

Crime Writing: Text overview - *Oliver Twist*

Read our overview which shows how you can consider *Oliver Twist* in relation to the genre of Crime Writing. We haven't covered every element of this genre. Instead, we hope this guide will provide a springboard to help you plan and to get you and your students thinking about the text in more detail.

Criminal acts

Given the heavy focus on crime and the London underworld, it is not difficult to see the novel as a clear example of a specific type of Crime Writing, one rooted in social realism. *Oliver Twist's* narrative is driven by a number of crimes. Bill Sikes' murder of Nancy is the most horrible and dramatic; Fagin's corruption of young boys, specifically his attempt to pervert Oliver, covers more of the story's action; Monks' vengeful spite as he tracks down Oliver and seeks his ruin provides a narrative structure; but perhaps surpassing all these are the terrible crimes committed by the state against its people, especially children, through the passing of the Poor Law Act of 1834. The creation of workhouses, the authorities' condoning child labour and the wide-held belief of those with power that poverty equalled criminality, are included by Dickens to show that the values held by the state are more devious and cynical than the criminal world itself. Since 1838 many of the laws that underpin the novel have been abolished, and public attitudes have likewise changed. Some practices which were once lawful are now crimes themselves, like making young children work and hanging them for acts of theft. As a result, pinning down crimes and judging them is problematic for modern readers.

The novel reflects the London of the 1830s as Dickens saw it and incorporates his reactions to it. His own views were complex. There is abhorrence for many laws and accepted practices but also contempt for law breakers. Sometimes there is criticism of the middle classes and of criminals, and sometimes there is sympathy. Fagin and Sikes are outlaws, but also social outcasts. They are developed with more psychological realism than Oliver and, at their ends, they are figures of terrifying loneliness.

Crimes and criminals

As Oliver progresses through childhood he encounters the criminal world first hand: theft, abduction, murder, prostitution, deception and fraud are at the heart of Dickens' novel.

Thieving is the profession of Fagin's gang and his empire depends on children of poverty being recruited as pickpockets. Stealing leads to some of the children being hanged.

Whereas modern readers are likely to be horrified at the practice of abducting children, Fagin and his adult gang think that this is their right, and the authorities seem to turn a blind eye to it. Some children are lured into Fagin's den and this is certainly the case when Oliver first goes, persuaded by the Artful Dodger that he will be given a home. When Oliver escapes from Fagin, he is forcibly kidnapped from Mr Brownlow's and returned to the den. Oliver is also an unwilling accomplice in Sikes' robbery and, when he is shot, his abductors show little compassion. The most violent and terrible crime is the brutal murder of Nancy by a raging Sikes who accuses her of betrayal. The incident is charged with emotional intensity. Sikes beats his pistol on the upturned face of Nancy until she "staggered and fell; nearly blinded with the blood that rained down from a deep gash in her forehead" and then as she attempts to pray "he seized a heavy club and struck her down".

Dickens mainly makes his criminals detestable. He is censorious of their behaviour, their lifestyle and seemingly their poverty. In some ways he validates prevailing 19th century attitudes regarding the lives of the poor, supporting the views that led to the Poor Law. At times the novel seems to support the belief that the population needed checking because, rather than working, people would prefer a dissolute life and claim parish relief. Dickens' criminals are made to look horrible, as if God is displeased with them. He paints them as being deformed and wretched and their lives as squalid and miserable. They skulk "uneasily through the dirtiest paths of life, with the great black ghastly gallows closing up their prospect..." In creating his characters, Dickens establishes a link between their immorality and their physical repulsiveness. Fagin, for example, is reptilian and "villainous looking".

Fagin is the chief criminal, a manipulative and intellectual kind of villain, feeding off others. He preys on children, whom he brutally trains to pick pockets. He does not care if they are caught and hanged so long as they do not "peach" on him. Although the children are given a home of sorts, they have to deliver the proceeds of their filching to him.

Sikes is a more terrible and terrifying villain, trumping Fagin's evil; he is a violent, brutal robber, inspiring terror in most who come across him. His murder of Nancy is vicious, an act of vengeance and anger.

