

# A Villain Ragged and Torn: The Moral Ambiguity of the Artful Dodger in Lean's *Oliver Twist*

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Through much of Charles Dickens's writings, criminals and villains play a large role both narratively and thematically. These deviant characters are often marked through their physical appearance and the places they occupy, a concept particularly important to Dickens. In film adaptations of Dickens novels, the physical representation of characters becomes increasingly important, because without a narrator to provide the narrative detail as explicitly as in a book, often the audience is left only with the visual impressions to understand characters that would otherwise be explained through narrative, something that David Lean does particularly well in his 1948 film, *Oliver Twist*. That being the case, Oliver who is physically represented as having the same glowing innocence as his internal self, or Fagin and Sikes whose features are jarring and whose environments are blackened, while certainly worth analyzing, are almost too simply treated. For this project, I instead look at the Artful Dodger's role as Fagin's henchman, visually similar to Fagin as Sikes, but also inconsolably similar to Oliver. Through these difficult comparisons, and through his ragged and disharmonized attire, I argue that Artful's fractured outfit resembles his deeply fractured moral self, one that is a skillful criminal but lacking the criminal indifference that characterize his villainous models, Fagin and Sikes.

For Dickens, physiognomy was a way of ordering his world and bringing resonance to the psychology of his characters. Through his novels, he uses the external as a looking glass to the internal which is more often disguised from the reader. It even harkens theatrical notions of emotional display, argues

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Juliet John, since theater was remarkably significant to Dickens (7). John speaks primarily about villainous psychology, but I believe her notions of criminality also work well with morally ambiguous characters like the Artful Dodger. In a move to understand how one functions in society, a common issue in the nineteenth century, she says, Dickens doesn't shroud his characters from his readership but instead "keeps his underside clearly and flagrantly on display" (qtd. in John 3). Oftentimes, this underside shows characters who, with matching interiors and exteriors, seem to lack interiority, but she posits that Dickens has a certain "refusal of the notion that interiority constitutes authenticity," instead arguing that other narrative techniques, including the distance of the narrator, helps to make these characters more than two dimensional<sup>1</sup> (14). Such a move aims to provide more depth to Dickens's use of physiognomy, a practice that often reduces a character to their exteriority alone.

In hopes of distinguishing clearly between the criminality of London versus the position of the upper classes, Dickens uses the physical aspects of his characters and their surroundings to emphasize this binary. Sambudha Sen writes in "Hogarth, Egan, Dickens, and the Making of an Urban Aesthetic" that this "netherworld of metropolitan criminality is juxtaposed against a safe haven of upper middle-class order and security," and that many of the villains in Dickensian literature embody the city's "chaos and violence" (84). Part of the threat of villains, then, is their likening to the dark and labyrinthine city and their ability to navigate it well while visitors struggle to "penetrate the inner city and observe and classify its most elusive inhabitants" (93). Even the rhetoric of *Oliver Twist*, argues Sen, "confront[s] the reader with locations that are mazelike in their impenetrability" (98). Furthermore, characters like Fagin inhabit and command the dark, dangerous areas: he packs up quickly and quietly whenever someone knocks at his hideout door and he knows his environment well enough to find a new location if he suspects they might be found, such as when Nancy reports of Oliver's court case. In this way, Fagin's location necessarily resembles the darkness of his character, transposing his internal self onto his environment.

The more vividly identifiable a character's morality is, the more clearly their person indicates it in Lean: thus, the truly criminal characters of Fagin and Sikes wear their criminality especially through their physical features<sup>2</sup>, in the same way that Oliver constantly wears his virtuous self despite any wardrobe changes that complement his locational change. Fagin's unkempt hair and nails indicate a lack of order more vividly and uniquely than the dirt that covers all the other boys; his lisp signifies his aberrance in that he is the only character in the film to reveal any speech impediment; and his perpetual stoop is a physical indication of his moral shortcomings, all three being signifiers of a deeper crookedness. Sikes, meanwhile, has perpetually widened eyes that appear crazed, he barks angrily, and his mouth twitches<sup>3</sup>, likening him in all three traits to a growling dog (which he also has with him constantly). Oliver, in direct contrast, "may be dispossessed, ragged, hungry,

and always liable to sink into a life of crime, but his Standard English and prepossessing looks also bespeak his entitlement to a place in the middle class" (Sen 103). The morality of these Dickensian figures, then, appears not merely through their actions (or through narrative techniques), but are apparent in their very person regardless of their attire.<sup>4</sup>

