

Helping you choose books for children



Opening extract from

Oliver Twist

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CONTENTS

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The Characters	4
Oliver Twist	7
Taking things further	55



THE CHARACTERS



Oliver Twist

Oliver is an orphan. Is he strong enough to resist Fagin's attempts to make him a thief?

The Artful Dodger

Dodger is Fagin's favourite and very good at his job. Can Oliver trust this new friend?



Fagin

Fagin looks after orphaned boys, as long as they earn him money. Can he make himself rich by turning Oliver into a thief?

Mr Brownlow

Mr Brownlow is a respectable and warm-hearted old gentleman. Can his fondness for Oliver overcome distrust and doubt?



Bill Sikes

Sikes is a hardened criminal who works with Fagin. Can he control Nancy and still keep her love? Will he ruin Oliver?



Nancy

Nancy works for Fagin and loves Bill Sikes; she has a warm heart. Can she save Oliver?



Mrs Maylie

Mrs Maylie shows Oliver love and compassion. Is she strong enough to keep him safe from Fagin?



OLIVER TWIST

Oliver Twist didn't know who had named him. It wasn't his father, who had never seen him, and it certainly wasn't his mother, who died giving birth to him. It was probably someone in the cold, grey workhouse in which he lived with hundreds of other orphaned boys.

Life in the workhouse was cruel and hard, but the worst thing of all was the lack of food. At meal times, in the cavernous grey stone hall, the boys queued before the fat Master for their one ladleful of grey, watery gruel. Having returned to their hard benches, they would devour their gruel in seconds, licking their bowls and spoons so clean that washing up was never necessary. Still their stomachs rumbled.

They were terribly thin and always hungry. Not just peckish, really hungry. When they felt that they could bear it no longer, the orphans decided to take action. One of them must be



brave enough to ask for more. The boy they chose was Oliver Twist.

The evening arrived. As the boys finished licking their spoons, the room became quiet but for the soft sound of two timid, terrified feet tapping to the front. Oliver looked up at the Master and held out his bowl.



‘Please, sir. I want some more.’

Silence.

The Master turned grey and whispered
‘More?’

Then he turned from pale grey to crimson.

‘MORE?’ he bellowed, grabbing Oliver roughly. ‘Mr Bumble, come quickly. This boy has asked for MORE!’

Mr Bumble dragged Oliver in front of the owners of the orphanage. They decided that he was a dangerous influence, and they must get rid of him immediately.

So, Oliver was thrown from the only home he remembered and sent to work for a cruel family. The adults worked him hard and beat him, and the children bullied him. Unable to stand it any longer, Oliver ran away.



Oliver could think of only one place to go: London. For seven long and lonely days he trudged along the muddy road. He slept in ditches and had to beg for food. Weak with hunger and misery, and shivering with cold, Oliver eventually reached London, where he sank to the ground. What should he do now? He was completely without friends. Completely without hope.

‘Got lodgings? Any food? Any money?’
Oliver heard a voice ask.

Fighting back tears, Oliver replied ‘No. I have been walking for seven days. I am very tired and hungry.’

The voice introduced itself. ‘Dodger. The Artful Dodger’s me name.’

Oliver looked up through the blur of his tearful eyes to see a strange sight. The Artful Dodger was about ten years old, small and filthy, with sharp little eyes and a snub nose. He was dressed in a grown man’s clothes. A hat struggled to balance right on top of his head.



Gladly turning away from the prison and leaving the past behind them, Oliver and Mr Brownlow walked hand in hand to their carriage. At last, they headed out of London towards the clear, fresh air of their new home, and towards the love and goodness of their dear, true friends.



TAKING THINGS FURTHER

The real read

This *Real Read* version of *Oliver Twist* is a retelling of Charles Dickens' magnificent work. If you would like to read the full novel in all its original splendour, many complete editions are available, from bargain paperbacks to beautifully bound hardbacks. You may well find a copy in your local charity shop.

Filling in the spaces

The loss of so many of Charles Dickens' original words is a sad but necessary part of the shortening process. We have had to make some difficult decisions, omitting subplots and details, some important, some less so, but all interesting. We have also, at times, taken the liberty of combining two events into one, or of giving a character words or actions that originally belong to another. The points below will fill in some of the gaps, but nothing can beat the original.

- Oliver's half-brother, Monks, is behind Fagin's attempts to corrupt Oliver. Monks and his mother, who was Oliver's stepmother, defrauded Oliver of his father's fortune: Monks' keeping it depends upon Oliver being made dishonest.
- When Oliver was born, his dying mother, Agnes, gave the lady looking after her, called Sally, a gold locket, saying that she hoped that one day Oliver would learn all about his mother. Sally reveals this years later, on her own deathbed. This secret eventually passes to Mr Bumble, and then to Monks, who throws the locket, containing a wedding ring inscribed 'Agnes', into the river.
- As a young man, Mr Brownlow was close friends with Edwin Leeford, Oliver's father, now dead. Mr Brownlow, unaware of her identity, has a picture on his wall of Agnes, Oliver's mother. Oliver feels a strange affinity for this picture, which gives the reader a hint of a connection. Furthermore, Mr Brownlow often thinks he sees something familiar in Oliver's face.

