

LIONEL BART'S

OLIVER!



PLAY GUIDE

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Oliver!: Synopsis

Oliver! begins in the workhouse where the orphan Oliver Twist was born and raised, and at the beginning of the story he is nine years old. The young boys of the workhouse dream of more decadent meals while eating their daily supper of gruel. When Oliver finishes his bowl, he does something unheard of: he asks for more. This gets him kicked out of the workhouse orphanage and sent to work for the undertaker, Mr. Sowerberry. Meanwhile, Mr. Bumble the beadle seduces Widow Corney the matron.

At the undertaker's, Oliver is eating scraps and sleeping under the table; he sings "Where is Love?" One of the other workers makes fun of Oliver's mother, for which Oliver fights him and then runs away. Away from the workhouse and the undertaker, he decides he should move to London. When he arrives after seven days of travel, he meets the Artful Dodger, who brings him back to live with Mister Fagin and his group of pick-pocketing orphans.

The orphans all welcome him ("Consider Yourself") and teach him to pick pockets in return for Fagin's favor and hospitality ("You've Got to Pick a Pocket or Two"). Nancy, the live-in girlfriend of abusive ex-pickpocket Bill Sikes, comes to visit the boys and takes a liking to Oliver. Then Dodger takes Oliver out on his first pick-pocketing mission. Their attempt to rob Mr. Brownlow goes awry, and Oliver falls and hurts himself. The other boys flee the scene of the crime, leaving Oliver alone and injured.

There is a trial in which Oliver is brought before the Magistrate and accused of theft, but a book-stall owner comes to his defense and clears his name. Mr. Brownlow sees Oliver's youth and innocence and when the boy faints after the trial,

Brownlow takes him in. Back at Fagin's, the Dodger tells of Oliver's arrest, and Fagin and Sikes decide to kidnap Oliver in order to protect themselves. At first Nancy refuses to help, but Sikes physically abuses her into submission.

Back at Mr. Brownlow's house, Oliver is being taken care of and recovering from his illness. Oliver offers to run an errand for Brownlow, and while he is out, Nancy and Sikes ambush him and bring him back to Fagin despite his protests. Meanwhile, back at the workhouse, Mr. Bumble and Widow Corney find out that Oliver may have wealthy relatives, and their path to pursue his wealth leads them to Mr. Brownlow, who turns out to be Oliver's great-uncle.

Still holding onto her fondness for Oliver, Nancy visits Brownlow and arranges to bring Oliver to him at London Bridge. Bill Sikes secretly follows her on this mission, knocks Oliver unconscious, and beats Nancy to death. He runs off with Oliver, leaving Nancy's body to be discovered by Brownlow. Bill appears and attempts to hold Oliver hostage, but Bill is killed and Oliver is rescued and sent to live with Brownlow. Fagin decides to use the chaos and misery as an opportunity to turn his life around.



Oliver dares to ask for more gruel

Oliver!: Characters



Oliver Twist, illustration
by James Mahoney

Oliver Twist - The main character of the story. An orphan who grew up in a workhouse and runs away to London, where he joins other orphans in picking pockets until he finds his family.

Mr. Bumble - The beadle who runs the workhouse in which Oliver grew up. Kicks Oliver out, but then wishes to take advantage of the family money he may have.

Widow Corney - The matron of the workhouse and Mr. Bumble's love interest. Also tries to get money out of Oliver's situation.

Mr. Sowerberry - The undertaker for whom Oliver is sent to work when he is kicked out of the workhouse.

Charlotte Sowerberry - The undertaker's daughter and love interest of Noah Claypole.

Noah Claypole - An older boy who works for the undertaker. He flirts with Charlotte and makes fun of Oliver.

The Artful Dodger - An orphan boy in London and one of Fagin's pick-pockets. He takes Oliver under his wing when he gets to London.

Fagin - A career criminal who takes in the homeless children of London in exchange for their picking pockets for him.

Nancy - The girlfriend of Bill Sikes who sometimes visits Fagin's children and takes a liking to Oliver. She dies trying to return him to his family.

Bill Sikes - An ex-pickpocket of Fagin and Nancy's abusive boyfriend. Occasionally still joins Fagin in crime.