In a significant change from the portrayal of the entirely criminal characters, Dickens asserts (and Lean emphasizes) how the morally ambiguous characters reject this simple physiognomy. Specifically, the role of Artful's morality in the shaping of his physiognomy demonstrates a more complicated figure than the easily recognized villains of Sikes and Fagin.<sup>5</sup> In Lean's portrayal of the Artful Dodger, Artful's interior hardly shows through his exterior, primarily because Lean strips him of demonstrative character indications on his person. The first time his face is shown, it is immediately difficult to read (as compared to Sikes, Fagin, or Oliver). When Oliver finds himself in London, the camera follows him until it pans right and pauses on Artful. Visually, then, we see him as a character in someone else's narrative, as standing in the margins until the camera brings his importance to the reader's attention. By pausing on him, though, Oliver exits the shot and the Dodger's significance to the narrative becomes more apparent, although he is at least initially unreadable. In a large way, this indecipherability contrasts Fagin and Sikes whose psychology or morality was marked on their person, but with Dodger, it is merely written on his clothes, if there; and clothing can be misleading. Monks, for example, in the novel and in many movie adaptations (excluding Lean's where he is left out altogether), is a character who dresses very well despite his criminal and selfish attitude. Oliver, too, wears certain clothing while he is at the Brownlow's which Fagin and his gang (specifically Artful, which I believe is interesting in its own right) immediately strip him of; yet despite his external representations of goodness, Oliver's morality is written more on himself than on his clothing.

Without a clear exterior to read on Artful's face, his clothes, though, do become necessary parts of the *mise en scene*. In the scene where he watches Oliver in the busy London streets, there are countless gentlemen standing behind the Dodger, offering a good comparison to his outfit: almost every man in the background (and there are mostly men in the shot) is sporting a top hat similar to Dodger's with varying degrees of wear (although Artful's is certainly the most worn). The scene pauses on a three shot of Artful and two men, one of whom resembles Artful's attire from the shabby hat to the oversized coat; the other is a gentleman entirely, with a starched outfit and hat and even a cane. Artful's outfit, then, places him in some way in a cultural narrative, in that it locates him through visuals to his appropriate position in society. As a petty thief, he can do his best to *look* like the established gentleman to the right, but he will be battling continually with the ragged gentleman-look-alike to his left. Regardless, both the persons behind Dodger are adults whose shaven faces draw an even greater comparison

to him and visually calls attention to the ways in which his profession (and his psychology) force the Artful Dodger to age differently than how a youth under other circumstances might have aged.

Artful's disarray through clothing suggests something more complicated as well: it indicates some fractured identity, psychological, moral, or otherwise. He has a hat, but it clearly wasn't tailored for him—which works narratively to imply his poverty, but it also suggests some instability regarding his person. He is made up of parts that look something like upper-class attire, but they lack the organization and the cohesion that characterizes such an outfit. Instead, he is mismatched, a conglomerate of parts that function as an outfit but that highlight its inability to have any sort of unity. As such, Artful's outfit never changes through the entire movie, meaning he takes his disjointedness into the *mise en scene* of each of his scenes. His clothing, in being similar to gentlemen's attire but inherently less put together, identifies a central struggle to the Dodger: as a thief, he has many of the features typically associated with criminality. He grimaces like Sikes in the very first scene of Artful in the streets of London (and although Sikes doesn't appear in the film until a bit later, such a harsh introduction to Dodger is hard to forget, especially when Sikes's grimaces are so memorable); he curls his lip and he sneers at Oliver, but then he immediately comes to offer some help. His outfit here matches his situation, whereby he clearly demonstrated certain features that seem to indicate a villainous disposition, but he counters this through his not-entirely-criminal behavior.

Lean also draws many similarities between Dodger and Fagin, which add to the tension of Artful's morality, since he is being compared with the manifestation of criminal greed in the film. Both characters seem to be the most present in Fagin's den, either fighting with one another with fire pokers and clubs or showing the same indifference when Oliver's innocence makes the gang of young boys laugh, excepting Fagin and Artful.<sup>6</sup> The two also resemble each other in their treatment of Charlie Bates, where his silliness causes them to react violently: Artful strikes him across the face when Bates laughs at Oliver's capture after the initial run-in with Brownlow; Fagin repeats this action toward the end of the film when Bates enters the hideout hurriedly and hysterically tries to report that "It's all up; they've got scouts out everywhere." Fagin slaps him and demands he speak clearly about the situation. In a final visual parallel, both Dodger and Fagin are the ones who appear in the window whenever anything significant happens outside the hideout, seeming to suggest some sort of collusion of criminality between these characters. In these comparisons, Lean emphasizes the ways in which Dodger certainly seems at times to embody the same criminality of his surroundings, although the complexity of his attire suggests a more intricate explanation of his character.

