

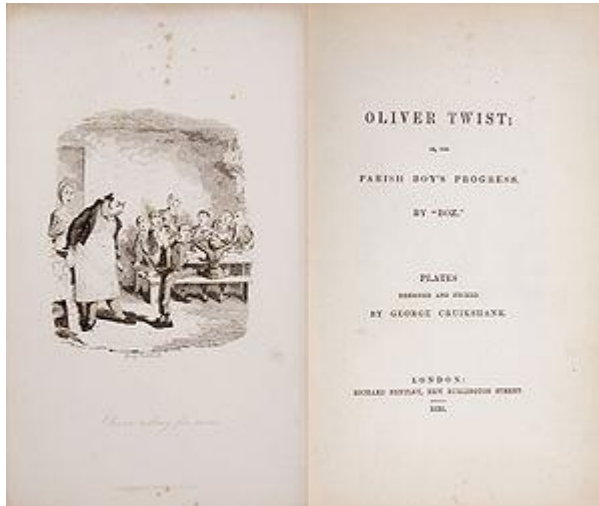
# *Oliver Twist*

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For other uses, see [Oliver Twist \(disambiguation\)](#).

## *Oliver Twist*



Frontispiece, first edition 1838

Design by [George Cruikshank](#)

<b>Author(s)</b>	<a href="#">Charles Dickens</a>
<b>Original title</b>	<i>Oliver Twist; or, The Parish Boy's Progress</i>
<b>Illustrator</b>	<a href="#">George Cruikshank</a>
<b>Country</b>	England
<b>Language</b>	English
<b>Series</b>	Monthly: February 1837 – April 1839
<b>Genre(s)</b>	Historical-Fiction Social criticism
<b>Publisher</b>	Serial: <a href="#">Bentley's Miscellany</a> Book: <a href="#">Richard Bentley</a>
<b>Publication date</b>	1837 (in three volumes)
<b>Media type</b>	Print (Serial, Hardcover and Paperback)
<b><a href="#">ISBN</a></b>	<a href="#">9119372019</a>
<b><a href="#">OCLC</a> Number</b>	<a href="#">185812519</a>
<b>Preceded by</b>	<a href="#">The Pickwick Papers</a>
<b>Followed by</b>	<a href="#">Nicholas Nickleby</a>

*Oliver Twist*, also known as *The Parish Boy's Progress* is the second [novel](#) by English author [Charles Dickens](#), published by [Richard Bentley](#) in [1838](#). The story is about an [orphan Oliver Twist](#), who endures a miserable existence in a [workhouse](#) and then is placed with an undertaker. He escapes and travels to London where he meets the [Artful Dodger](#), leader of a gang of juvenile [pickpockets](#). Oliver is led to the lair of their elderly criminal trainer [Fagin](#), naively unaware of their unlawful activities.

*Oliver Twist* is notable for Dickens' unromantic portrayal of criminals and their sordid lives.<sup>[1]</sup> The book exposed the cruel treatment of many a waif-child in London, which increased international concern in what is sometimes known as "The Great London Waif Crisis": the large number of orphans in London in the Dickens era. The book's subtitle, *The Parish Boy's Progress*, alludes to [Bunyan's \*The Pilgrim's Progress\*](#) and also to a pair of popular 18th-century caricature series by [William Hogarth](#), "[A Rake's Progress](#)" and "[A Harlot's Progress](#)".<sup>[2]</sup>

An early example of the social novel, the book calls the public's attention to various contemporary evils, including the [Poor Law](#), child labour and the recruitment of children as criminals. Dickens mocks the hypocrisies of his time by surrounding the novel's serious themes with sarcasm and dark humour. The novel may have been inspired by the story of [Robert Blincoe](#), an orphan whose account of hardships as a child labourer in a cotton mill was widely read in the 1830s. It is likely that Dickens's own early youth as a child labourer contributed to the story's development.

*Oliver Twist* has been the subject of numerous film and television adaptations, and is the basis for a highly successful [musical play](#), and the multiple [Academy Award](#) winning [1968 motion picture made from it](#).