Monks is another villain who exhibits a festering kind of evil which works below the surface; he is manipulative and malignant. Unlike other criminals in Fagin's camp, he is not poor. However, although he inspires some terror and mystery when he first enters the novel, he becomes little more than a plot mechanism, seeking to destroy his half-brother Oliver out of spite.

The Artful Dodger is a cunning worldly-wise thief, who sees himself as a professional man, wanting to rise in the world. The 'dodger', despite being drawn with some affection, is self-seeking and full of guile.

Victims

Oliver is the novel's insipid victim and literary hero. He is a victim of the official world which first abuses him and, after his escape, he becomes a victim of Fagin's villainy, Sikes' cruelty and Monks' vindictiveness. However Oliver also breaks laws: he assists Sikes, albeit unwillingly, in the house robbery because he is small and can get through windows. Even earlier, when he runs away from the workhouse, he breaks the law by being on the road with no money (the 1824 vagrancy act criminalised begging and sleeping outdoors without means of support). Yet he is no true criminal and Dickens makes his face attractive to signify his innocence.

Nancy is a law breaker in that she supports Fagin and Sikes in acts of robbery. She is also a prostitute, though her prostitution is only alluded to. However, she is also a victim, immersed into Fagin's world from the age of five and ultimately beaten to death by her brutal lover, Sikes. Nancy's representation in the novel as primarily being a victim is secured by her sacrificing her life to keep Oliver away from a world she cannot leave. She also breathes 'one prayer of mercy to her Maker' as she dies.

Settings

Dickens creates very clear place and time settings in *Oliver Twist*: the streets of 1830s London are specifically named, there is the workhouse, Fagin's den, the three Cripples and Newgate prison. These dark and dangerous settings are contrasted with the middle-class residences of Brownlow and Mrs Maylie and are an important element of the crime writing genre.

Police/law enforcers

There is a police force of sorts operating in the world of *Oliver Twist*, but Dickens does not place police constables in the foreground. The work of detection and arresting criminals is carried out by individual citizens like Brownlow (who tracks down Monks and interrogates him), and by mobs; though police assistance is in the background should it be needed. When it is thought Oliver has stolen Brownlow's handkerchief, the crowd shout "Stop thief" and they hound him with "a passion for hunting". Later a dehumanised mob pursues Sikes, in a state of frenzy and fury.

Criminal trials and punishment

In *Oliver Twist*, punishment is meted out on criminals to serve Dickens' moral purpose. The apparatus of the law abounds: courts of law, magistrates and court officials, prisons and executions.

Formal trials are an important part of the framework of the novel. When Oliver is taken to the metropolitan police office for apparently stealing Brownlow's handkerchief, despite Brownlow's reluctance to press charges, Oliver is tried by the magistrate Mr Fang. He is sentenced to three months hard labour which is only retracted when a late witness arrives at the trial to say that Oliver is not the thief.

The Artful Dodger's trial for stealing a silver snuff box is a humorous farce. His punishment is transportation to Australia.

Fagin's trial contrasts with the two above in that it is utterly serious. The scene is recounted through Fagin's eyes and suspense is created when the jury return their verdict: "The jury returned, and passed him close. He could glean nothing from their faces; they might as well have been of stone. Perfect stillness ensued – not a rustle – not a breath – Guilty."

To Sikes, Dickens administers a different justice. After Sikes kills Nancy he is fearful of the consequences. He is terrified by shadows "but these fears were nothing compared to the sense of that morning's ghastly figure following him at his heels". It seems here that Sikes' conscience is at work; in no way can murderers escape, or justice be evaded. In *Oliver Twist* Providence is not asleep. Sikes is terrified by his guilt and, like Macbeth, is transfigured by the act of murder. He tries to escape but cannot, and after being pursued by the crowd onto a house roof he accidentally hangs himself.

Monks' punishment is less severe. After his capture he is given a second chance by Oliver's generosity and allowed to leave England, though in America he reverts to crime and dies in prison.

For Fagin, Dickens reserves the harshest form of institutionalised punishment: Newgate prison and then hanging. When Fagin is condemned to the gallows he screams in terror as the crowd gather. He does not repent.

Moral purpose

In *Oliver Twist*, ultimately the good prosper and the evil are punished. In this example of Crime Writing there is a moral outcome. Oliver discovers he has noble origins and being adopted by the kindly Mr Brownlow is his reward for his inner goodness.