

THE REALISM AND ROMANTICISM OF CHARLES DICKENS AS EXPRESSED IN  
OLIVER TWIST

A Thesis  
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## OUTLINE OF THESIS

### The Realism and Romanticism of Charles Dickens as Expressed in Oliver Twist

- I. Preface
- II. Introduction
- III. Acknowledgments
- IV. Table of Contents
- V. Chapter One--Realism verses Romanticism
  - A. Introduction--problem for the modern reader
  - B. Realism ~~versus~~ Romanticism
    - 1. The Workhouse
    - 2. The Board
    - 3. The Undertaker
    - 4. London
    - 5. The Den of Thieves
    - 6. The World of Mr. Brownlow and the Maylies
    - 7. The Den of Thieves Returns
- VI. Chapter Two--Dickens' Use of Emotion
- VII. Chapter Three--The Value for the Modern Reader
- VIII. Conclusion
- IX. Bibliography

PREFACE

## PREFACE

It is my purpose in writing this thesis to show that the characters and plot of Charles Dickens' Oliver Twist make a remarkable mixture of romanticism and realism. Dickens is recognized as a master of this combination, but the reader is not always aware of how skillfully the author has worked these two contradictory devices together in order to bring about a truly enjoyable experience in reading. In order to show this, I will make use of numerous quotations directly from the text of Oliver Twist. I feel that this method of letting the book speak for itself will best illustrate the skill of the author. I will also travel as briefly as possible through the book in order to show <sup>how</sup> the use of plot by Dickens' aids in this use of realism and romanticism.

I will not divide the plot and characters in my treatment, but will treat both of these views at the same time. I am sure that this will add unity and thus make the thesis much easier to understand at one reading. Thus let us proceed to the task with the hope that this will open up a new world of understanding to everyone who has or will read the works of Dickens and in particular Oliver Twist.

## INTRODUCTION

There are three obvious facts that show style has a decisive influence on the author's subject matter: first, it is conditioned by the time and place in which the author lived; second, by his racial inheritance; third, by his individual personality and character. These are very easy to see in the writings of Charles Dickens, especially in Oliver Twist. The character of Oliver is shaped from Dickens' own childhood. The situation of the story is the London of his own time, and the character of the young twenty-six-year-old Dickens and the experiences of his childhood can be seen throughout the book in all of his creations of character.

In order to understand realism and romanticism as used by Dickens, it is necessary to understand what the terms themselves mean. There are two types of fiction; realistic and romantic. Romantic fiction primarily offers the reader an escape from reality. The things that happen in it are more exciting or mysterious or adventurous or strange than happen in real life. In short, romance shows life not just as it is, but as we imagine it to be.

The characters in romantic novels are painted in brighter colors and sketched in softer outlines than characters in realistic novels. They are moved by the more elemental emotions, such as love, hate, pride, loyalty, or jealousy, and they are

not as subtly differentiated as the characters of a realistic novel. Romantic characters show us not so much what we are as an enlargement of what we might be. Romantic heroes and heroines are ourselves as our dreams would have us be. Romanticizing characters in fiction is the author's way of making people's dreams come true.

Romantic fiction is not necessarily untrue to life, although it is often improbable. In essence, romance is raised to the nth degree. It deals with fundamentals of life—courage, devotion, love, self-sacrifice, hate, heroism—qualities that human beings do have. Only it takes these human qualities and isolates, intensifies, or simplifies them so that they are seen in a stronger light. Life can be heroic; only in romance, it is steadily so.

Realistic novelists, in contrast to romantic novelists, attempt to show life as they see it, without flinching from the facts, or letting their imaginations wander into the land of the ideal. ~~In~~ realistic fiction, the events that take place are usually events that could and do happen to a great many people in everyday life. It helps understand life by making it more real. Such a book is not always exciting, but it is interesting as a record of life itself, and it is significant because it deals with common experiences. Probably most of the greatest novels in the world are essentially realistic, some, it is true, equipped with a little romantic machinery to keep the plot going.

Some books of course, contain both realistic and romantic elements. Oliver Twist, like so many of Dickens' novels, is made up of both life and theatricalism.

Let us now see the ways in which these two types are found exemplified in Oliver Twist.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to express my thanks to the Porter Memorial Library of Kansas State College of Pittsburg, Kansas, for the use of their fine collection of critical works on Charles Dickens. Without these books this thesis would not have been able to be written.

My gratitude and appreciation to Father Alaric Scotcher, OSB, for his counsel and advice. Without his direction of this thesis, I could not say what the results might have been.

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My thanks also to my mother and the others who have contributed to my moral and financial commitments during my years of study. To these I owe a debt that I can never repay.

