

Khristina Gonzalez

Conference Paper

“Small Bodies, Small Coffins, Big Profits:  
*Oliver Twist* and the Problem of Anti-Poor Law Authorship”

In the opening pages of *Oliver Twist*, the eponymous young orphan is apprenticed out of the parish “workhouse” and goes to work for the local undertaker, Mr. Sowerberry. Sowerberry, it seems, is in need of some professional assistance. He has seen a rapid increase in his business, a happy side effect of the newly implemented “Poor Law Amendment.” Described in the novel as the “rule that all poor people should have the alternative of being starved by a gradual process in the [parish workhouse], or, by a quick one, out of it,” the New Poor Law has caused two major consequences: first, the “necessity of taking in the clothes of all the paupers, which fluttered loosely on their wasted, shrunken forms” and, second, the rapid “increase of the undertaker’s bill”(12). The latter consequence is obviously, a favorable one for Sowerberry, but the increased number of deaths is only half of the profitable equation. As Sowerberry explains to Mr. Bumble, the parish Beadle, “there’s no denying that since the new system of feeding has come in, the coffins are something narrower and more shallow than they used to be”(27). The emaciated state of the dead paupers allows Sowerberry to use less “expensive well-seasoned timber” in his coffins and, thereby, make a greater profit per funeral. Sowerberry has found a way to profit from the reduction of the bodies of the poor. That the bourgeoisie can profit from the suffering bodies of the lower-class is certainly nothing new, but what makes this case interesting is the fact that Sowerberry has found a way to profit off of their bodies regardless of their ability, inability, willingness, or refusal to labor.

I begin with this macabre moment because it so neatly illustrates what I see as the social circumstances that drive the novel's exploration of the relationship between material and representational exploitation. It is nothing new to say that in *Oliver Twist*, Dickens was invested in the socio-economic condition of England. From contemporary reviewers forward, critics have understood Dickens's second novel as a searing indictment of a social structure in which the lower-classes were both systematically and individually exploited and ill-used, particularly under the New Poor Laws. No doubt it is. But what this criticism has largely missed is the way that the novel both acts as an anti-Poor Law, social reform text *while simultaneously* providing a self-conscious critique of the representational techniques common to such texts. Dickens, I argue, does not use a rhetoric of melodramatic suffering to evoke bourgeois sympathy for Oliver and, by extension, the poor. Rather, Dickens *creates a narrator* who uses a rhetoric of melodramatic suffering to evoke bourgeois sympathy for Oliver and, by extension, the poor. In distancing the narrator of the novel, Oliver's self-proclaimed "biographer," from Dickens himself, we can see the way that the novel parallels the material exploitation of the lower-class by Poor Law administrators and supporters, and the representational exploitation of the lower-class by anti-Poor Law authors and activists.

As Elaine Hadley has argued, in their various pamphlets, articles, and reform tracts, the mainly middle- and upper-class vocal opponents of the New Poor Law set out to "give a...suffering body to the poor...that they needed in order to transform their predicament into a recognizable moral force...[they thus] continually depicted scenes of...suffering...in order to give a feeling body" to the horrors of relief administration"(98). In other words, to gain strength for their movement, these reformers worked to rhetorically render the bodies of the poor as miserable as possible. Certainly, these reformers largely employed such representational tactics

in the service of “good intentions;” their pamphlets and articles were intended to “save” the poor from the material misery that they experienced on a daily basis. But what would it mean to profit off these representations of misery? Perhaps as the author of an anti-Poor Law novel? Is such profiteering so very different from the way that Mr. Sowerberry profits off the miserable bodies of the emaciated paupers? It is, I think, precisely this ethical dilemma question that Dickens (who was concurrently involved in a copyright movement through which he sought to increase his own profit-share) explores in the pages of his second novel, *Oliver Twist*.