## Contents

[\[hide\]](#)

- [1 Publications](#)
- [2 Plot summary](#)
  - [2.1 Workhouse and first jobs](#)
  - [2.2 London, the Artful Dodger, and Fagin](#)
  - [2.3 Mystery](#)
  - [2.4 Resolution](#)
- [3 Major themes and symbols](#)
  - [3.1 Poverty and social class](#)
  - [3.2 Symbolism](#)
  - [3.3 Characters](#)
- [4 Allegations of anti-Semitism](#)
- [5 References](#)
- [6 External links](#)

[\[edit\]](#) Publications



Cover, first edition of serial, entitled "The Adventures of Oliver Twist" January 1846  
Design by [George Cruikshank](#)

The book was originally published in [Bentley's Miscellany](#) as a serial, in monthly installments that began appearing in the month of February 1837 and continued through April 1839. It was originally intended to form part of Dickens's serial [The Mudfog Papers](#).<sup>[3][4][5]</sup> It did not appear as its own monthly serial until 1846. [George Cruikshank](#) provided one steel etching per month to illustrate each installment.<sup>[6]</sup> The first novelization appeared six months before the serialization was completed. It was published in three volumes by Richard Bentley, the owner of *Brantley's Miscellany*, under the author's pseudonym, "Boz" and included 24 steel-engraved plates by Cruikshank.

The first edition was titled: *Oliver Twist; or, The Parish Boy's Progress*.

## [\[edit\]](#) Plot summary

### [\[edit\]](#) Workhouse and first jobs



[Oliver](#): "Please, sir, I want some more."



Mr. Bumble by [Kyd \(Joseph Clayton Clarke\)](#)

[Oliver Twist](#) is born into a life of poverty and misfortune in a workhouse in an unnamed town (although when originally published in [Bentley's Miscellany](#) in 1837 the town was called [Mudfog](#) and said to be within 70 miles north of London). Orphaned almost from his first breath by his mother's death in childbirth and his father's unexplained absence, Oliver is meagerly provided for under the terms of the [Poor Law](#), and spends the first nine years of his life at a [baby farm](#) in the 'care' of a woman named Mrs. Mann. Oliver is brought up with little food and few comforts. Around the time of Oliver's ninth birthday, Mr. Bumble, a parish [beadle](#), removes Oliver from the baby farm and puts him to work picking [oakum](#) at the main workhouse. Oliver, who toils with very little food, remains in the workhouse for six months. One day, the desperately hungry boys decide to draw lots; the loser must ask for another portion of [gruel](#). The task falls to Oliver, who at the next meal tremblingly comes forward, bowl in hand, and makes his famous request: *"Please, sir, I want some more."*

A great uproar ensues. The board of well-fed gentlemen who administer the workhouse hypocritically offer five pounds to any person wishing to take on the boy as an apprentice. A brutal chimney sweep almost claims Oliver, however, when he begs despairingly not to be sent away with "that dreadful man", a kindly old magistrate refuses to sign the indentures. Later, Mr. Sowerberry, an undertaker employed by the parish, took Oliver into his service. He treats Oliver better, and because of the boy's sorrowful countenance, uses him as a mourner at children's funerals. However, Mr. Sowerberry is in an unhappy marriage, and his wife takes an immediate dislike to Oliver — primarily because her husband seems to like him — and loses few opportunities to underfeed and mistreat him. He also suffers torment at the hands of Noah Claypole, an oafish but bullying fellow apprentice and "charity boy" who is jealous of Oliver's promotion to mute, and Charlotte, the Sowerberrys' maidservant, who is in love with Noah.

One day, in an attempt to bait Oliver, Noah insults Oliver's biological mother, calling her "a regular right-down bad 'un". Oliver flies into a rage, attacking and even beating the much bigger boy. Mrs. Sowerberry takes Noah's side, helps him to subdue, punching, and beating Oliver, and later compels her husband and Mr. Bumble, who has been sent for in the aftermath of the fight, into beating Oliver again. Once Oliver is sent to his room for the night, he does something that he hadn't done since babyhood — he breaks down and weeps. Alone that night, Oliver finally decides to run away, and, "He remembered to have seen the

waggon, as they went out, toiling up the hill. He took the same route," until a well-placed milestone sets his wandering feet towards [London](#).

### [\[edit\]](#) London, the Artful Dodger, and Fagin



[George Cruikshank](#) original engraving of the [Artful Dodger](#) (centre), here introducing [Oliver](#) (right) to [Fagin](#) (left)

During his journey to London, Oliver encounters Jack Dawkins, a [pickpocket](#) more commonly known by the nickname the "[Artful Dodger](#)", although Oliver's innocent nature prevents him from recognising this hint that the boy may be dishonest. Dodger provides Oliver with a free meal and tells him of a gentleman in London who will "give him lodgings for nothing, and never ask for change". Grateful for the unexpected assistance, Oliver follows Dodger to the "old gentleman"'s residence. In this way, Oliver unwittingly falls in with an infamous Jewish criminal known as [Fagin](#), the so-called gentleman of whom the Artful Dodger spoke. Ensnared, Oliver lives with Fagin and his gang of juvenile [pickpockets](#) in their lair at [Saffron Hill](#) for some time, unaware of their criminal occupations. He believes they make wallets and handkerchiefs.

