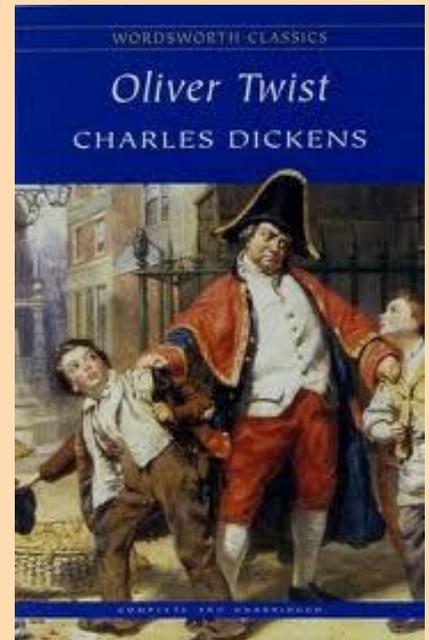
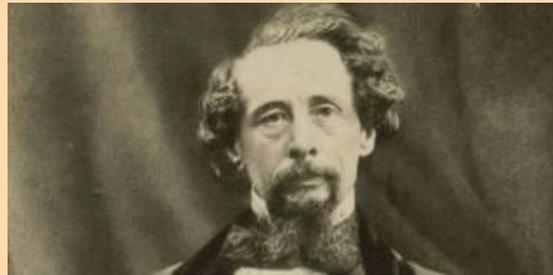


## Oliver Twist, by Charles Dickens or A Parish Boy's Progress

Who can possibly resist Oliver Twist? Any British school child, upon hearing the name Oliver will spout forth the most famous quote of all Dickensian time,

“Please sir, I want some more...”

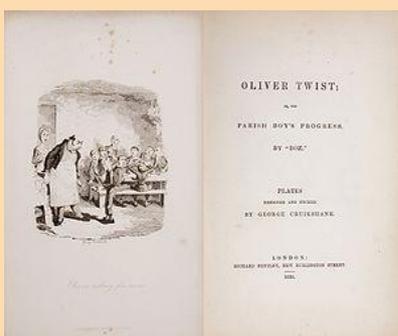
So despite its length, despite its (relative) difficulty, why not give it a go, and introduce students to 19<sup>th</sup> century England and all that went with it? Here to help you are chapter summaries, character analyses, a geographical journey through the novel, and a few suggestions of activities that might help the French student to appreciate the bitter-sweet notes, beauty, and intricacies of Dickensian plots!



### First a few facts

**Dickens:** 1812 – 1870;

- ✓ 7 siblings;
- ✓ the only child not to accompany his father to live (for a few months) in Debtor's Prison in 1824;
- ✓ left school to work 10-hour days in a blacking warehouse in order to help his family;
- ✓ attended a school where he endured “haphazard, desultory teaching, [and] poor discipline punctuated by the headmaster's sadistic brutality”;
- ✓ works originally published on a monthly basis; this, in part, explains the length and complexity of the novel



### Oliver Twist and themes:

- ✓ Dickens' second novel;
- ✓ published in 1838;
- ✓ portrays many an unsavory character;
- ✓ some themes (to name but a few)
  - poverty and the Poor Laws (or institutional cruelty)
  - social class and the importance of upbringing
  - good versus evil,
  - hidden family relationships
  - mistaken identities
  - the powerlessness of women and children
  - the treatment of children

## **A brief summary of the novel      or      How It All Came Down**

Oliver Twist's mother died shortly after giving birth to him in a workhouse. At the age of nine he went to live with an undertaker where he was cruelly treated. He ran away to London, where he became involved with a gang of child thieves, controlled by the evil Fagin. After a street robbery went wrong, Oliver was cared for by the kindly Mr. Brownlow, but he soon ended up back in the grip of Fagin and his accomplice Bill Sikes. Oliver was accidentally shot while breaking into the Maylie's house and later recovered there, once again free of Fagin. However, Fagin and the mysterious Mr. Monks plotted to recapture him. Nancy, Sikes's girlfriend, heard of the plot and told Rose Maylie. Upon discovering her 'betrayal', Sikes murdered Nancy.

