

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Oliver Twist (Unabridged)

by
Charles Dickens

Book Information

Charles Dickens, Oliver Twist (Unabridged)

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Oliver Twist is the tale of a young orphan's odyssey from the bleak life of a parish workhouse to a life of comfort with his newly discovered relatives.

Topics: Adventure, Escape; Classics, Classics (All); Countries/Regions, England; Family Life, Orphans; Popular Groupings, Upper Grades Popular Authors/Starred Reviews

Main Characters

Charley Bates a friend of John Dawkins and a fellow thief

Dick Oliver's workhouse friend who is very ill and welcomes death

Fagin an old man who takes in troubled boys and teaches them the art of stealing for his own profit

Harry Maylie Mrs. Maylie's son, who foregoes a political life to win Rose's hand in marriage

John Dawkins, or "the artful Dodger" a young pick-pocket who introduces Oliver to Fagin

Monks, or Edward Leeford Oliver's half-brother, who tries to discredit Oliver's good character

Mr. Brownlow an older gentleman who takes Oliver in and cares for him

Mr. Bumble a parish beadle who is in charge of the workhouse where Oliver lives

Mr. Losberne a doctor who treats Oliver and tries to clear him of guilt; he helps reveal Oliver's identity

Mr. Sowerberry the undertaker who takes Oliver as an apprentice

Mrs. Corney a workhouse matron who learns part of Oliver's past from a dying woman

Mrs. Maylie a woman who takes in the sick and injured Oliver

Nancy a girl who "works" for Fagin and comes to Oliver's defense; she is murdered by Sikes

Noah Claypole the charity boy Oliver works with under Mr. Sowerberry

Oliver Twist a poor boy orphaned at birth who is sent to a workhouse, then apprenticed, falls in with a band of thieves, and is eventually saved and receives the kind of life he deserves

Rose Maylie a young beauty who helps Oliver back to health and later learns she is Oliver's aunt

Sikes the often-drunk criminal whom Nancy protects; he later murders her when she betrays Fagin

Vocabulary

beadle an officer in charge of keeping order in the parish workhouse

cabriolet a horse-drawn carriage with a folding top and one or two seats

choleric irritable

gig a horse-drawn, two-wheeled cart

gruel a food made from boiled oatmeal or cereal

sovereign a British gold coin valued at one pound

victuals food

Synopsis

The main character, Oliver Twist, is an orphaned pauper who is forced to live a wretched existence in a parish workhouse. One day he dares to ask for a second helping of food, and his audacity is severely punished. The parish board decides that he is a menace to their system, and they apprentice the boy to an undertaker.

Oliver learns the undertaker's profession until a fight with another charity boy leaves him severely beaten by his master and falsely accused of attempting murder. Oliver decides to run away from this home and seek his fortune in London.

On the road to London, Oliver meets a young dodger named John Dawkins, who introduces him to Fagin, the leader of a band of thieves. Oliver does not realize their "trade" until he accompanies Dawkins and another boy to the London streets and they steal a man's handkerchief. Oliver is wrongly

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identified as the thief and apprehended by the police, but then released when the kindly victim, Mr. Brownlow, takes pity on the sickly boy. Oliver is taken to live with Mr. Brownlow and recuperates in unaccustomed comfort.

One day, while returning books for Mr. Brownlow, Oliver is kidnapped and once again falls into the clutches of the thief, Fagin. Mr. Brownlow is worried about Oliver and advertises a reward for information concerning his whereabouts and background. Mr. Bumble, a parish beadle who knew Oliver at the workhouse, tells Mr. Brownlow that Oliver was a nasty child who has probably run off and stolen his books. Mr. Brownlow believes this news and forbids his servants from ever speaking Oliver's name again.

While in Fagin's control, Oliver is immersed in the sub-culture of thievery. He is sent with a violent criminal named Sikes to rob an estate, but Oliver is shot during the break-in. Sikes carries him away from the crime scene, but then abandons the wounded boy in a ditch. Oliver awakens the next day and returns to the house to seek help.

Rose Maylie, the niece of the owner of the house, persuades her aunt to help the wounded boy. Their doctor friend, Mr. Losberne, convinces the family that Oliver was not responsible for the robbery. Oliver is allowed to stay with the Maylie family. He eventually accompanies them to their country cottage where Rose becomes ill. Eventually Rose overcomes her illness, and Oliver is reunited with the kind Mr. Brownlow.