Later, Oliver naïvely goes out to "make handkerchiefs" because of no income coming in, with two of Fagin's underlings: The Artful Dodger and a boy of a humorous nature named Charley Bates. Oliver realises too late that their real mission is to pick pockets. Dodger and Charley steal the handkerchief of an old gentleman named Mr. Brownlow, and promptly flee. When he finds his handkerchief missing, Mr. Brownlow turns round, sees Oliver, and pursues him. Others join the chase and Oliver is caught and taken before the magistrate. Curiously, Mr. Brownlow has second thoughts about the boy—he seems reluctant to believe he is a pickpocket. To the judge's evident disappointment, a bookstall holder who saw Dodger commit the crime clears Oliver, who, by now actually ill, faints in the courtroom. Mr. Brownlow takes Oliver home and, along with his housekeeper Mrs. Bedwin, cares for him.



[Bill Sikes](#) by [Fred Barnard](#)

Oliver stays with Mr. Brownlow, recovers rapidly, and blossoms from the unaccustomed kindness. His bliss, however, is interrupted when Fagin, fearing Oliver might "peach" on his criminal gang, decides that Oliver must be brought back to his hideout. When Mr. Brownlow sends Oliver out to pay for some books, one of the gang, a young girl named [Nancy](#), whom Oliver had previously met at Fagin's, accosts him with help from her abusive lover, a brutal robber named [Bill Sikes](#), and Oliver is quickly bundled back to Fagin's lair. The thieves take the five pound note Mr. Brownlow had entrusted to him, and strip him of his fine new clothes. Oliver, dismayed, flees and attempts to call for police assistance, but is ruthlessly dragged back by the Dodger, Charley and Fagin. Nancy, however, is sympathetic towards Oliver and saves him from beatings by Fagin and Sikes.

In a renewed attempt to draw Oliver into a life of crime, Fagin forces him to participate in a [burglary](#). Nancy reluctantly assists in recruiting him, all the while assuring the boy that she will help him if she can. Sikes, after threatening to kill him if he does not cooperate, sends Oliver through a small window and orders him to unlock the front door. The robbery goes wrong, however, and Oliver is shot and wounded in his left arm. After being abandoned by Sikes, the wounded Oliver ends up under the care of the people he was supposed to rob: Miss Rose and her guardian Mrs. Maylie

### [\[edit\]](#) **Mystery**

Meanwhile, a mysterious man named Monks has found Fagin and is plotting with him to destroy Oliver's reputation. Monks denounces Fagin's failure to turn Oliver into a criminal and the two of them agree on a plan to make sure he does not find out about his past. Monks is apparently related to Oliver in some manner, although it's not mentioned until later. Back in Oliver's hometown, Mr. Bumble married Ms. Corney, the wealthy matron of the workhouse, only to find himself in an unhappy marriage constantly arguing with his domineering wife. After one such argument, Mr. Bumble walks over to a pub, where he meets Monks, who questions him about Oliver. Bumble informs Monks that he knows someone who can give Monks more information for a price, and later Monks meets secretly with the Bumbles. After Mrs. Bumble has told Monks all she knows, the three arrange to take a locket and ring which had once belonged to Oliver's mother and toss them into a nearby river. Monks relates this to Fagin as part of the plot to destroy Oliver, unaware that Nancy has eavesdropped on their conversation and gone ahead to inform Oliver's benefactors.



Nancy, by this time ashamed of her role in Oliver's kidnapping, and fearful for the boy's safety, goes to Rose Maylie and Mr. Brownlow to warn them. She knows that Monks and Fagin are plotting to get their hands on the boy again and holds some secret meetings on the subject with Oliver's benefactors. One night Nancy tries to leave for one of the meetings but Sikes refuses permission when she doesn't state exactly where she's going. Fagin realizes that Nancy is up to something and resolves to find out what her secret is. Meanwhile, Noah has fallen out with the undertaker Mr. Sowerberry, stolen money from him and fled to London. Charlotte has accompanied him — they are now in a relationship. Using the name "Morris Bolter", he joins Fagin's gang for protection and becomes a practitioner of "the kinchen lay" (robbing children) while it is implied that Charlotte becomes a prostitute. During Noah's stay with Fagin, the Artful Dodger is caught with a stolen silver snuff box, convicted (in a very humorous courtroom scene) and transported to Australia. Later, Noah is sent by Fagin to "dodge" (spy on) Nancy, and discovers her secret: she has been meeting secretly with Rose and Mr. Brownlow to discuss how to save Oliver from Fagin and Monks.