Mr. Brownlow - A rich man in London who Oliver and the Dodger try to pick-pocket. He takes Oliver in and is eventually discovered to be his great-uncle.

Oliver!: Vocabulary

Undertaker - A person whose job is to prepare funerals. Undertakers also prepare dead bodies for burial or cremation.

Beadle - An officer of a church, school, or, in the case of *Oliver!* a workhouse.

Matron - The woman in charge of housing and caring for children at a boarding school or workhouse.

Magistrate - A judge in a court that deals with minor offences, such as the pickpocketing for which Oliver gets in trouble.



Biography of Charles Dickens

1812-1870

In his childhood, Charles Dickens (1812-1870) experienced first-hand the effects of poverty and suffering. His early education was interrupted at the age of twelve, when his father was sent to prison for debt. His entire family was imprisoned at Marshalsea in London, and the young Charles was sent to work in a bootblacking factory, alone and miserable, living and working in atrocious conditions. However, after three years Dickens was able to return to school, and from there he went on to become a clerk in a law office. In 1828 he started working as a freelance journalist, a job which eventually developed into the illustrious career as a well-known journalist, novelist, and playwright.

Dickens achieved literary fame with novels such as *David Copperfield*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, and *Great Expectations*. These works focused on timeless themes that spoke to the Victorian society as much as they do to modern readers: the importance of friendship and family, helping the poor or suffering, and being compassionate to strangers and loved ones alike. These ideas were explored through the social issues of his time, like poverty and child labor, using vivid and enchanting characters; Scrooge, Tiny Tim, Oliver, and the Artful Dodger are all still memorable cultural symbols today. With the success of his writing career, Dickens was able to travel broadly and establish himself as a philanthropist, embodying the compassion for suffering that is the main theme of his works.

In 1836, Dickens married Catherine Hogarth, with whom he went on to have 10 children. He continued to travel the world and work as a writer, speaker, and philanthropist until June of 1870, when he suffered a stroke and passed away. His last novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, remained unfinished with the identity of the murderer still unknown. Dickens was buried at Westminster Abbey alongside Geoffrey Chaucer, Ben Jonson, Edmund Spenser, and many other prestigious writers.

Oliver!: Themes

Poverty and Power

Poverty and power are two of the most pervasive connected themes of *Oliver!* Almost everyone in the play suffers for want of money. The relationship between the amount of money someone has and the amount of power this gives them over other people is clear from the start. Mr. Bumble and Widow Corney are not terribly wealthy, but they have more money than the orphans who depend on them, and therefore have the power to control their livelihood. While the workhouse is the standard, societally approved alternative to having children live on the streets, it gives the orphans neither happiness nor prospects; they are given the bare minimum to live and no options to escape.



Oliver out on his first pickpocketing mission

In the world of *Oliver!*, the characters without money have to gain freedom through dishonesty. Fagin and his crew of pickpockets survive outside of society by thievery, living in a culture of moral ambiguity, full of imbalanced and manipulative relationships, often fueled by selfishness. Out of the adults in Oliver's world, Nancy and Mr. Brownlow are the only two who seem to give anything to Oliver without looking for something in return. Nancy is a lower-class female in the 19th century; she has too many odds against her to afford selflessness and she is killed for her efforts. Mr. Brownlow is kept from making sacrifices by his gender, money, and class. Luckily for him, Oliver is brought into the comfortable world of Mr. Brownlow at the end of the play, and while the darker side of London still exists alongside it, Fagin's final song offers the potential for change.

Oliver!: Themes Cont'd

Love and Human Relationships

Love and human relationships are also themes explored in *Oliver!* One of the most pressing questions and most touching songs in the play is “Where is Love?” Being loved is a feeling Oliver has never experienced, and he has no idea if or when it will ever happen. When he escapes the unfeeling workhouse and the abusive undertaker, he finds the Artful Dodger and Fagin, who offer protection and inclusion. While being told to “consider himself” one of the gang, it does not ring true as genuine love. Fagin uses the boys for his own financial benefit, and when Oliver goes out on his first pick-pocketing mission, the other boys abandon him at the first sign of trouble. However, this leads him to the genuine, familial love of Mr. Brownlow, who is willing to struggle to get Oliver back and keep him safe.

