

# OLIVER TWIST AND THE NEWGATE NOVEL

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THOSE who consider Dickens' treatment of the criminals in *Oliver Twist* superficial usually ascribe this quality to his inherent tendency to overwrite—to romanticize and burlesque, to stress the sentimental and the sensational. This tendency seems not to have been entirely personal, however, for *Oliver Twist* closely resembles the Newgate novel,<sup>1</sup> a kind of fiction now forgotten by all but a few people, but widely read and strongly influential in its time.

A Newgate novel is a story of a criminal. Its name derives largely from those records of crime and violence, the Newgate calendars, which were very popular with English readers during the first decades of the nineteenth century as "thrillers" and which some English writers used as sources for their plots and heroes. Lytton's Eugene Aram and Ainsworth's Dick Turpin and Jack Sheppard, for example, had appeared in the notorious old collections of blood-and-thunder before taking on airs in fashionable three-deckers. Not all the protagonists of the romances of crime were historical as Lytton's *Paul Clifford* (1830), the first of the Newgate genre, illustrates, but even those who were fictitious had no cause for shame, since they were as good robbers and murderers as any honoured by the calendars.

Newgate fiction not only tells a story of a criminal but tries also to palliate his crimes. He is a felon but almost always pleasing or pathetic. He robs with a smile on his face as a sort of painless extraction for his victim, allowing him at the same time the privilege of having the light and air let into him with only the finest rapier strokes or straightest pistol shots; or beats his brains out, but only on the very highest moral principles. Purporting to hold the society that produced criminals up to scorn, the Newgate novelists held the criminals themselves up to admiration or pity. They set out to attack causes and finished by defending results. They indicated that felons are good, brave men, sometimes even suave fellows (red-blooded blue-bloods were favourites), who rob and murder through no fault of their own or because of their "nobility," and hence the Newgate novelists' "pretended purpose," as Shepperson puts it, "to conduct a rational inquiry into the nature and causes of crime," was lost sight of.

<sup>1</sup> The name is used for the genre by Walter C. Phillips in *Dickens, Reade, and Collins Sensation Novelists* and Archibald B. Shepperson *The Novel in Molley*

The Newgate novel belongs, like the half-epical tales of Robin Hood or historical romances like *Rob Roy*, to fiction that seeks to vindicate lawlessness. But it differs from them in two important respects. It is semi-realistic, dealing, not with the strange and wonderful, but with the unusual in the world of matter-of-fact. The reader does not go on flights of fancy to the haunts of picturesque brigands in far away forests and mountains. Instead, sentimentalized or glamourized gaol-birds entertain him in the pubs or the fashionable ballrooms and on the streets and highways that were all part of his own world. Handling ostensibly the stuff of real life but afraid to treat it accurately, Newgate writers compromised between romance and realism. They chose protagonists whose criminality made them unusual but who were only petty felons in a stable society, not men who achieve the grandeur of wrongdoing in a stable society. A villain-hero in a historical romance is a lawless man in a Lawless community. He lives according to the regulations of his group, which, as leader, he dominates. He inhabits a world of his own and one apart from ordinary people. Robin Hood is only Robin Hood when he is in Sherwood Forest, and similarly Rob Roy is only Rob Roy when he is in the Scottish Highlands. Newgate fiction attempted to place outlaws in a world where they could not establish their own standards and where they lived a lawless and disruptive force in a Lawful society. The authors sought to excuse them, however, not because of but in spite of their offences. Glorified, they were to gain esteem as heroes in adversity; sentimentalized, they were to win sympathy as victims—of unjust laws, personal enemies, corrupt society, harsh environment, or even of cupid's darts.

Newgate fiction differs in its treatment of criminals from the novel of sensation also; the former exaggerates their virtues, and the latter, their depravity. One school of writers produced the improbably good, and the other, the improbably bad. Furthermore the Newgate novelists tried to focus attention on the man committing the crime, whereas the novelists of sensation preferred to stress the crime itself and made little or no pretense to conceal the fact that the ruffians in their books were present mainly "to strike terror to the reader's heart."

