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Cruikshank's Fagin—The Illustrator as Creator

Sidney Wechter

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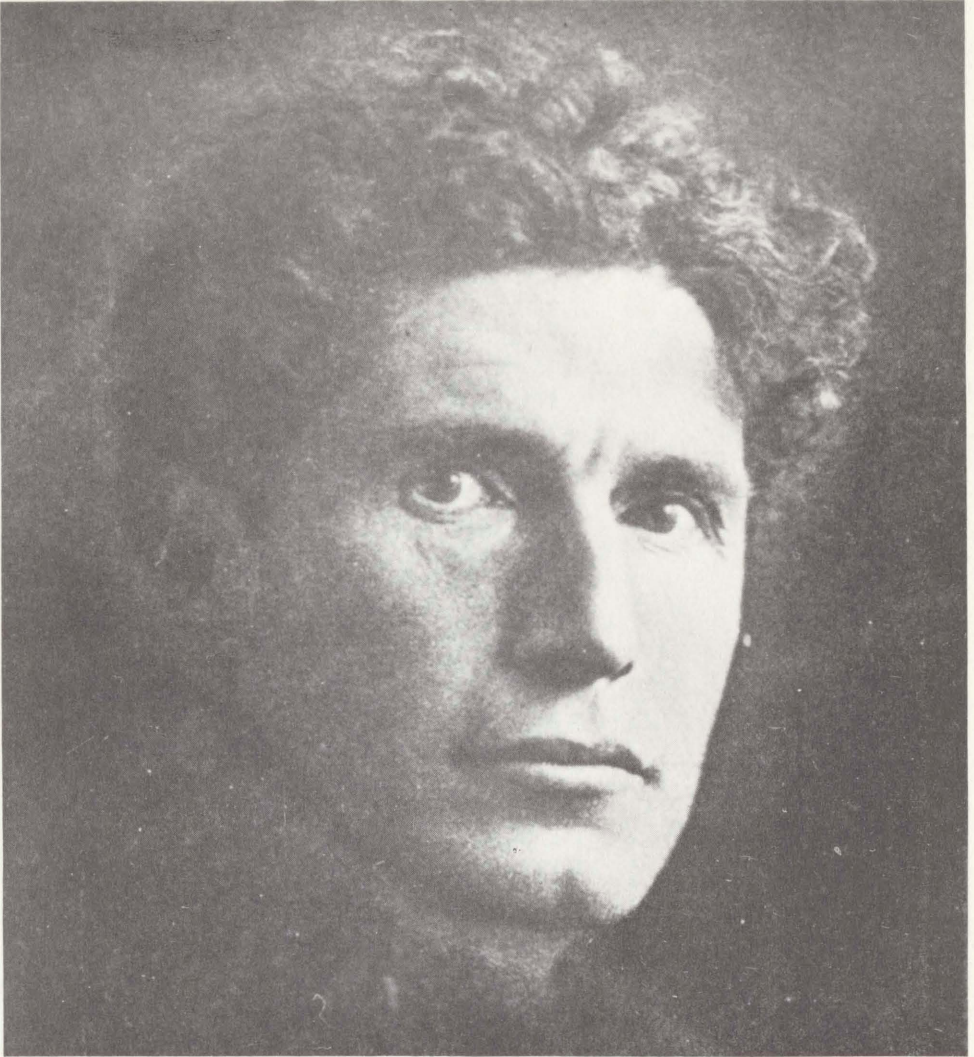


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Recommended Citation

Wechter, Sidney. "Cruikshank's Fagin—The Illustrator as Creator." *The Courier* 14.3 (1977): 29-32.

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JOHN COWPER POWYS

*Photograph from the George Arents Research Library for Special Collections,
Syracuse University*

THE COURIER

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Fig. 1. By permission of the Victoria and Albert Museum.