Another exploration of love we see in the play is the love that Nancy has for Bill Sikes. This is an example of the sort of unequal and manipulative relationships that can come from desperation. Nancy is not in a socially advantageous position on her own, but Sikes has made his way to a place Oliver out on his first pickpocketing mission of comfort through brutality in the criminal world of London. Living with him offers Nancy a similar social position, though her level of comfort and security is not quite on the level with his, given his violent outbursts towards her. However, through her hardships she somehow retains the capacity for love, both for Sikes and for Oliver.

Charity

Charity is another major theme in *Oliver!* as it is in all the works of Dickens. However, *Oliver!* does not simply lecture on the importance of charity and taking care of the less fortunate, but it provides a critique of the structures in society that exist to be helpful and are in fact damaging. Oliver’s brushes with the established social system include living at the workhouse, his “apprenticeship” at the undertaker’s, and being under trial for the thievery of which he was innocent. None of these are effective ways of taking care of him or anyone else, and he is better and better off the further he is from something that looks like an organization. While Fagin takes care of him better than the workhouse, the ring of pickpockets is still run like a business, and it continues to run at the expense of those involved in it. It takes the personal, familial care of Mr. Brownlow for Oliver to be safe. Charity takes more than a government establishing programs or disconnected people putting money in a bucket; it takes genuine, personal concern for individuals and specific understanding of what they need. Dickens shows a dark world in which this is very rare and he provides no real solution to the problems he presents, but in *Oliver!* we see one inspiring case of a life that seeks improvement in many places but is ultimately saved by love.

THE CONTEXT



Oliver's London



Bethnal Green – The neighborhood where Nancy and Bill Sikes live.



London Bridge – Where Nancy arranges to meet Mr. Brownlow to return Oliver.



Saffron Hill – The run-down neighborhood where Fagin and the orphan boys live.



The Strand – The fashionable entertainment district where Mr. Brownlow lives.

Oliver!: Discussion Questions

- 1.** **Oliver! is a boisterous musical based on Charles Dickens' novel Oliver Twist. Although the musical creates a lighter mood than the novel, the ideas remain the same: despite society's inequalities and people's inhumanity to others, life is worth living. There is always hope for a better world.**

What are two things you can do to make a better world for yourself or others?
- 2.** **The novel Oliver Twist was first published in 1838 and is still read today as one of the Classics.**

What contemporary book/s might you have read that follow the same themes as Oliver!?

What contemporary book/s have you read and seen the stage production based on the book?
- 3.** **The novel Oliver Twist became a vehicle for social criticism after the Poor Act of 1834 which sent the poor to workhouses and escalated the problem of poverty in 19th-century London.**

How do you understand "social criticism"?

What were "workhouses"?

What does it mean by "the problem of poverty"?
- 4.** **"Please Sir, I want some more" is the most famous line of Oliver!**

What is the significance of this line?

Is Oliver only talking about food?
- 5.** **Oliver! has themes of inequality, compassion, and the plight of the underprivileged which continue to resonate with people today, as does the character of Oliver Twist's journey to find belonging and acceptance.**

Think about situations in your own life where you have experienced or witnessed inequality or the way some people are treated differently. Then think about a time when you or someone else has shown compassion for someone needing to be lifted up. How did each of these scenarios make you feel? How did you react?

Royal Pavilion Theatre,

NEVER ACTED!
A NEW DRAMA, from "OLIVER TWIST," by "BOZ"
Mr. & Mrs. YATES Every Evening this Week.

On **MONDAY, MAY 21st, 1838,** and **DURING THE WEEK,**
Will be presented, as entirely New Dramatic Subjects, to be recalled.

OLIVER TWIST!

Or, the Parish Boy's Progress!

Adapted from "BOZ's" celebrated Tale of the same name.

