

1952

## Dickens without Holly: David Lean's Oliver Twist

Vernon Young

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq>

---

### Recommended Citation

Young, Vernon. "Dickens without Holly: David Lean's Oliver Twist." *New Mexico Quarterly* 22, 4 (1952).  
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol22/iss4/16>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by the University of New Mexico Press at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in New Mexico Quarterly by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact [disc@unm.edu](mailto:disc@unm.edu).

Vernon Young

## DICKENS WITHOUT HOLLY: DAVID LEAN'S *OLIVER TWIST*

CERTAINLY no better film than England's *Oliver Twist* was shown to American filmgoers during the year 1951 (after a three-year imprisonment by censorship) and one hopes that it will now enter the repertory of vanguard movie societies as securely as *The Baker's Wife* has done. It would do so with vastly more justification, since it is not simply an anecdote, it is a world; not an accident of salacious charm to be patronized for its refreshing crudity but an accomplishment to be wondered at for its mastery of a complex cinematic problem. Like *The Third Man*, it is not merely a filmed story which, at the plot level, any literary critic can perforate but an art experience derived from another (if relatively meager) art experience, reconstrued in its own technical right and achieving effect in excess of its derivation through translation of means.

As a single unit of the Dickens canon, *Oliver Twist*, the novel, is pretty poor stuff—astonishingly dull by contemporary standards—but as it contains generic elements of the total Dickens world it can be made to yield energy, tonality and vividness which exist in that total world retrospectively, so to speak, as we relive and extend it in our memories. And it is this *essential* character, the Dickensian Real Thing, as it were (untiring energy, eccentric profusion, black-and-white brutality, plum puddings and gallows, halos and holly) which David Lean, adapter and director, imported from the stronger areas of the novelist into this archetypal cinematic version, to date, of the Dickens scene—the scene of Industrial Revolution England, surely one of the closest approaches to hell on civilized earth.

The cold wet shelterless midnight streets of London; the foul and frowsy dens, where vice is closely packed and lacks the room to turn; the haunts of hunger and disease; the shabby rags that scarcely hold together; where are the attractions of these things?

David Lean, and his co-adaptor, Stanley Haynes, have answered Dickens' rhetorical question by finding "the attractions of these things" in their potentiality for dramatically visual returns. Taking for granted the pathetic but silly moral outline of the fable, with its sun and shadow, pity and terror, the wages of sin and virtue rewarded, they have concentrated on designing a relatively pure *motion* picture. To witness the result without having reread the book is sufficient evidence of their great talent. To compare some of their points of departure is further food for admiration, since everywhere one will find bold adaptation, unsparing excision: an elaboration here, a reduction there, a pointing up or a refining down, a complete reordering into an economy of points, yet rich in image, characterization and flow of conflict with which Dickens himself could not but go along.

With the first note struck, Lean improved on Dickens by employing a method of Dickens' own, of the later, achieved Dickens: the introductory thematic impression with Nature as complementary force. In this particular novel, Dickens did not avail himself of such an opportunity. He sought distance instead of immediacy, chose statement instead of picture, opening the book with a deceptively quiet, if offensively coy, exposition.

Among other public buildings in a certain town, which for many reasons it will be prudent to refrain from mentioning, and to which I will assign no fictitious name, there is one anciently common to most towns, great or small; to wit, a workhouse; and in this workhouse was born, on a day and date which I need not trouble to repeat, inasmuch as it can be of no possible consequence to the reader, in this stage of the business at all events, the item of mortality whose name is prefixed to the head of this chapter.

Lean and his associates salvaged the drama of the birth so coldly summarized by plunging directly into a setting of agony and fortitude, jagged clouds over a blasted heath, tree-boughs straining in the gale as parallel to Oliver's pregnant mother struggling, exhausted, toward "to wit, a workhouse." These were key images for the subject of the film: the fight for existence in a chokingly inhuman world.

Again, when Oliver is first led up the stairs to Fagin's headquarters, the ascent is made the visual and aural announcement of one of the strongest motifs in the film, whereas Dickens had given it no more than this matter-of-fact, uncolored description:

Oliver, groping his way with one hand, and having the other firmly grasped by his companion, ascended with much difficulty the dark and broken stairs; which his conductor mounted with an ease and expedition that showed that he was well acquainted with them. He threw open the door of a back room, and drew Oliver in after him.

The diction by which the novelist conveyed the aftermath of Bill Sikes' crime, as Sikes sits in Nancy's room while dawn breaks, with the murdered girl lying on the floor, is chromolithographic and consequently unimpressive:

Of all bad deeds that, under cover of darkness, had been committed within wide London's bounds since night hung over it, that was the worst. Of all the horrors that rose with an ill scent upon the morning air, that was the foulest and most cruel. The sun—the bright sun, that brings back, not light alone, but new life and hope, and freshness to man—burst upon the crowded city in clear and radiant glory. Through costly colored glass and paper-mended window, through cathedral dome and rotten crevice, it shed its equal ray. It lighted up the room where the murdered woman lay. It did. He tried to shut it out, but it would stream in. If the sight had been a ghastly one in the dull morning, what was it now, in all that brilliant light!

