About the author

Charles Dickens, born in Portsmouth in 1812, was the son of a clerk in the Navy Pay Office. Although the family had been relatively well-off, they got into great debt and when Charles was just twelve his father was imprisoned in Marshalsea debtors' prison in London. The boy was put to work in a factory for some months. Dicken's intense misery in this place made a profound impression on him and he drew greatly upon this experience in his novels.

At the age of fifteen, Dickens started work as an office boy and then became a reporter of debates in the Houses of Parliament. His first novel, *The Pickwick Papers*, published in serial form between 1836 and 1837, became very popular and Dickens became a celebrity. In 1836 he married Catherine Hogarth, the daughter of his publisher. *Oliver Twist*, which also appeared in serial form, was published between 1837 and 1839. A steady stream of novels followed, twenty in all.

Dickens lived an extraordinarily active life. As well as writing his novels and editing magazines, he worked for a variety of social causes, among them the abolition of slavery and capital punishment and the reform of prostitutes. He staged numerous theatrical productions, and from 1858 onwards he travelled throughout England and America, giving public readings of his novels. Although it produced ten children, his marriage was not a happy one and in 1858 Dickens separated from his wife. Around this time, the author became involved with the actress Ellen Ternan.

Dickens died suddenly in 1870 at the age of 58. He had achieved admiration and acclaim in a way that no other novelist had done before.

Summary

Charles Dickens, one of the greatest writers in the English language, wrote *Oliver Twist* between 1837 and 1839.

The novel tells the story of an orphaned boy, Oliver Twist, who spends his early childhood in the terrible conditions of a nineteenth century English workhouse. The inmates are given very little food and are regularly beaten; many of them die as a result of the under-nourishment and harsh living conditions. At the age of nine, after narrowly escaping being apprenticed to a drunken chimney sweep, Oliver is put to work with an undertaker. Conditions at the undertaker’s house are not much better than at the workhouse, but Oliver does at least have some meat to eat, even if it is only the dog’s leftovers. But the boy is treated so cruelly by the other members of the household that he runs away to London.

When he arrives in the big city Oliver falls into the hands of a gang of thieves and pickpockets under the control of the evil and scheming old Jew, Fagin. Oliver is very naïve and doesn’t realise that Fagin is trying to teach him the pickpocketing trade until it is too late. On his first ‘job’, Oliver ends up being arrested. Fortunately, the victim of the gang’s crime – a kindly old gentleman – recognises the honesty and sweetness of the young Oliver and he decides not to press charges. The old gentleman gives him shelter and nurses Oliver through a bad fever.

Meanwhile, the thieves want Oliver back with them because, for one thing, he knows enough of their secrets to get them hanged. Oliver is soon re-captured by Nancy, another member of Fagin’s gang. Nancy obviously likes Oliver and wants to help him, but she knows she is a victim of the gang herself and cannot do much. However, she does manage to intervene when Fagin looks set to give him a beating, threatening to kill the old man if he hurts the boy. Oliver is locked in a room in Fagin’s house for being so ‘ungrateful’ as to run away from those who had taken him in off the street.

A robbery of a house is organised by the ruthless Bill Sikes, a member of Fagin’s gang, and it is decided that Oliver should take part as he is small enough to climb through the window. But the robbery goes badly wrong and Oliver is shot and wounded by one of the servants and is then abandoned by the gang as they make their escape. On hearing the news, Fagin is distraught and it soon becomes clear that there is a secret about Oliver that no one must know when he meets with a mysterious man in a pub to bargain over the boy’s future.
The morning after the robbery, Oliver goes to the house the gang was trying to rob for assistance and he is taken in by the family who do not believe that such a sweet child would take part in such a terrible crime. The Maylies family look after Oliver and take him to their country house where he spends three happy months far away from the poverty and crime of the London streets.