Part of Artful's complexity is that he embodies all the skills that make for an excellent villain, but he seems to do it out of necessity rather than enjoyment. He has the harsh features of Sikes, complete with the grimaces, sneers, and rough way

of handling Oliver, but unlike Sikes, he offers food and lodging to Oliver without any benefit for himself. Essentially, he convinces Oliver to come to Fagin's because he sees the starvation and lack of options for Oliver; in the same way, then, hints of Artful's own need for Fagin's help come through, and his criminality becomes more a means to survive than means to thrive.

Dodger's skills, then, help him to be a productive member of Fagin's crew. His ability to operate without being seen in a large way characterizes him in Lean's film, and he is often associated with dark surroundings.<sup>7</sup> More importantly, his deception affects the viewers as well as the characters: for example, in his con where he steals handkerchiefs from Fagin in order to demonstrate pick-pocketing techniques to Oliver, he visibly grabs one handkerchief and the scene cuts to Oliver laughing. Suddenly, Artful empties his pockets in front of Oliver, and Oliver's face changes to shock as Artful pulls out a large gold watch and chain, a handkerchief, a wallet, and a second handkerchief. Interestingly, though, the audience must be as surprised as Oliver, since the only item depicted as stolen was the one handkerchief. Lean creates a similar surprise for the audience towards the end of the film when Fagin has Artful dodge Nancy as she has a conversation with Brownlow. Lean shows Artful waiting in the rain outside Nancy's apartment, so that the audience suspects that he will be following her; but when she actually leaves, the camera follows her so closely through the winding and confusing streets that Dodger, who is never shown to move from his original, hidden location, is essentially forgotten about. He is not shown for over two minutes; all the while Nancy is continually checking to see if she is being followed, and the camera, from her perspective, indicates that the trail is safe. When the camera finally does show him, hidden behind a wall unknown to Nancy and only just known to the audience, it does so with a very slow pan to the right, identically recalling the first shot of Dodger in the movie, when he was watching Oliver without Oliver's knowledge. His sneakiness, then, made Artful capable at evading both the characters as well as the audience.

As the scene fades to the galleon in Artful's sleeping hand, the motivation for his villainy becomes apparent: just as Artful's attire suggests his imposed role of criminal, the money serves as a visual reminder that economics play a large part in the Dodger's situation. The money additionally connects Artful to Fagin, the character most concerned with finance in the film, and offers the possibility that Artful might end up becoming a character like his odd supervisor eventually based on the multitude of visual similarities that the film has already suggested.

Lean, however, instead emphasizes the Dodger's similarities with Oliver as the film progresses, suggesting for Artful an alternative to the life of crime. Whereas Sikes and Fagin have their criminality written on their bodies, Artful avoids such a permanent marker. He is clearly made out to be a child stuck in a very adult role through the comparisons to the Londoners at the first shot in the city; when he stands outside of Nancy's apartment about to dodge her, he looks childish as he

blows on his hands and pulls the oversized coat over his face to keep warm. In a later scene, as Fagin wakes Artful after his spying mission, Sikes and Fagin interrogate Artful as the camera tilts menacingly, putting Artful in the same, vulnerable position that Oliver occupies for the majority of the film.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, Artful's ability to escape when necessary at least visually calls to mind Oliver's attempted escape through the London streets following the attempted Brownlow theft. In this way, Artful's exterior, both physically and materially, indicate a complexity that is neither the moral depravity of Fagin and Sikes, nor is it entirely the moral virtuousness embodied by Oliver.

Artful's complexity, therefore, seems to come from his conflicted position: a talented and sly pickpocket, he shares enough similarities with Fagin to indicate the possibility of eventually enjoying his wealth (although like everything to do with Fagin, the wealth stays mostly invisible), but he is certainly not a double of Fagin. He bears resemblances—and sympathies—with Oliver Twist's character, and therefore, the economic allure that Fagin embodies is not enough to dissuade Artful from helping Oliver initially and from his eventual conversion at the end of the Lean film.

