

As the child hero of a melodramatic novel of social protest, *Oliver Twist* is meant to appeal more to our sentiments than to our literary sensibilities. Oliver is shocked and horrified when he sees the Artful Dodger and Charley Bates pick a stranger's pocket and again when he is forced to participate in a burglary. On many levels, Oliver is not a believable character, because although he is raised in corrupt surroundings, his purity and virtue are absolute. Throughout the novel, Dickens uses Oliver's character to challenge the Victorian idea that paupers and criminals are already evil at birth, arguing instead that a corrupt environment is the source of vice. Oliver's moral scruples about the sanctity of property seem inborn in him, just as Dickens's opponents thought that corruption is inborn in poor people. His grammatical fastidiousness is also inexplicable, as Oliver presumably is not well-educated.