and other widely read accounts of criminals' lives, see endnotes 79 and 101.

Oliver Twist displays Dickens's skill in more literary modes, such as the carefully crafted set pieces which he had practised in his *Sketches by Boz* and the Fielding-esque short essays which open certain chapters.[11] However, critics have persuasively argued that the mainspring of Dickens's creative process lies in his transformation of popular genres.[12] *Oliver Twist* comes early in Dickens's development as a fiction writer, and these elements are less fully assimilated than in his later work. Although the narrative takes on the continuity and shapeliness of a novel with surprising effectiveness, so that we can read it in that form without knowledge of its origins, it is this generic diversity, these disparate ingredients, that feed the bubbling pot of *Oliver Twist*.

The Country and The City

The impact of *Oliver Twist* depends to a great extent on the contribution of memorable settings to our constructing of theme and character, especially through the opposition of country and city. Oliver's boyhood adventures in the country, or more precisely in the neighbourhood of a small town, initially counter conventional notions of an idealised countryside. Dickens's unequivocal message is that poverty and institutionalised bullying in the rural parishes of England cause as much misery as any urban squalor. Nevertheless, from this provincial vantage-point the city could be luridly imagined as a much more dangerous place:

> 'Mrs Mann, I am a-going to London' [Mr Bumble declares in Chapter 17].
> 'Lauk, Mr Bumble!' cried Mrs Mann, starting back. (p.108)

Dickens, who had grown up in London from the age of ten, revels in the intimate knowledge that enables him to trace his characters' steps district by district and alley by alley. But, as narrator, he deploys London in a variety of ways. The text initially draws on a schematic moral cartography for the innocent country boy's entry into the wicked city. Oliver never identifies with the city, which remains a place of fear and wonder to him.[13] Fagin's Saffron Hill and East End, warrens of crime and poverty, epitomise an urban environment almost beyond social control. Even the streets of respectable districts are unsafe: pickpockets haunt bookstalls, danger lurks just outside Mr Brownlow's

11 See, for example, the set piece on the chase (pp. 62), and the Fielding-esque opening to Chapter 17 (p. 106). *Oliver Twist* has obvious antecedents in eighteenth-century fiction, notably the work of Fielding and Smollett, who were among Dickens's childhood favourites.

12 See, for example, Williams (p. 262).

13 See Craig on 'the disjunction between the city's chaotic multiplicity and the hero's innocent consciousness'; Fagin, by contrast, is 'inseparable' from his environment (pp. 22–5).

house. The sequence in which the little boy is recaptured by the gang is the stuff of nightmare: as he is 'dragged into a labyrinth of dark narrow courts' (p. 96), child murder is just off the margin of the page. When he is reimprisoned in Fagin's 'family', there awaiting him – with the frightening completeness of a trap closing in a dream – is his old discarded suit of clothes. After a brief interlude of security and comfort in a bourgeois home, the underworld has dragged him back down.

When the novel enters its third and final phase, characters from the different worlds meet in more ambiguous settings. Nancy seals her fate by bravely crossing the border from East End to West End to seek out Rose Maylie in a 'handsome street near Hyde Park' (p. 260), but the women's detailed negotiations are held beside the Thames, where fashionable people walk only yards from wretches and criminals in the shadows. The neighbourhood of the workhouse has to change its nature for the encounter in the storm between Monks and the Bumbles (Chapter 38), which takes place in a Gothically ruined factory in a swamp. The waterside, always evocative in Dickens's writing, is where solid land meets mud, boundaries and order break down. Most corrupt and waterlogged of all is Jacob's Island, source of a cholera epidemic in the early 1830s.[14] Here, where an underclass subsists in stench-ridden tenements amid 'filth, rot, and garbage' (p. 330), the degraded figure of Sikes meets his end.

Having given London into the hands of Fagin's gang for most of the narrative, Dickens needs to find another appropriate location for the Maylies. Their house seems at first to be in a rural area, but the burglary by a town gang proves that Chertsey is too close to London, and the household removes to a place of safety in a more remote 'inland village'. Here rose and honeysuckle cling to the cottage walls, and the respectable poor who pray in the village church are 'neat and clean' (pp. 207–9). One explanation for this unconvincing style of writing is simply that Dickens was 'a thorough cockney', with little interest in life outside London.[15] More relevant is the recognition that such a rustic idyll is a typical romantic imagining of the city dweller, a vision that was to take powerful hold on the imagination of the newly urbanised middle classes as the nineteenth century progressed. By the 1830s, it was already apparent to social observers that the balance of the national economy was rapidly shifting in favour of the expanding towns, and a great wave of emigration from the countryside to industrial centres was well under way. A new

14 The Victorians were obsessed with the idea of a plague infiltrating middle-class districts from the miasma of squalid slums and sewage, an image that underlay their public health reforms.