What ultimately converts Artful is the extraordinary violence of Sikes. Having succumbed to Fagin's financial offer to spy on Nancy, when Sikes and Fagin interrogate Artful, he is suddenly visually in Oliver's place of powerlessness, but even worse, he observes the rage that overtakes Sikes. In the following sequence, Artful comes across the murdered body of Nancy in her apartment, and he looks surprised, disgusted, and strangely like Sikes immediately after the murder. Unlike Sikes, though, he promptly reports the murder (as indicated by the fade shot to the hearth in the streets proclaiming "Murder! Brutal murder!"). In this way, Lean's film sets up a visual narrative that shows Artful's journey of crime drawing parallels to both Fagin and Sikes while at the same time comparing Dodger to Oliver, someone his own age although quite different in appearance. Artful's complexity comes from his various motivations, sometimes towards the money and power associated with Fagin, but sometimes with some internal sense of wrong, such as his reaction to Nancy's murder. He finds himself trapped between his impoverishment (and his skills which allow him to navigate the labyrinthine streets with ease) and his sense of wrongdoing, which finally leads him to break from Sikes in an explicit way: just as Nancy dies because of Artful's report of her behavior, so also does Sikes' death come at Artful's report, as it is Artful's testimony that ultimately turns the townspeople on Sikes.

The movie also pairs Artful's conversion with Oliver's rectitude. Following the murder scene, as Sikes tries to find refuge at Fagin's, all the boys scatter at his menace. Shadows fill the *mise en scene*, and the corners of the shot are continually darkened. As Sikes looks around the room, demanding someone to say something, each boy casts his eyes down instead of meeting Sikes's glare, save two: Oliver and

Artful both manage to keep eye contact (Oliver more easily than Artful, whose eyes eventually drop after a good deal of struggle), prompting Sikes to violently throw his bottle at the floor. Here, Artful, though shakily, stands up to Sikes, claiming that he isn't afraid (although his demeanor and backwards steps suggest otherwise) and saying that he'll give Sikes up at the arrival of the police. In this scene, his entire identity as a person fragmented, at times similar to Sikes or similar to Oliver, comes through most clearly with both Sikes and Oliver around to draw comparisons. Most significantly, though, is his adherence to his promise to report Sikes: as the crowd comes looking, Artful cries out of the window, "Help, help! He's here! Help!" before Sikes comes up menacingly behind him and knocks him unconscious. This scene draws a visual and vocal connection to one that happens just a few minutes later: when Sikes takes Oliver to the roof in hopes of escape, the crowd is distracted by Fagin until Oliver drops a chimney part into the river and calls out, "Help! Help!" This immediately brings about the actual death of Sikes— with Artful largely responsible through his initial call out of the window, despite the violence that befell him. As the movie ends on Sikes's death and Oliver's safe return to the Brownlow's, nothing further is seen of Artful; his tale ends with his consciousness. His final action of the movie, though, serves as an explanation (at least partially) for his moral ambiguity. He allowed himself to suffer the same violent hands that assaulted Nancy and in a sense help account for his role in her death. By no means does this make him a simplified character, but it does demonstrate the ways in which he is willing to take his criminality only so far, not quite to the point of depravity like Fagin and Sikes, who live solely for themselves.

Obviously, there is more to Artful's complexity than his morality or his dress, but the ties to both of these features through Lean's film were fascinating. By dressing Artful in a top hat and coat, there is even a visual similarity to Brownlow, Oliver's rescuer and one of the movie's moral paradigms, although the Dodger's outfit suggests a sloppier, more ragged sort of morality, physically and metaphorically colored by his darker, dirtier surroundings. The conflicting simultaneous comparisons to Oliver as well as to Fagin and Sikes make Artful both difficult to read and incredibly complex. By keeping his interior more hidden from the audience, though, Lean could explore the fragmentation of Artful's character through more visually interesting means, a character both ragged and torn.