Fagin angrily passes the information on to Sikes, twisting the story just enough to make it sound as if Nancy had informed on him. Believing Nancy to be a traitor, Sikes beats her to death in a fit of rage and later flees to the countryside to escape from the police. There, Sikes is haunted by visions of Nancy's ghost and increasingly alarmed by news of her murder spreading across the countryside. He flees back to London to find a hiding place, only to be killed when he accidentally hangs himself while attempting to flee across a rooftop from an angry mob.

## [\[edit\]](#) Resolution



[Fagin](#) in his cell.

Monks is forced by Mr. Brownlow to divulge his secrets: his real name is Edward Leeford, and he is Oliver's paternal half-brother and, although he is legitimate, he was born of a loveless marriage. Oliver's mother, Agnes, was their father's true love. Mr. Brownlow has a picture of her, and began making inquiries when he noticed a marked resemblance between her face, and the face of Oliver. Monks has spent many years searching for his father's child—not to befriend him, but to destroy him (see [Henry Fielding's \*Tom Jones\*](#) for similar circumstances). Brownlow asks Oliver to give half his inheritance (which proves to be meagre) to Monks because he wants to give him a second chance; and Oliver, being prone to giving second chances, is more than happy to comply. Monks then moves to America, where he squanders his money, reverts to crime, and ultimately dies in prison. Fagin is arrested and

condemned to the gallows. On the eve of his hanging, in an emotional scene, Oliver, accompanied by Mr. Brownlow, goes to visit the old reprobate in [Newgate Gaol](#), where Fagin's terror at being hanged has caused him to come down with fever. As Mr. Brownlow and Oliver leave the prison, Fagin screams in terror and despair as a crowd gathers to see his hanging.

On a happier note, Rose Maylie turns out to be the long-lost sister of Agnes; she is therefore Oliver's aunt. She marries her long-time sweetheart Harry, and Oliver lives happily with his saviour, Mr. Brownlow. Noah becomes a paid, semi-professional informer to the police. The Bumbles lose their jobs and are reduced to great poverty, eventually ending up in the same workhouse, where they originally lorded it over Oliver and the other boys; and Charley Bates, horrified by Sikes's murder of Nancy, becomes an honest citizen, moves to the country, and works his way up to prosperity.

## [\[edit\]](#) Major themes and symbols



 Bill Sikes by [Kyd \(Joseph Clayton Clarke\)](#)



 The Artful Dodger by [Kyd \(Joseph Clayton Clarke\)](#)

In *Oliver Twist*, Dickens mixes grim realism and merciless satire as a way to describe the effects of industrialism on 19th-century England and to criticise the harsh new [Poor Laws](#). Oliver, an innocent child, is trapped in a world where his only options seem to be the workhouse, Fagin's gang, a prison, or an early grave. From this unpromising



industrial/institutional setting, however, a fairy tale also emerges. In the midst of corruption and degradation, the essentially passive Oliver remains pure-hearted; he steers away from evil when those around him give in to it, and in proper fairy-tale fashion, he eventually receives his reward — leaving for a peaceful life in the country, surrounded by kind friends. On the way to this happy ending, Dickens explores the kind of life an orphan, outcast boy could expect to lead in 1830s London.<sup>[7]</sup>

## [\[edit\]](#) Poverty and social class

Poverty is a prominent concern in *Oliver Twist*. Throughout the novel, Dickens enlarges on this theme, describing slums so decrepit that whole rows of houses are on the point of ruin. In an early chapter, Oliver attends a pauper's funeral with Mr. Sowerberry and sees a whole family crowded together in one miserable room.