Meanwhile, the mysterious man who met with Fagin in the pub turns up again. This time he goes to see Mr Bumble, seeking information on the identity of Oliver’s dead mother. Bumble and his new wife agree to meet the man at the dead of night in an old abandoned house on the river bank. In return for a sum of money, Bumble’s wife provides the man with what he is looking for – a package containing a gold chain and a wedding ring which belonged to Oliver’s mother. The mysterious man throws the package into the river saying that now it can never be used against him.

Since the robbery, Sikes has been unwell and unable to make a living. As a result, he and Nancy are living in poverty. He asks Fagin to give him some money and it is decided that Nancy should accompany Fagin to his house to fetch it. While she is waiting for Fagin to get the money, Nancy overhears a conversation between Fagin and the mysterious man which fills her with worry and anxiety. She realises that Oliver is in great danger and she resolves to help him even though it will put her life in great danger. She goes to see the Maylies family with whom Oliver is staying and tells them what she overheard in Fagin’s house – that in return for money, Fagin has agreed to do all he can to make Oliver a criminal.

The Maylies family contact Mr Brownlow and he sets about making Oliver safe and putting him out of reach of the criminals. He tries to help Nancy, but she refuses, saying she has no choice but to return to Bill Sikes. But unfortunately for her, Fagin has noticed her strange behaviour and, assuming she has found another lover, has been having her followed. When he finds out that Nancy has been giving away the gang’s secrets, Fagin decides to inform Bill Sikes of Nancy’s treachery. The reaction of the robber is predictably violent, and Nancy pays a terrible price at his hands.

But in the end, the thieves are brought to justice. They are all either hanged or end their days in prison, with the exception of one boy from Fagin’s gang who is so outraged by Bill Sikes’s violent behaviour that he sees the error of his ways and lives an honest life. Oliver’s secret is finally revealed and he goes to live with Mr Brownlow in whose house he is given the safe and loving environment that he deserves.

Background and themes

Oliver Twist was Dickens's second novel. It was begun in 1837 when Dickens was twenty-four and completed in 1839. It was written at great speed and intensity, which was typical of Dickens. He has two specific aims in mind, the first of which was to draw people’s attention to the terrible hardship created by the Poor Law of 1834. This law placed the unemployed in workhouses where the rules were so strict and the food so meagre that no one would willingly enter them. In the novel, the children in the workhouse where Oliver is sent are almost starved. The modern reader finds it difficult to believe that children could be treated like this. But Dickens’s account of workhouse life is not exaggerated by much and children regularly died under this harsh regime.

The author's second aim was to show the criminal world as it really was. At the time, novels were being published that tended to glamorise criminals (the same thing happens today). Dickens, with his experiences of childhood poverty, had seen the underworld first hand. He wanted to show its cruelty and degradation. He did a great deal of research for Oliver Twist. For example, the cold-hearted magistrate, Mr Fang, was loosely based on a real life magistrate, Mr Laing, whom Dickens had observed in court.

Over and above these two aims, Dickens had a greater purpose: to show the powerful links between poverty and crime. He wanted to demonstrate how poverty forced men, women and children into a life of crime in order to eat and survive. It is not an exaggeration to describe Dickens as one of the great social reformers of the nineteenth century. His novels brought the misery of poverty to the attention of the wealthy and the middle class in a way that they could not ignore. Of all his novels, Oliver Twist is the one that deals most directly with poverty and its consequences.

Oliver Twist was written with great energy and the novel is tense and dramatic. One reason for this is that the book was published in serial form for a magazine. Ending a chapter on a note of high drama was a way of keeping the reader keen for the next instalment. But the author’s high creative energy also manifests itself in the creation of unforgettable characters and scenes. Fagin, the leader
Oliver Twist

of the gang of pickpockets is one of the greatest creations in English literature. Scenes such as when Fagin teaches Oliver to pick pockets or when Oliver asks for more food in the workhouse created a sensation in nineteenth century society.

Dickens has always been loved for his humour. There are scenes of farce in Oliver Twist which comment on society while being savagely funny. While they are very cruel characters, both the scheming Fagin and bombastic Mr Bumble are also very comic characters.