Lastly I wish to thank Mr. Robert Benedict for his moral support last summer when I was doing most of the work of research for this thesis and also Mr. John A. Marietta for help with typing notes during last summer.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE-----	1
INTRODUCTION-----	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS-----	v

### CHAPTER ONE

REALISM VERSES ROMANTICISM-----	1
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### CHAPTER TWO

DICKENS USE OF EMOTION-----	26
-----------------------------	----

### CHAPTER THREE

THE VALUE OF <u>OLIVER TWIST</u> TO THE MODERN READER----	30
---	----

CONCLUSION-----	35
-----------------	----

BIBLIOGRAPHY-----	37
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CHAPTER ONE

REALISM VERSES ROMANTICISM IN OLIVER TWIST

## INTRODUCTION

### PROBLEM FOR THE MODERN READER

When a person reads Dickens' Oliver Twist today, the first reaction is that it is nothing more than a melodramatic contrivance, a novel of rich romanticism, but not a novel of which realism has any part. Dickens' realism does not ring true for the modern reader mainly because we are living in the period of the "Naturalistic novel". In this type of novel, realism has been extended to its extremity. Such novels as Upton Sinclair's The Jungle, and John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath are typical examples of modern works relating to poverty which are naturalistic.

When Dickens wrote Oliver Twist as a social protest against the treatment of paupers during the early eighteen hundreds, he was beginning the era of realism that has resulted in what we know today as naturalism. The people for which Dickens wrote not only considered Oliver Twist as realistic, but criticized him for being too realistic, for presenting characters who were offensive to their readers and for picturing places that did not exist. Dickens defends himself against these criticisms in his Preface to the Third Edition of Oliver Twist. Here he states that he was not writing for such delicate minded people as those offended by such characters.

As for the existence of such localities as are presented in Oliver Twist, Dickens tells us that he himself has visited such places personally.<sup>1</sup>

In order for the reader of today to enjoy and understand this novel of poverty in London, he must be willing to place himself in this London that Dickens knew to exist. He must be sympathetic to what the author is trying to convey about poverty.

The realism presented in Oliver Twist is interspersed with romanticism, and it is my purpose to show how the real and the romantic elements combine in order to compliment each other. There is a lesson to be learned from the realism as Dickens presents it. Through the presentation of the poverty of London, universal truths about poverty can help a person come to a better understanding of the poverty which exists in our own time. There is also a lesson to be learned from the romanticism. Through this, the truly human element of this story is brought home with force. It is of the utmost importance that the poor always be thought of as human beings, with human dignity.

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<sup>1</sup>Charles Dickens, Oliver Twist, (New York: The New American Library of World Literature, Inc., 1962), p. v-x.

### REALISM VERSES ROMANTICISM

There are two separate and distinct worlds in Oliver Twist, the real and the romantic. The real world is the workhouse and the den of thieves. The romantic comprises the world of Mr. Brownlow and the Maylies. Oliver, the main character for whom the novel is named, vacillates between <sup>h</sup>these worlds throughout the book.

In the opening seven chapters, we are presented with the poverty of the workhouse. It is in these chapters that Dickens voices his condemnation of the existing legal establishments for the care of paupers.

### THE WORKHOUSE

In the first chapter, we are presented with the birth of Oliver and the consequent death of his mother. This takes place in a workhouse where Oliver's mother is assisted during childbirth by "a pauper old woman, who was rendered rather misty by an unwonted allowance of beer, and a parish surgeon who did such matters by contract."<sup>1</sup> This prepares the reader with somewhat of an introduction to the life of the poor that is to follow.

With chapter two, we are told of the life of Oliver during his first nine years in the pauper baby farm, Dickens

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<sup>1</sup>Charles Dickens, Oliver Twist, (New York: The New American Library of World Literature, Inc., 1962), p. 24.

leaves little to the imagination. He introduces us to it as a place "where twenty or thirty other juvenile offenders against the poor-laws rolled about on the floor all day, without the inconvenience of too much food or too much clothing," and to its administrator, "parental superintendent...an elderly female, who received the culprits at and for the consideration of seven-pence half-penny per small head per week."<sup>2</sup> We are told that this was more than enough to feed such infants, but that Mrs. Mann had a bad habit of putting most of her payment into her own pocketbook. This immediately tells us what we can expect the rest of those connected with the workhouse to have as human values.

We are given an idea of the life of Oliver in the pauper baby farm when Dickens relates Oliver's ninth birthday. "It was his ninth birthday; and he was keeping it in the coal-cellar with a select party of two other young gentlemen, who, after participating with him in a sound thrashing, had been locked up for atrociously presuming to be hungry"<sup>3</sup>. From what we have already been told about the life in the workhouse, it is not hard to see Dickens' use of "It was" in a sort of blank astonishment that anyone could live until his ninth birthday under such conditions.

It is on the occasion of Oliver's ninth birthday that

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 29.

Mr. Bumble the local Beadle<sup>4</sup> arrives to take Oliver, "being now too old to remain here" in the pauper baby farm, "back into the house".<sup>5</sup> This decision as are all the others of Oliver's workhouse days was determined by the Board.<sup>6</sup> It is upon "The Board" that Dickens places the blame for the conditions that he is presenting. This will be shown vividly in the near future.

