

# **The Image of the London Underworld in Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist***

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## **Bachelor Thesis**

This thesis is a very interesting exploration of the novel *Oliver Twist*, which has as its focus Dickens's portrayal of the London underworld. The thesis is sensitive in its analysis of the book and very well written. It also uses a number of interesting sources, in particular the novelist George Gissing's penetrating study. The author first outlines the reality of underworld life in the 1830s and then discusses a controversial aspect of the book, namely the anti-Semitic portrayal of the character Fagin. She then turns to an examination of the main characters of the novel, as 'characters of the underworld'. Her conclusion points out that Dickens used the novel to both illustrate social wrongs, specifically the Poor Law Amendment, and also to make moral points, e.g. through the virtuous character of Oliver as an example to the poor, and that the novel also shows the opinions of Dickens, some of which reflect the anti-Semitism of the times. The final paragraph of the conclusion draws attention to the limitations of the novel – the prevalence of coincidence and the flatness of many of the characters – whilst claiming that *Oliver Twist* provides one of the most vivid portrayals of the London underworld.

In the section in which Dickens's attitude to Jews is discussed, the author surely understates the case when she describes Dickens as only "slightly clasped in stereotypes" (p.12), given his utterly and memorably stereotypical portrayal of Fagin, and it is surely too strong to state "it would be absurd to consider Dickens anti-Semitic. His opinion about Jewish minority altered along with the improvement of Jewish living conditions" (p.12) as this interpretation accepts at face value Dickens's defence that he was reporting reality, "it unfortunately was true, of the time to which the story refers, that that class of criminal almost invariably was a Jew". Dickens's anti-Semitism clearly reflected generally accepted prejudices of the time and he also, as the author points out, responded positively to challenges to his views and made some reparation for the creation of what remains a controversial portrayal of a Jewish stereotype. In general the author deals with this issue sensitively and perceptively.

The main criticism to make of the thesis is that it is descriptive rather than analytical, i.e. it sensitively discusses specific themes and aspects of *Oliver Twist*, but does not seem to have any specific argument. This is particularly apparent in the section on 'characters of the underworld' as this is basically a survey of almost all the characters in the book, and includes some who could not be considered 'underworld' e.g. Rose Maylie or Oliver himself. A comparison of *Oliver Twist* with another portrayal of London's underworld, either from another Dickens novel or another source would have created a stronger focus. Or, picking up on some comments the author makes on Dickens as a realist, isn't the extent to which Dickens 'realistically' portrayed the underworld an illuminating question? In her introduction the author says (p.2) "Realist writers were not realistic in the word's literal meaning. Therefore, their described world does not always have to look authentic". What does the author mean by this exactly? She further quotes K.J. Fielding towards the end of the thesis, "our

grasp on Oliver Twist depends on not trying to read it as if it were ‘realistic’” (p.26). To what extent does the author of the thesis consider Dickens to be a Realist writer, and to what extent influenced by Romanticism? To what extent can Oliver Twist be considered a morality tale? (this question would provide a context for her criticism of the ‘flat’ characters in the novel). These questions and a deeper exploration of them could have provided a stronger focus for the discussion of his treatment of the underworld.

On the whole this is a very good analysis of the novel and I am happy to recommend it, with a suggested mark of 2.

Bernadette Higgins MA

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