CURRENT TOPIC

Oliver Twist, textbook of child abuse

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Oliver Twist, as everybody knows, is Dickens' novel about an orphaned boy who starts life in a workhouse and after trials on the streets of London in Fagin's "gang", is eventually adopted by a middle class gentleman who has liberal and gentle ideas of parenthood. Roy Meadow, in the *ABC of Child Abuse*, defines child abuse as "treatment which is unacceptable in a given culture at a given time".¹ Clearly, what might have been acceptable in Victorian England was not acceptable to Dickens, who expresses his disapproval of much that he described. In terms of standards in Britain in the year 2001, many of the childcare practices described in *Oliver Twist* constitute child abuse.

Throughout the book, Dickens gives observations on childcare and parenting, both by society

and by natural and substitute parents. He observes and describes many categories of child abuse, together with risk factors which modern research has identified in abusing parents.

Institutional abuse is the first scene, as Oliver's mother dies in childbirth. She is attended by a drunken "midwife" and an uncaring doctor. The infant is turned over to a baby farm and later the workhouse itself. The children here are neglected, barely fed or clothed. Oliver Twist's ninth birthday found him "a pale thin child, somewhat diminutive in stature, and decidedly small in circumference" (chapter 2).

They were also emotionally abused, being deprived of all human adult love or affection and constantly criticised. Up to his ninth birthday, Oliver was said to have come "from the wretched home where one kind word or look had never lighted the gloom of his infant years" (chapter 2), "a naughty orphan which nobody can't love" (chapter 2).

While locked in a small dark room "after asking for more", he could hear the other boys being instructed to be "guarded from the sins and vices of Oliver Twist who was led by wickedness of the Devil" (chapter 3).

Physical abuse was also part of children's lives: "the fist had too often been impressed on his body not to be deeply impressed upon his recollection" (chapter 2); "would flog him to death in a playful mood, some day after dinner, or would knock his brains out with an iron bar" (chapter 2).

The sequelae of abuse, including absconding, passivity, "stupidity", depression, poor self image, and a vulnerability to corruption by anyone who seems to show them some love or attention, are well illustrated in this novel.

Sexual abuse was only vaguely referred to in descriptions of Nancy and Betsy, the prostitutes. It is suggested that they were led into prostitution, possibly via alcohol, by Fagin at an early age. "Nancy, indeed was not exempt from a failing which was very common among Fagin's female pupils, and in which, in their tenderer years, they were rather encouraged than checked" (chapter 24).

Even more remarkable than the descriptions of abuse, was Dickens' identification of all the parental "at risk" factors which have recently been defined by research. These include alcohol abuse, domestic violence, mental health problems, and animal abuse. His incidents of domestic violence revealed two sides, the battered "wife" and the battered husband.

Bill Sykes was not married to Nancy, but was her partner and pimp. Her ambivalence towards him was well illustrated when she tried to defend Oliver against him, but not at the risk

Illustration from *Oliver Twist* (reproduced by permission of the Dickens House Museum, London).

of harm to Bill himself. She was fearful of him, but could not break away. He assaulted her, “she pointed hastily to some livid bruises on her neck and arms” (chapter 20), and finally, in a brutal blind rage, killed her, “the murderer, staggering backward to the wall and shutting out the sight with his hand, seized a heavy club and struck her down” (chapter 47).

In contrast, Mr Bumble, the beadle, after weighing the apparent advantages to himself, married Mrs Coney, the superintendent of the female workhouse. After just two months, he realised that she was the greater bully. “The expert lady, clasping him tightly around the throat with one hand, inflicted a shower of blows ...” (chapter 37).

Substance abuse, in the form of alcohol abuse, features throughout the novel, suggesting the problem was widespread. The midwife attending Oliver’s birth “was rendered rather misty by an unwanted allowance of beer” (chapter 1) and Mrs Mann, the baby farm superintendent, plied the beadle with gin with “a very little cold water and a lump of sugar” to give him “that temporary blandness which gin-and-water awakens in some bosoms” (chapter 2). The whole district where Fagin lived was pervaded by alcohol. It had “little knots of houses, where drunken men and women were positively wallowing in the filth” (chapter 8), and Fagin himself plied the young boys in his gang with alcohol. Bill Sykes, like many violent men, drank alcohol at almost every appearance. He seldom had just one drink, and on the evening before the Chertsey robbery drank “all the beer at a draft ... and then disposed of a couple of glasses of spirits and water” (chapter 26).