Mr. Bumble's visit to Mrs. Mann also gives Dickens an occasion to show another aspect of the farm, its squalor. We are told: "Oliver, having had by this time as much of the outer coat of dirt which encrusted his face and hands, removed, as could be scrubbed off in one washing, was led into the room by his benevolent protectress."<sup>7</sup> Mrs. Mann might have been a "benevolent

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<sup>4</sup>Beadle--a minor parish officer in the Church of England.

<sup>5</sup>Dickens, op. cit., p. 31.

<sup>6</sup>The Poor Law of 1834. After Henry VIII had destroyed the monasteries, England was forced to provide a state system of poor relief. Accordingly, the Act of 1601 provided overseers for each parish, allowed a local tax to be levied for the support of the poor, decreed that able-bodied paupers should be aided in finding work, and specified that poor houses should be erected for those unable to work. The justices of the peace proved to be unsatisfactory enforcement officers, however, and so many able-bodied people secured relief that the poor rates gradually increased to a very high figure. This situation led to the passage of a new law (1834), which forbade able-bodied people to secure aid except in poor houses; but it allowed them to leave their own community to find work, and it provided local administrators controlled by a central board. (History of England, by J.A. Rickard, Barnes and Noble, New York.) This gives the historical basis for the whole novel.

<sup>7</sup>Dickens, op. cit., p. 31.

protectress," but it was of herself and not of the infants.

Oliver leaves Mrs. Mann behind and goes with Mr. Bumble to appear before "The Board". We are introduced to the spokesman which represents Dickens' attitude towards the thinking of the board in a man simply described as "the gentleman in the white waistcoat".<sup>8</sup> It is from his mouth that Dickens shows the thinking of the political men of his time. "The boy is a fool—I thought he was."<sup>9</sup>

At first, we tend to be amused by the board, but Dickens wastes no space in getting to his point in bring Oliver before them. One of the members in addressing Oliver says, "I hope you say your prayers every night and pray for the people who feed you, and take care of you—like a Christian."<sup>10</sup> Dickens finds this statement very amusing and retorts, "It would have been very like a Christian, and a marvellously good Christian, too, if Oliver had prayed for the people who fed and took care of him. But he ha~~x~~d't, because nobody had taught him."<sup>11</sup> This shows, to some extent, the pity of people who have no understanding for the position in which the poor are placed. Having no education and little humane treatment, how could anyone expect Oliver to know how to pray, let alone to pray for those who were the cause of all his suffering and hardship.

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 33

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 33-34.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 34.

Oliver, given his trade by the gentleman in the white waistcoat, "You'll begin to pick oakum to-morrow morning at six o'clock",<sup>12</sup> is then hurried to a large ward where he cries himself to sleep. Dickens' comment is simple, "What a noble illustration of the tender laws of England! They let the paupers go to sleep!"<sup>13</sup>

### THE BOARD

Dickens presents the members of the board as "very sage, deep, philosophical men;", and gives us a complete view of what goes on in their minds when he tell us that:

when they came to turn their attention to the workhouse, they found out at once what ordinary folks would never have discovered—the poor people liked it! It was a regular place of public entertainment for the poorer classes; a tavern where there was nothing to pay; a public breakfast, dinner, tea, and supper all the year round; a brick and mortar elysium, where it was all play and no work. "Oho!" said the board, looking very knowing, "we are the fellows to set this to rights; we'll stop it all, in no time." So they established the rule that all poor people should have the alternative (for they would compel nobody, not they) of being starved by a gradual process in the house, or by a quick one out of it.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

The diet that they decided upon is a good indication of what they meant when they said starve. "They contracted with the waterworks to lay on an unlimited supply of water", at least something besides starvation was unlimited, "and with a corn-factor to supply periodically small quantities of oatmeal, and issued three meals of thin gruel a day, with an onion twice a week and half a roll on Sundays."<sup>15</sup> This system was in full operation when Oliver arrived in the workhouse.

This produced added expense at first because of the additional funerals, but "the number of workhouse inmates got thin as well as the paupers, and the board were in ecstasies."<sup>16</sup>

It is not hard to see that Oliver did not have a chance against such a system. It is also easy to understand that the paupers under the poor-laws of Dickens' time did not have any way of fighting against such a political system either. This is the realism that Dickens is trying to present for his reader to see. The pauper of every age is unable to help himself when such a system as Dickens presents is forced upon him from such "sage, deep, philosophical men". All that Dickens describes so vividly for his reader is the situation of the pauper of his age, but the universal truth of what he is saying should be evident to every one reading him in our present age.

The conditions of a workhouse where nine-year-old children are placed and subjected to such hunger that, "The bowls

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., pp. 34-35.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 35.

never wanted washing. The boys polished them with their spoons till they shone again."<sup>17</sup>, can hardly be the action of a group of people who either understand the plight of the poor or wish to understand it. Therefore, we are not in the least shocked when Oliver finally approaches and states his hunger in the haunting plea: "Please, sir, I want some more."<sup>18</sup> We are not surprised either when he has to repeat his cry. Nor are we at a loss for a reason why the board itself is so understandably shocked. The man in the white waistcoat exclaims, "I know that boy will be hung. ...I never was more convinced of anything in my life, than I am that that boy will come to be hung."<sup>19</sup> What he is saying is that anyone who dares to go against the system set up by the board can come to no other end.