To the various kinds of romances mentioned *Oliver Twist* undoubtedly owes something; yet it would seem to owe most to the Newgate novel. In the first place Dickens' alleged aim in depicting Sikes, Fagin, and their compeers was simply a

repetition of an old favourite with authors who described low-life. "I have yet to learn," Dickens writes, "that a lesson of the purest good may not be drawn from the vilest evil," and, like Lytton, cited Hogarth as his model. *Oliver Twist* was to contain "no canterings upon moonlit heaths, no merry-makings in the snuggest of all possible caverns, none of the attractions of dress, no embroidery, no lace, no jack-boots, no crimson coats and ruffles," nothing but "the stern and plain truth" about its criminal characters. These remarks were probably aimed at Ainsworth's *Rookwood* (1834), in part the story of "heroic" Dick Turpin. At least Dickens found it possible in the same commentary to praise as "admirable and most powerful" Lytton's *Paul Clifford*, certainly a novel of canterings, merrymaking, crimson coats, and ruffles. The fact is that Dickens tried to defend *Oliver Twist* with the same arguments that Lytton had used to justify his Newgate novels. Aside from pointing out the general moral of *Oliver Twist*, that crime does not pay, the first preface, like the introduction to *Eugene Aram* (1831), proclaims, though somewhat vaguely, the suitability of criminals for fiction on the ground that their characters need to be investigated and understood. Lytton's reasoning runs thus: "Whenever crime appears the aberration and monstrous product. . . of a nature ordinarily virtuous, it becomes not only the subject for genius. . . but a problem for philosophy. . . to investigate and solve. . ." Dickens rephrases the same general idea: "(The character of the social outcast) involves the best and worst shades of our common nature; much of its ugliest hues, and something of its most beautiful; it is a contradiction, an anomaly, an apparent impossibility, but it is a truth. I am glad to have it doubted, for in that circumstance I find a sufficient assurance that it needed to be told." A later preface is more forthright and, re-echoing Lytton's comment on *Paul Clifford*, stresses the social purpose of *Oliver Twist* and the need of "compassion for human misery when it is accompanied by filth, poverty and ignorance."

Like Lytton, Dickens did not succeed especially well in revealing the truth about criminal character or the responsibility of society for it. His story is too obviously contrived and so similar to Newgate Fiction as again to suggest its influence. Aside from murder and robbery, *Oliver Twist* makes much of the court trial, another favourite incident in Newgate fiction, and includes no fewer than three such scenes—Oliver's appearance before police magistrate Fang, the Artful Dodger's before

another but less spiteful one, and Fagin's before judge and jury at Newgate. Again, *Oliver Twist* includes the episodes of the flight of Sikes and the hue and cry after Oliver that undoubtedly owe something to the idea (and popularity) of Turpin's ride to York described in Ainsworth's *Rookwood*.

Other conventions of Newgate fiction, "flash" songs and dialogue and thieves' carousals, Dickens avoids for the most part. The scene at The Three Cripples to which Ainsworth, Lytton, or Whitehead would have devoted several pages, Dickens dismisses in two. And the speech of Dawkins and Bates, compared to the conversation of similar characters in other Newgate novels, is sprinkled very sparingly with terms from the early Victorian underworld.

*Oliver Twist* is most obviously like the Newgate novel in its treatment of criminals and is compounded of the same kind of melodrama, sentimentality, and romance that went into the very popular *Paul Clifford*, *Eugene Aram*, and *Rookwood*. It exhibits the same tendency to uphold—to pity or admire—felons and to scoff at law.