Before continuing with the novel, it is important, I think, to point to the historical particularities of the social system imagined in the New Poor Law. After all, it is hardly news to point out that the lower-classes experience exploitation at the hands of both their middle-class attackers and defenders. But the novel works to point out a specific type of material and representational exploitation, one that, it seems to me, grew specifically out of the structure of the New Poor Law System: as we saw in the example of a Sowerberry, the middle-class characters in the novel work to find ways to profit from the bodies of the poor, despite the fact that these poor bodies cannot, will not, or do not physically labor. A quick look at the specificities of the New Poor Law system will, I believe, explain the reasons for an exploration of this particular type of exploitation.

In the debates over the Poor Laws in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the “poor” were largely categorized into two different populations, “paupers” and “independent laborers.” “Paupers” were defined as those who would or could not work for their subsistence, while “independent laborers” were the members of the lower-class who received wages. Until the implementation of the New Poor Law in 1834, paupers, or those who could, would, or did not work were able to receive parish relief and remain in their own homes, and “independent laborers” could also

receive parish relief to supplement their low wages until they reached variously defined “subsistence levels.” The trouble with the old system, as the pro-Poor Law reformers explained in their Commissioners’ Report, was that it encouraged “indolence imposture in the lower-classes.” These reformers argued that the contemporary increase in pauper numbers was caused by able-bodied men and women choosing not to work, since they could receive *relief* that was equitable to the amount they could make in *paid wages*. Since there was no standardized system for determining relief “eligibility,” these indolent “able-bodied” could simply claim need and receive money from the parish. The commissioners of the Poor Law thus sought to “depauperize” society, by instituting the “workhouse” system, in which relief, in the form of food and lodging, would only be distributed within the incarcerating walls of the workhouse. These workhouses were designed to provide “the necessities of life and nothing more,” in order to “render it more irksome to gain a livelihood by parish relief than by industry”(230, *Commissioners Report*).

The New Poor Law was designed to have two distinct effects: first, it would force the lower-class to become laboring bodies and second, it would keep the remaining paupers as wretched and small as possible. The latter effect would deter others from desiring such a condition, but it also had the added benefit of cohering with the common Malthusian rhetoric that coded vital pauper bodies as reproductive threats to the resources of the nation. Once these paupers were rendered into, in the novel’s terms, “wasted, shrunken forms,” they no longer read as signs of wasted bourgeois relief money, nor did they portend the doom of overpopulation. Put simply, their starving bodies told of full bellies for the rest of the nation and continued resources for future generations of the middle-class.

Though the starving forms of the paupers did mean that the social body would expend less capital for their existence, these paupers were still not considered *profitable*. The middle-class tenants and business owners had lower poor-rates to pay, of course, but they were still losing money on the support of the poor, and they were still considered burdens. How, then, could these “wasted, shrunken forms” be rendered profitable? Was there a way for the middle class to actually profit not only from “independent laborers” but also from paupers? And if so, how could one profit from the fact that these emaciated paupers now had wretched bodies and were thus largely ineffective laborers?

It is within these particular social circumstances that Dickens frames *Oliver Twist*. In the novel, the middle-class characters must find creative ways to financially profit from the miserable, emaciated bodies of the lower class, rather than from their labor. And it is this particular circumstance of the exploitation, the fact that the poor body need not work to be profitable, that makes it so parallel to the representational exploitation used in Anti-Poor Law Literature.

Mr. Sowerberry, as we have seen, clearly exemplifies this type of profiteering. For the undertaker, the smaller and more miserable the pauper body, the more profitable. Corpulent pauper bodies, on the other hand, force him to consider his potential financial ruin:

“‘Though I must say, Mr. Bumble, that I have to contend against one very great disadvantage: which is, that all the stout people go off the quickest. The people who have been better off, and have paid poor rates for many years, are the first to sink when they come into the house; and let me tell you, Mr. Bumble, that three or four inches over one’s calculation makes a great hole in one’s profits; especially when one has a family to provide for sir.’ Mr. Sowerberry said this with the becoming indignation of an ill-used man”(27).