Because Oliver has asked for more and gone against the system, the board relinquishes its control over Oliver for a small fee and apprentices him to a local undertaker, Mr. Sowerberry.

#### THE UNDERTAKER

Dickens uses the occasion of Oliver's apprenticeship to Mr. Sowerberry to strike out anew against the board. When

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 37.

asked if he is hungry, Oliver replies in the affirmative and Mrs. Sowerberry says, "give this boy some of the cold bits that were put by for Trip."<sup>20</sup> Trip was their dog, but nevertheless in answering if he was "too dainty to eat'em"<sup>21</sup> "Oliver, whose eyes had glistened at the mention of meat", for it was a very rare occassion when meat was given at the workhouse, "and who was trembling with eagerness to devour it, replied in the negative."<sup>22</sup> In reference to the board whom Dickens calls from here on "the philosophers" he comments:

I wish some well-fed philosopher,  
whose meat and drink turn to gall  
within him, whose blood is ice,  
whose heart is iron, could have  
seen Oliver Twist clutching at the  
dainty viands that the dog had  
neglected. I wish he could have  
witnessed the horrible avidity with  
which Oliver tore the bits asunder  
with all the ferocity of famine.  
There is only one thing I should  
like better, and that would be to  
see the Philosopher making the same  
sort of meal himself, with the same  
relish.<sup>23</sup>

Dickens apparently felt that at this point he has said enough about the board and as such they drop from the picture. However, they do not drop from the memory of the reader. The oppression which they have caused to Oliver and to everyone in

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

the workhouse remains with us when ever we think of Oliver's days in the baby farm and workhouse. Thus it can be said that Dickens purpose in writing these introductory chapters has been fulfilled, and he is content to leave the impressions made upon us for our own reflection.

For the first time in the progress of the novel, we travel with Mr. Sowerberry and Oliver out into the world that surrounds the workhouse. This is the world of the other choice given by the board. The world where you can starve all on your own.

They walked on, for some time, through the most crowded and densely inhabited part of the town; and then, striking down a narrow street more dirty and miserable than any they had yet passed through, paused to look for the house which was the object of their search. The houses on either side were high and large, but very old, and tenanted by people of the poorest class, as their neglected appearance would have sufficiently denoted without the concurrent testimony afforded by the squalid looks of the few men and women who, with folded arms and bodies half doubled, occasionally sulked along. A great many of the tenements had shop-fronts; but these were fast closed and mouldering away, only the upper rooms being inhabited. Some houses which had become insecure from age and decay, were prevented from falling into the street by huge beams of wood reared against the walls and firmly planted in the road; but even these crazy dens seemed to have been selected as the nightly haunts of some houseless wretches, for many of the rough boards which supplied the place of door and window, were wrenched

from their positions, to afford an aperture wide enough for the passage of a human body. The kennel was stagnant and filthy. The very rats, which here and there lay putrefying in its rottenness, were hideous with famine.<sup>24</sup>

After reading a passage such as this, there is little doubt in our minds as to the chance one has against such destitution.

After the passage of a little over a month, Oliver decides to run away from Mr. Sowerberry. The reason given by Dickens is because of the many insults that have been given to his mother's memory. Mrs. Sowerberry who is attacked by Oliver in defending his mother thinks that "he must be mad",<sup>25</sup> but Mr. Bumble is quick to reply "after a few moments of deep meditation, 'It's meat. ...You've overfed him'".<sup>26</sup> Dickens also shows by this statement how unreasonable the laws passed and promulgated by the board were in the reasoning of those officers who administered them. There could be no other reason in the mind of Mr. Bumble than somehow Oliver had been fed to much.

### LONDON

With the beginning of chapter eight, we leave the workhouse and the town of Oliver's birth behind, never again to walk down its streets or to haunt its poverty. We move with

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., pp. 75-76.     -13-

Oliver to the city and the consequent involvement in the den of thieves. It is in this den of thieves that we see what will happen to those who are not in the workhouse but have enough will power to find other means of making a living. The exploitation of young boys as pickpockets was a common thing in Dickens' time; thus it is not hard to see why he chose it as his means of presenting the poverty and crime of London.

Throughout the first seven chapters, Dickens has presented the poverty of the workhouse. Now he will present the poverty that breeds criminals, such people as Bill Sikes, Fagin, and Nancy. It will not be hard to see why we are still in the real world.

