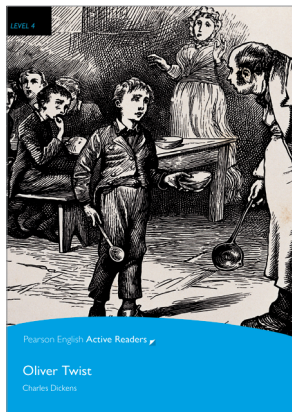


# Oliver Twist

Charles Dickens



## About the author

Charles Dickens was born in 1812 in Portsmouth, England, the second of eight children. His family then moved to Chatham, to the east of London. His childhood was not a very happy one. His father, a government clerk, was imprisoned for debt and the twelve year old Dickens was sent to work in a factory. The experience had a profound effect on him, and throughout his life Dickens had a fear of the lack of money and this drove him to undertake huge workloads. Despite little formal education, he worked hard, first as a solicitor's clerk and then as a parliamentary reporter. His first book, *The Pickwick Papers* (1836–7), essentially a comedy, was a publishing phenomenon with the characters in it becoming household names. Dickens followed this with *Oliver Twist* and later such classics as *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*. Towards the end of his life his novels became increasingly more sombre, full of biting social criticism and savage comedy. Dickens was married to Catherine Hogarth, but separated from her in 1858. They had ten children. Dickens died in 1870, and despite his insistence that he wanted a normal, quiet family funeral, was buried in Poet's Corner in Westminster Abbey in London.

## Summary

*Oliver Twist's* mother dies shortly after giving birth to him in a workhouse. At nine years old he goes to live with an undertaker where he is cruelly treated. He then runs away to London, where he becomes involved with a gang of child thieves, controlled by the evil Fagin. After a street robbery goes wrong, Oliver is cared for by the kindly Mr Brownlow but he soon ends up back in the grips of Fagin and his accomplice Bill Sikes. Oliver is shot while breaking into the Maylie's house and later recovers

there, once again free of Fagin. However, Fagin and the mysterious Mr Monks plot to recapture him. Nancy, Sikes's girlfriend, hears of the plot and tells Rose Maylie. On hearing of her deception, Sikes murders Nancy. We learn that Oliver is actually Monk's half brother and entitled to a fortune from his father's will, which was destroyed, and that Monks has been trying to turn Oliver into a criminal to discredit him. The truth comes out in the end and the characters get what they deserve. Sikes is killed, Fagin is hanged, and Oliver eventually finds long-lasting happiness.

**Chapters 1–3:** The story begins in the workhouse where a boy is born. His mother dies soon after the birth and the child is named Oliver Twist. The first nine years of his life are spent in the terrible conditions of cold and hunger that prevailed in the workhouse. Then one day Oliver asks for some more food at dinner time and the enraged Mr Bumble pays for Oliver to be taken away by a local undertaker, Mr Sowerberry. Oliver suffers further mistreatment at the hands of Noah Claypole, an employee, and Mrs Sowerberry. After suffering physical and mental abuse, he decides to run away to London.

**Chapters 4–6:** Oliver sets off on foot for London. On the way he meets a strange boy, Jack Dawkins, who befriends him and offers him a place to stay in London. Dawkins leads Oliver to a house of unimaginable filth, and introduces him to an ugly old man, Fagin. At first, Fagin and the boys who live with him seem very kind to Oliver. One day, Oliver asks if he can go to 'work' with the other boys and it is then that he realises they are all thieves. Jack Dawkins and Charley Bates steal a handkerchief from an old man, Mr Brownlow. The man raises the alarm, and in the confusion Oliver is apprehended by a policeman. Mr Brownlow takes pity on Oliver and takes him to his house. Fagin and his evil friend Bill Sikes are informed of this development and make plans to get Oliver back, with the help of Bill's girlfriend, Nancy.