#### Notes

1. Later, though, John posits that "Externalization is the melodramatic meta-technique by which depths and surfaces become synonymous" which seems to call into question these initial identifications of depth (29)
2. John writes: "In Dickens's novels, they are frequently the site of tensions and paradoxes which surround the attempt dramatically to marginalize the psyche underpinning Dickens's populist, anti-intellectual project" (11). She calls this "anti-intellectual" because when the individual's internal attributes are written on his character, the act of analysis requires less rigor (or so John argues).
3. John considers the appearances of Fagin and Sikes, both portrayed as unattractive, embody that "best physiognomical tradition of melodrama, [which] betray[s] their wickedness through their ugliness" (103).
4. Lisa Rodensky writes about the clearly villainous characters versus the clearly moral characters when she described Sikes's role in *Oliver Twist*: "There is a strong sense in Dickens's presentation of Sikes of what-you-see-is-what-you-get: no punches pulled, no surprises to come" (77). Rodensky connects such a character to the "same kind of caricatural simplicity as Mr. Brownlow or Rose Maylie. They are simply good; he is simply bad" (77). Their morality, when at such a hyperbolic degree, becomes essentially their entire being.
5. John argues for something slightly different, saying that "Ultimately interiority is only as knowable, in Dickens, as its (frequently duplicitous) external or social manifestations" (19). My concern with such a generalization is that it glosses over discrepancies between the external and the internal by calling them merely "duplicitous" as if the exterior must indicate a similar interior. As this paper will hopefully demonstrate, oftentimes a disconnect between the external and the internal are indicative of a character whose morality is likewise difficult to read. It's not a duplicitous exterior but a complex one.
6. In the scene when Oliver first finds himself in Fagin's den, Fagin inquires "Do you know what a beak is?" to which Oliver responds "A bird's mouth, sir." The boys all laugh riotously, but Artful and Fagin remain impassive. During the dinner scene that follows, again Oliver belies his naïveté, and again the majority of the gang ridicules him, but the stoicism of Fagin and Dodger indicate a relationship between them unlike the other boys'. While it would be interesting to explore their relationship further, there is unfortunately not enough space in this current project.
7. Artful is dangerous through his ability to evade perception. Lean shoots the pickpockets as

being shadowy figures, living in dark, confined spaces that the audience can't even see well enough to penetrate; they live through deception, stealing pocketbooks and handkerchiefs. John claims that they "can act duplicitously rather than 'ostensibly,'" among other characterizations, all which indicate their unseen threat (11).

8. Contrast this vulnerability of Artful with his previous comparisons to Fagin, where, as Fagin throttles Artful for letting Oliver get caught, the Dodger sneaks out of Fagin's grasp (demonstrating his slyness) and defends himself with a fire poker.

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Oliver leaned his head upon his hand when the old man disappeared, and pondered, with a trembling heart, on the words he had just heard. The more he thought of the Jew's admonition, the more he was at a loss to divine its real purpose and meaning. He could think of no bad object to be attained by sending him to Sikes, which would not be equally well answered by his remaining with Fagin; and after meditating for a long time, concluded that he had been selected to perform some ordinary menial offices for the housebreaker, until another boy, better suited for his purpose could be engaged. He was Oliver Twist study guide contains a biography of Charles Dickens, literature essays, a complete e-text, quiz questions, major themes, characters, and a full summary and analysis. Sikes and Nancy take Oliver to a house, where the artful Dodger lets them in, and where they also find Charley Bates and Fagin. They all take Oliver's new belongings, and Fagin and Sikes fight over the five pound note that Mr. Brownlow gave Oliver. Oliver begs them to send the books and the note back to Mr. Brownlow so that he won't think that Oliver stole them, but this only makes Fagin and Sikes happier, because it means that Mr. Brownlow won't go looking for Oliver. Oliver suddenly runs out of the room, but Fagin and the boys catch him before he gets far. Jack Dawkins, better known as The Artful Dodger or simply Dodger, is the main deuteragonist in Disney's Oliver Twist. He is Fagin's lieutenant, a thief, and Oliver's best friend. Dodger is first seen catching an orphan named Oliver Twist trying to steal an apple from a market in London. Dodger stops Oliver from committing the theft and pretends to take him away when in fact, he simply intends to make a proper thief out of him since he, himself, is a master of thievery and to avoid him getting caught A page for describing YMMV: Oliver Twist. Accidental Innuendo: Charlie Bates is frequently called "Master Bates." Alternate Character Interpretation: Bill Other criminals fear Sikes and his violent temper, and none of the other villains come close to matching him in being an utter bastard. Advertisement: Ensemble Dark Horse: The Artful Dodger is generally considered the most popular character in the story. Also, Nancy, Charley and The Artful Dodger grabbing Oliver and bringing him back to Fagin's clutches. Nancy, however, ends up excused for this through virtue of having a Heroic BSoD when she fully realizes how screwed up this was, and openly calls Fagin out before collapsing out of stress. Advertisement