



# #9723

## OLIVER TWIST

WGBH, 2000

Grade Levels: 9-13+

360 minutes

### DESCRIPTION

One of Charles Dickens' most popular stories, "Oliver Twist", was an early work published in 1837-39. Similar to his later novels, its central theme is the hardship faced by the dispossessed and those on the outside of "polite" society. Accusations were made that the book glamorized crime.



### ACADEMIC STANDARDS

#### Subject Area: World History – Era 7 – An Age of Revolutions, 1750-1914

- ★ Standard: Understands the causes and consequences of the agricultural and industrial revolutions from 1700 to 1850
  - Benchmark: Understands how industrialization shaped social class and labor organizations (e.g., connections between industrialization and the rise of new types of labor organizations and mobilization; what 19th-century literature reveals about the emergence and conditions of new social classes during the industrial period; conditions for children employed by 19th-century England before and after major legislation passed in 1833, 1842, and 1847; the wide variety of organizations created by working-class peoples in England, Western Europe, and the United States in response to the conditions of industrial labor) (See Instructional Goal #1.)

#### Subject Area: Language Arts - Reading

- ★ Standard: Uses reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of literary texts
  - Benchmark: Uses reading skills and strategies to understand a variety of literary texts (e.g., fiction, nonfiction, myths, poems, biographies, autobiographies, science fiction, supernatural tales, satires, parodies, plays, American literature, British literature, world and ancient literature) (See Instructional Goal #2.)

### INSTRUCTIONAL GOALS

1. To depict what 19th-century literature reveals about the emergence and conditions of new social classes during the industrial period.
2. To utilize reading strategies to understand 19<sup>th</sup>-century British literature.

# EPISODE 1

## VOCABULARY

- |                             |               |
|-----------------------------|---------------|
| 1. bumble                   | 13. locket    |
| 2. contest the will         | 14. oblige    |
| 3. custom demands           | 15. perhaps   |
| 4. devious                  | 16. poised    |
| 5. docket                   | 17. proper    |
| 6. gruel                    | 18. retreated |
| 7. honorable                | 19. sensible  |
| 8. hussy                    | 20. terms     |
| 9. ill                      | 21. troubling |
| 10. intentions              | 22. twitching |
| 11. lack resolve            | 23. workhouse |
| 12. last will and testament |               |

## BEFORE SHOWING

1. Discuss marriage in modern American culture. List reasons why people marry now. Contrast this with Victorian marriage customs.
2. Survey the local community concerning out-of-wedlock births, adultery, and divorce. Consider how society's attitudes have changed in recent years. Contrast with attitudes in Victorian England.

## AFTER SHOWING

### ► Discussion Items and Questions

1. Describe the opening scenes of *Oliver Twist*. Consider setting, mood, music, action, colors, and dialogue.
  - a. How does your impression of Agnes change when the scene moves from her death at the workhouse to the meadow scene with Edwin?
  - b. How does your understanding and/or your feelings about the cliff scene change the second time you see it?
2. Discuss the importance of names.
  - a. What does Agnes mean when in the workhouse in labor she says, "I've lost my name"?
  - b. What do names symbolize in this story?
  - c. Where does Oliver get his name?
3. Brainstorm a list of words to describe Edwin Leeford. Circle the positive words; underline the negative ones.
  - a. Is he presented as a victim, a villain, or both?
  - b. How is he viewed by each of the following: Agnes, Captain Fleming, Mr. Brownlow, and Elizabeth Leeford?



## ► Applications and Activities

1. Hypothesize how the story of Agnes and Edwin would be different today.
2. Write an interior monologue for Agnes during the opening scene on the cliff. Consider what's going through her mind, what has led her to contemplate suicide, and the reasons she refrains from doing so.
3. Write a letter from Edward to his father explaining how he has become the man he is. Consider his father's fears that he is a bad seed, his mother's influence, and his life's circumstances.
4. Research Charles Dickens' life and other novels. Examine how Dickens' writing reflects and responds to the historical time he lived in.

