

**Institutions in *Oliver Twist*;  
Workhouse, Fagin's Gang, and Family**

It is no secret that Charles Dickens' 1838 novel *Oliver Twist* functions as a social commentary piece about the lives of the poor. More specifically, Dickens comments upon three of the primary institutions at the time: workhouses, crime, and family. In *Oliver Twist*, the title character grows up in and is formed by these three institutions. He is raised in a workhouse from nearly the beginning of his life. When he runs away from the workhouse, he is taken in by Fagin and his gang. When he finally breaks free of Fagin's gang, he finds a family atmosphere with the Maylies and also Mr. Brownlow. Charles Dickens shows the misfortune that the first two institutions brought Oliver to emphasize family values, and show the importance of family, to an individual as well as in general.

During the time *Oliver Twist* was written, people in the workhouses were being treated as just another number and all the same instead of being treated as individuals, differently based on their circumstances. Dickens also makes comment that even though the government gave the workhouses a set amount of funds for each occupant, the workhouse officials could often choose to spend less of that funding on the occupants in order to keep more of it for themselves. This often resulted in the people getting less food than they needed or not getting bathed in order to save money on water, to maximize profit for the officials.

In *Oliver Twist*, the paupers in the workhouse, including Oliver, are not given enough food, not bathed enough, and are not cared for or loved enough. They are not fed or bathed enough because of the workhouses' cheapness in taking care of them to make more money for themselves. They are not cared for or loved enough because the workhouses are overloaded and impersonal, and the authorities largely didn't care. The workhouses barely look at the paupers as people at all. They are treated more like animals in a kennel than fellow human beings.

After telling the story of the man who had gotten his horse to live on just one piece of straw a day, only for it to die shortly afterward, Dickens writes, "at the very moment when the child had contrived to exist upon the smallest possible portion of the weakest possible food, it did ... happen in eight and a half cases out of ten... that it sickened from want and cold, the miserable little being was usually summoned into another world." Dickens uses this allegory to show that Oliver is being fed the smallest amount possible to live on and that there were many instances when the workhouse authority's methods had backfired, with a pauper either ending up sick or dying because of it.

The workhouses may have argued that the poor would be more motivated to become independent if the conditions were miserable when they were being supported and they realized how much better they might do on their own. A problem with this was that it was a distinct possibility for the people from the workhouses to turn to pick-pocketing to live, because they did not have the skills necessary to make a living doing anything else productive or useful, which brought up the crime rate and made it less safe for the wealthier citizens. The economic awareness is a large part of what makes this a political commentary novel.

Dickens crafted the novel to follow the life of someone that goes through a workhouse and has to deal with the mistreatment that was common in the workhouses. He creates sympathy for the protagonist by using a young child, who was innocent and likable. In parallel, this creates sympathy for the workhouse paupers as a whole. Oliver also deals with other large concerns of his time, abandonment, hunger, gangs, and loneliness. By creating a likeable character that goes through the common ordeals of the poor in that time, Charles Dickens indirectly persuades the reader to share his bias and empathy towards the poor.

When Oliver meets the Artful Dodger, who invites Oliver to stay with him, he at first does not even realize that he has been brought into a gang. Oliver enjoys it considerably more than the workhouse, largely due to getting fed better, although he doesn't realize that the food is stolen. He feels more cared for because Fagin acts more interested in him than any authority figure has before. Even though at this point he is being brought up by thieves, and has never had a strong moral role model, he still thinks what they are doing is wrong. He becomes skilled at "the game" they use to simulate and practice pick-pocketing, but when Fagin sends him out with Charles Bates and the Artful Dodger, he is shocked and confused when they steal from Mr. Brownlow.

Neither of the first two institutions in his life offer enough of what he needed; whether it was attention, food, baths, care, love, or a good example to follow. The workhouse does not feed or care for him enough and Fagin's gang, though they feed and care for him more, teach him immoral skills and practices. This makes it surprising that Oliver turns out how he does and is not morally tainted or caused to turn away from his original, respectable character.

Oliver finally finds happiness with Mr. Brownlow, later with the Maylies and finally with Mr. Brownlow again. Oliver has never had a family, since that his mother died shortly after childbirth and his father was never there, so for Oliver, family is completely new. It was fate that Mr. Brownlow, who took care of him, has a picture of his mother and that the woman taking care of him noticed the resemblance. It is also fate that the girl in the family Oliver is forced to try to steal from happens to be his aunt. These instances of "small world" occurrences emphasize the importance of family connections. Mr. Brownlow has a deep trust in Oliver from the start and even though he doesn't come back, like Mr. Grimwig says, Mr. Brownlow knew it hadn't been his fault and still cares for the boy. Proof of this is that he searches for anyone that had information about Oliver Twist. Oliver had never had anyone really care for him or have that much compassion towards him until he met Mr. Brownlow. Since Oliver has been through so much and lived in miserable situations, he never takes anything for granted in these "family" situations and is eager to do anything he can to help. This tells readers not to take family for granted and to be grateful for what they have because there are those that are less fortunate than us. The institution of family offers Oliver more of what he needs than any other institution in his life has. Mr. Brownlow makes sure that he is fed and bathed enough and that he has whatever he needs. Mr. Brownlow cares for and loves Oliver more than anyone had before. Family gives Oliver what he has been searching for all along: happiness. Family is what Oliver has needed from the very start, and when he finally finds it with Mr. Brownlow, it was good for him both inside and out. With Mr. Brownlow, Oliver is healthy, safe, and content, a combination he had not experienced prior to finding a family.

As the plot progresses, there is something better about each institution than the previous. In a way, Oliver is getting what he deserves for staying pure and doing what is right when he is surrounded by wrong and mistreatment. Oliver is good at heart and by staying true to himself, no matter how hard it was because of all the temptations and misery he dealt with, he finally finds happiness in a family atmosphere. To Oliver, a family is the best institution to be in and this is supported well because he was brought up in three of the major institutions of the time; the workhouse, a gang, and finally, in a family.

Part of what is amazing about Charles Dickens most well-known work is that it manages to make social commentary about the bleak living conditions of the poor, accurately portraying their hardships, while still having a positive ending which symbolizes Dickens' hope for the future. *Oliver Twist* is successful both as a piece of literature and as a piece of social commentary. Its legacy has followed long after, making it a must-read, and an important piece of literary and historical education.