It turned out that Oliver was actually Monk's half brother and therefore entitled to a fortune from his father's will, which had been deliberately destroyed. Monks had been trying to turn Oliver into a criminal to discredit him, thereby pocketing the entire inheritance. The truth came out in the end and the characters got their just desserts! Sikes was killed, Fagin hanged, and Oliver lived happily ever after.

### **Summary chapter by chapter (more or less!)**

#### **Chapters 1-7:**

The story begins in the workhouse where a boy is born. His mother dies soon after the birth and the child is named Oliver Twist. The first nine years of his life are spent in the terrible conditions of cold and hunger that prevailed in the workhouse. Then one day Oliver asks for some more food at dinner time and the enraged Mr Bumble pays for Oliver to be taken away by a local undertaker, Mr Sowerberry. Oliver suffers further mistreatment at the hands of Noah Claypole, an employee, and Mrs Sowerberry. After suffering physical and mental abuse, he decides to run away to London.

**Chapters 8-14:** Oliver sets off on foot for London. On the way he meets a strange boy, Jack Dawkins, who befriends him and offers him a place to stay in London. Dawkins leads Oliver to a house of unimaginable filth, and introduces him to an ugly old man, Fagin. At first, Fagin and the boys who live with him seem very kind to Oliver. One day, Oliver asks if he can go to 'work' with the other boys and it is then that he understands they are all thieves. Jack Dawkins and Charley Bates steal a handkerchief from an old man, Mr. Brownlow. The man raises the alarm, and in the confusion Oliver is apprehended by a policeman. Mr. Brownlow takes pity on Oliver and takes him to his house. Fagin and his evil friend Bill Sikes are informed of this development and make plans to get Oliver back, with the help of Bill's girlfriend, Nancy.

**Chapters 15-22:** Oliver is very content in Mr. Brownlow's house, which is very clean and comfortable. One day, Oliver offers to take some books and some money to a bookshop for Mr Brownlow. On the way to the shop, Oliver is captured by Bill Sikes and Nancy and taken back to Fagin's house. Fagin tells Oliver that he has to work for him. Sikes and Fagin plan a robbery in a country house, and they choose Oliver as the boy they need to enter the house through a small window. Oliver enters the house, but a noise wakes up the household, and Oliver is shot. Sikes grabs him and runs away, but then drops him in a field.

**Chapters 23-38:** Oliver wakes up and decides to enter the house again. A doctor is called to attend to Oliver's wound. The owners of the house, Rose Maylie and her aunt, Mrs. Maylie, nurse Oliver through a fever. He recovers and enjoys several months of happiness. Then, one night when he is half asleep, he thinks he sees Fagin and another man at his window and screams. Meanwhile, back in the workhouse, Mr. Bumble receives a visitor, Mr. Monks. Monks questions Bumble about Oliver, and wants to see a woman who knows something about Oliver's mother. Bumble arranges a meeting and an old woman gives Monks a locket that belonged to Oliver's mother. Monks then throws this into the river.

**Chapters 39–47:** Nancy overhears a conversation between Fagin and Monks concerning Oliver. She decides to tell Rose Maylie, who is now in a London hotel with Oliver. She informs Rose that Monks believes Oliver to be his brother and is planning terrible things for him. Nancy arranges to meet Rose on London Bridge on Sunday night. There she tells Brownlow and Rose where they can find Monks, and what he looks like. Noah Claypole, who is hiding nearby, overhears the conversation and runs to tell Fagin. Claypole then recounts his story to Bill Sikes, who in a mad rage, batters Nancy to death with a heavy stick.

