



# Oliver Twist: The Author

What do you know about Charles Dickens?

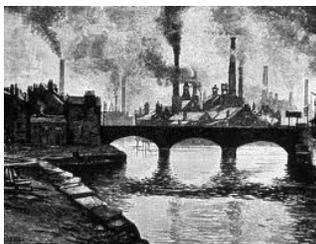
Charles Dickens is the probably the most read author of novels who ever lived. His works have also been adapted more than any other novelist, so there are more film, theatre, musical and TV versions of his works than any other writer.

Did you know?

In 2012 Dicken's 200th birthday was celebrated!

Why is this?

Dickens wrote his novels in the middle of the nineteenth century, so why is he still so popular in this day and age all around the world? Here are some possible answers:



Dickens was the first writer to describe the modern industrialized world, especially its cities, like London. Dickens was the first writer to make children the central characters of novels aimed at adults. Dickens linked his anger at the inequality and cruelty of society with exciting stories that are almost "soap

operas" - in fact his novels were published originally chapter by chapter each week. This style has been described as the basis for modern film techniques. His work satisfied every class and type of reader. Dickens is a master of character- only Shakespeare created more memorable and internationally recognised characters. Dickens mixes comedy, tragedy, melodrama and documentary styles. Most other writers use one style only. This richness of style is simply very entertaining. Dickens prose style is very rich and varied.

He is a master of dialogue and action - which is why his books make wonderful films. Dickens himself knew this and often performed extracts to huge audiences.



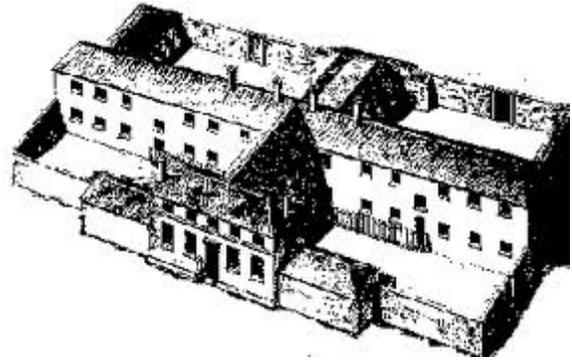
Did you know?

Also in the workhouses: orphans and abandoned children, the physically and mentally sick, the disabled, the elderly and unmarried mothers.

# Oliver Twist: The Setting

## Background

In 19th century Britain there were many poor people. That may be true of many societies even today but the type of poverty in Britain then was new. Poor farmers were leaving the land through pressure from the new industrial agriculture that did not need humans. Even more importantly than that the new industrial cities lured country people to them as there was a huge need for factory workers.



## What did they expect?

Many people thought the new cities would be paved with gold but they found them to be full of “dark satanic mills” and conditions not much better than slavery. There was no proper sanitation or medical care. Beggars and thieves were everywhere. To control the poor and keep the streets free from beggars and the sick the British government set up special places in every city and small town called workhouses.



## What were workhouses?

These places gave free food and shelter to poor people but they were also a type of punishment for being poor. They were run rather like prisons. Each workhouse was run by a Beadle – this officer could easily steal money set aside to feed and clothe the poor ....and the Beadle often did just that! Poor people feared the workhouse and would do almost anything to escape its clutches. The workhouses continue right up until the First World War. Dickens hated workhouses. Oliver is a typical victim of the workhouse. As an illegitimate orphan there was nowhere else for him to go except the street and a life of crime.

# Oliver Twist: The Characters



## Fagin

He is a Jew so he is an outsider, a victim of prejudice in Victorian England. Fagin is a wonderful and complex character – is he good or bad? He is morally wrong because he organises thieves and sells stolen goods. He is morally good because he provides protection food and housing for lost and abandoned children and is kinder to them than the workhouse officers. It is not clear if Fagin himself could survive in any other way. Like Bill Sikes he is both a victim and an exploiter of others. He is eventually executed. Is this fair? What crime did he commit that was that bad? “If I am so bad why am I so poor?” What do you, the audience, think of this moral dilemma? The novel and play ask “what is the relationship between poverty and crime?”

## The Artful Dodger

He is a typical street child, a minor criminal who will surely grow up to be another Bill Sikes, But he is still a child who likes to play and have fun. He has no family. He seems tough but needs affection. He cares for Little Joe who is betrayed. He cares for Nancy who he betrays. His last words are “All I ever done was steal handkerchiefs” but the police and mob want to destroy him. Is he right? Is he victim or criminal or maybe both?

## Nancy and Bill

Two criminals who love each other but destroy each other. Bill Sikes is a tough guy and a drunkard. He lives by violence, kills the only woman who loved him and dies violently. The criminals in OLIVER TWIST end up destroying themselves. Nancy tries to be moral and save Oliver and is punished for her small act of goodness.



## Oliver

He is at the centre of the book, but often has few choices. His great moment of rebellion is to ask for more food in the workhouse, where the poor are almost starved. “Please Sir, can I have some more?” Is one of the most famous speeches in English literature. It is a demand for justice as well as food. Oliver is lucky – he escapes because he is taken back into wealthy and respectable society. But this escape is not available to the Artful Dodger or Nancy – they are not the lost grandchild of a rich man. So does Dickens’ happy ending really leave us with a solution or does it simply say that luck is the only escape?

# Oliver Twist: Work and Activities

LET'S  
DISCUSS

What do you  
image life in a  
workhouse to be  
like? Do such  
realities still exist  
today?

What is the  
relationship  
between poverty  
and crime?

Answer the following  
questions.... then find the  
correct one-word answer  
in the box on the right:

- 1) A female character in Oliver Twist
- 2) The workhouses were run by who?
- 3) Fagin was an outsider because he was what?
- 4) A tough character in the novel... often drunk
- 5) This era serves as a background to many of Dickens' stories
- 6) One of the cities featured in Dickens' works

A	S	N	A	N	C	Y	O	K	L
S	E	B	J	B	B	U	Y	H	O
D	R	E	D	I	A	R	O	F	N
B	E	A	D	L	E	T	R	A	D
T	B	E	V	L	Z	G	P	C	O
J	E	W	B	S	S	D	H	T	N
U	Q	Y	D	I	W	D	A	O	D
E	S	O	S	K	E	S	N	R	S
W	L	L	O	E	P	V	S	Y	X
I	N	D	U	S	T	R	I	A	L

- 7) Many farmers went to the city to work in one of these
- 8) These people were often sent to the workhouse

Group up in small teams and pick any one of the following topics and create projects to share with your class. You may find more information, pictures etc. and present them in any way you like- the more colourful, fun and interactive the better!

The industrial  
revolution

Charles Dickens:  
His Life and Works

Life in the  
workhouse