

Oliver Twist or The Parish Boy's Progress (1837-39)



LEAD IN

1 Read this definition of 'social inequality' by sociologist Ashley Crossman. Then answer the following questions.

Social inequality [...] can manifest in a variety of ways, like income and wealth inequality, unequal access to education and cultural resources, and differential treatment by the police and judicial system, among others.

1. What aspects of 'social inequality' do you think Dickens identified in the Victorian world?
2. If you were a writer today, what aspects of 'social inequality' would you condemn?

Share your ideas with the rest of the class.

VOCABULARY Lab

2 Match the Italian words (1-8) with their English translation (a-h). Write a letter in the boxes.

- | | | |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|---------------|
| 1. orfano | <input type="checkbox"/> | a. apprentice |
| 2. parto | <input type="checkbox"/> | b. burglary |
| 3. ospizio per i poveri | <input type="checkbox"/> | c. childbirth |
| 4. fame | <input type="checkbox"/> | d. hunger |
| 5. apprendista | <input type="checkbox"/> | e. orphan |
| 6. ladri | <input type="checkbox"/> | f. pickpocket |
| 7. borseggiatore | <input type="checkbox"/> | g. thieves |
| 8. furto | <input type="checkbox"/> | h. workhouse |

Oliver Twist or The Parish Boy's Progress - The plot

3 Complete the text with the missing words (1-8). Use the words of the Vocabulary Lab.

Oliver Twist was born in a workhouse. He is an **1**....., son of an unknown father, and his mother dies in **2**..... . Conditions in the **3**..... are terrible and the boys constantly suffer from **4**..... . When Oliver asks for more food at the end of the evening meal, he provokes a furious reaction from the officials who send him away to work as an **5**..... for an undertaker¹. Oliver runs away to London, where he becomes involved with a gang of **6**....., led by Fagin. On his first mission as a **7**....., Oliver is arrested but then rescued and looked after by Mr Brownlow, the victim of the theft. Fagin's gang of criminals capture Oliver and return him to Fagin. Oliver is forced to take part in a **8**..... with Sikes, Fagin's brutal accomplice. Oliver is shot at and abandoned by the gang. He is taken in by Mrs Maylie, who nurses Oliver back to health. Oliver spends an idyllic summer with Mrs Maylie and her adopted niece, Rose. Nancy, a prostitute with a kind heart who is part of Fagin's gang, discovers why Fagin and his gang are so determined to recapture Oliver. Monks, one of Fagin's accomplices, is in reality Oliver's half-brother: both are sons of a wealthy father, who left most of his fortune to Oliver's mother, Agnes Fleming. Monks plotted to kill Oliver to get the entire inheritance. It also emerges that Rose is Agnes's younger sister and therefore Oliver's aunt. Nancy is brutally murdered by Sikes for revealing this information to Rose and Mr Brownlow. Sikes dies as he is trying to escape arrest. Fagin is caught and sentenced to be hanged and Monks dies in prison. Oliver, who now knows his true identity and receives his share of his father's inheritance, is adopted by Mr Brownlow and can finally enjoy a peaceful life in the countryside.

1 undertaker: impresario funebre



[↑] A scene from the film *Oliver Twist* (2005) by Roman Polanski, starring Barney Clark as Oliver.

PROSE

The main themes

- Poverty:** through *Oliver Twist* Dickens expresses his anger at the living conditions of the poor and the iniquity of the Poor Law of 1834, which dictated that **public charity was to be administered through workhouses**. In Victorian England poverty was seen mainly as a sin and under the terms of the Poor Law poor people could only receive assistance if they lived and worked in workhouses. Conditions were extremely harsh to discourage the poor from relying on public charity. Families were divided and children forced to do hard physical work and severely undernourished. In his novel Dickens shows that the only possible alternative to the suffering and humiliation of life in the workhouse, where the hypocritical middle class saw themselves as paragons of Christian virtue as they gave charity to the poor, was a life of crime or prostitution.
- Hypocrisy of Victorian England:** *Oliver Twist* contains innumerable merciless descriptions of the **cruelty and hypocrisy** of Victorian England, a land of misery where Oliver's good qualities truly stand out and are amplified. The best example of Victorian hypocrisy is represented by the system that legalised **workhouses**: these institutions are only supposed to be charitable initiatives to support the needy; in reality, they are 'ghettos' where Victorian society confines unwelcomed members of the community, forcing them to live in conditions of aberration and degradation.
- Purity and reward:** Dickens' novel makes Oliver encounter a variety of different circumstances and people. 'Twisted' around – as his name suggests – by all of them, Oliver stands out as a child with a **pure heart** and a **determined spirit**, two qualities that are ultimately rewarded when, at the end of the novel, he finds his proper place in society and leads a comfortable life in a country house. Oliver's happy ending comes because of a process of self-discovery, through which Oliver manages to find his true identity. In this phase of his literary production Dickens' social criticism does not lead to any reform or change in the Victorian mindset as Oliver simply returns to his rightful status.



↑ A scene from the film *Oliver Twist* (2005) by Roman Polanski, starring Ben Kingsley as Fagin.

KEYTOPICS OPPOSITES

Social inequality. In *Oliver Twist*, Dickens explores the many contrasts underpinning Victorian society and emphasises their effects on people experiencing poverty. In the novel, Dickens focuses on the representation of **the impact of the Industrial Revolution**, whose triumph in terms of progress came at a very high cost if we consider the terrible conditions of life for the poor, who were forced to live in squalid conditions where child labour, crime, and exploitation were the norm, forcing them to embrace abjection and degradation.

REFLECT & DISCUSS

- 4 Answer the following questions.**
- How does Dickens challenge Victorian people's view on 'poverty' in *Oliver Twist*?
 - How does Dickens portray crime and moral degradation in the novel?
 - Do you think writers and artists can promote or accelerate social change through their works?

ORACY Lab

5 Use the following guiding questions to prepare for an oral test on Dickens' *Oliver Twist*.

- Where is Dickens' novel set?
- Why is Oliver Twist sent away from the workhouse?
- How does Oliver Twist end up in the care of Mr Brownlow?
- How does Dickens describe the impact of the Industrial Revolution on the poor in *Oliver Twist*?

WRITING Lab

6 Summarise how *Oliver Twist* expresses Dickens' view on social inequality.