In the last decade of his life, Dickens did several tours of England and America, giving public readings from his novels. He read with such dramatic intensity that he became physically and emotionally exhausted after these performances. This intensity was at its greatest when he gave readings of Oliver Twist, and his doctors advised him, for the sake of his health, to stop his performances of this novel. It stands as one of the greatest novels in the English language.

It is hardly surprising therefore that Oliver Twist has been adapted for the cinema screen on many occasions. The 1968 screen version of the musical play Oliver stands out for Ron Moody’s wonderfully comic creation of Fagin. In this production, the ending of the story is changed so that Fagin manages to escape capture and he and the Artful Dodger live to thieve another day. More recently, in 2005, Roman Polanski’s big-budget film version was released. This production offers a very bleak vision of the criminals’ lives and at the end of the film we see the harrowing scene of Oliver paying a final visit to Fagin as the pitiful old man awaits execution.

Discussion activities

Before Reading

1. Discuss: Tell students they have five minutes to write down three sentences about Charles Dickens and Oliver Twist. Tell them at least one of the sentences must be true and at least one of the sentences must be false. Then ask individual students to dictate one of their sentences and write it on the board. Ask the group to comment on the sentence – is it true or false? Repeat the procedure with another student and continue around the class for ten or fifteen minutes.

2. Guess: Put the students into pairs. Ask them to read the titles of the chapters on the Contents page of the book. Tell them to make list of all the characters named in the chapter titles and to divide them into two groups – ‘good’ characters and ‘bad’ characters. Beside each name the students write down their reason for putting the character in that particular group. Then conduct a feedback session with the whole class, with students comparing their answers.

Chapters 1–5, pages 1–16

After reading

3. Discuss: Put the students into groups of four. Allocate one of the following characters to each student in the group – Mr Bumble, Mrs Mann, Mrs Sowerberry, Noah Claypole. Each student makes a list of all the ways their character is cruel to Oliver. Then the students have a group discussion to elect the cruellest character of the four. Ask them to begin with each student in turn presenting their allocated characters. When they have finished, conduct a feedback session with the whole class in which each group of four presents their chosen ‘cruellest character’.

4. Role play: Students work in pairs. Ask them to imagine that Mr Bumble is to be interviewed by a modern-day journalist sent to investigate life inside the orphanage. Student A takes the role of Mr Bumble. Student B takes the role of the journalist. Before they begin the role play, the students should make a list of the important points and/or questions they wish to raise during the interview. Make sure that Student A realises that Mr Bumble is convinced he has right on his side and that boys like Oliver are ‘ungrateful’. The journalist, on the other hand, is appalled by Mr Bumble’s attitude.

5. Read carefully: Working individually, students write a short summary of the story so far.

6. Guess: Put the students in pairs. Ask the students to imagine what is going to happen to Oliver now he has run away. Each pair should note down their ideas so that they can read them out to the whole class during the feedback session.

Chapters 6–10, pages 16–35

Before reading

7. Discuss: Put the students in pairs and ask them to answer the following questions. What attracts poor people to go and live in a capital city like London? What are the advantages and disadvantages of such a move?

After reading

8. Role play: Working in pairs, students try to guess why John Dawkins has acquired the nickname ‘The Artful Dodger’. You may need to tell them the meaning of the verb ‘to dodge’ (to move quickly to avoid an obstacle). Ask them to imagine what John Dawkins has done to earn him his name and to invent a story about him. Then get them to role-play a conversation between Dawkins and Oliver in which Dawkins seeks to impress Oliver with his exploits and in which Oliver is naively impressed by everything he is told.
9 **Read carefully:** Put the students into groups of three or four. Allocate one of the following characters to each group – The Artful Dodger, Fagin, Mr Brownlow, Mr Grimwig (leave out Mr Grimwig if you don’t have enough students in your class). Ask each group to write a short character sketch of Oliver from the point of view of their character. After ten minutes or so, have one student from each group present their character sketch to the whole class.

10 **Discuss:** Students work in pairs to answer the following question: *Do you think it was better for Oliver to be with Fagin and his boys or with Mr and Mrs Sowerberry? Give reasons for your answer.* After the pairs have discussed the question for five or ten minutes, hold a whole-class discussion.