The trial of Fagin illustrates the point well, for Dickens fails in it to make the old Jew as repulsive in dying as in living. As he appears in the court and the condemned cell at Newgate, he is no longer a receiver of stolen goods and an abductor of little boys but rather a pathetic figure suffering from the inhumanity of all the ceremony of capital punishment. The influence of the Newgate school on the depiction of Fagin was reinforced by Dickens' way of writing. He saw men as individuals, and on this principle constructed his plots. He thought of his characters first and then planned his story. Of *Oliver Twist* he once wrote to Yates, "I am quite satisfied that no one can have heard what I mean to do with the different characters in the end, inasmuch as, at present, I don't quite know myself." Dickens was aware, however, not only of man as an individual but of man as a being with a need and desire to be part of his society, and his failure to reconcile these two points of view in *Oliver Twist* helps to obscure the fact that Sikes and Fagin are Oliver's worst enemies and two evil men. In the trial of the fence, the emphasis on the isolation of the cunning old villain from man necessarily places an equal stress on his need for association with man and makes him an object of pity. He ceases to be a specific person, to be Fagin, and becomes simply a man in desperate circumstances. Fagin, as Fagin, loses his personality, but as an individual gains the reader's sympathy.

The court was paved, from floor to roof, with human faces. Inquisitive and eager eyes peered from every inch of space. From the rail before the dock, away into the sharpest angle of the smallest corner in the galleries, all looks were fixed upon one man—the Jew. Before him and behind: above, below, on the right and on the left: he seemed to stand surrounded by a firmament, all bright with gleaming eyes. . . . At times, he turned his eyes sharply upon (the jury) to observe the effect of the slightest featherweight in his favour; and when the points against him were stated with terrible distinctness, looked towards his counsel, in mute appeal, that he would, even then, urge something in his behalf. . . . As his eyes wandered to the gallery, he could see the people rising above each other to see his face; some hastily applying their glasses to their eyes: and others whispering their neighbours with looks expressive of abhorrence. A few there were, who seemed unmindful of him, and looked only to the jury, in impatient wonder how they could delay. But in no one face—not even among the women, of whom there were many there—could be read the faintest sympathy with himself, or any feeling but one of all-absorbing interest that he should be condemned.

At the close of the book, Sikes, too, is placed in a situation conducive to compassion. When he comes back to his friends after the murder of Nancy, only to find that they have turned against him, or when he attempts to escape across the rooftops with a mob shouting curses at him, he is simply a poor persecuted man. Furthermore Sikes kills Nancy because she fails to live up to the moral code of the gang—a common cause of crime in the Newgate novel—and in Dickens' characterization there are shades of Eugene Aram and Houseman. Besides sentimentalizing his anti-heroes, Dickens demonstrates a similar want of directness through his generally facetious handling of Fagin's boys and especially the Artful Dodger during his trial. The formula of "smiles and tears" that Lytton had used very successfully in his "studies" of crime seems also to have determined much of the matter and manner of *Oliver Twist*.

Edmund Wilson hypothesizes in *The Wound and the Bow* that a traumatic experience—work as a factory hand—was largely responsible for Dickens' interest in criminals, a manifestation of his spirit of rebellion, and it may well be that Sikes and Fagin have symbolic overtones. In tracing Sikes and his gang to a hideout in a blacking warehouse, however, one must not neglect the fact that other authors of the period who antedate Dickens and who had never had to work "from morning to night with common men and boys" also described thieves and murderers in their books. One might readily, of course, consider Newgate fiction as a display of the revolutionary spirit of the age, but such an observation, though related to Wilson's, differs significantly from it.

Like the Newgate novel, *Oliver Twist* is often nothing more than a novel of action in which the examination of a criminal

character becomes a what-happens-next-how-does-it-end affair. Yet it does achieve one of the objectives of the Newgate school, as Lytton wrote it, "Let characters reveal themselves through action," an aim that often led to much action but to little revelation in their books. The remarkable chapter, "The Flight of Sikes," for example, illustrates the interdependence of character and incident and the inner Sikes in action. Through a modified stop-thief episode, Dickens presents the murderer as running not from some pursuer but from his own conscience. And in this situation, it is again noticeable that Dickens stresses the loneliness, the isolation, of the outcast. Seeing a fire, Sikes rushes toward it.