Sowerberry has learned to read fat paupers as his doom. It is, we learn, only the emaciated pauper corpse that can bring him financial profit. Yet as corpses, these pauper bodies are

certainly not “laboring,” at least in the sense that the word implies a type of action. In fact, the novel emphasizes that their dead bodies are even too emaciated to even “*work*” as fuel for lower organisms. Upon the death of his wife, one pauper cries to Sowerberry that he “won’t have her put into the ground. She couldn’t rest there. The worms would worry her, not eat her—she is so worn away”(40). Even the worms, it seems, are at a loss for how to make the worn pauper body work.

But not Sowerberry. As we have seen, he has found a way to profit off of the emaciated state of the poor, exploiting their starvation and refusing the need for their labor. Yet the miserable bodies need not be corpses in order to be lucrative for Sowerberry. In Oliver, he finds an ideal specimen of live misery, a body that on which suffering is clearly inscribed. During a conversation with his wife, Sowerberry proposes that Oliver’s body might be used profitably as a “funeral mute:”

“There’s an expression of melancholy in [young Twist’s] face, my dear,” resumed Mr. Sowerberry, “which is very interesting. He would make a delightful mute, my love...I don’t mean a regular mute to attend grown-up people, my dear, but only for children’s practice. It would be very new to have a mute in proportion, my dear. You may depend upon it, it would have a superb effect”(37).

Again, Sowerberry directly and financially profits from the misery and suffering of Oliver’s body: the more miserable the funeral mute, the more he will attract the “indescribable admiration and emotion of all the [grieving] mothers in the town,” and their financial gratitude. Though one might call funeral “attendance” a type of labor, Oliver need not actually *do* anything at these funerals. His profitability for Sowerberry depends only on the fact that he is *read* as a suffering body. And it is here, through the language of “read bodies” that we can see the direct parallel between material and representational exploitation. Through this connection, I want to switch

gears, then, and move from a focus on Sowerberry's exploitation of material suffering bodies, to a discussion of a literary exploitation of representational suffering bodies.

Like Sowerberry, anti-Poor Law writers needed for the bodies of the poor to be *read* as suffering in order to better profit from them. These activists, as we have seen, thus represented the poor to be as miserable as possible, in order to gain support for their movement. As an anti-Poor Law tale, *Oliver Twist* is not exempt from such tactics but is, I believe, self-aware of these representational tactics.

In various ways, the novel posits that suffering and misery are the very things that allow for literary production in the first place. We can see this idea thematized, for instance, through the words of Mr. Brownlow, Oliver's kind-hearted benefactor. Toward the end of the novel, Brownlow shares his own past history. He prefaces his story with the statement that "It is a true tale of grief and trial, and sorrow...and such tales usually are. If it were one of unmixed joy and happiness, it would be very brief." Mr. Brownlow's preface reminds us that while suffering is productive of literature, happiness will very likely destroy it, or at least render it too brief to be a substantial work. And indeed, the novel itself enacts this literary propensity: as happiness finally befalls Oliver at the conclusion of the novel, the narrator is unable to continue with his tale, despite his stated desire to just that:

"And now, the hand that traces these words, falters...and would weave, for a little longer space, the thread of these adventures. I would fain linger yet with a few of those among whom I have so long moved, and share their happiness by endeavoring to depict it. I would show Rose Maylie in all the bloom and grace of early womanhood...I would paint her the life and joy of the fire-side circle and the lively summer group...I would recall the tones of that clear laugh...these an a thousand looks and smiles...I would fain recall them all...these are all matters which cannot be told. I have said they were truly happy"(471).

As Karin Oberstein has argued, the novel is literally “ended by the achievement of happiness...The narrator struggles to prolong [his tale] by listing the scenes and events of “happiness” in Oliver and Rose Maylie’s lives. [Yet] in his very writing he reveals his defeat through the constant use of the optative [word] ‘*would*’”(98). Suffering, in *Oliver Twist*, is the necessary pre-condition for literary production. The narrative can simply not be carried on without it. Just as the fat pauper corpses threaten to destroy Mr. Sowerberry, a contented, happy, and well-fed Oliver destroys the narrator.