### THE DEN OF THIEVES

When Oliver arrives in London we are introduced into the den of thieves. Here a whole new world is presented to us. The workhouse is dropped and so is everyone in it with the exception of Mr. Bumble who plays a part in Dickens' climax and periodically appears throughout the rest of the novel, just enough so that we do not forget him. Dickens has a way of always seeing that each of his characters always get what they deserve. Mr. Bumble is no exception, and his marriage to Mrs. Corney provides the reader with a touch of comic relief from the depressing life of the paupers.

The lives of the characters in the den of thieves are

presented by Dickens even more vividly than the workhouse characters. Dickens states in his Preface to the Third Edition of Oliver Twist that he "often saw and read of in actual life"<sup>27</sup> such characters as Bill Sikes, Fagin, the Artful Dodger, and Nancy.

Upon nearing London Oliver is immediately spotted by the Artful Dodger, who, being an astute judge of character, immediately recognizes Oliver as a potential member for the gang of pickpockets. Thus Oliver is taken to Fagin and introduced into the following atmosphere.

The walls and ceiling of the room were perfectly black with age and dirt. There was a deal table before the fire, upon which were a candle, stuck in a ginger-beer bottle, two or three pewter pots, a loaf and butter, and a plate. In a frying-pan, which was on the fire, and which was secured to the mantelshelf by a string, some sausages were cooking; and standing over them, 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, with his throat bare; and seemed to be dividing his attention between the frying-pan and a clothes-horse, over which a great number of silk handkerchiefs were hanging. Several rough beds made of old sacks, were huddled side by side on the floor. Seated round the table were four or five boys, none older than the Dodger, (who we were informed earlier is about the same age as Oliver), smoking long clay pipes, and drinking spirits with the air of middle-aged men. These all crowded about their associate as he whispered a few words to the Jew, and then turned round and grinned at Oliver.

So did the Jew himself, toasting-fork  
in hand.

"This is him, Fagin," said Jack Dawkins,  
"my friend Oliver Twist."

The Jew grinned and, making a low obeisance  
to Oliver, took him by the hand and hoped  
he should have the honour of his intimate  
acquaintance.<sup>28</sup>

Oliver is initiated into the life of a pickpocket and  
with the beginning of chapter ten is taken out on a job with  
the Dodger and Charley Bates. Although he has nothing to do  
with it, Oliver is arrested as a pickpocket and brought to  
trial before a local judge, Mr. Fang. Dickens gives us his  
opinion of the jails of his time by describing the one in  
which Oliver is detained until his trial.

The cell was in shape and size something  
like an area cellar, only not so light.  
It was most intolerably dirty, for it was  
Monday morning, and it had been tenanted  
by six drunken people who had been locked  
up elsewhere since Saturday night. But  
this is little. In our station-houses, men  
and women are every night confined on the  
most trivial charges—the word is worth  
noting—in dungeons, compared with which  
those in Newgate, occupied by the most  
atrocious felons, tried, found guilty,  
and under sentence of death, are palaces.  
Let any one who doubts this compare the  
two.<sup>29</sup>

The farce that is made of the trial is not a distortion

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 87.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., pp. 102-103.

by Dickens. The conditions of the courts in the time of Dickens had reached a new low, and this subject is brought up again in the trial of Dodger ~~later~~, in all its details.

With the trial over and Oliver acquitted, we move into a different world. This is the romantic world of Mr. Brownlow. After he has dropped the charges against Oliver and is about to leave, he finds Oliver laying "on his back on the pavement with his shirt unbuttoned and his temples bathed with water, his face a deadly white, and a cold tremble convulsing his whole frame."<sup>30</sup> Mr. Brownlow calls a coach and takes Oliver home with him. We have entered the World of Pentonville.

Up until this point, we have always seen Oliver as a victim of the system for the care of paupers. This is no longer true. Oliver returns to the life of a pauper only for a short time in the future; and for all practical purposes, it can be said that he has finally become a member of the bourgeoisie. The life of those in the den of thieves will return and for a time Oliver will be a part of it, but actually he is only in it and not a part of it in any real sense.

We will return to the life of the den of thieves after a short consideration of what becomes of Oliver while he is living in the romantic world he has now entered.

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<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 109.

## THE WORLD OF MR. BROWNLOW AND THE MAYLIES

In the home of Mr. Brownlow Oliver is nursed back to health by "a motherly old lady, very neatly and precisely dressed."<sup>31</sup> She dotes around him in his sick bed "with tears in her eyes", ~~and~~ using such expressions as "What a grateful little dear it is".<sup>32</sup> When Mr. Brownlow enters Oliver's sick room, Dickens gives us our first view of the type of people who live in the bourgeois world.