There were people there—men and women—light, bustle. It was like new life to him. He darted onward—straight, headlong. . . . He came upon the spot. . . . and, flying from memory and himself, plunged into the thickest of the throng.

Hither and thither he dived that night: now working at the pumps, and now hurrying through the smoke and flame, but never ceasing to engage himself wherever noise and men were thickest. . . . This mad excitement over, there returned, with tenfold force, the dreadful consciousness of his crime. He looked suspiciously about him, for the men were conversing in groups, and he feared to be the subject of their talk. The dog obeyed the significant beck of his finger, and they drew off, stealthily, together.

Here (and I have quoted only a fragment) the interest is not in what happens next. That Sikes is a felon, that the police are after him, and that at any moment he is liable to capture seem of no importance compared to the struggles of his tormented soul to find ease and to escape from its own hell. A novel of action has become a story in which internal is made external, and character the focal point of interest. The fire is not a sensational event only but a symbol of Sikes' acute personal distress, and, even though Dickens simply describes the episode, the murderer's actions tell the reader—make him comprehend—more of a conscience-stricken man than Eugene Aram's soliloquies and meditations ever do. He forgets to wonder whether the Sikes whom he has known hitherto would be thus disturbed, but he is convinced that a man with blood on his hands could and that his actions have laid his personality bare.

*Oliver Twist* was soon recognized as a Newgate novel by the critics of its day. R. H. Horne thought the "overstrained terror of the intended moral had an immoral tendency." Thackeray, in *Catherine*, mentioned it as a book that made whitewashed saints of evil persons. Ungrammatically, but none-the-less vehemently, *Paul Pry* commented that "whilst such atrocious libels upon decency and commonsense as . . . *Oliver Twist*

is allowed to emanate from the press without the slightest intention of those powers, to whom are delegated the governance of the rectitude and morals of the state; England will, and must be called the school of thieves." Not all damned poor Oliver, however; Ainsworth, Father Prout, Lord Jeffrey, received him with open arms. One man, an Italian translator, became so enthusiastic over the book that he placarded the walls of the Ducal Palace of Venice with the parish orphan's name.

In the history of Newgate fiction, *Oliver Twist* holds a peculiar position, because, though imitated, it influenced writers away from rather than toward the genre. Among the explanations of this anomaly is the fact that the story has very obvious characteristics of the novel of social purpose and some of its imitators chose to stress that aspect in their books. On the other hand *Oliver Twist* has more traits of the novel of sensation than had earlier Newgate fiction and thus led other authors, even those of the Newgate group, to emphasize sensationalism, especially in the unending yarns about lost heirs and winning heiresses that Edward Lloyd's hacks turned out during the 1840's. In brief, after *Oliver Twist* Newgate fiction drew away from the novel of purpose and closer and closer to the novel of sensation.

*Oliver Twist* is but one of the manifestations of a new spirit that crept into English letters with the rise of a new reading public and a new kind of writer, the professional literary man, to whom markets were even more important than art. Like almost everything else in early Victorian England, literature was being democratized and popularity became more and more the accepted criterion of merit. How far this observation is true of *Oliver Twist* is evident from the tone and matter of the book, from Dickens' acceptance of the formula that Lytton, Whitehead, and Ainsworth had followed in their popular romances of crime, and from his willingness to base payment for his work on the volume of sale of the magazine in which the story was serialized. *Oliver Twist* belonged with a "new kind of fiction," which, says Mrs. Q. D. Leavis, "flourished because it was written for a new, naive public, not that of the old circulating libraries or that could afford to buy Scott but for the shop-keeper and the working man." Briefly, in the history of the English novel, *Oliver Twist*, like the Newgate fiction, marks an early phase of the split between best sellers and best novels.