



[Oliver Twist](#), by Charles Dickens

In A Nutshell

Oliver Twist is one of the most famous novels Charles Dickens ever wrote, which is impressive, given that he wrote fifteen very popular novels during his life. It's a classic rags-to-riches story about an orphan who has to find his way through a city full of criminals, and avoid being corrupted. People read *Oliver Twist* in Dickens's day, and are still reading it now, for the gritty realism with which Dickens portrays working class people and the horrible living conditions of the London slums.

Oliver Twist is the second novel Dickens ever wrote, and it was published in installments between 1837 and 1839. Many novels at the time were published serially, meaning that each chapter was issued separately, once a month, over the space of a year or two.

Novels were published serially for a number reasons during the 1830s. Earlier in the 19th century, when Scottish novelist and poet Sir Walter Scott and English novelist Jane Austen were writing, novels were published more-or-less the way they are today, in the form of single volumes. But after Austen and Scott died, there weren't really any writers popular enough to produce novels that would be bestsellers. Plus, there was a really big economic downturn in 1826, and publishers were playing it safe.

Instead of spending a lot of money producing novels in volume form by relatively unknown authors, publishers allowed up-and-coming writers, like Dickens, to publish their novels in

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installments. This worked out well for everyone: the audience would get hooked and keep coming back to buy whatever magazine was publishing the installments, and the publishers were able to make more money than they would just publishing the novels all at once.

OK, so it didn't work out as well for the writers – they weren't paid much for each installment, and publishers required them to crank out each chapter on a fast schedule. Then, if the novel became popular, the publisher could go ahead and publish it in single volume form for the readers to buy (but again, the novelist wouldn't see much, if any, of the profit).

The whole system is similar to buying the full series of a TV show on DVD...for a price. How much does the complete *Sopranos* cost? Something like \$500? Or you can rent it one DVD at a time from Netflix. Which is what most people did in the 1830s – only obviously they didn't have Netflix, so they'd go to the local library to borrow volumes of popular novels.

The publishing of novels in magazines is similar to our cable television: each magazine was like a different channel. Just as we have the History Channel, Lifetime, and Bravo, the Victorians had magazines with different specialties. *Household Words* published essays and novels that dealt with contemporary social issues. There was also *Bentley's Miscellany*, which was like an early Victorian HBO – it pushed the envelope in terms of the type of content that could be published, and a lot of prominent novelists and essayists started out writing for *Bentley's*.

Including our man Charles Dickens – he started writing the monthly installments of *Oliver Twist* before he'd even finished writing his first novel, *The Pickwick Papers*. *Pickwick* was a huge success at a competing magazine, so Bentley was probably pretty excited to have Dickens turn to him to publish his second novel.

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Oliver Twist is very different from *The Pickwick Papers*, and some people had a hard time believing the two novels were written by the same person. *The Pickwick Papers* is a chaotic, rollicking good time. Everyone in it seems to be drunk on brandy fruit punch about three quarters of the time, and the rest of the time, they're falling in love, being caught in compromising circumstances by going to the wrong hotel room, and eloping with spinster aunts.

Then there's *Oliver Twist*. Where's the rollicking good time? Where's the punch? Where's the smooching behind the garden wall? Instead, it opens in a dingy workhouse with the birth of the soon-to-be orphaned Oliver Twist. It's a much darker story than *Pickwick* right from the get-go.

And it wasn't just the lack of punch that caused contemporary readers to object. *Oliver Twist* is an example of a style of novel that was incredibly popular (but widely criticized) from the 1820s to the 1840s: the "Newgate novel." The Newgate novel takes its name from the Newgate prison, the main prison for felons (pickpockets, thieves, prostitutes, murderers) in London. Throughout the 18th century, criminals were hanged on a regular basis in London, and the prisoners all spent their last days and nights in Newgate.

The famous criminals (the Charles Manson and Scott Petersons of the time) had little pamphlets written about them that were handed out at their execution. (Executions were like big street parties – children got to go, and vendors sold snacks.) These pamphlets, with the lives of criminals and their last words, were collected and published in one big volume called the "Newgate Calendar." Writers like Charles Dickens would read the criminal biographies and get ideas for their novels.

Those Newgate novels sold like hotcakes. It seemed like folks couldn't get enough of them.

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But the critics of the Newgate novels thought they were damaging English morals. Because the Newgate novels didn't shy away from depicting criminal stuff – prostitution, stealing, and even murder – critics said that reading those novels would desensitize people to violence. Hmm, sounds an awful lot like the arguments you hear today against first-person shooter videogames, or games like *Grand Theft Auto*, doesn't it? The next time someone criticizes your taste in videogames, you can try suggesting that, if Dickens were alive today, he might have tried his hand at writing a shooter.

Only Dickens's characters would have been more complex and memorable, and the story more engrossing than in your average videogame.

Oliver Twist is Dickens's only novel that qualifies as a "Newgate novel," though, so it seems like he just wanted to try his hand at the popular style of writing before turning to other, loftier pursuits. We're certainly happy that he experimented with the Newgate genre, because we're left with the fruits of that experiment. And *Oliver Twist*, while not the rollicking good time of *The Pickwick Papers*, does have a lot going for it.

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Big Picture Study Questions

- 1 Is this novel potentially dangerous to readers' morals? Why did some contemporary critics think so?
- 2 Why isn't Fagin able to corrupt Oliver?

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- 3 Why do both of the "fallen women" of the novel (Nancy and Agnes) die before the end of the novel?

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