**Chapters 11–15, pages 36–61**

**After reading**

11 **Role play:** Put the students in groups of four. Allocate one of the following roles to each student in each group: Fagin, Bill Sikes, the Artful Dodger, Charley Bates. Have them role-play the scene which takes place at the beginning of Chapter 11 on pages 36–37 where the boys explain to Fagin and Sikes how Oliver was arrested by the police. Make sure the students behave ‘in character’.

12 **Role play:** Put the students in groups of three. Each student plays one of the following roles: Fagin, Bill Sikes, Nancy. Ask them to act out the scene between these three characters when the men are trying to persuade Nancy ‘by threats and promises’ (page 37) to go to the police station to find out what has happened to Oliver. Sikes should do the threatening and Fagin should do the promising. Choose one or two groups to role play the scene again in front of the whole class.

13 **Read carefully:** Working individually, the students re-read Chapters 11 and 12 to identify all the ways that Fagin shows himself to be wicked. They note down their answers and then compare their findings with another student. Call on each pair in turn to read out their findings to the whole class.

14 **Pair work:** Students must imagine that a police officer is called to the house in Chertsey to investigate the attempted robbery. Put the students in pairs. Ask each pair to prepare either the role of the servant, Giles, or the role of the police officer who has come to investigate the robbery. After a few minutes of preparation time, get the students to form new pairs so that a student who prepared the servant’s role is paired with a student who prepared the policeman’s role. Now tell the students to role play the conversation between Giles and the policeman.

15 **Pair work:** Repeat the procedure in exercise 14, but this time one half of the class prepares the role of Oliver and the other half prepares the role of the policeman.

16 **Guess:** Put the students in small groups. Ask them to re-read Chapter 15 and to come up with suggestions about the identity and the motives of the stranger who goes to meet Fagin. Ask them to answer the following questions: *Who is Monks? What does he want?*

**Chapters 16–20, pages 61–76**

**After reading**

17 **Role play:** Divide the class into four groups. Ask each group to draw up a detailed description of one of the characters in the Maylie household (Mrs Maylie, Rose Maylie, Dr Losberne, and Giles). They should include details of age and appearance as well as personality. Then ask them to consider their character’s opinion of Oliver Twist and to note down their ideas. They are to imagine that they are going to meet the other characters in order to decide what is to be done with the boy. Each group prepares a short speech to present their case. After a few minutes, create new groups so that each new group contains at least one representative for each of the four characters. Now ask them to role play the meeting with Dr Losberne as the chairman.

18 **Pair work:** Put the students in pairs and tell them to imagine the conversation that takes place between Mr and Mrs Bumble when Mr Bumble returns home after meeting Monks and tells his wife about their chance to earn some money. Remind them that the Bumbles had had an argument before Mr Bumble left for the pub and so their dialogue should reflect this. Go around the class while they are preparing and give help on vocabulary if necessary. Once they have written the dialogue, the students practise it out loud in pairs. Finally, ask some of the pairs to act out their dialogue in front of the whole class.

19 **Guess:** Why is Monks so keen to get rid of the contents of the little packet that Mrs Bumble gives him in Chapter 19? Put the students into groups of three or four. Ask the students to imagine what the significance of the contents of the little packet might be. They must invent a coherent story connected to these contents and offer an explanation for Monks’s behaviour. To help them, ask the students to consider the following questions: *Who did the objects in the packet belong to? What is the link between these objects and Oliver? What is the link between Oliver and Monks?*

20 **Discuss:** In Chapter 20, Nancy overhears the conversation between Fagin and Monks. What she hears affects her and she feels very anxious. As a whole class activity, ask students to volunteer guesses about what Nancy has overheard. If they have trouble thinking of reasons, offer this one: *Perhaps Monks is a police agent and Fagin was giving him information about Bill Sikes.* When you have obtained two or three guesses, ask the students to imagine what they would
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do in Nancy’s position in each case. What decision has Nancy made when she suddenly stands up after sitting on the doorstep in the street?