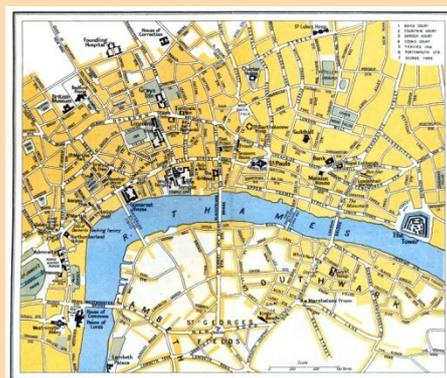
**Chapters 48–end:** Sikes decides to leave London, but returns with plans to escape to France. Meanwhile, Monks is brought to Brownlow's house. Brownlow tells Monks what he believes happened in the past. Monks's father separated from his wife, and fell in love with a beautiful young girl, Agnes. He planned to marry her, but died suddenly. Agnes died soon afterwards in the workhouse, after giving birth to Oliver, making Oliver Monks's half brother. Monks's father left a will giving half of his property to Oliver, a will that Monks's mother then destroyed. Brownlow accuses Monks of throwing away a locket, proof of Oliver's parentage, and of paying Fagin to turn Oliver into a thief. Monks admits to everything. Sikes later dies by accidentally hanging himself, Fagin is sentenced to death and hanged, and Oliver lives happily as Brownlow's adopted son.

### The (geographical) journey that Oliver took – Places (Now and Then) in Oliver Twist:

These places can be noted (in the journal) as they are encountered.

Have the students

- ✓ write a historical description
- ✓ describe the places in modern times
- ✓ make a comparison – were things always better in the good old days?
- ✓ Draw a map or mark an existing map to show his journey



**Barnet:** a borough in London, formed in 1965

When Oliver escaped from the terrible undertaker, Mr. Sowerberry, he walked 70 miles to Barnet, a small town 11 miles north of London. This is where he encountered the Artful Dodger.

**Whitechapel :** a built-up inner city district located just over 3 miles east of Charing Cross. This is where Jack the Ripper 'operated' in 1880.

Oliver was taken to this part of East London after having been recaptured by Sikes and Nancy.

**Bethnal Green** – a district of the East End of London

a dirty, lower-class area of London where Nancy lived with Bill Sikes. When Oliver starts his "expedition" to Chertsey with Sikes, he leaves from Bethnal Green.

On their way to **Chertsey**, Bill Sikes and Oliver go through several points of interest:

- **Finsbury Square** in Islington (near Liverpool St station)
- **Holborn** suburban London
- **Hyde Park** Rose Maylie lived here; she was visited by Nancy

**Chertsey:** a town in Surrey and part of the London commuter belt

A peaceful little village on the Thames; Mrs. Maylie lives here; Oliver is abandoned here after his failed attempt at burglary.

**The Strand:** An important commercial area of London, the road is  $\frac{3}{4}$  mile long and runs from Trafalgar Square to Fleet Street.

Mr. Brownlow lives after returning from the West Indies

**St. Paul's Cathedral:** the main cathedral in central London; designed by Sir Wren and built after the great fire of London.

Nancy, Brownlow and Rose can hear the bells of the cathedral when they meet secretly at London Bridge.

When Fagin is imprisoned, and about to be hanged at the Newgate prison, he too hears the bells.

**London Bridge:** Built in 1831, it was purchased, dismantled and rebuilt, brick by brick, near Lake Havasu, Arizona in 1971.

This is where Nancy, Mr. Brownlow and Rose meet to discuss Oliver. Their conversation is overheard by Claypole, and reported to Fagin.

**Hampstead Heath:** a grassy, hilly area, it has remained a favorite place for Londoners to go today for a breath of fresh air.

Bill Sikes crosses these hills as he flees London, having killed Nancy

**Jacob's Island:** a now gentrified, well-developed location, this impoverished and unsavory area was described by Dickens as "*the filthiest, the strangest, the most extraordinary of the many localities that are hidden in London*".

Bill Sikes hanged himself on this small island, albeit accidentally

**Newgate Prison:** demolished in 1902, Newgate Prison was the largest and most notorious of all the English prisons. Executions which were public and took place every Monday morning always drew considerable crowds.

Oliver visited Fagin in his cell before the death sentence was carried out.

## Most of the CHARACTERS – in short

**Oliver Twist:** good, kind-hearted, mistreated, orphaned. Even in the worst imaginable situation, he never loses his sense of morality or generosity of spirit.

