Charles Dickens’ 1838 novel *Oliver Twist* is a barely hidden critique of the treatment of the poor, particularly poor orphaned children, in nineteenth century England. Dickens spends the majority of his book detailing all the ways in which his titular character is exploited, abused, and neglected by the orphanage and workhouse system in place in the mid 1830’s. The angelic and naïve Oliver is clearly meant to tug at the heartstrings of his readers and make them identify with someone who they may have considered lowly or perhaps just not considered at all. Oliver is accosted on all fronts by almost comically evil adults in positions of power over him, from the neglectful Mr. Bumble to the amoral Bill Sikes and Monks. The only people to take pity the boy, some women and a few educated middle class men, are posed as ideal models of behavior. Even the initially wretched Nancy is softened by Oliver’s presence risks and ultimately loses her life to help him.

The anti-exploitation message of *Oliver Twist* is a strong theme throughout the book. The ending is a neat package of punishment for those who were cruel to Oliver and those who helped him enjoy an idyllic village retirement with the boy. In fact, the ends that meet the big players in Oliver’s post-workhouse exploitation are particularly gruesome, including two hangings and one wasting away in an American prison. The Bad Guys are clearly, and occasionally brutally, penalized for their transgressions while the Good Guys are easily identified by their happiness and proximity to Oliver. Nancy remains an outlier, and an
interesting case. Nancy is the only character to directly learn her lesson as a result of Oliver’s influence.

Nancy is introduced initially as a member of Fagin’s gang attached to Bill Sikes. She is loud, rude, and a criminal whokidnaps Oliver from his first happy home with Mr. Brownlow at the request of her boss. However, over time the little influence Oliver has on Nancy starts to change her. Shevolunteers to collect him because she knows she’ll be gentle, she protests his beating, and later risks a great deal to go to Rose with information on Monks. She is the only Bad Guy to change for Oliver’s sake. She has a strange end in the narrative, in her suffering the death of one of the Bad Guys she becomes catalyst for good change in others (Charley Bates reevaluates his life of crime after things get serious) and ironically triggers a panic in Sikes that ultimately leads to his death.

So, in the whole fifty-three chapters of Dickens’ argument against workhouses and mistreatment only one character actually learns their lesson and is subsequently punished for their crimes anyway. Dickens’ didn’t agree with the way things were, but what does the treatment of his characters, particularly Nancy, say about his opinion on the possibility of change? There’s a thread of fatalism in Oliver Twist that puts a bit of a damper on its message. Oliver gets the good end because he was just born good, Monks gets a bad end because he was just born bad. In a book trying to humanize those suffering under the system in place for impoverished people, this dichotomy leads to an uncomfortable question of who is deserving of humane treatment. Not all the boys in the work house were angelic Olivers, would they be deserving of a happy ending? Nancy, and to some extent Charley, is the only ray of hope for the boys Oliver Twist left behind.