15 The Victorian critic, John Ruskin, writing about *The Old Curiosity Shop*, jibed that Dickens was evidently 'a thorough cockney, from his way of talking about hedgerows, and honeysuckles, and village spires' (XXXVI, p. 26).

working class and a new middle class were forming, with huge attendant social problems and massive implications for English culture. In *Oliver Twist*, the appearance of Fagin and Monks at the cottage window is more than a small boy's nightmare. It stands for national anxieties about the dominance of town over country, as the urban tentacles of economic and cultural influence reached into the depths of England's countryside.[16]

The Jew

Dickens's manipulation of character stereotypes, particularly the Jew and the Jezebel, provides another route into *Oliver Twist*. By making Fagin a Jew – and he is called 'the Jew' more often than 'Fagin' – Dickens was able to stir a potent anti-Semitic brew in the minds of his readers. The link between London Jews and the nineteenth-century underworld was well established in the popular consciousness by the notoriety of certain Jewish criminals, and by the prevalence of Jews in the second-hand trade, which enabled them to deal easily in stolen goods. But there was a stronger link to a much older tradition in English culture, a bundle of racist superstitions that can be traced from the Middle Ages to the Victorian stage.

What we see in a brilliant vignette, when the Artful Dodger throws open the door of the thieves' blackened kitchen, is the Jew as devil, red-haired and grasping a pitchfork, and Oliver as his latest victim:

> . . . standing over [the fire], with a toasting-fork in his hand, was a very old shrivelled Jew, whose villainous-looking and repulsive face was obscured by a quantity of matted red hair. He was dressed in a greasy flannel gown . . . 'This is him, Fagin,' said Jack Dawkins; 'my friend, Oliver Twist.' (p. 51–2)

In accordance with the stereotype, Fagin is wily and duplicitous, a poisoner, a child kidnapper, a treasure hoarder. He is disgustingly dirty – Jews were believed to give off a distinctive smell – even sub-human, a 'loathsome reptile' with claws and fangs. More frequently he is, like the Prince of Darkness himself, a 'merry old gentleman', cunning and endearing enough to retain his power over the criminal network, the affections of Nancy and the boys, and the mesmerised reader.[17] Late in the plot, a swift development unmasks him as utterly evil, the Judas who betrays Nancy (pp. 312–13). To Oliver he is both a wicked stepfather – the opposite of the 'good' father, Mr Brownlow – and the bogey of his

16 This section is indebted to Williams's *The Country and the City* (1973); see especially Chapters 15 & 19. Later cultural historians are likely to emphasise awareness of rural poverty. See also Maxwell, J. Hillis Miller, Schwarzbach and Welsh (1971).

17 See pp. 54, 57, 79–80, 121–2, 293 & 308–9.

nightmares. In a kind of dreamlike trance, Oliver watches Fagin gloating over his treasure and brandishing a murderous knife (pp. 54–5), and glimpses him looking in at the window of the sacrosanct country cottage, before he disappears, supernaturally leaving no footprints behind (pp. 222–5).[18] Fagin is the creature at the edge of the clearing, the unfocused fear of our dreams.

In the social system of the novel, Fagin stands for foreignness and decadence. Sikes, though a criminal and therefore in some sense an outsider, could not perform the same function. Fagin seems exotic, even sexually ambiguous, using 'female' tactics of wheedling and insinuation to undermine Sikes's aggressive masculinity. He exhibits a more sinister aspect of the evil that threatens Oliver's innocence than Bill Sikes's brutality. By his difference, he helps to create a definition of Englishness and respectability far more effectively than the passive stereotype of Mr Brownlow, who is intended to embody these qualities.[19]

Fagin is made and marred by this unambiguous racist stereotyping. There was some unease when he made his first appearance, since discrimination against Jews – though deeply institutionalised – was already being challenged.[20] But at the time of writing, Dickens himself was apparently uninhibited by considerations of racist prejudice.[21] The multivalent sign of the Jew had enabled him to fulfil his dual vision of a creature who was both a credible representative of London's underworld and a villain of nightmare.