This ubiquitous misery makes Oliver's few encounters with charity and love more poignant. Oliver owes his life several times over to kindness both large and small.<sup>[8]</sup> The apparent plague of poverty that Dickens describes also conveyed to his middle-class readers how much of the London population was stricken with poverty and disease. Nonetheless, in *Oliver Twist* he delivers a somewhat mixed message about social caste and social injustice. Oliver's illegitimate workhouse origins place him at the nadir of society; as an orphan without friends, he is routinely despised. His "sturdy spirit" keeps him alive despite the torment he must endure. Most of his associates, however, deserve their place among society's dregs and seem very much at home in the depths. Noah Claypole, a charity boy like Oliver, is idle, stupid, and cowardly; Sikes is a thug; Fagin lives by corrupting children; and the Artful Dodger seems born for a life of crime. Many of the middle-class people Oliver encounters—Mrs. Sowerberry, Mr. Bumble, and the savagely hypocritical "gentlemen" of the workhouse board, for example—are, if anything, worse.

Oliver, on the other hand, who has an air of refinement remarkable for a workhouse boy, proves to be of gentle birth. Although he has been abused and neglected all his life, he recoils, aghast, at the idea of victimizing anyone else. This apparently hereditary gentlemanliness makes *Oliver Twist* something of a [changeling](#) tale, not just an indictment of social injustice. Oliver, born for better things, struggles to survive in the savage world of the underclass before finally being rescued by his family and returned to his proper place—a commodious country house.

In a recent film adaptation of the novel, [Roman Polanski](#) dispenses with the problem of Oliver's genteel origins by making him an anonymous orphan, like the rest of Fagin's gang.





[Oliver](#) is wounded in a [burglary](#)

## [\[edit\]](#) Symbolism

Dickens makes considerable use of symbolism. The many symbols Oliver faces are primarily good versus evil, with evil continually trying to corrupt and exploit good, but good winning out in the end. The "merry old gentleman" Fagin, for example, has satanic characteristics: he is a veteran corrupter of young boys who presides over his own corner of the criminal world; he makes his first appearance standing over a fire holding a toasting-fork; and he refuses to pray on the night before his execution.<sup>[9]</sup> The London slums, too, have a suffocating, infernal aspect; the dark deeds and dark passions are concretely characterised by dim rooms and pitch-black nights, while the governing mood of terror and brutality may be identified with uncommonly cold weather. In contrast, the countryside where the Maylies take Oliver is a pastoral heaven. The novel is also shot through with a related [motif](#), obesity, which calls attention to the stark injustice of Oliver's world. When the half-starved child dares to ask for more, the men who punish him are fat. A remarkable number of the novel's characters are overweight.

Toward the end of the novel, the gaze of knowing eyes becomes a potent symbol. For years, Fagin avoids daylight, crowds, and open spaces, concealing himself most of the time in a dark lair. When his luck runs out at last, he squirms in the "living light" of too many eyes as he stands in the dock, awaiting sentence. Similarly, after Sikes kills Nancy, he flees into the countryside but is unable to escape the memory of her dead eyes. In addition, Charley Bates turns his back on crime when he sees the murderous cruelty of the man who has been held up to him as a model.

## [\[edit\]](#) Characters



### The Last Chance

In the tradition of [Restoration Comedy](#) and [Henry Fielding](#), Dickens fits his characters with appropriate names. Oliver himself, though "badged and ticketed" as a lowly orphan and named according to an alphabetical system, is, in fact, "all of a twist."<sup>[10]</sup> Mr. Grimwig is so called because his seemingly "grim", pessimistic outlook is actually a protective cover for his kind, sentimental soul. Other character names mark their bearers as semi-monstrous [caricatures](#). Mrs. Mann, who has charge of the infant Oliver, is not the most motherly of

women; Mr. Bumble, despite his impressive sense of his own dignity, continually mangles the king's English he tries to use; and the Sowerberries are, of course, "sour berries", a reference to Mrs. Sowerberry's perpetual scowl, to Mr. Sowerberry's profession as an undertaker, and to the poor provender Oliver receives from them. Rose Maylie's name echoes her association with flowers and springtime, youth and beauty, while Toby Crackit's is a reference to his chosen profession of housebreaking.

Bill Sikes's dog, Bull's-eye, has "faults of temper in common with his owner" and is an emblem of his owner's character. The dog's viciousness represents Sikes's animal-like brutality, while Sikes's self-destructiveness is evident in the dog's many scars. The dog, with its willingness to harm anyone on Sikes's whim, shows the mindless brutality of the master. Sikes himself senses that the dog is a reflection of himself and that is why he tries to drown the dog. He is really trying to run away from who he is. <sup>[citation needed]</sup> This is also illustrated when Sikes dies and the dog does immediately also. <sup>[11]</sup> After Sikes murders Nancy, Bull's-eye also comes to represent Sikes's guilt. The dog leaves bloody footprints on the floor of the room where the murder is committed. Not long after, Sikes becomes desperate to get rid of the dog, convinced that the dog's presence will give him away. Yet, just as Sikes cannot shake off his guilt, he cannot shake off Bull's-eye, who arrives at the house of Sikes's demise before Sikes himself does. Bull's-eye's name also conjures up the image of Nancy's eyes, which haunts Sikes until the bitter end and eventually causes him to hang himself accidentally.