Now, the old gentleman came in as brisk as need be; but he had no sooner raised his spectacles on his forehead, and thrust his hands behind the skirts of his dressing-gown to take a good long look at Oliver, than his countenance underwent a very great variety of odd contortions. Oliver looked very worn and shadowy from sickness, and made an ineffectual attempt to stand up, out of respect to his benefactor, which terminated in his sinking back into the chair again; and the fact is, if the truth must be told, that Mr. Brownlow's heart, being large enough for any six ordinary old gentlemen of humane disposition, forced a supply of tears into his eyes, by some hydraulic process which we are not sufficiently philosophical to be in a condition to explain.<sup>33</sup>

When Oliver regains his health, he is very anxious to

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 110.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 111.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 115.

please Mr. Brownlow, and so he is sent to return some books to a book-stall keeper. Although it is only a few blocks away, he is captured by Nancy together with Bill Sikes, and he is returned to Fagin and the den of thieves. Although Oliver's stay with Mr. Brownlow is very short, we are aware of, the fact that Oliver will never be a part of the den of thieves, and it is not long before Bill Sikes takes Oliver with him to commit a burglary. As a result, Oliver is again placed in the hands of another bourgeois family, the Maylies. It is here that Oliver will spend the rest of his life.

Oliver is shot in the arm when the thieves are surprised by the awakened occupants and left to die in a ditch by Sikes, so that he could escape capture. Awakening the next morning, Oliver is just strong enough to get back to the house in which he was shot the night before. This is almost a repeat of Oliver's introduction to Mr. Brownlow. When we meet the characters who inhabit the Maylie house we see that they are almost exact copies of Dickens' bourgeoisie also.

In a HANDSOME ROOM (THOUGH ITS FURNITURE HAD rather the air of Old-fashioned comfort than of modern elegance) ~~there sat~~ two ladies at a well-spread breakfast table. Mr Giles, dressed with scrupulous care in a full suit of black, was in attendance upon them. ...

Of the two ladies, one was well advanced in years; but the high-backed oaken chair in which she sat was not more upright than she. Dressed with the utmost nicety and precision, in a quaint mixture of by-gone

costume, with some slight concessions to the prevailing taste, which rather served to point the old style pleasantly than to impair its effect, she sat, in a stately manner, with her hands folded on the table before her. Her eyes (and age had dimmed but little of their brightness) were attentively fixed upon her young companions.

The young lady was in the lovely bloom and spring-time of womanhood, at that age when, if ever angels be for God's good purposes enthroned in mortal forms, they may be, without impiety, supposed to abide in such as hers.

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. The very intelligence that shone in her deep blue eyes, and was stamped upon her noble head, seemed scarcely of her age, or of the world; and yet the changing expression of sweetness and good-humour, the thousand lights that played about the face and left no shadow there; about all, the smile, the chreeful, happy smile—were made for Home, and fire-side peace and happiness.<sup>34</sup>

We cannot accept these people or their world as real because the people are all too good, too kind, too lovable. There is nothing about these people with which to identify ourselves. We do not enter into their character as we do into that of the characters of the den of thieves.

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid., pp. 259-260.

### THE DEN OF THIEVES RETURNS

It is the characters that Dickens presents in the den of thieves that we really get to feel that we know. The comment is often made that these are not real characters either. This is true to a certain extent; but these types of people did exist in the London of Dickens, and he presents them with much more power than Mr. Brownlow and the Maylies. It is with these characters that we recognize the world that we know, and so, in this respect, these are the only real people in the novel. Oliver is supposed to be the hero of the book, but he is not as interesting as is Fagin as a character; and as soon as he enters the world of Mr. Brownlow and the Maylies, we begin to lose interest in him. We are glad to see that he has escaped from the life of the poor house, but we are more concerned at the time about what is going to happen to the members of the den of thieves. Let us take a look at the way in which the characters of the den of thieves are presented in contrast to those we have just described.

We have already been introduced to Fagin. The picture of him standing before the fire dressed in his greasy flannel gown, of his lurking through the dark streets of London, of his final hours in the jail cell are events that the reader never forgets. In fact, of all the characters in Oliver Twist the one that is most easy to picture when recalling the novel is that of Fagin.

Another character that we like to recall is the Artful Dodger. Dickens introduces us to him in the following description.

The boy (Dodger) was about his own age, but one of the queerest looking boys that Oliver had ever seen. He was a snub-nosed, flat-browed, common-faced boy enough, and as dirty a juvenile as one could wish to see, but he had about him all the airs and manners of a man. He was short of his age, with rather bow-legs, and little, sharp ugly eyes. His hat was stuck on top of his head so lightly that it threatened to fall off every moment—and would have done so, very often, if the wearer had not had a knack of every now and then giving his head a sudden twitch, which brought it back to its old place again. He wore a man's coat, which reached nearly to his heels. He had turned the cuffs back, half-way up his arm, to get his hands out of the sleeves, apparently with the ultimate view of thrusting them into the pockets of his corduroy trousers, for there he kept them. He was altogether, as roystering and swaggering a young gentleman as ever stood four feet six, or something less, in his bluchers.<sup>35</sup>

After reading a description of Dodger, one would have no trouble recognizing him if one saw him in a crowd picking pockets.

Dickens needs to tell us no more about this character and he doesn't.

The first time that a description is given of Bill Sikes we are not even given his name.