The Jezebel

Nancy, the kind-hearted prostitute, is a different kind of stereotype, constructed from traits normally associated with opposing female

18 On Fagin, fairy tale and dream, see Marcus and Stone (1979).

19 On the importance of defining Englishness in the period following the Napoleonic War, see Colley.

20 England was more tolerant than many other countries; nevertheless, in the 1830s Jews could not open a retail shop in the City of London (hence their dependence on the second-hand trade), become a barrister or enter Parliament. The first Jewish MP, Lionel de Rothschild, took up his seat in 1858. For background material and further references, see Heller, Rosenberg, Steyn and Stone (1959).

21 For a different reading of anti-Semitism in *Oliver Twist*, see Grossman. Dickens's representation of other Jewish characters in the novel, especially Barney, was even closer to the anti-Semitic stereotype, emphasising big noses, nasal accents and grasping behaviour; this could, however, be read as a parody device. Fagin is visited in jail by 'Venerable men of his own persuasion' (p. 352), though we never meet one. In 1860, Dickens alluded to the prospective purchaser of his house in a private letter as a 'Jew Money-Lender'; later in the 1860s he unequivocally denied anti-Semitism, created a 'good Jew' in *Our Mutual Friend*, and made a number of editorial changes for the 1867 edition of *Oliver Twist*, which had the effect of reducing the number of times Fagin was called 'the Jew'.

images. She falls into the category of 'fallen woman', though her individuality stands out from Dickens's more conventional depiction of the women who frequented the Three Cripples:

> some with the last lingering tinge of their early freshness almost fading as you looked; others with every mark and stamp of their sex utterly beaten out, and presenting but one loathsome blank of profligacy and crime. (p. 163)

According to the dominant cultural code of the nineteenth century, such women could never recover their respectability; indeed, in the East End, where Nancy was based, it was true that women were likely to be inextricably involved in crime and fall under the control of pimps like Sikes. However, elsewhere in London, the reality was far less tragic than the middle-class myth. A prostitute typically worked on the streets for only a couple of years, usually operating as a free agent, and managed to return to a normal domestic life.[22] But Dickens's moralistic fiction never meshed with the facts where sinful women were concerned, and throughout his novels he perpetuated the conventions of the period – except with Nancy. She quickly became an important figure to her creator as the serial unfolded. 'I hope to do great things with Nancy,' he wrote, '[and with] the female who is to contrast with her.'[23]

Nancy is brash, independent and assertive. Though Dickens toned down her speech to differentiate her from other underworld characters, she remains the antithesis of the aptly named Rose Maylie. Rose first manifests her presence as a disembodied 'sweet female voice' (p. 183) and attracts every cliché that Dickens ever associated with the concept of the self-sacrificing angel in the house. When the women meet by the Thames, Nancy briefly plays out the part of the fallen woman, sinful, self-accusing and tempted by suicide. But instead of drowning herself in the Thames, or taking up Rose's offer of refuge and reform, she carries on her efforts to save Oliver and boldly returns to Sikes.

For Dickens, her motives revealed the true womanhood beneath her rough exterior. Unlike Fagin, who will always be 'Other', a pariah in respectable society, Nancy has feminine traits that allow her passage across the border between East and West End to talk directly to Rose. Dickens seems to interpret her emotional dependence on Sikes as a vestige of her womanliness – hardly a likely response in today's reader – and her protectiveness towards Oliver as evidence of her fundamental motherliness. So having mixed together the traits of the good and bad woman, why did Dickens murder Nancy? In an influential book on

22 See Walcowitz, especially p. 25; see also 'prostitution' and related entries in Schlicke. In 1846 Dickens became heavily involved in a project to house and reform women at risk, but the depiction of prostitutes in his fiction was unaffected.

23 See 3 November 1837 to John Forster, *Letters*, I, p. 328.

Desire and Domestic Fiction, Nancy Armstrong argues that it was this very combination of features – incompatible in the nineteenth-century's ideological scheme – that Dickens was unable to deal with: 'It has to be the mixing of illicit sexual features with the attributes of the good mother that makes her body the site of sexual violence' (p. 182).