# EPISODE 2

## VOCABULARY

- |                  |                   |
|------------------|-------------------|
| 1. coffin        | 7. orphan         |
| 2. daresay       | 8. philanthropist |
| 3. disgraced     | 9. revenge        |
| 4. heir          | 10. starve        |
| 5. knave         | 11. thrash        |
| 6. liberal terms | 12. workhouse     |

## BEFORE SHOWING

1. Investigate Victorian workhouses and baby farms that housed orphaned infants in 19<sup>th</sup>-century England.
  - a. What was the philosophy behind the workhouse relief for the poor?
  - b. Why were families separated within the workhouse?
  - c. Why were they fed meager rations?
2. Evaluate poverty.
  - a. What was the attitude of most middle-class Victorians toward people who lived in poverty?
  - b. What is our attitude today toward Americans who live in poverty? Towards those who live in less developed countries?
  - c. What is the responsibility of the state to its poorest citizens? What should the state require of those who receive its aid?
3. Compare Victorian England's New Poor Law and the 1995 U.S. Welfare Reform Act.
  - a. What did the bill's backers believe was wrong with the old system of welfare or relief?
  - b. What were the provisions of the new law?
  - c. Was the new law intended to discourage reliance on government relief, create opportunities for work, or both?
  - d. How did the bill address the needs of children in poverty?
  - e. Why was the new system criticized?
  - f. What did the bill assume about the causes of poverty?

## DURING SHOWING

1. View the video more than once, with one showing uninterrupted.
2. Replay the following scenes from the start of Episode II where Oliver asks for more and is brought before the Board, and where Oliver and Sowerberry visit the home of a poor woman who died of starvation.
  - a. How do these scenes demonstrate the hypocrisy of those who devised and enforced the New Poor?
  - b. How and why was poverty treated like a crime?

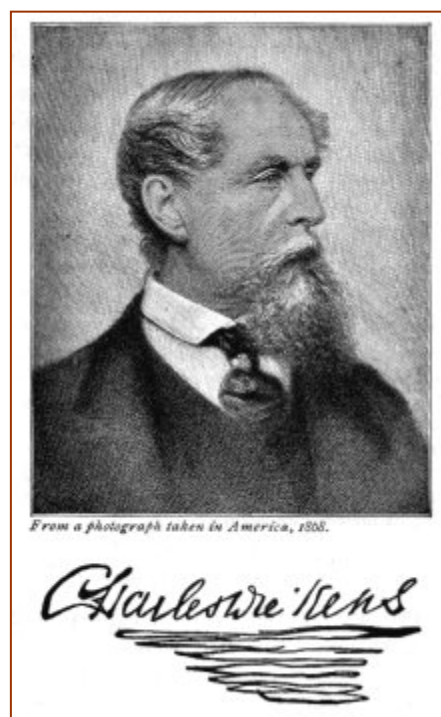
## AFTER SHOWING

### ► Discussion Items and Questions

1. List the characters that do not live in poverty.
  - a. What does each character see when looking at Oliver?
  - b. How does their judgment and treatment of Oliver reflect who they are, what they believe, and what their values are?
2. Compare the criminal underworld and the workhouse.
  - a. What does Oliver find in his first days living in Fagin's den that he has never known before?
  - b. Why do you think the screenwriter decided to make Fagin a magician?
  - c. What do you think Dickens wanted his middle-class readers to understand about the world of London criminals and prostitutes?
  - d. What does Dickens believe is the relationship between poverty and criminality?
3. Discuss Edward Leeford (Monks).
  - a. Why is Edward looking for Oliver?
  - b. What does he want Fagin to do?
  - c. How has Edward changed since Episode I?
4. Discuss why Dickens did not choose to make Oliver the poor orphaned son of a man and woman who were also poor. Why did Dickens give Oliver an upper-class background?

### ► Applications and Activities

1. Evaluate how accurate Dickens' perceptions of the relationship between poverty and criminality are for modern America. Give examples from personal experience and the media.
2. Write or enact a debate between a proponent of the New Poor Law and a Victorian-era reformer who opposed the law. Use the life of Oliver Twist as evidence for both arguments.
3. Collect present-day articles about poverty in this country and others.
  - a. What attitudes, morals, and laws do these articles reflect?



- b. How would the article be different or the same if it had been written during the period of the New Poor Law?
4. Research local poverty statistics. Compare with national figures.
  - a. What does poverty mean in your community?
  - b. Does holding a full-time job necessarily mean that a person is above the poverty line?
  - c. What social supports are available locally for people falling below or just above the poverty line?

## EPISODE 3

### VOCABULARY

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|--------------|----------------|
| 1. gallows   | 7. reveal      |
| 2. go abroad | 8. shilling    |
| 3. incognito | 9. snatch      |
| 4. keepsake  | 10. spunk      |
| 5. pence     | 11. stipulated |
| 6. pound     | 12. tragic     |

### BEFORE SHOWING

1. Recall a time when you were faced with a difficult moral choice. Write about your thinking processes and decision.
2. Predict how each thread in the plot will be resolved. Consider Oliver, Brownlow, Monks, Fagin, Nancy, and Sikes.