The man who growled out these words was a stoutly built fellow of about five-and-thirty, in a black velveteen coat, very

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 83.

soiled drab breeches, lace-up half boots, and grey cotton stockings, which inclosed a bulky pair of legs, with large swelling calves—the kind of legs, which in such costume, always look in an unfinished and incomplete state without a set of fetters to garnish them. He had a brown hat on his head and a dirty belcher handkerchief round his neck, with the long frayed ends of which he smeared the beer from his face as he spoke. He disclosed, when he had done so, a broad heavy countenance with a beard of three days' growth, and two scowling eyes, one of which displayed various particoloured symptoms of having been recently damaged by a blow.<sup>36</sup>

This gives us a vivid idea of what type of man we can expect to be living in the following:

In the obscure parlour of a low public-house in the filthiest part of Little Saffron Hill, a dark and gloomy den, where a flaring gaslight burnt all day in the winter time, and where no ray of sun ever shone in the summer, there sat, brooding over a little pewter measure and a small glass strongly impregnated with the smell of liquor, a man in a velveteen coat, drab shorts, half-boots, and stockings, whom even by that dim light no experienced agent of police (or reader) would have hesitated to recognize as Mr. William Sikes.<sup>37</sup>

There can remain no doubt in the mind of the reader after such an introduction of what type of character Bill Sikes is. We see him as a middle-aged man with a temper, loud mouth, and violent personality. I am sure that we have all met such a

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<sup>36</sup>Ibid., p. 121.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., p. 140.

person in our own lives or have at least read of such people in newspapers.

Nancy is described by Fagin as "a clever girl", but Sikes has his own opinion, "She's a honour to her sex," filling his glass, and smiting the table with his enormous fist, "Here's her health, and wishing they was all like her!"<sup>38</sup> Dickens describes her as "possessed of that natural good breeding which cannot bear to inflict upon a fellow-creature the pain of a direct and pointed refusal."<sup>39</sup> Dickens' use of the phrase "natural good breeding" gives us an insight into her defense of Oliver against the blows of Fagin when Oliver is returned to the den, and also into the events that lead up to her death. It is in a way a pity that Bill Sikes did not remember his statement that he wished all women were like Nancy when he killed her that dark, misty night on London bridge. Again, we have all met young women who have become victims of the environment and who only wait for the chance to be loved by someone and to help those who need help and can not help themselves.

When we compare these people with the descriptions of Mr. Brownlow and the Maylies, it is not hard to see that Dickens wants us to believe in the den of thieves and to accept the other world as part of the story. The main point that Dickens is trying to make about the situation of the pauper and the

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid., p. 125.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., p. 124.

criminal of his time is what he wants to remain with us when we put the book back on the shelf. Someone might raise the objection that the people as found in the passages concerning Mr. Brownlow and the Maylies actually exist also. This is true to a certain extent, but they are not presented as realistic people nor does Dickens seem to want us to accept them as such. He makes no effort to convince the reader that these characters are real people as he does in the den of thieves. The Brownlow's and Maylies' are, as I have stated earlier, too good, too kind, too perfectly dressed, and too unreal for the reader to even consider them as part of the realistic world in this novel.

DICKENS' USE OF EMOTION

Dickens' use of emotion is one aspect of Oliver Twist that can be easily misunderstood. It is important to an appreciation of the novel, because it is necessary for the emotions of the reader as well as the intellect to be engaged in a sympathetic response. If one is only going to read Oliver Twist as social criticism, then it would be better to read a social history. The part that the emotions play in our everyday life is the same as the reactions Dickens wants us to have to his use of emotion in Oliver Twist. He wants us to feel that we are suffering with the paupers. We are to be a part of their lives and to in some way enter into the very depths of their subconscious. This can only be done through emotion.

Dickens has good and bad use of emotion in Oliver Twist. We see one of his best uses of emotion when we go with Oliver and Mr. Sowerberry to the home of the paupers' woman who has died. The emotion involved is one that we all understand and we are sympathetic toward.

"Ah!" said the man, bursting into tears and sinking on his knees at the feet of the dead woman; "kneel down, kneel down—kneel round her, every one of you, and mark my words! I say she was starved to death. I never knew how bad she was till the fever came upon her, and then her bones were starting through the skin. There was neither fire nor candle; she died in the dark—in the dark! She couldn't even see her children's faces, though we heard her gasping out their names. I begged for her in the streets and they sent me to prison. When I came back, she was dying; and all the blood in my heart has dried up, for they

starved her to death. I swear it  
before the God that saw it! They  
starved her!"<sup>1</sup>

Who can fail to feel the despair of the person who has gone to prison because he was trying to get money to help this dying woman. Here we are involved with the emotion of a man, and it is not a cheap melodramatic contrivance on the part of Dickens to engage our sympathy. This is a strong presentation of a situation that pierces to the very core of the human heart.

However, this is not always the case in Dickens' use of emotion. The little scene that takes place between Oliver and Dick, outside the workhouse as Oliver is about to leave for London, does in no way justify the insertion of the passage later in the book where Dick is finally dying.