Bill Sykes, while not obviously mentally ill, is of a violent and paranoid personality, who also abuses his dog. The passivity of the dog after abuse, mirrors the behaviour of some abused children. Bill told him to lie down and accompanies “the command with a kick, which sent the animal to the other end of the room. He appeared well used to it, however, for he coiled

himself up in a corner very quietly, without uttering a sound” (chapter 13).

Child abuse and neglect were recognised when Kempe wrote his articles about baby battering in the 1960s and 1970s. However, it has obviously been an issue for centuries and Dickens certainly described all the categories of abuse, together with many predisposing features and many sequelae.

1 Meadow S. *ABC of child abuse*. London: BMJ Publishing Group, 1997.

Commentary

I first came to Barnet in 1955, having just completed my National Service. I became registrar to George Newns at Barnet Hospital and was eventually appointed consultant paediatrician locally. Everyone in Barnet “knew” that Oliver Twist was born at the Wellhouse, the poor law institution that opened in 1835. This was a response to the “new” Poor Law Act of which Dickens was so critical.

When in 1970 the medical centre here opened, I was determined to establish an annual lecture with a social and community emphasis, and what better name than the Oliver Twist Lecture. I then re-read Dickens’ account and found that Oliver could not have been born at Barnet. Dickens probably had in mind a very similar institution near Lowestoft. When Oliver ran away from the undertaker to whom he was apprenticed, he saw a sign which read “London 100 miles”. He did indeed pass through Barnet and it was here that the Artful Dodger recruited him, alias Jack Dawns. We have had an Oliver Twist lecture ever since with many distinguished lecturers (see table 1).

KEN NORTON

Retired Consultant Paediatrician

Dr Ken Norton, consultant paediatrician at Barnet General Hospital in 1972, inaugurated an annual lecture at his hospital—the “Oliver Twist Lecture”.

Table 1 *Oliver Twist lectures*

1972	Dr George Newns	Causes of Short Stature in Children
1973	Dr Philip Evans	A Little Gruel for Oliver
1974	Professor Leonard Strang	Liquid in the Lungs
1975	Professor Eric Stroud	Children Who Need Second Helpings
1976	Professor Jon Scopes	Delivery in the Work’us
1977	Professor John Emery	Little Scoops and Defective Handles (Starving Children Today)
1978	Dr Hugh Jolly	Difficult Children
1979	Professor David Morley	Gruel—Not Enough for Oliver’s Growth
1980	Professor John Davis	The Infancy of Oliver—a Twist in the Tale
1981	Dr Pamela Davies	Very Low Birthweight: Its Implications for the Pre-School and School Years and Later Life
1982	Professor Roy Meadow	The Problems of Having Parents
1983	Dr Anthony Jackson	Child Abuse and Neglect
1984	Dr D Black	Sundered Families—Orphans and Others Who Lose Their Families
1985	Dr Brian Wharton	It’s Good to be Children Sometimes
1986	Professor Roger Robinson	The Causes of Speech Delay in Children
1987	Professor Christopher Wood	Now All I Want is Fact—One mass of bruises both blue and green—language was not powerful to describe infant phenomenon (<i>Pediatrics</i> , 1987)
1988	Mr J A M Martin	What Oliver Wanted to Say on Hearing and Speech
1989	Professor Lewis Spitz	Please Sir, I Want Some More
1990	Professor Victor Dubowitz	Some Food for Thought on the Potential Treatment of Muscular Dystrophy
1991	Dr Aiden Macfarlane	Healthy First Helping for all Children—Can we make Oliver Twist’s Request Redundant
1992	Dr Ken Norton	Wellhouse Revisited
1993	not held	
1994	Professor David Baum	Oliver’s Rights
1995	Dr Graham Clayden	Sick Children or Artful Dodger
1996	Mr Tam Fry	4’ 6” Is No Longer Swagging
1997	Dr Anthony Costello	Treats of the Circumstances Attending his Birth
1998	Professor Charles Brook	Growth Hormone for Oliver
1999	Dr Harvey Marcovitch	Artful Dodgers or Lawyers I have Known
2000	Professor David Barker	London Children in the Past: Underfed and Ill-clad but Healthy in Adult Life