

Anti-semitism as personified in fagin from oliver twist



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In English novels, Jewish characters have been routinely described as greedy, nit-picking, and stingy misers. They are usually but not always merchants, money lenders, or bill brokers—Shylock from *The Merchant of Venice* by William Shakespeare, Isaac from *Ivanhoe* by Sir Walter Scott, and Fagin from *Oliver Twist*, among other Jewish characters, are the most well-known examples of such racial and cultural stereotype. *Oliver Twist* is the second novel by Charles Dickens and was first published as a serial 1837-9. Through the crafty description of the orphan Oliver Twist's uneasy life, Dickens reflects the reality of the massive low class poor people at that period of time. And the villainous character in the novel—Fagin, and his Jewish identity have always been controversial to readers across cultures and generations. In this essay I will talk about anti-Semitism in *Oliver Twist* as personified in Fagin. I will present the difference in attitude towards Jews as seen in Fagin through the comparison between Dickens's original novel and other later adapted versions—specifically, David Lean's 1948 film adaptation and Roman Polanski's 2005 film adaptation. Also I will demonstrate the causes as well as the consequences of different stages of attitude towards Jews in these versions of *Oliver Twist* made in three different period of time.

In Dickens' Archetypal Jew, Lauriat Lane makes several arguments. First, he claims that Dickens follows the “ anti-Semitic tradition in English literature” by making the villainous character from *Oliver Twist*—Fagin as a Jew (94 Lane). However, Lane also claims that Dickens shows himself “ in no way free from the general attitude and prejudice of his age” (95). Lane claims that Dickens's Jewish character has basis in reality. He is certain true for that

he mentioned in the preface to *Oliver Twist*, Dickens aims to make the novel realistic—"to draw a knot of such associates in crime as really did exist...to show them as they really were" (). Despite Dickens's aim of being realistic, Lane denies the character of Fagin as a pure realistic study of Jewishness. The evidence Lane offers is a letter Dickens wrote to Mrs. Eliza Davis, of Fagin, "that that class of criminal almost invariably was a Jew" (94). Also, "a few passages from Dickens's another letter reflect the same prejudice. On 12 September 1843 he wrote to Thomas Hood that one Mr. Colburn had taken 'a money lending, bill-broking, Jew clothes-bagging, Saturday-night pawn-broking advantage of your temporary situation'" (95). All these suggest that, not only does Dickens follow the anti-Semitic tradition in his writing, but he also stands for a firm stereotypical attitude towards Jews in reality. However, Dickens at his time, was not the only anti-Semitist in reality. Historically, anti-Semitism has been a long-existing racial prejudice both in literature and reality.

In order to better comprehend the meaning and causes of anti-Semitism, it is necessary to grasp its opposite, the meaning of Semitism, or a more proper word would be philo-Semitism or Judeophilia, both words refer to people with "an interest in, respect for, and appreciation of the Jewish people, historical significance, and the positive impacts of Judaism on the world, particularly on the part of a gentile" []. However, this ideological stereotype, as the French Jewish literary critic Bernard Lazare convincingly argues in the preface of his book *Anti-Semitism: Its history and causes*, "was not born without cause" (5 Lazare). He noticed that wherever the Jews settled, anti-Semitism develops. Also be noticed that he disputes the word anti-Semitism to describe this

certain attitude towards Jews. He claims he'd rather call it anti-Judaism, for which is a more accurate word. Various views have been given to explain the cause of anti-Semitism. The religious theory from the old time is that, from the Christian perspective Jews are the "killers" of Jesus progenitors of Jesus; from the Judaism perspective they arrogantly declare themselves to be the possessor of a chosen people mentality. The racial theory propagated by the Nazi is that Jews are considered as an inferior race. The conspiracist theory claims that Jews are hated because they are the cause for most of the world's problems—Adolf Hitler frequently denounced international capitalism and communism as being part of a Jewish conspiracy. In the original novel, Fagin is described as "a very old shriveled Jew, whose villainous looking and repulsive face was obscured by a quantity of matted red hair" (63; ch. 8). Such an apparently stereotypical description about Jewishness Dickens made, was not on a personal basis. In the Victorian Britain, anti-Semitism was considered as a social convention—*Oliver Twist* grew out of an era and a literary tradition which was "predominantly anti-Semitic" (Stone 225). As Harry Stone has suggested, Dickens "did exhibit anti-Semitism and this anti-Semitism was typical of his age" (225). Laws, parliamentary debates, newspapers, magazines, songs, and plays, as well as novels, reflect the latent anti-Semitism which was a part of the Victorian heritage. In 1830 a Jew could not open a shop within the city of London, be called to the bar, receive a university degree, or sit in Parliament...In 1830 the majority of England's twenty to thirty thousand Jews earned their living through buying and selling clothes, peddling, and money-lending. Portraits in fiction of Jewish cloth dealers staggering under huge bags of rags, bearded peddlers haggling with country wives, and miserly usurers gloating over their secret treasuries were