**Chapters 7–9:** Oliver is very content in Mr Brownlow's house, which is very clean and comfortable. One day, Oliver offers to take some books and some money to a bookshop for Mr Brownlow. On the way to the shop, Oliver is captured by Bill Sikes and Nancy and taken back to Fagin's house. Fagin tells Oliver that he has to work for him. Sikes and Fagin plan a robbery in a country house, and they choose Oliver as the boy they need to enter the house through a small window. Oliver enters the house,

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but a noise wakes up the household, and Oliver is shot. Sikes grabs him and runs away, but then drops him in a field.

**Chapters 10–12:** Oliver wakes up and decides to enter the house again. A doctor is called to attend to Oliver's wound. The owners of the house, Rose Maylie and her aunt, Mrs Maylie, nurse Oliver through a fever. He recovers and enjoys several months of happiness. Then, one night when he is half asleep, he thinks he sees Fagin and another man at his window and screams. Meanwhile, back in the workhouse, Mr Bumble receives a visitor, Mr Monks. Monks questions Bumble about Oliver, and wants to see a woman who knows something about Oliver's mother. Bumble arranges a meeting and an old woman gives Monks a locket that belonged to Oliver's mother. Monks then throws this into the river.

**Chapters 13–17:** Nancy overhears a conversation between Fagin and Monks concerning Oliver. She decides to tell Rose Maylie, who is now in a London hotel with Oliver. She informs Rose that Monks believes Oliver to be his brother and is planning terrible things for him. Nancy arranges to meet Rose on London Bridge on Sunday night. There she tells Brownlow and Rose where they can find Monks, and what he looks like. Noah Claypole, who is hiding nearby, overhears the conversation and runs to tell Fagin. Claypole then recounts his story to Bill Sikes, who in a mad rage, batters Nancy to death with a heavy stick.

**Chapters 18–21:** Sikes decides to leave London, but returns with plans to escape to France. Meanwhile, Monks is brought to Brownlow's house. Brownlow tells Monks what he believes happened in the past. Monks's father separated from his wife, and fell in love with a beautiful young girl, Agnes. He planned to marry her, but died suddenly. Agnes died soon afterwards in the workhouse, after giving birth to Oliver, making Oliver Monks's half brother. Monks's father left a will giving half of his property to Oliver, a will that Monks's mother then destroyed. Brownlow accuses Monks of throwing away a locket, proof of Oliver's parentage, and of paying Fagin to turn Oliver into a thief. Monks admits to everything. Sikes later dies by accidentally hanging himself, Fagin is sentenced to death and hanged, and Oliver lives happily as Brownlow's adopted son.

### Background and themes

**Poverty and the lower classes:** Before Dickens, no writer had written about the poor except to portray them as chronic criminals or characters to be laughed at. Dickens, however, was on the side of the poor. He loved them and he wrote for them. Of course, there are criminals in the book, but they are portrayed as three dimensional people with reasons for their actions and not just as caricatures. Dickens describes the utter squalor these people had to live in and the wretchedness of their lives and contrasts this sharply with the comfort and stability of others. By doing this he shows us that he believed that people were made bad by circumstance and not born bad.

**The pursuit of money:** Fagin wants his boys to steal so he can profit, Monks wants to profit from a will, Bumble wants money to reveal a secret. These characters are consumed by the greed for money and this is what turns them into evil people. Dickens had a fear of the lack of money because he fully understood what it could lead to.

**The treatment of children:** The majority of poor children in Victorian London had dreadful lives. They were confined to workhouses, beaten in deplorable boarding schools, forced to work in terrible conditions, or reduced to petty theft on the streets. Dickens was one of the first people to bring this to public attention, and this prompted the government to act.