Dickens employs polarised sets of characters to explore various dual themes throughout the novel; <sup>[citation needed]</sup> Mr. Brownlow and Fagin, for example, personify "good vs. evil". Dickens also juxtaposes honest, law-abiding characters such as Oliver himself with those who, like the Artful Dodger, seem more comfortable on the wrong side of the law. Crime and punishment is another important pair of themes, as is sin and redemption: Dickens describes criminal acts ranging from picking pockets to murder, and the characters are punished severely in the end. Most obviously, he shows Bill Sikes hounded to death by a mob for his brutal acts, and sends Fagin to cower in the condemned cell, sentenced to death by due process. Neither character achieves redemption; Sikes dies trying to run away from his guilt, and on his last night alive, the terrified Fagin refuses to see a rabbi or to pray, instead asking Oliver to help him escape. Nancy, by contrast, redeems herself at the cost of her own life, and dies in a prayerful pose.

Nancy is also one of the few characters in *Oliver Twist* to display much ambivalence. Although she is a full-fledged criminal, indoctrinated and trained by Fagin since childhood, she retains enough empathy to repent her role in Oliver's kidnapping, and to take steps to try to atone. As one of Fagin's victims, corrupted but not yet morally dead, she gives eloquent voice to the horrors of the old man's little criminal empire. She wants to save Oliver from a similar fate; at the same time, she recoils from the idea of turning traitor, especially to Bill Sikes, whom she loves. When he was later criticised for giving a "thieving, whoring slut of the streets" such an unaccountable reversal of character, Dickens ascribed her change of heart to "the last fair drop of water at the bottom of a dried-up, weed-choked well". <sup>[12]</sup>

## **[[edit](#)] Allegations of anti-Semitism**

See also: [Fagin#Antisemitism](#)

Dickens has been accused of following [anti-Semitic](#) stereotypes because of his portrayal of the Jewish character Fagin in *Oliver Twist*. Paul Vallyely writes that Fagin is widely seen as one of the most grotesque Jews in English literature, and the most vivid of Dickens's 989 characters.<sup>[13]</sup> Nadia Valdman, who writes about the portrayal of Jews in literature, argues that Fagin's representation was drawn from the image of the Jew as inherently evil, that the imagery associated him with the Devil, and with beasts.<sup>[14]</sup>

The novel refers to Fagin 257 times in the first 38 chapters as "the Jew", while the ethnicity or religion of the other characters is rarely mentioned.<sup>[13]</sup> In 1854, the *Jewish Chronicle* asked why "Jews alone should be excluded from the 'sympathizing heart' of this great author and powerful friend of the oppressed." Eliza Davis, whose husband had purchased Dickens's home in 1860 when he had put it up for sale, wrote to Dickens in protest at his portrayal of Fagin, arguing that he had "encouraged a vile prejudice against the despised Hebrew", and that he had done a great wrong to the Jewish people. While Dickens first reacted defensively upon receiving Davis's letter, he then halted the printing of *Oliver Twist*, and changed the text for the parts of the book that had not been set, which is why Fagin is called "the Jew" 257 times in the first 38 chapters, but barely at all in the next 179 references to him.<sup>[13]</sup>

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- ↑ <sup>a</sup> <sup>b</sup> <sup>c</sup> [Vallyely, Paul](#). [Dickens' greatest villain: The faces of Fagin](#), 7 October 2005.
- ↑ [Valdman, Nadia](#). *Antisemitism, A Historical Encyclopedia of Prejudice and Persecution*. [ISBN 1-85109-439-3](#)

## [[edit](#)] External links





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- [\*Oliver Twist\*](#)—easy to read HTML version
- [\*Oliver Twist\*](#)—searchable HTML version
- [\*Oliver Twist\*](#) with various translations (French, Spanish, Italian, German).

Critical analysis

- [When Is a Book Not a Book? Oliver Twist in Context, a seminar by Robert Patten from the New York Public Library](#)
- [Background information and plot summary for \*Oliver Twist\*, with links to other resources](#)
- [Article in \*British Medical Journal\* on Oliver Twist's diet](#)
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