<https://assignbuster.com/anti-semitism-as-personified-in-fagin-from-oliver-twist/>

given reality not only by a long literary tradition but by the intermittent evidence of the London streets. (225)

Another factor that contributes to the anti-Semitism in the Victorian era as represented in *Oliver Twist*, is Dickens's Christianity. Susan Mayer argues in *Antisemitism and Social Critique in Dickens's Oliver Twist* that Dickens "invokes Christianity" as a moral center in *Oliver Twist* (239 Mayer). Various discussions on Dickens's Christianity are employed as evidence: Writing in 1962, John Gross, noting Dickens's interest in redemption and resurrection, commented that Dickens's Christianity "is more relevant than one tends to think nowadays" (xii). Twenty years later, Andrew Sanders again noted that the combination "of a sincere but simple enough faith with a general refusal to proclaim it from the house tops... [has] rendered Dickens's insistent Christianity...irrelevant to those modern critical discussion of his work. (Resurrection xi) Mayer also claims that, in *Oliver Twist*, Dickens "emphatically criticizes what he represents as unchristian in the behavior of the English towards the poor" (241 Mayer). "In the novel's opening chapters, set in the unnamed town of Oliver's birth, make an criticism of those who created the new Poor Laws and those who justify, administer, and benefit from them, as well as of all the indifferent bystanders who profit from, or do not help to remedy, the situation of the poor" (241-245). Mayer perceives these flaws of both individual and institutional morality as the "failure of Christianity" (242). Lean's 1948 film adaptation follows George Cruikshank's illustration—in the film adaptation, Fagin played by Alec Guinness, is of a repulsive look along with the enormous hooked nose, chipped teeth, shaggy eyebrows, and matted hair, which represent the

conventional Jewish racial stereotype at the time. This anti-Semitic portrayal also resulted in protests by Jewish objectors from the new world to the European continent. Concerning the 1948 film adaptation with historical background at that time, Liora Brosh has given a context for comprehending Lean's cinematic representation of Fagin and the audiences' view (especially the Jewish protests) of it: In a departure from the novel, Lean's idea is less about the private domestic sphere and more about British collective identity. ... Lean's *Oliver Twist* is obsessed with those characters who subvert national boundaries. Both Fagin and the prostitute Nancy are represented as untrustworthy and not reliably British. ... Even though Lean is said to have relied on Cruikshank for his film, unlike in the illustrations, Fagin is not small and lanky. ... In the illustration Cruikshank drew for the novel, Fagin is thinner, smaller, and shorter than any other adult character, especially Sikes. ... This film was made when the Second World War was a recent and vivid memory, the British Empire was disintegrating, and Jews were fighting the British to establish their own independent Jewish state. ... These new historical contexts changed the conventional trope of the cowardly feminized Jew represented in Dickens. (Brosh 94-95)

As Brosh and other sources have explained, the anti-Semitic portrait of Fagin in Lean's 1948 film adaptation is set as a political propaganda to serve the diplomatic demand—Zionism emerged in the late 19th century. "After the death of the moderate pro-British Zionist leader's son, also with the anti-Zionism policies in Britain, the leadership of the Zionist movement passed to the Jewish agency led by the anti-British socialist party" (125-135 Cohen). In an effort to win the independence of the establishing Jewish state in

Palestine, Zionist waged a guerrilla war against Britain. Like 1948 film adaptation, multiple later adaptations on Oliver Twist were also widely criticized. In the London stage premiere of Lionel Bart's 1960 musical adaptation, Fagin played by the actor Ron Moody received criticism of his "stereotypical nasal infection and chanted songs in the style of Jewish folk music" (Gross). To avoid the controversy that have occurred to those previous adaptations, Carol Reed's 1968 film version made a bit of adjustment—"instead, he played with gay stereotypes, mincing his way through 'Pick a Pocket or Two,' and twirling a frilly pink parasol in 'I'd Do Anything'" (Gross). Unlike Lean's 1948 film adaptation and the other previous versions of Oliver Twist, Roman Polanski takes an obviously different approach in making of his 2005 film adaptation of Oliver Twist. His idea of approaching the character Fagin was revealed in a telephone interview where he said "We've lived long enough to know that certain things should be done for certain reasons. Without analyzing it. Which would be embarrassing, you know?" (Gross). When dealing with Fagin, Polanski completely abandoned the anti-Semitic characteristics that earlier adaptations employed. He identifies Fagin neither as Jewish nor the usual evil exploiter of young boys. He focused on the both evilness and goods—the dualistic nature of human-being in shaping Fagin—"There is no completely bad man," he added. "Fagin, with all his villainy, is still giving the children some kind of home, you know. What was happening to these kids in the street was just unbearable" (Gross). For him, Fagin is simply a lost citizen who is morally corrupted due to the social conditions, and meanwhile there is goodness with this character.