### AFTER SHOWING

#### ► Discussion Items and Questions

1. Why did Mr. Brownlow and Mrs. Bedwin argue at the end of Episode II? Why does Brownlow go to his country home? Who is there? What does Brownlow learn about himself by helping Oliver?
2. Is Nancy a heroic figure? Why does she return to Bill? Have Dickens and the screenwriter made her motives understandable?
3. What did you learn about Edward Leeford in the scene in which he apologizes to Oliver? How is his life changed by his encounter with Oliver and Brownlow?
4. Why is Fagin condemned for his crimes, yet Edward remains free? What answer does Brownlow give?
5. What is revealed by the text of Edwin Leeford's letter to Agnes? Why do you think the screenwriter made Leeford's words the last lines spoken in the video?

#### ► Applications and Activities

1. Define poetic justice. Evaluate if poetic justice was served in each main character's case. Consider Oliver, Brownlow, Monks, Fagin, Nancy, and Sikes.
2. Select one of the following characters: Charley Bates, Edward Leeford (Monks), Rose Fleming, Mr. Brownlow, Nancy, Fagin, or Bill Sikes.

- a. Define the moral challenge or difficult choice each character faces. Describe how the character resolves it.
  - b. Write or improvise a monologue in the voice of the character as he or she weighs the choice and its consequences.
3. Go to the "From Text to Screen" feature on the Master Piece Theater website for *Oliver Twist* (See Related Resources) to study how screenwriter Alan Bleasdale used and adapted Dicken's dialogue.
    - a. Has Dickens' original dialogue been shortened or expanded? Why might Bleasdale make the changes he did?
    - b. How has the wording been changed? Does the new dialogue have the same tone? The same meaning?
    - c. Why is some change in dialogue necessary to adapt a novel for the screen?
    - d. How did Bleasdale adapt the novel to make it more appealing to a modern audience?

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## RELATED RESOURCES

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- [Charles Dickens: A Tale of Ambition and Genius #8245](#)



### World Wide Web

The following Web sites complement the contents of this guide; they were selected by professionals who have experience in teaching deaf and hard of hearing students. Every effort was made to select accurate, educationally relevant, and "kid safe" sites. However, teachers should preview them before use. The U.S. Department of Education, the National Association of the Deaf, and the Captioned Media Program do not endorse the sites and are not responsible for their content.

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### • MASTERPIECE THEATER - OLIVER TWIST

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/olivertwist/index.html>

The official website for the video includes pictorial information regarding each character, information regarding Dickens' London, a teacher's guide, an on-line forum, and extensive links and bibliography.

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### • CHARLES DICKENS

<http://www.helsinki.fi/kasv/nokol/dickens.html>

Compiled by a Finnish scholar, this site not only covers Dickens' life, family, work, and homes, but it also gives extensive information regarding the historical time period that Dickens wrote during and numerous related websites.

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### • CHARLES DICKENS' GAD'S HILL PLACE

<http://www.perryweb.com/Dickens/index.html>

This eclectic site provides information about Dickens' home, Gad's Hill, as well as daily quotes, biographical information, crossword puzzles, character matches, and on-line texts.



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- **DAVID PERDUE'S CHARLES DICKENS PAGE**

<http://www.fidnet.com/~dap1955/dickens/>

Compiled by a Dickens enthusiast, this site includes information about his work, illustrations, maps, a timeline, information about Dickens in America, related links, and an alphabetical list of character sketches from Dickens' works.

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- **THE PEEL WEB OF ENGLISH HISTORY**

<http://dSPACE.dial.pipex.com/mbloy/peel/peelhome.htm>

Named for Sir Robert Peel, a key Dickens-era reform legislator, the Peel Web provides important historical context, including information about political organizations, popular movements such as Chartism and trade unions, and economic affairs such as the Anti-Corn Law League and the Poor Law. Includes many primary source documents.

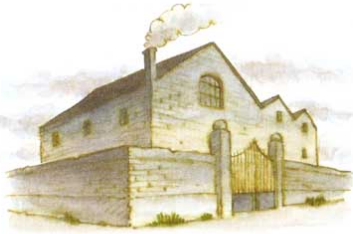
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- **THE VICTORIAN WEB**

<http://www.victorianweb.org/>

A comprehensive site covering the religion, political history, social history, gender matters, science, technology, authors, and art of the Victorian era. Also includes many related websites.

CHAPTER ONE



*The Workhouse*

**A** long time ago every town in England had a workhouse. This was a house for very poor people. Oliver Twist was born in a workhouse. His mother was a young woman. She was very ill when she came to the workhouse. A doctor and a woman were with her. After Oliver Twist was born his mother said, 'I want to see my baby and then die.' 'You are too young to die,' said the woman. The doctor put the little baby in his mother's arms. She kissed the baby and died. 'She's dead,' said the doctor. 'Poor dear! She came here last night. No one knows where she's from,' said the woman.

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