Cruikshank's Fagin—

The Illustrator as Creator

by Sidney Wechter

"I am the originator of *Oliver Twist*." So claimed George Cruikshank in a pamphlet he had published, entitled "The Artist and the Author," in 1872. Cruikshank waited until two years after Dickens's death before putting forth his claim. He also wrote that he was the originator of Harrison Ainsworth's *The Miser's Daughter*, *The Tower of London*, and other books by Ainsworth.

It has been proven beyond doubt that all these assertions are without foundation. We have learned that, starting with his first book, *Sketches by Boz*, for which Cruikshank did the illustrations, it was Dickens's policy first, to write a chapter; next, to give it to the artist; who would only then create the illustrations. Dickens followed this procedure with all the books he wrote.

Whatever Cruikshank's reasons were for making his incredible statements, one must not lose sight of the fact that he was a brilliant artist, and that some of the success for *Oliver Twist* must go to him.

While Dickens created the characters, Cruikshank gave them form. This can be seen in the drawings of Fagin shown here. Without the illustrations the story is exciting, of course; but when the reader turns the page and sees Fagin pictured as the evil man he really is—the slight hunching over, the furtive look—he comes alive.

When Cruikshank first conceived the idea of "Fagin in the condemned cell," he saw him as pensive and afraid. Fagin is in a corner of the cell, looking small, and very alone. (Fig. 1) The initial drawing did not have the essence of what Fagin felt—the fear and horror that is in his face in the final drawing. (Fig. 3)

In the second drawing (Fig. 2) Fagin's face is drawn, frightened, his hands resting on his lap. Cruikshank changed the composition, placing Fagin near the center, commanding attention more to the man than to his surroundings.

Mr. Sidney Wechter is a Dickens collector and a member of Library Associates' Board of Trustees. He was founder and chairman of Library Associates' Antiquarian Book Auction in 1976.

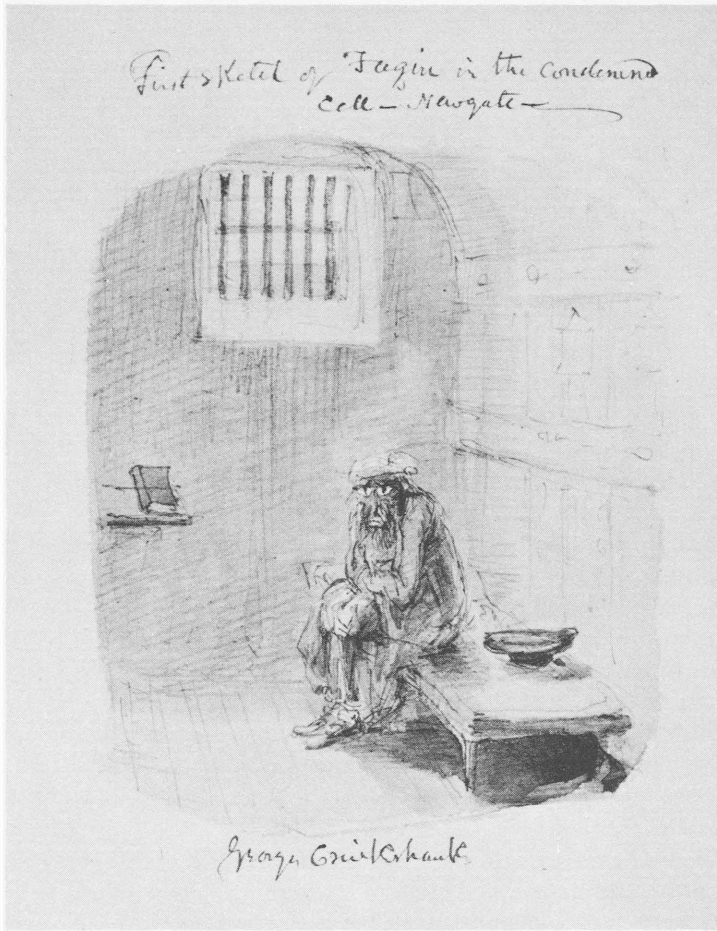


Fig. 2. From the author's collection.