**Fagin:** greedy, vicious, villainous-looking, the leader of a gang of boy thieves, he is a very old man and a very nasty piece of work. He eventually betrays Nancy to Sikes, thereby causing her death.

**Nancy :** young, a prostitute (with a sort of heart of gold?) she tried to save Oliver in betraying Fagin and Sikes. However, convinced she will not survive in any other way, she refuses to leave the two villains and pays dearly for this decision.



**Sikes :** In his thirties, a violent burglar and thief, in cohorts with Fagin. Involved with Nancy, he eventually kills her.

**Rose Maylie:** Mrs. Maylie's niece, beautiful, seventeen years old, both intelligent and perfectly kind. An orphan, taken in by Mrs. Maylie, she marries Harry Maylie.

**Mr. Brownlow:** a very respectable-looking elderly gentleman, has had his heart broken many times, including losing his fiancée on the day of their wedding, likes Oliver even after suspecting him of stealing his handkerchief, takes him in, does everything he can to help him.

**Mr. Bumble:** beadle of the parish, fat, choleric man, enjoys abusing those below him, often offended by their impositions on him.

**Edward Leeford:** Edward is Oliver's half-brother, called "Monks" for most of the novel; offers to pay Fagin to corrupt Oliver, wanting Oliver's inheritance. In his late twenties, haggard in appearance, deep set eyes, suffers from fits.

**Mrs. Maylie:** an older lady, but very dignified and stately; owns the mansion that Sikes and Crackit attempt to rob; mother of Harry Maylie; adopted aunt of Rose Maylie. In her kindness, she takes Oliver in.

**Jack Dawkins aka the Artful Dodger:** common looking, devil-may-care attitude, about Oliver's age; takes the airs and manners of a man; Fagin's best pickpocket, he finds Oliver and leads him to London, to Fagin's place.

**Charley Bates:** a sprightly young friend of the Dodger's, another of Fagin's boys, very excitable, often laughs. Oliver and he are the only of Fagin's boys to end up making an honest living.

**Mrs. Corney, later Mrs. Bumble,** matron of the workhouse where Oliver was born; a widow for twenty-five years, she ends up marrying, dominating and humiliating Mr. Bumble.

**Mr. Losberne:** the doctor who tends to Oliver after the shooting; eccentric, kind, hearty, fat gentleman, he often acts without forethought, but is universally liked. He agrees to help the ladies try to protect Oliver.

**Mrs. Bedwin:** Mr. Brownlow's housekeeper, kind, motherly, an old lady, takes care of Oliver in his illness, never doubts his honesty even when he disappears with Mr. Brownlow's books and money.

**Mr. Grimwig:** an old friend of Mr. Brownlow's, a little rough in manners, but a worthy man; a stout old gentleman, talks something like a parrot, has a strong taste for contradiction.

**Noah Claypole;** a charity-boy with a fierce look; works for the undertaker, enjoys bullying Oliver; steals from the Sowerberrys, runs away to London, joins Fagin's gang.

**Harry Maylie:** Mrs. Maylie's son, about 25, has a frank, handsome face, an easy demeanor, deeply in love with Rose; first ambitious, he chooses to become a country cleric so that he will be on Rose's level, and she will agree to marry him.

**Mr. Giles;** a fat man, works as butler and steward to Mrs. Maylie; shoots Oliver during the robbery; at first he's very proud of, then feels very guilty about.

**Toby Crackit;** Bill Sikes's partner in crime, flashy and always convincing servants to help him and Sikes break in.

**Mr. Sowerberry:** undertaker, a tall, gaunt man, takes Oliver on as an indentured servant. He rather likes Oliver, but cannot stand up to his wife's hatred of the orphan.

**Mrs. Sowerberry:** the undertaker's wife, short, thin woman with a vixenish countenance, cannot stand Oliver, and treats him very badly.

**Mrs. Mann;** runs the orphanage where Oliver grows up, keeps most of the money allotted by the parish for the care of the orphans, and neglects them rather steadily.

