

# Dickens and the ‘Criminal Class’

Dickens began his writing career during a period in which social observers of the city began to fear that a separate and sinister underworld had developed in the heart of London, the world’s largest city.

Victorians began to write of a ‘criminal class’ who lived entirely on the proceeds of crime and preyed upon the respectable people of the West End of London. To make matters worse, this ‘criminal class’ lived undetected in the dark backstreets, ‘rookeries’ and courts of the East End, a place where ‘civilised’ people feared to tread. However, the Victorian idea that an organised underworld separate from the rest of society was systematically preying on the wealthy was largely a myth and perpetuated by social researchers such as Charles Dickens and Henry Mayhew.



In his novel, *Oliver Twist* (1838), Dickens provided readers with a vivid picture of this mythical underworld and the dangerous characters that inhabited it. Indeed, the villainous characters in Dickens reflected the popular perception that the underworld was principally composed of Irish and Jewish immigrants. The following passage describes how the Artful Dodger led Oliver Twist into the

East End abyss:

Dickens witnessed for himself the ‘dangerous’ underworld of London and recounted his tour of the ‘plauge pots’ of the capital in his journal *Household Words*. On one expedition, he visited the underbelly of Westminster which he described as the ‘Devil’s Acre’. He informed his

readers that it was an error to think of Westminster as simply a district of splendour and grandeur since in the back streets flowed '*the blackest tide of moral turpitude*' as it was '*the most notorious haunt of law-breakers in the empire*'. In both *Oliver Twist* and his reports in *Household Words*, Dickens explicitly linked filth and squalor with crime, immorality such as prostitution and the 'criminal class'. Dickens's portrayal of a morally depraved underworld that lived in filth and squalor became an accepted view of the poor in the East End by the 1850s and led other social explorers to investigate similarly densely populated towns in Britain.