- Mr Brownlow discovers Oliver's true identity, and learns about Monks. He succeeds in gaining a full confession from Monks. At the end of the novel, Monks has to explain everything to Oliver. He eventually squanders the money Oliver gives him.
- The first time Nancy slipped out to go to Mrs Maylie's, she drugged Bill Sikes so that he wouldn't notice her absence.
- Bill Sikes is deceived by Fagin into believing that Nancy's betrayal is absolute. Fagin deliberately fails to tell him that Nancy refused to give information about her friends. Fagin successfully manipulates Bill into killing Nancy. He doesn't shoot her, but beats her to death.
- Bill Sikes escapes, and experiences great suffering, after killing Nancy. Some time passes between her murder and his accidental death by hanging.

Back in time

Victorian England was a period of great transition. Having been an agricultural, rural economy, it was moving swiftly towards industrial nationhood. A 'middle class' was emerging, with considerable economic and political influence.

This swift change left many deprived of their traditional means of living, and dependent upon the state. People left their livelihoods in the countryside to seek their fortune in London, increasing the density of poverty there.

Mistakenly, Victorian culture considered poverty a sign of weakness or laziness. The Poor Laws of 1834 stated that people could only receive assistance from the state if they lived and worked in workhouses. Life in workhouses was deliberately made miserable in an attempt to discourage laziness. Workhouse owners often grew rich by depriving their inmates of any comfort.

Charles Dickens experienced poverty at first hand – his father was imprisoned for debt and the young Charles made to work in a warehouse. These experiences affected him deeply.

In *Oliver Twist*, Dickens exposes the nature and consequences of the poverty of his times and the ineffective, often hypocritical, ways in which society dealt with it.

Finding out more

We recommend the following books and websites to gain a greater understanding of Charles Dickens' and *Oliver Twist*'s England:

Books

- Terry Deary, *Loathsome London* (Horrible Histories), Scholastic, 2005.
- Terry Deary, *Vile Victorians* (Horrible Histories), Scholastic, 1994.
- *Victorian London*, Watling Street Publishing, 2004.
- Ann Kramer, *Victorians* (Eyewitness Guides), Dorling Kindersley, 1998.
- Berlie Doherty, *Street Child*, Collins, 1995.
- Peter Ackroyd, *Dickens*, BBC, 2003.

Websites

- www.victorianweb.org
Scholarly information on all aspects of Victorian life, including literature, history and culture.
- www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/victorians
The BBC's interactive site about Victorian Britain, with a wide range of information and activities for all ages.
- www.dickensmuseum.com
Home of the Dickens Museum in London, with details about exhibits, events and lots of helpful links.
- www.dickensworld.co.uk
Dickens World, based in Chatham in Kent, is a themed visitor complex featuring the life, books and times of Charles Dickens.
- www.charlesdickenspage.com
A labour of love dedicated to Dickens, with information about his life and his novels and many useful links.
- www.workhouses.org.uk
Facts, figures and true stories about England's workhouses.

Food for thought

Here are some things to think about if you are reading *Oliver Twist* alone, or ideas for discussion if you are reading it with friends.

In retelling *Oliver Twist* we have tried to recreate, as accurately as possible, Dickens' original plot and characters. We have also tried to imitate aspects of his style. Remember, however, that this is not the original work; thinking about the points below, therefore, can help you begin to understand Charles Dickens' craft. To move forward from here, turn to the full-length version of *Oliver Twist* and lose yourself in his wonderful storytelling.

Starting points

- Which character interests you the most? Why?
- Do you agree that Oliver is naturally good, or is it only through good fortune that he escapes a life of crime?

- How much sympathy do you feel for Nancy, Bill Sikes or Fagin?
- What do you think about the difference between the lives of the wealthy people and the poor people you meet in this story?
- Do you feel that society fails the poor people in *Oliver Twist*?

Themes

What do you think Charles Dickens is saying about the following themes in the story of *Oliver Twist*?

- childhood poverty
- poverty and crime
- honesty and deceit
- love
- the power of good to overcome evil
- loyalty
- the city and the countryside

Style

Here's a challenge. Can you find paragraphs which contain the following?

- descriptions of setting and atmosphere
- suspense created by repetition, or short sentences and phrases
- the use of alliteration to enhance description or create rhythm
- the use of imagery to enhance description

Look closely at how these paragraphs are written. What do you notice? Can you write a paragraph in the same style?

Symbols

Writers frequently use symbols in their work to deepen the reader's emotions and understanding, and Charles Dickens is no exception. Think about how the symbols in this list match the action in *Oliver Twist*:

- darkness, shadows, fog and night
- brightness and daytime
- the dirt and smells of the city
- the freshness and cleanliness of the countryside