Chapters 21–25, pages 77–95

After reading

21 Role play: Put the students in pairs and have them summarise the main points of the dialogue between Nancy and Rose on pages 78–82. Ask them to re-write the dialogue and to practise reading it out loud. Ask some of the pairs to act out the dialogue in front of the whole class.

22 Discuss: Put the students into small groups. Ask them to answer the following questions: Is Nancy a good or a bad woman? Justify your opinion. Why do you think Nancy refuses Rose’s offer to help in order to return to Bill Sikes? Can you understand her behaviour? After the group discussions, you may want to broaden the discussion into a whole class activity with each group presenting its opinions to the rest of the class.

23 Pair work: Working in pairs, the students write the conversation which takes place between Rose and Mr Brownlow at the end of Chapter 22. Have them practise reading it out loud.

24 Write: Working in small groups, the students imagine they are court reporters at the trial of the Artful Dodger. They write a short account of the Dodger’s court appearance. To add variety, ask the different groups to write the report in different styles. For example, one group could write a humorous account of the trial, while another could write a very serious, objective account. A third group could write an account which is sympathetic to the Dodger, and a fourth group could write an account which is hostile to him. At the end of the activity, each group reads their report to the rest of the class.

25 Discuss: Put the students in small groups and have them discuss the following question: On page 88 we learn that Fagin believes Nancy has a new lover. In what ways might this be an advantage to him?

26 Role play: Ask the students to re-tell the story contained in the first part of Chapter 24 (pages 87–88) from the point of view of Fagin. They should write a monologue for the character in which he goes over what he has just seen before coming to the conclusion that Nancy has another lover and that he must have her followed. One member of each group is chosen to perform the monologue for the whole class.

27 Discuss: Write the following question on the board: Who is the worse villain of the two, Sikes or Fagin? Ask the students to consider the behaviour of each of these characters up to and including the death of Nancy. Working individually, the students write one statement about each of the characters. Then, ask one of the students to read out one of their statements and write in on the board. Then go around the class asking individual students to react to it. Continue the procedure for 10 to 15 minutes or until the students’ interest wanes.

Chapters 26–30, pages 95–113

After reading

28 Pair work: Ask students to imagine that after killing Nancy, Bill Sikes has a dream about her in which she talks to him and wants to know why he killed her. Before playing out the scene, student A writes down all the reasons that made Sikes think Nancy had to be killed. Student B writes down all the reasons why Nancy did not deserve to be killed. Then have the students act out the scene.

29 Discuss: Put the students in small groups. Have them re-read the encounter between Mr Brownlow and Monks. Now write the following questions on the board: Does Brownlow judge Monks too harshly? To what extent is Monks a victim of circumstance, just like Oliver Twist?

30 Write: Charley Bates is disgusted by Sikes when he finds out he has killed Nancy. He is also present in the house in Jacob’s Creek when Sikes meets his death. Ask the students to write an account of the death of Sikes from the point of view of Charley Bates.

31 Write: Have the students work individually. Ask them to write Fagin’s confession as he sits in his cell awaiting execution. Does he regret his behaviour? Does he feel he is being unfairly treated?

After reading

32 Pair work: In pairs, students make a list of the five most dramatic chapters in the book. They must write a sentence about each of their chosen chapters in order to justify their decisions.

33 Read carefully: Put the students into groups of four or five people. Students take turns to give one or two facts about one of the characters in the book without saying who it is. (Since there is a lot to say about most of them, characters may be described several times.)

34 Role play: Put the students into groups of six people. Ask each group to choose two or three scenes from the book involving two or three people and to divide up into pairs or threesomes accordingly and to act out the scenes. Afterwards, the students say why they chose those particular scenes.

35 Pair work: In pairs, students discuss the following questions: Do you like Oliver? Do you think he is a believable character? Give reasons for your opinion.

Vocabulary activities

For the Word List and vocabulary activities, go to www.penguinreaders.com.