

Stanford House Classics - Elementary

OLIVER TWIST

Charles Dickens

literature analysis and response



OLIVER TWIST

Charles Dickens

Charles Dickens was about twenty five when he wrote *Oliver Twist*. He was a famous and popular writer. The story was written in episodes, and appeared each month in a 'periodical', starting in 1837. Dickens wrote under the name of 'Boz'. He was writing several books at the same time. Dickens was sure that the environment a person lived in would create their character. Oliver was an exception – bad environment – good boy. Long live the hero!



Stanford House

Born in a 'Workhouse'

There was trouble in England in the early nineteenth century.

The rich people were afraid of a Revolution¹ similar to the one that had happened in France. And they were afraid that some of their own money would be used to feed the hungry and homeless.

They invented the 'Workhouse', and built them in all the small towns. From now on, if the poor wanted help, they would have to live in the Workhouse. The meals were tiny, men were separated from women, and everyone had to work at boring, unhealthy tasks. Life was bad and many people died. Beggars² were thrown in prison.

Oliver's mother had been found lying in a street of a small town. She was taken to the Workhouse. That same night, she gave birth³, looked at her newborn son, and died.

So, Oliver Twist was born in a Workhouse.

"One less mouth to feed!" said the doctor, looking at the dead mother as he washed his hands. Then he went to eat a fine dinner.

An Unloved and Unwanted Child

On Oliver's ninth birthday, something happened which changed his life. He had finished his tiny bowl of thin soup. He went to stand in front of the master, and said, "Please, sir, I want some more."

"What!" cried the man who served up the food. He grabbed Oliver, and hit him with a large spoon.

The next day, the masters of the Workhouse decided to sell the boy who had said this terrible word, 'more'. Oliver was sold for five pounds to the local undertaker⁴ as an assistant. Undertakers always had plenty of business at the Workhouse. The undertaker liked Oliver and trained him to help at the funerals⁵, but the undertaker's wife hated him. Soon, Oliver ran away.

1. Has society changed for poor people since the 19th century? List some changes.

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2. Write out the section beginning "Oliver's mother..." up to "eat a fine dinner" in the Present Tense.

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1. **Revolution:** literally, turning a complete circle. Here, a complete change of government and society.
 2. **Beggars:** people who try to live by asking for food or money in public places.
 3. **gave birth:** had a baby (to give; gave; given).
 4. **undertaker:** one who takes a dead body and buries it.
 5. **funeral:** ceremony at which a person is buried.

For seven long, cold days he walked towards London.

It was daybreak. Oliver was sitting in a doorway, cold, hungry, tired and alone.

“Hello... Hello... You look awful¹!”

The voice came from a boy who was dressed in clothes which were too big for him. He stared at Oliver from beneath an old top-hat that balanced on his head.

“My friends call me the ‘Artful Dodger’²,” said the boy, proudly. “I think you need a place to stay and some food. Come with me. I know a nice old gentleman in London who will help you, and he won’t ask for a penny!”

“Artful Dodger is a strange name,” thought Oliver, but then he said out loud, “Yes, please. Thank you for your help.”

“Look,” said the Dodger, “I have five pence. I will buy us some food and beer for breakfast!”

Fagin

The Artful Dodger led Oliver to London, and into the oldest, most crowded, and dirtiest part – nothing but small streets and alleys³. Oliver was frightened. He stumbled over stinking rubbish.

“Here we are,” said his companion, “this is the house of the nice old gentleman.”

They knocked on the filthy door.

“Come in, come in, my fine boys. I am very, very glad to see you.”

It was Fagin who spoke. He was old. His face was wrinkled, his mass⁴ of red hair was dirty and knotted, and his body was thin and bent.

“Yes, come in, my dears⁵.”

When Fagin’s eyes looked at Oliver, Oliver felt horribly cold inside. But the man gave him a meal, and

3. List six adjectives from the page opposite, and explain what they mean.

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4. Sketch Fagin.

1. **awful:** bad, ill, messy.
2. **Artful Dodger:** Many people in Dickens’ books have funny names which say something about their character. Artful Dodger = cunning cheat.
3. **alley:** narrow path between buildings.
4. **mass:** here, a large amount.
5. **dears:** a term of affection for children or younger friends.

led him to an old mattress¹ where he could sleep.

There were other boys living in the house. A woman called Nancy and a man called Bill Sykes often visited. Bill Sykes was violent and dangerous. Oliver looked away when Sykes looked at him.

“London people are strange,” thought Oliver.

In the days that followed, he noticed that the boys always went out in the morning. When they returned, they pulled large numbers of handkerchiefs², wallets³, and watches out of their deep pockets. They gave these to Fagin.

“I am very pleased, my dears,” said Fagin, smiling. But his eyes looked hard as he said, “Are you sure that this is everything?”

Oliver Twist was an honest boy, but he knew too little about the world to wonder where all these valuable things had come from.

Oliver Among Thieves

Next day, Oliver found out. He was taken for a walk in the more wealthy streets of London by the Artful Dodger and another boy, called Charley Bates.

“Look, Charley!” said the Artful Dodger suddenly, “Do you see that man standing by the bookshop reading an old book?”

“I see him,” whispered Charley.

“You stay here, Oliver. Come on, Charley, let’s get him.”

The two boys walked carefully up to stand beside the elderly man. He looked wealthy in his gold spectacles⁴ and velvet⁵ jacket. Suddenly, the Dodger put his hand into the man’s pocket, pulled out a handkerchief, and gave it to Charley. The boys ran away.

“Oh, dear,” thought Oliver, standing with his mouth open, “this is where all those things came from. Fagin

5. Say whether the following are true or false.

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| a) Oliver was a thief. | T | F |
| b) Bill Sykes was a pleasant man. | T | F |
| c) The elderly man looked wealthy. | T | F |
| d) Fagin was pleased. | T | F |
| e) Oliver knew too much about the world. | T | F |
| f) The elderly man was reading a newspaper. | T | F |
| g) Fagin did not trust his boys. | T | F |
| h) Bill and Nancy lived with Fagin. | T | F |

Now Correct the false ones.

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6. Complete the sentences.

- a) All the boys went out
- b) They came back with
- c) Oliver didn’t understand
- d) The elderly man didn’t notice when the Dodger
- e) When Oliver realized what they did, he was

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1. **mattress:** padded mat to sleep on.
2. **handkerchief:** a square of fine material carried in the pocket.
3. **wallet:** a small bag or flat case for carrying money or papers.
4. **spectacles:** eye-glasses, bifocals.
5. **velvet:** a type of cloth with a soft, springy surface.