**Mrs. Thingummy:** Also known as Old Sally, an old woman pauper who acts as nurse during Oliver's delivery, but had too much beer. She steals a locket from Oliver's dead mother, which holds the key to his identity.

### Hints that should help with apparent difficulties:

One of the difficulties in reading Dickens is the sheer length of his novels. A solution is to simply choose excerpts which will be read and studied by the student. The number of characters and details thereof are all intricately entwined with the happenings and plot. To overcome this problem of complexity, tell the students to keep a "**character journal**" consisting of a page, divided into four columns:

Character	Location	Relation to Oliver	Good or Bad influence on Oliver
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As each character is introduced, a page is made, and notes on the following are taken: conflicts, climaxes, resolution and resolutions that affect each character.

Another column can be added that will contain the interpretations of each student, character analysis, etc.

These journals can be used to create a time line, or chain of events. Depending on the excerpts chosen, several minor or parallel plots may be discovered.

## A few THEMES in OLIVER TWIST:

- Poverty and the lower classes
- The treatment of children
- Purity in a Corrupt City
- Criminality



### SUGGESTIONS FOR (pre or early) reading ACTIVITIES:

It goes without saying that our French students will need knowledge of how Victorian society was organized, and what Victorian London was like. Will they even have heard of Queen Victoria? Give out the following questions (these are just a few suggestions - many more aspects can be tackled) to groups of 3-4 students. After some (internet?) research, they will make a short, oral presentation to the rest of the class who will take notes so as to better understand the novel.

London of the 1840s – find out about

- *the amount of crime*
- *the difference between the rich and poor*
- *children and schools*
- *hospitals*
- *food*
- *transport*
- *cleanliness and hygiene in the town*
- *workhouses*
- *poorhouses*

**Careful choice of excerpts will enable them to do the following activities:**

**Chapters 1-7:** Please Sir, I want some more...

#### **Role Play**

Have groups of 3 students role play the scene when Oliver asks for more food. Two of his friends make him do it and Oliver argues against them.

**Chapters 8-14**

#### **Mini debate : groups of 4 students**

1. Pick out all the words associated with criminal activity (names of crimes, criminals, punishment meted out, etc.)
2. List the crimes, and have students debate what the sentence would be if they were a judge.

**Chapters 15-22**

#### **Creative note-taking and oral expression:**

Imagine what Oliver will tell Mr. Brownlow about certain aspects of his life so far:

- ✓ details of the workhouse,
- ✓ living with Mr. and Mrs. Sowerberry,
- ✓ meeting the Artful Dodger, Fagin
- ✓ the robbery.

## Chapters 23-38

### Creative writing

1. Oliver is finally happy for a few months. Write his diary.
2. Oliver has a bad dream about Fagin. What sort of bad dreams have you had? Have you had them more than once? What happened? Are they premonitions? Write a few lines about it. Your teacher will read to the class, who will guess who had this dream.

## Chapters 39 - 47

### Oral Pairwork – questions and answers

1. Nancy and Rose 2 very different backgrounds – they meet and ask each other about their childhood, parents, favorite activities, her job, her house, everyday problems.
2. Claypole and Sikes – act out the conversation that they had, paying attention to the emotions and attitudes they would have had

## Chapters 48-end

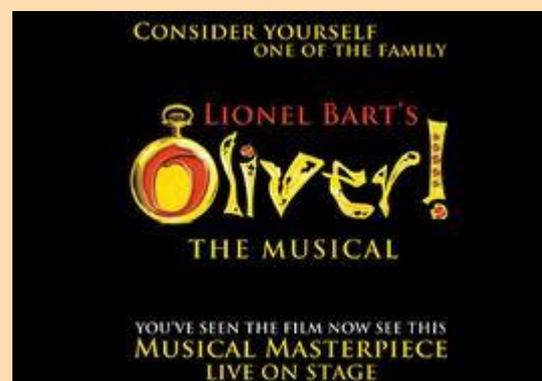
### GroupWork –

1. **The Trial** Act out Fagin's trial –
  - Fagin
  - The judge
  - A lawyer for the death sentence
  - A lawyer who wants him to go free
  - Character witnesses – for and against
2. **Monks' confession** or Admitting to a Heinous Plot  
Act out the scene IN YOUR OWN WORDS
  - Monks
  - Oliver
  - Mr Brownlow
  - Mr Grimwig
  - Mr Bumble
  - Mrs Bumble
  - Rose



### OLIVER – THE MUSICAL

Still playing in Great Britain, 'Oliver!' is also still a brilliant success. However, is it not a slightly sweetened version of the actual novel? Only one way to find out – after having nearly finished the reading and studying, take your well-deserving students to see it!