But just because suffering is productive of literature in general, doesn’t mean that it is productive of *profitable* literature. And, after all, profitability is our main focus. How, then, can an author ensure the profitability of their tale of destitute suffering? If we turn again to the words of Mr. Brownlow, we might find the novel’s answer, namely that literary profitability is achieved through the representation of a particular brand of suffering bodies: the innocent. After losing Oliver to Fagin and his band of thieves, Brownlow advertises the payment of five guineas for “information as will lead to the discovery of Oliver Twist, or tend to throw any light upon his previous history”(142). The advertisement draws the attention of Mr. Bumble, the Parish Beadle who had overseen Oliver in the workhouse. He immediately repairs to Brownlow’s home in order to tell his version of Oliver’s history, a version which is decidedly biased against the orphan. As Bumble fills his story with the information that Oliver was “born of low and vicious parents [and] had, from birth, displayed no better qualities than treachery, ingratitude, and malice,” Mr. Brownlow grows more and more sorrowful. In Bumble’s tale, Oliver leads a miserable life, but does not suffer innocently. Instead, Bumble represents Oliver as mischievously complicit in his own suffering, a detail that ends up making his tale significantly less profitable for the authorial Beadle:

“I fear it is all true,” said the old [Brownlow], sorrowfully. “This is not much for your intelligence; but I would gladly have given you treble the money, if it had been favorable to the boy.” It is not improbable, that if Mr. Bumble had been possessed of this information at an earlier period of the interview, he might have imparted a very different coloring to the little history. It was too late to do so, however, so...pocking the five guineas, withdrew (144).

Both the reader and Bumble thus learn an important lesson about literary profitability: there is more money to be made from a story that represents the poor as both suffering and innocent.

As we have seen, *Oliver Twist* is a novel that explicitly thematizes and stages the profitability of writing the poor as suffering innocents. As such, it is misguided to read the narrator’s excessive and melodramatic representation of Oliver’s misery without any sense of irony, as so many critics have tended to do. Rather, the novel is self-consciously aware of its own representational tactics. In creating the narrator as a character himself, Oliver’s “biographer,” the novel points to the way that even those authors who advocate against the oppression of the poor profit from their suffering bodies.

It is the narrator himself who asks us to be aware of his representational creation of Oliver. In the initial sentences of the novel, the newly-born Oliver lingers between life and death. The narrator postures that, had the child died in infancy, “these memoirs...being comprised within a couple of pages, would have possessed the inestimable merit of being the most concise and faithful specimen of biography, extant in the literature of any age or country”(1). From the novel’s opening, then, we know that this particular biography will *not* be the most concise and faithful specimen of biography. In attaining a biological life and being born into a world of suffering, Oliver makes his biographer’s task *literary and profitable*—it becomes a representational project that will have the length to become a marketable book. There will

necessarily be an “unfaithful” gap between Oliver’s biographical and biological bodies. In pointing us to this gap right from the beginning, the narrator calls for our attentiveness to Oliver’s biographical birth; he asks us to remain aware of the representational strategies that he uses to create Oliver’s textual body.

This initial notice from the narrator proves crucial to an understanding of the novel. It is well-known that Oliver, despite being the novel’s apparent hero, actually speaks very little. He is too often swooning, crying, fainting to have much time to speak.

The reasons for the narrator’s persistent representation of Oliver’s silent suffering is, I think, now clear. As we have established, Oliver is simply more lucrative for the narrator when he can’t speak. By rendering his little body so miserable that it is incapable of speech, the narrator can highlight Oliver’s suffering without fear that the child might reveal himself to be anything other than pure, profitable Innocence. Just as his mute, melancholy body benefited Sowerberry’s funeral business, so it benefits the narrator’s literary business.

The parallels between Sowerberry, who profits from the material suffering of paupers, and the narrator, who profits from their representational suffering are now, I hope, quite apparent. In drawing these parallels, the novel points to the trouble with much of the anti-Poor law literature. Through this self-conscious tactic, Dickens can both critique the current social structure and simultaneously interrogate the representational tactics that he uses for such a critique. He can thus both peacefully and profitably inhabit the conflicted identity of a middle-class author who both benefits from and defends the suffering bodies of the lower class.