Rose never steps out of character; *Oliver Twist*'s supporting cast of women, from maternal housekeepers to shrewish wives, predictably fulfil their female roles. But Nancy presumes to assert her singularity, and having prided himself on developing her part in the drama, Dickens bludgeons her to death.

The Author

Dickens's personality and career were so extraordinary – and his self-promotion so successful – that it is tempting to read his works by that brilliant light. For this reason I have left the biographical dimension of this introduction until last.

The best-known personal influence on *Oliver Twist* is the death of Mary Hogarth, his wife's sister. She had stayed for long periods with the couple in a typical Victorian household arrangement during the first year of their marriage, and died suddenly under their roof in May 1837 at the age of seventeen.[24] Dickens was devastated, and his portrayal of Rose Maylie merged with Mary and her death, even leading him to introduce a highly sentimental episode when Rose survives a near-fatal illness (Chapter 33). He seems to have remembered Mary for the rest of his life as embodying, in a way his wife failed to do, the idealised female figure of his fiction. But Dickens's image of Mary (and no doubt Mary's view of her own role) had less to do with one woman than with the ideological positioning of middle-class women in the 1830s. Attitudes towards women were entering a new phase which gave them greater power in the domestic sphere, and changing constructions of gender, as much as the life and death of Mary Hogarth, shaped the creation of Rose.[25]

This private grief became public knowledge with Dickens's decision to suspend publication of the serial for a month, but a much more fundamental influence on *Oliver Twist* was only indirectly revealed in his lifetime. This was the period, long seen as seminal to Dickens's development, that he spent working in two London warehouses in the company of a boy called Bob Fagin. Dickens was nearly twelve, on the cusp of adolescence, when his education was painfully interrupted by a family financial crisis and he was thrust into the demeaning job of

24 On Mary Hogarth, see Slater, pp. 77–102.

25 For the exploration of such issues by feminist critics and historians, see references in Schlicke and Westland.

labelling bottles of boot blacking. His own narrative of these events (the famous 'Autobiographical Fragment'), which he passed in confidence to his friend John Forster and retold through the story of David Copperfield, powerfully expresses the misery and degradation he felt.[26] Not surprisingly, this ordeal of suddenly losing financial security and status made Dickens determined to entrench his position in the middle class. Underlying *Oliver Twist* is his personal journey from Blacking Factory to respectability. We can see why Oliver had to be saved, against all the odds, from falling back into one of Fagin's dens. Dickens's close imaginative identification with Nancy's murder can also be attributed to this pattern of ambition and fear of degradation, since she is a sexually attractive member of the lower classes from whom Dickens needed to dissociate himself, brutally if necessary.[27] However, Dickens's Blacking Factory experience did not make him unique: anxiety about status was endemic among the growing middle class at this crucial stage in the formation of the Victorian social structure. As Steven Connor has persuasively argued, the plot-line of *Oliver Twist* which is concerned with establishing Oliver's rightful heritage reveals a deep-seated need in Dickens and his middle-class readership to confirm 'the legitimacy of social and personal origins' (p. 15).

The Blacking Factory was responsible for more than insecurity about social background: Dickens left the warehouse with an indelible sense of what it was like to be a deprived child with no hope of advancement. The 'badged and ticketed' parish child in the opening episode of *Oliver Twist* became a focus for Dickens's impassioned defence of the marginalised and oppressed, of human values warped by an inhuman social system.[28] By the age of twenty-five, he had found the radical theme that was to last the length of his writing career. He had also become an accomplished humorist, a subtle psychologist and a perpetrator of 'good murderous melodrama'. Such an array of gifts guarantees a stirring and compulsive read.

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26 Allen estimates that Dickens's job lasted just over a year. For the significance assigned by critics to this experience, see Wilson's seminal essay; for challenges to the orthodoxy, see Musselwhite and Welsh (1987).

27 Nancy's murder can be interpreted in other ways: when first written, as a critical demonstration of the violence men do to women; when rewritten in 1868 for performance, as an expression of Dickens's anger against his separated wife, or even, conceivably, against his younger mistress, Ellen Ternan, for failing to quieten the raging unhappiness of his last years (see Tomalin).

28 See Kettle for a persuasive Marxist reading of the novel, followed by Kincaid and others. For further examples of valuable critical approaches not represented in this introduction, see particularly Houston ('reading the body'), Jordan (using Derrida), and D.A.Miller (using Foucault).

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