## OLIVER TWIST – the film

Directed by Roman Polanski, 2005

The film caused quite a controversy when it was released, many critics accusing it of having left out far too much and of being far too full of realism (which was Polanski's intent!).

Nine-year old Oliver is taken to the workhouse where the rapacious benefactors starve the children. Lots are drawn for a boy to ask for more. Oliver pulls the short straw, asks the famous question and is marked out a troublemaker by the powers that be, who hastily pack him off to an undertaker, where he is treated cruelly so runs away to London. In London he falls in with the vagabond Fagin and his team of pickpockets. The boy is going one way - to the noose. But fate - and a kindly gentleman - intervenes, proving that **bad company cannot ruin truly good character.**



The film is long (3 hours) and while not quite true to the original plot, it does have a central theme that was so dear to Dickens – despite really bad influence and far too much suffering, Oliver's pure-heartedness is not tainted, nor does he change into a 'bad' person.

The number of characters is far reduced in the film, simplifying the initial plot greatly. For example, the Maylies don't exist in the film at all, which results in Fagin and his gang being wicked and evil just for the sake of it! However, the beauty of English countryside, and the misery, dirt and poverty of parts of Victorian London are well conveyed.

There are several possibilities for comparison here, even for the non-native speaker, viewer, reader aside from the inevitable, "What did Polanski leave out of the film?"

### **Before viewing the film (but having done quite some reading):**

- Have students play the role of screenwriter – they write out descriptions of places, people, even attitudes (example, the crowds who came to hangings).
- Have students (in groups) draw up a list of the characters that they consider essential to the plot? Each group defends its list to the others.

### **After viewing:**

- Which scenes point to the evidence of social injustice?
- Oliver, in the book, is slowly but surely drawn into Fagin's wicked world. Have the students watch the scene where Oliver is guided by the Artful Dodger from sunny,

main thoroughfares to the backstreets of London ... can they see the parallel? The symbolism?

- Notice the constant drunkenness as did Oliver – have the students attempt an explanation (gin was very cheap, and beer was safer to drink than water)
- Oliver, a lone child, in the country is treated differently at two different farms. Which of the two is more realistic?
- Violence:
  - Nancy is brutally murdered by Sikes. Is the film true to the novel?
  - She has been a prostitute more or less since childhood. She lives with a far older man – Dickens himself was criticized for this sordid situation. Polanski harps on this situation in the film – was he right to do so?
- Happy End : Student opinion
  - is it all just a bit too happy?
  - The film ends differently from the novel – why did Polanski choose this version?
  - What do you notice about the credits, and the images at the end of the film? What purpose does this serve?
- Good versus Evil (Oliver and Fagin)
  - What aspects in the film make people like Oliver even more?
    - His physical appearance
    - Scenes shot from his point of view
    - The injustice of the way his name was chosen (alphabetical order)
    - His desire for cleanliness (he washed in puddle )
    - His visit to Fagin in the prison cell
  - Fagin the devil – is he totally evil? How is he perceived
    - at the beginning (he talks to his hidden plunder)
    - when he dresses Oliver's wound
    - in the Newgate Prison cell, at the end

These are just a few suggestions for activities based on the Polanski film. However, Oliver Twist has been filmed throughout the ages, as witness:

- there were FOUR silent films made between 1909 and 1922
- 1933 first talking version
- 1948 film by David Lean
- 1974 an animated movie
- 1982 film starring George C Scott as Fagin
- Two television movie adaptations in 1982 and 1997