Polanski's film adaptation reflects both how contemporary people perceive the general attitude towards Jews today, and how Jewish individual/community respond to the anti-Semitism as they were treated with once upon time (Polanski is Jewish himself). Conventional attitude towards Jewish people and organizations, and the behaviors, ideologies, and policies of Jewish individual/organizations, both have mutual impact to each other. Just as Raphael Magarik has argued, "denying that Israel's behavior has any causal in anti-Semitism is deeply counter-intuitive. This summer, Israel fought a war and anti-Semitism surged in Europe—were those two facts supposed to be a coincidence?" (n. pag. Magarik). Magarik's detail-lacked argument is valid but it is also very weak. What can be discovered in this argument is that the contemporary people, in this context, unlike the people in the Victorian era, define and practice anti-Semitism based on not the Jewish race or the past stereotype, but the actions taken by Jewish people/organizations towards others. In this context, the contemporary anti-Semitism distinctly differs from the past ones, which are based on racial or religious hatred. The comparison of Dickens's novel, Lean's and Polanski's film adaptations reveal the evolution of attitude towards Jewishness from the Victorian era, to the Post-War period, and finally to the contemporary world. And the re-organization of the meaning of anti-Semitism helps to clarify and classify Fagin, in different versions of *Oliver Twist*, as the representation of attitude towards Jewishness. From Victorian era to today, anti-Semitism, or the attitude towards Jewish individual-organization has gone through three main stages, in the Victorian era, anti-Semitic attitude was recognized as a social convention, Jews are generally treated with injustice. There for "

Dickens shows himself in no way free from the general attitude and prejudice
<https://assignbuster.com/anti-semitism-as-personified-in-fagin-from-oliver-twist/>

of his age" (95 Lane). In the post war period, due to the anti-British Zionist organizations, the establishment of Israel that weakened Britain's impact of the Middle East region, anti-Semitism as personified in Fagin from Lean's Oliver Twist film, was served as a political propaganda, just like the U. S's and Soviet Union's political propaganda of each other during the Cold-War period.

At this stage, anti-Semitism existed not as a socially accepted convention but merely an ideology to impact the regional and international relation. Move to the contemporary world, after the Third Reich's failure of dictatorship. Anti-Semitism as a stereotypical attitude towards Jewish culture/religion was eventually denounced by most parts of the globe. Anti-Israeli attitude remains not as an extension of the past racially stereotyped ideology but a form of rational, undeniable pacifism. Polanski's Oliver Twist film was able to present, in his ideal, the reconciliation between the non-Jewish world and the Jewish community. For the matter of anti-Semitism, the former disputes, the latter lets go.

Works Cited

1. Brosh, Liora. Screening Novel Women: From British Domestic Fiction to Film. N. p.: Palgrave Mcmillan, 2008. Print.
 2. Cohen, Michael. The making of British policy, 1936-1945. New York: n. p., 1979. Print.
 3. Gross, Michael Joseph. " A Face Lift for Wretched Old Fagin." New York Times [New York] 21 Aug. 2005: n. pag. Print.
 4. Lazare, Bernard. Antisemitism: Its History and Causes, 1894. N. p.: n. p., n. d. Print.
 - Stone, Harry. " Dickens and the Jews." Victorian Studies 2 (1959): 223-53. Print.
 - Lane, Lauriat, Jr. " Dickens' Archetypal Jew." Modern Language Association 73. 1 (1958): 94-100. Print.
- <https://assignbuster.com/anti-semitism-as-personified-in-fagin-from-oliver-twist/>

Magarik, Raphael. "Do Jewish Actions Ever Cause Anti-Semitism." *Forward*. – N. p., 24 Sept. 2014. Web. 16 Dec. 2015.. 6. Mayer, Susan. "Social Critique in Dickens's 'Oliver Twist.'" *Victorian Literature and Culture* 33. 1 (2005): 239-52. Print. 7. Dickens, Charles. *Oliver Twist*. N. p.: Richard Bentley, 1838. Print. 8. *Oliver Twist*. Dir. David Lean. 1948. Film. 9. *Oliver Twist*. Dir. Roman Polanski. 2005. Film. 10. "Fagin in Berlin Provokes a Riot." *Life* 7 Mar. 1949: 38-39. Print.