### Discussion activities

#### Chapters 1–3

##### Before reading

- Group work:** Put the students in small groups and write *Victorian London, 1840* on the board. Ask them to consider the following questions:  
*Was there a lot of crime? Was there a big difference between the rich and poor? Did the children go to school? What were the hospitals like? What was the food like? What type of transport did they use? Was it a clean place to live?*

**While reading** (p. 2, when Oliver asks for more food)

- Role play:** Put students in groups of three. Tell them that one of them has to be Oliver and the others have to be two of his friends. They then have to role play the scene when Oliver asks for more food. His friends try to make him do it and Oliver has to argue against them.

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## After reading

- 3 Write and guess:** Put students in pairs and ask them to choose a short paragraph from Chapters 1–3. Tell them to write it again, making five changes to words in the text. Students then read out their paragraphs to the other students, who have to identify the mistakes.

## Chapters 4–6

### While reading (Beginning of Chapter 5)

- 4 Pair work:** Put the students into pairs and ask them to write all the words they know that relate to criminal activity. This can be the names of individual crimes and the criminals that commit them, and the types of punishment criminals can receive. The pair with the longest list wins. Then put the words on the board. Each pair chooses one word from that list and writes a definition. Have the pairs read their definitions aloud without saying the word itself and the other students in the class have to guess which word they are describing. Afterwards, ask the students to decide what sentence they would give for each crime if they were a judge.

### While reading (pp. 18–19)

- 5 Write:** Ask students to look at the drawing on pages 18–19. Tell them to write a list of all the things they can see in Fagin's house.

## Chapters 7–9

### While reading (p. 28, where Oliver starts to tell his story)

- 6 Group work:** Put students into groups and ask them to think about what Oliver is going to tell Mr Brownlow about his life so far. Tell them they must include details of what happened in the workhouse, what happened in Mr Sowerberry's house, how he met Jack Dawkins, his time in Fagin's house and details of the robbery.

## After reading

- 7 Pair work:** Write the following words on the board: *bookshop, small window, a lamp, a picture, hanged*. Have the students talk and write in pairs to say how these words were used in Chapters 7–9.

## Chapters 10–12

### While reading (Beginning of p. 49)

- 8 Discuss:** Tell the students that Oliver thinks he has seen Fagin, or has had a bad dream. Put students into groups to talk about their own experiences of bad dreams.  
*What happened in the dream? Have you had the dream more than once? Did you tell anyone about the dream at the time? How old were you? Do you think dreams can tell us anything? Can they tell us about the future?*

## After reading

- 9 Write and guess:** Write *I'm ashamed I shot a young boy* on the board. Ask student to guess which person says or thinks this. Now, have students choose a person from Chapters 10–12 and write a sentence to say what they are thinking at one particular moment. Students read out the sentences and the others guess who it is.

## Chapters 13–17

### While reading (p. 59, when Nancy meets Rose)

- 10 Pair work:** Put students into pairs. Remind students that Rose and Nancy have very different backgrounds. One student plays the role of Nancy and the other the role of Rose. Students have to tell each other about their lives.  
*What was her childhood like? What do her parents do? What does she like doing now? What is her job? What is her house like? What problems does she have in her everyday life?*

## After reading

- 11 Discuss:** Put the students into small groups and ask them to think of all the famous murders throughout history. These can be real or imaginary as found in books and films. The students can also consider famous cases in their own countries.  
*Who was murdered and when? How was it done? Why was it done? What happened to the murderer?*

## Chapters 18–21

### While reading (Beginning of p. 86)

- 12 Role play:** Tell the students they are going to act out the trial of Fagin. Put students in groups of four. The group chooses one of them to be Fagin, one of them to be the judge, one of them to be a lawyer who wants Fagin to hang and one of them who wants him to go free. Each lawyer asks Fagin questions, and the judge can also ask questions to the lawyers or Fagin. At the end, the judge gives his/her decision.

## After reading

- 13 Research:** Ask the students if any of them have seen any of the film versions of the book and what they thought of it. Then tell them to find some film reviews on the Internet. They then have to write a summary of those reviews and some students can be chosen to give a short oral presentation to the rest of the class.