Meanwhile, Fagin has been trying to locate and recapture Oliver, as Oliver has information that could lead the criminal to the gallows. One of Fagin's associates, a girl named Nancy, uncovers a plot between Fagin and a shadowy figure named Monks that places Oliver in great danger. Monks knows of Oliver's history and is after a family inheritance that Oliver does not know exists. Before Monks can succeed in ruining Oliver's reputation, Nancy intercedes on Oliver's behalf. Her enraged boyfriend, Sikes, then murders Nancy.

Sikes dies while trying to escape from the authorities, and Fagin is discovered and hanged. Mr. Losberne and Mr. Brownlow locate Monks and force him to divulge the truth, revealing Oliver's true heritage. The reader learns that Monks is really Edward Leeford, Oliver's half-brother, and that Rose is his mother's sister. While Monks relocates to America, Mr. Brownlow adopts Oliver, and they move to the country to live next to his beloved Aunt Rose and the Maylie family.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

Harry Maylie is a privileged man who makes no secret of his love for Rose. Unfortunately, Rose's questionable past makes associating with her a threat to his promising future. What does Harry do to remedy his problem, and why does this course of action work?

Harry accepts Rose's assessment that his future in politics would suffer because of innuendoes surrounding her past. He chooses to forsake politics altogether and cleverly becomes the minister of a small country church. It is the perfect solution since it is a respectable profession and one in which the supposed "sins" associated with Rose's past would most likely be overlooked or forgiven.

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Literary Analysis

The setting for *Oliver Twist* is England in the mid-1800s. How important is this setting to the main storyline?

The historical backdrop for the story is the bleak time period surrounding the Industrial Revolution in England. It was a time when many people had little to survive on and a majority of the country's wealth was controlled by a very few people. Workhouses were prevalent, and many poor youths were forced to labor while receiving the bare essentials. In a different setting, the story would not have played out as it did. While many of today's youth face difficult lives, there are better laws in place to protect most children from a fate similar to Oliver Twist's.

Inferential Comprehension

Oliver has no family of his own and, thus, his friends become a central part of his life. Dick, a youth who lives with Oliver in the workhouse, is probably Oliver's best friend. Unlike Oliver, Dick is not able to survive his hard life. Why do you think Oliver survives while Dick does not?

Both Dick and Oliver are sickly while living together in the workhouse. Oliver, however, by virtue of the care he receives after leaving the workhouse, recovers his health. Also, Dick fondly remembers his little sister who is already dead and wishes to be with her in heaven so she will not forget him. With nothing on earth to comfort him and with Oliver gone, Dick seems to look forward to dying. Oliver, on the other hand, believes he has had no relatives to miss. He is blessed with a positive outlook, pleasant personality, and the will to survive.

Constructing Meaning

Mr. Bumble is a self-absorbed beadle who enjoys making the workhouse children miserable. When he is accused of being more guilty in the eye of the law than his wife for destroying the trinkets she stole, he declares that the law must be "a bachelor." What does he mean by this?

While Mr. Bumble is very influential as a beadle, in his role as husband he carries very little weight. In fact, his wife seems to wield all the power in their relationship. The law supposes that he has more say than his wife in what they do. But, if the law was based on a relationship similar to Mr. Bumble and Mrs. Corney's it would not assume such a thing.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors The workhouses of England play a prominent role in *Oliver Twist*. It would be interesting to see what progress has occurred since Dickens's time in the manner in which the poorest and most destitute are treated. Ask your students to research the history of workhouses and other government programs from the 1840's to the present. Have them write a summary of their findings along with their opinion of whether or not things have improved for the paupers of today.

Understanding the Author's Craft Dickens stated that he refused to alter the realism of his subject matter just to soften its impact on his readers. He compared his writing to other famous literary figures such as Fielding, Defoe, Goldsmith, Smollett, Richardson, and Mackenzie. Have your students choose to read a work by one of these authors. Ask them to identify the author's purpose in writing the piece and to compare the work of *Oliver Twist* in terms of the strength of its language.

Comparing and Contrasting Dickens initially portrays Mr. Bumble as a self-absorbed and unfeeling man who possesses some power because of his position as a beadle. He is unmistakably proud to wear the uniform of the beadle. Later, when he loses his job and status,

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he seems to lose his identity as well. Have your students compare Mr. Bumble with real people in other professions who also wear a uniform. Have them compare the authority inherent in their uniforms are to how effectively they are able to execute their duties. For example, a policeman is instantly recognizable by his uniform and people react immediately upon seeing it.

Deriving Word or Phrase Meaning Charles Dickens wrote many of his works for publishing in serial installments. As such, he was paid by the word, and there are many passages in the story where this fact may be evident by his verbose style. Have your students choose a "wordy" passage from the book and ask them to rewrite a more streamlined version while still maintaining its intended meaning. Ask students to read the original and then their own version to the class.