By way of conclusion, I’d like to make a final gesture toward connecting the novel’s critique of Anti-Poor Law representational tactics to its portrayal of villainy, particularly in the character of Fagin. My argument so far leaves open what I see as an obvious question. If the novel

critiques bourgeois representational strategies that figure the poor as suffering bodies, does it imagine an alternative? The answer, I think, is a yes...but.

*Oliver Twist's* most notorious villain is the character of Fagin, the Jewish thief who houses, feeds, disciplines and profits from his band of juvenile criminals. Fagin's villainy has been a hot topic for criticism on the novel, since he is the only character in the novel who is ultimately tried and hung for his crimes. Why does the novel choose Fagin to punish, when other characters are responsible for more heinous crimes, like domestic murder? The answer is not, as many critics have said, because Fagin is Jewish and Dickens was an anti-Semite. Rather, I think that we can locate the reason for Fagin's punishment in his dual position as both mother and storyteller. Fagin, as I have stated, *cares* for his band of children: The first time the reader encounters him, he is grilling sausages for the criminal boys. He regularly provides them with food, drink, and lodging, and the boys, rather than being figured as emaciated or wretched, are largely written as well-fed and jocular. Now, this is not to say that Fagin doesn't have his faults. He does, after all, turn his boys into pickpockets and alcoholics. But under the framework that we have just established, it is precisely this mix of mothering and corrupting that makes Fagin so threatening for middle-class authors and capitalists trying to profit from the bodies of the poor. Fagin renders his pauper boys fat and guilty, making them unappealing and unprofitable for both someone like Sowerberry, who would no doubt fear the extra inches on the bodies of the pickpockets, and for someone like the narrator, whose representation of the poor as innocent and suffering is threatened by the presence of these happy criminals.

But what makes Fagin even more threatening for the narrator is his desire to disrupt the very possibility that middle-class authors will even have the opportunity to write the poor. For Fagin,

mother that he is, very much wants his boys to grow up and author themselves, or, at the very least, escape bourgeois representations that turn them into victims.

Upon the incarceration of the “Artful Dodger,” Fagin’s most prized and successful pupil, Charley Bates, another young criminal, grows despondent. Not because his friend has been arrested, mind you, but because his friend has been arrested for the menial crime of stealing a single “snuffbox.”

“To think,” he cried, “of Jack Dawkins—the dodger, the artful dodger, going abroad for a common two-penny, halfpenny, sneeze box! I never thought he’d done it under a gold watch, chain, and seals, at the lowest! Oh why didn’t he rob some rich old gentleman of all his waluables, and go out as a gentleman, and not like a common prig, without no honour and glory...nobody will never know half of what he was, How will he stand in the Newgate calendar? P’raps not be there at all! Oh, my eye! Wot a blow it is!”

But Fagin steps in, and assures the young Charley that his worries are for nothing, that “it’ll all come out, it’ll be sure to come out. They’ll all know that a clever fellow he was; he’ll show it himself, and not disgrace his old pals and teachers...think of how young he is! What a distinction, to be lagged at his time of life. He shall make a speech for himself, and we’ll read it in all the papers!”(375). And indeed, as we later learn, Fagin is right. He has brought the Dodger up well, and the young criminal makes a resounding speech in the courtroom, “doing full justice to his bringing-up, and establishing for himself a great reputation”(381).

In the character of Fagin, then, we have someone who poses a serious threat to the narrator of *Oliver Twist*. Not only does he materially create boys who are both well-fed and guilty, but he urges those boys to “speak for themselves” to establish “for themselves” a great reputation. As such, these boys are unavailable for the representational appropriation of middle-class Anti-Poor Law authors. Even though they likely won’t publish their own stories, their biographies will be written in the “Newgate Calendars,” an anthology of tales about the nation’s worst criminals,

rather than in Anti-poor law novels or pamphlets. Fagin thus makes his boys completely unprofitable for our bourgeois narrator who, we must remember, is our storyteller. And it is for this reason, I believe, and not because Dickens was an anti-Semite, that Fagin must both killed and erased in the final chapters of the novel, finally figured, by our narrator, as nothing more than a “dark-cluster of objects” on the gallows.