In Lean's version, this curiously antimacassar rhetoric is remodelled into audio-visual equivalents that create their own exclama-

tion points: Sikes' sweating face, the disordered corpse, the cowering dog, the street noises and the tattered rustling curtain. Sententiously induced atmosphere has been translated, by a more empirical means of communication—more empirical yet, paradoxically, more abstract—into a plastic scene. A tableau has become an event.

There was, of course, narrative and dialogue which Lean tried to duplicate as closely as possible: his genius lies in his having taken no more than he could negotiate cinematically, building from adjectival hints magnitudes of fresh movie meaning. One of his most consummate transcriptions of a famous literary moment into a great moment of movie style was his striking edition of the fearful "Please, Sir, I want some more" episode, resumed on the screen in a half-dozen rapidly cut images exploding at close range.

He established finally what may be described as a unity of helplessness in which one sees, with the overrefined Oliver, a towering and headlong world of walls too high, roofs too steep, all angles Gothic, faces too ugly (or overkind), voices too harsh, smoke and fog too thick, of energy altogether too raw. Photographed from the boy's witness point, steps spread and mount beyond view *for a reason* (not, as in Olivier's *Hamlet*, where they exist for no reason at all except as an affectation of unrelated mobility). Feet and hands become thematic tokens: the sound of feet, marching in the workhouse as Oliver is born, tramping in the streets, pounding up the stairs—pursuing Oliver, pursuing Fagin, pursuing Sikes; hands clutching at Oliver, clouting, dragging, pushing, impelling him—"Come along there, young 'un," "Don't drag behind, lazy-legs"—and at the last guiding him, comforting him, symbol of his entirely passive existence, a passivity unacceptable if we dwell intellectually on his astoundingly incorruptible gentility but agreeable within the fable when its innocence is thus visually ritualized.

The whole procedure is what a *movie* should be: a *succession*

(in the best sense), a *progression d'effet*, a narrative art of transitive images effectual in sum by virtue of its moving parts. We, the spectators, reflect on it not so much with the satisfaction from an idea perceived, a plot unravelled or a dialectic resolved, as from a tone-poem having expression through lighting and movement, a satisfaction of the symphonic, perhaps, in which we recall special closeups or sequences as we might, after a concert, recall the bass figurations of a cello, the entrance of the violin section with the first theme, or augmentations from the brass. Note after note in *Oliver Twist* is, by this test, memorable: the steep grim walls of the poorhouse; Oliver diminutive between the whip and the boys; faces of the boys pressed against the poorhouse window, watching their "betters" gorge; the old crone dying among harpies and giant shadows; the intentionally artificial piles of house-tops and chimney-pots with St. Paul's in the distance, as background to the bridge across which Fagin's lads clatter and reclatter; the low-angle shot of Sikes listening to the Dodger's betrayal of Nancy; the dog writhing to get out of the door as Sikes beats Nancy to death.

The scenarists' radical transformations are, naturally, reinforced by the technical vitality of the set designer (John Bryan) and of the photographer (Guy Green) whose camera is always in the teeth of its object. The actors, themselves, project that expert kind of personification which by now we recognize as so thoroughly and uniquely the British flair for verisimilitude. Nancy and Bill Sikes, The Artful Dodger and Fagin seem especially to assume proportions on the scale of Dickens' intention, as if the drawings of Cruikshank had anachronistically ripened into portraits by Hogarth. If Robert Newton's Sikes is remorselessly single-faceted, this is no more than justice done to the author's unassailable simplicity of conviction, for Dickens, in his 1867 preface, solemnly defended the unredeemable Bill by declaring, "I fear there are in the world some insensible and callous natures, that do become utterly and incurably bad." (As regards Guinness's

portrayal, it would appear that objections which succeeded in first cutting and then suppressing the film came from the wrong quarter. His wonderfully insinuating Fagin is more alarmingly homosexual than it is anti-Semitic!)

The point remains that here is no simulacrum of literary form, despite the referential departure. Lean's *Oliver Twist* is a model of storytelling whereby the original mode has been crystallized, has undergone a sea change into a structure which, instead of destroying the dedicated function, has reconstituted it as a more refined glory, replacing merely anecdotal values by plastic ones. It is interesting to remember that *Great Expectations*, a novel far superior to *Oliver Twist*, was filmed, also by David Lean, at a much more moderate pitch, and it is regrettable to note that British film critics, as a whole, preferred the earlier film. I say regrettable, not because *Great Expectations* demanded the same treatment as *Oliver Twist* so much as it deserved a similar ruthlessness of psychological approach.

There have been many superlatives of European film craft during the last few years to shame the Hollywood hawkers—*Beauty and the Beast*, *Panic*, *The Fallen Idol*, *The Third Man*, *The Queen of Spades*. None of these was inferior to *Oliver Twist* from any special point of cinematic view but neither did any of them excel the Dickens film in terms of that combination of forces we look for in vain from our domestic industry—literacy, richness of characterization and the precious skills of the camera pledged and executed with maximum taste.