Cruikshank's earliest account of the inspiration for "Fagin in the condemned cell" was given to Horace Mayhew. One morning after the artist had begun to despair of ever finishing his drawing, Cruikshank said that he sat up in bed, his hand covering his chin, his fingertips between his lips, his whole attitude expressive of disappointment and despair. He saw his face in the cheval glass opposite him and exclaimed, "That's it! That's just the expression I want!"

Cruikshank's later account of this was slightly different. He contended that he had never been perplexed and never had any doubts as to the design, but that he did sit before a mirror, assuming various poses until he hit upon his hand covering his chin.

Whichever story may be correct, the results were astonishing.

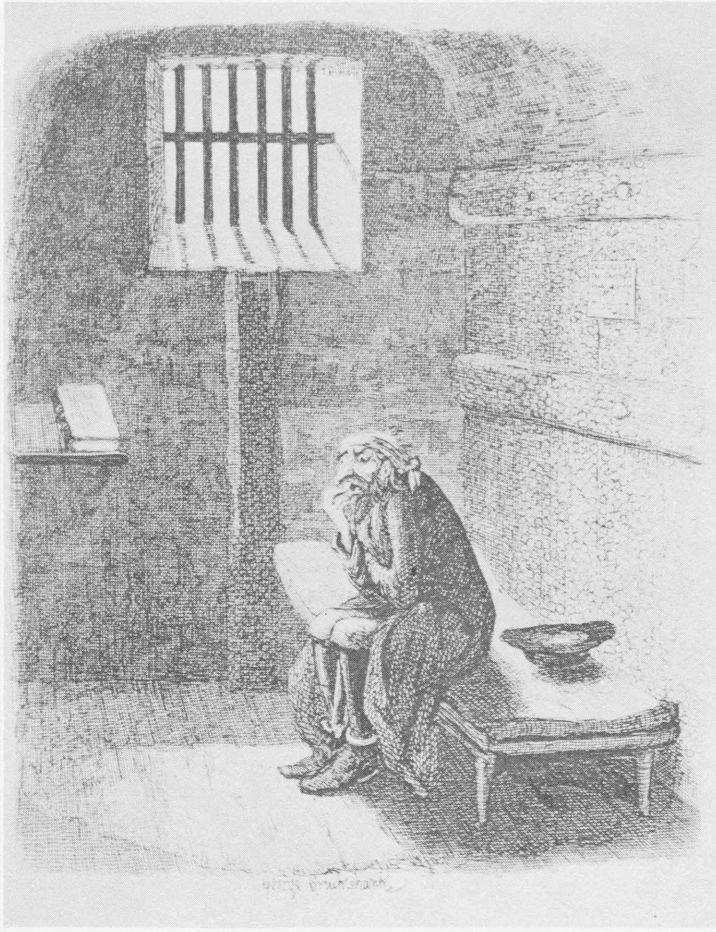


Fig. 3. Final plate used by Cruikshank.

In the third drawing, Fagin is in the condemned cell, as we have all come to know him: his hands resting under his chin, a frightened and horrified creature who will not bring harm to Oliver ever again. It is a powerful drawing; all of Fagin's fears are there. We feel his aloneness. His isolation seems complete.

Cruikshank, creating in a different medium, expressed Dickens's characters so well that the artist and writer are now inseparable. Cruikshank's sensitivity to Dickens's work in the development of the Fagin drawings proves him to be, not only an illustrator, but an imaginative artist of high degree and high standards of performance.



Dr. Wayne S. Yenawine receives the *Post-Standard* Award for Outstanding Contribution to the Syracuse University Libraries from Mr. J. Leonard Gorman. From left: Dr. Benjamin J. Lake, Dr. Yenawine, Professor Antje B. Lemke, Mr. Gorman.
Photograph courtesy of the *Syracuse Post-Standard*.