"I should like", said the child, "to leave my dear love to poor Oliver Twist, and to let him know how often I have sat by myself and cried to think of his wandering about in the dark nights with nobody to help him. And I should like to tell him," said the child, pressing his small hands together, and speaking with great fervour, "that I was glad to die when I was young; for, perhaps, if I had lived to be a man and had grown old, my little sister, who is in Heaven, might forget me or be unlike me; and it would be so much happier if we were both children there together."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, (New York: The New American Library of World Literature, Inc., 1962), p. 63.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid. p. 161.

This does not move the reader, because for the most part it is nothing more than a "tear jerker." It has no mature thought nor does it in any way strike the reader as real. This is done very frequently throughout the book, but it is the passages that are not of this type that makes all the others worthwhile.

Without spending anymore time on this subject, it can be said that the use that Dickens makes of emotion is very important to the over-all effect that is produced by the novel. There is bad use of emotion in Oliver Twist, but the impact of the correct use of emotion by Dickens makes one forgive him this fault of not always being able to use strong masculine emotions with the male characters and strong feminine emotions for the female characters. Some of the men in this novel would make better woman than they do male characters, but it must be admitted that we can find such people in everyday life also. The real point to remember is to accept the bad with the good. When Dickens uses emotion in a real, ~~strong~~ sympathetic way, we should respond with the sympathetic reaction; but in the use of poor emotional response, we must accept it as a failing of the writer and thank God for the good that is presented.

THE VALUE OF OLIVER TWIST  
TO  
THE MODERN READER

Oliver Twist was written as a serial publication and this accounts to some extent for the short, brief chapters and the fast movement that is noticed from the first page. Dickens spends most of this first page in telling us that what he is leaving out is unimportant. He could have very easily told it to us in half the space that he uses for this explanation. However, the pace of the book moves very quickly throughout.

In the first seven chapters, we see Oliver's life in the workhouse and we move with him into the life of London and the den of thieves. When we get to chapter eleven, however, we become as Oliver's name implies, twisted. From this point on, Oliver seems to become less important as a character. We become more interested in the characters that inhabit the den of thieves and Oliver becomes a device in the hands of the plot that is used to hold the story together. Fagin and Sikes take the place of Oliver. Oliver is not even a necessary part of the rest of the book except for the ending, which is rather affected than resolved.

Therefore you cannot say that the book is good because of its plot, but it must have some value to the reader other than just plain entertainment. The answer to this question is easy. It is "yes". Oliver Twist has much to offer the reader besides a poor plot and weak main character development. It gives a view of the life of the pauper and criminal that perhaps is not found anywhere as vividly as Dickens here presents it. It gives a person an insight into the suffering of these

people that should give a person a sympathetic and understanding approach to all those who are poor in our own time. This is where the real value of the book lies, in what it has to say about the abuses that the poor are forced to suffer without any means of bettering themselves and no one to help them. The criminal types that develop from the adverse situations that are forced upon them from birth until the gallows are not unreal at all. The fatal climax that Dickens has prepared for each of his characters is carefully chosen to show what results from this life of deprivation.

If one takes a close look at the first part of the book, he will notice that Oliver goes from the workhouse to the undertaker and finally into the den of thieves. This progression is not an accident. It is carefully worked out to show the progression in the formation of the criminal from the life in the slum to the finished product in such characters as Sikes and Fagin. This is the point that Dickens is trying to place before his readers. The doctrine that is proposed is that if you change this first situation, the other will take care of itself. The solution that Dickens himself offers is not exactly one that we can accept, but it is at least an attempt. Dickens himself did not believe in it, or else he would not have made it so contrived as it appears to be in the novel itself.

Therefore I feel that any person that reads Oliver Twist should find the time that he spent with it of value to him as a view of life that is still looking for a solution in our present

day with increaded vigor. This is where the value of Oliver  
Twist lies for the modern reader.

CONCLUSION

We have examined Oliver Twist for the last three chapters and in so doing we have established that there exists both realism and romanticism in this world of Dickens' novel. We considered in the first chapter Dickens trying to portray the poverty of London and the horror of the workhouse as he himself had witnessed it, but not without a feeling for the dramatic. We also pointed out the romantic world of the Brownlows and the Maylies. In chapter two, we discussed Dickens use of emotion both good and bad and showed its importance to an understanding of Oliver Twist. In chapter three, we pointed out some of the more important values of Oliver Twist for the reader of today. The subject of characters as such was treated throughout the whole of this thesis.

Therefore I do not feel any further need of development for the subject treated in this thesis. It is now for the reader himself to peruse Oliver Twist and to discover for himself the den of thieves with Fagin at the fire, Sikes and Nancy on the dark, damp streets of London, the Artful Dodger, and of course Oliver himself. I sincerely hope that the reading of this thesis will bring about a greater appreciation for all the works of Charles Dickens and make Oliver Twist even more delightful reading, because of some insight that might have been gained herefrom.

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