Burns.....(a Magistrate).....Mr. R. COLLIER. Brownlow.....Mr. COBHAM.
 Monk.....Mr. J. R. WILLIAMS. Sweeney.....(an Undertaker).....Mr. TONGMAN.
 Fagin.....(a Jew).....Mr. LYON. Noah Claypole.....(a Charly Boy).....Mr. G. NORMAN.
 Bill Sikes.....(a Burglar).....Mr. S. SMITH. Dawkins.....(the Artful Dodger).....Mr. DRY.
 Charley Bates.....(a Pickpocket).....Mr. DILLON. Mr. Bunble.....(a Parish Beadle).....Mr. H. BEVERLEY.
 Oliver Twist.....(a Parish Orphan).....Miss CARSON.
 Nancy.....(Sikes' Wife).....Mrs. COONEY.....(Mother of the Workhouse).....Mrs. FOSSBROOK.
 Female Pauper.....Mrs. JOHNSON. Clerks, Officers, Paupers, Servants, &c.

Programme of the Scenery and Incidents:

Act I.--THE WORKHOUSE.

INTERIOR OF "THE THREE CRIPPLES."

A little party: select, if not respectable--The Hatch--The Advertisement--The Solomon
A ROOM IN ST. NICHOLAS WORKHOUSE.

The Matron and the Huddle--The Parish Orphan--Oliver asks for more, and is likely to get more than he asks for--Visit of the Magistrate.
 Oliver Twist is very apt getting a place which would be no worse.

SOWERBERRY'S SHOP.

Oliver being offered another place, makes his first entry into public life--A Charity Boy and a Workhouse Orphan: "A distinction without a difference"

THE ESCAPE OF OLIVER TWIST.

ACT II.

ADVENTURES IN LONDON.

THE APPROACH TO LONDON FROM ISLINGTON.

Oliver's arrival in Town--He meets with a strange Young Gentleman who forms a friendship for him.

FAGIN'S ABODE.

A respectable kind old Gentleman at home--Oliver introduced to him and a very hopeful youth. A bit of mystery--Expert Workmen--Good Examples.

ROOM IN THE WORKHOUSE.

Arrival of a new visitor--An unexpected meeting.

STREET IN CLERKENWELL.

Oliver left to the lurch--Fagin's dismay--Sikes' reappearance.

AN APARTMENT IN BROWNLOW'S HOUSE.

Oliver takes better care of than ever he was before--Some particulars concerning a certain picture--A surprise--Oliver forced to quit at a short notice.

FAGIN'S DEN.

Reverts to the merry Old Gentleman and his youthful friends, and relates other pleasant matters appertaining to this history--The merry Old Jew and his friends get very fond of Oliver--Oliver finds a friend where he least expects one.

GUILT--SHAME--and--REMORSE.

Act 3.--THE DISCOVERY.

Sikes' dwelling--A notable plan discussed and determined on--An Obscure Street.

THE EXPEDITION. MEETING OF MONKS AND FAGIN.

SCULLERY IN BROWNLOW'S HOUSE.

THE BURGLARY.

A STREET--The Escape--An Favee-dropper--Bold determination of Monks--All hands to action.

APARTMENT IN BROWNLOW'S HOUSE.

The Police--Oliver in danger--Whereas "this strange & awful history" draws to conclusion--The Peril--The RESCUE.

OLIVER'S REVENGE--DEATH OF MONKS.

Fun Facts

- ★ Oliver Twist (1909), the first film adaptation of Dickens's novel, a silent film starring Edith Storey and Elita Proctor Otis.
- ★ In 1838 Charles Zachary Barnett's stage adaptation, the three-act burletta Oliver Twist; or, The Parish Boy's Progress opened at the Marylebone Theatre in London. See image of playbill to the left.
- ★ *Oliver!*, a 1960 West End theatre stage musical adaptation by Lionel Bart. The original cast featured Ron Moody as Fagin (he would reprise the role for the film adaptation), and boys who alternated in the juvenile lead of the Artful Dodger included Phil Collins and Davy Jones (of the musical group The Monkees). Many songs are well known to the public, such as "Food, Glorious Food", "Consider Yourself" and "I'd Do Anything".

OTHER NOVELS BY CHARLES DICKENS

Hard Times

A Tale of Two Cities

A Christmas Carol

Great Expectations

Nicholas Nickleby

The Mystery of Edwin Drood

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