

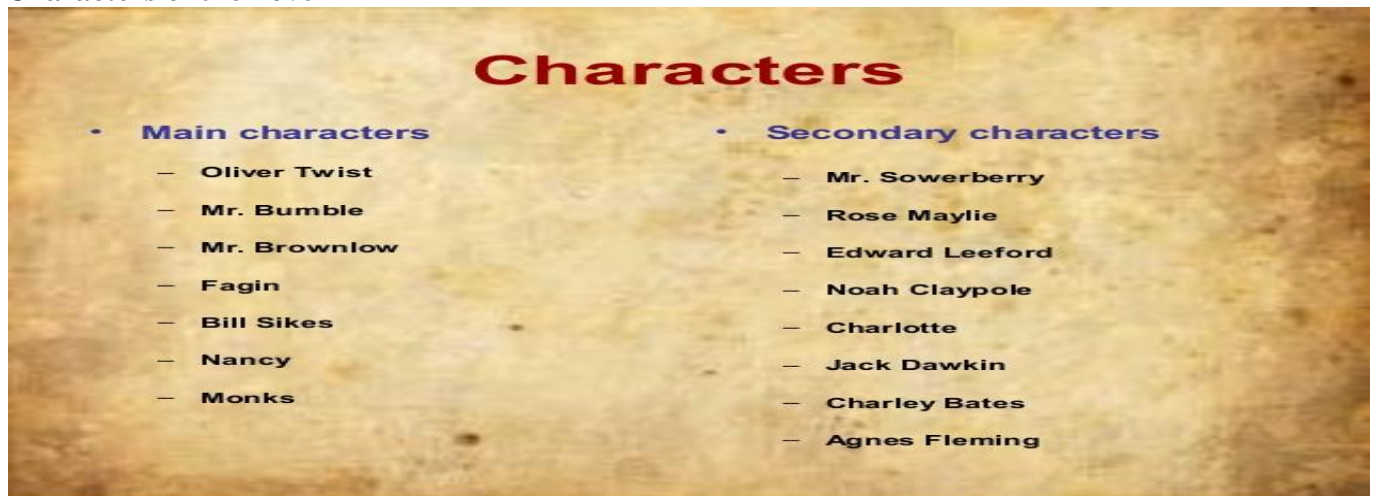
## Oliver Twist – Charles Dickens



### An Introduction to the Author:

**Charles Dickens** (1812 – 1870) was the most popular English novelist of the Victorian era, and he remains popular, responsible for some of English literature's most iconic characters. Dickens wrote *Oliver Twist* in the years 1837-38. The dates are important because in 1835 Parliament passed a new law called the “poor law”. The law said that there was work for everybody, so people without work or money were lazy. Local governments offered these people a workhouse, where they were given food and a bed, and this is one part of the book that talks about.

### Characters of the novel



**Oliver Twist** : He is a young, good-hearted, and kind--but often mistreated--orphan who is raised in a workhouse, and finds himself indentured to an undertaker, living with thieves, and eventually taken in by the kind Mr. Brownlow and Mrs. Maylie. His generosity of spirit is total, and even when faced with serious maltreatment, he never loses his sense of morality or kindness.

**Fagin** : A very old man, with a villainous-looking and repulsive face, Fagin is the leader of a gang of boy thieves, and a very greedy and vicious man. It is Fagin who tries to turn Oliver into a thief, and who betrays Nancy to Sikes, leading to her death.

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

**Nancy** : She is a young woman and prostitute raised into that profession by Fagin. Nancy eventually betrays Fagin and Sikes to save Oliver, but she will not leave them, and pays her life for this decision.

**Mr. Bumble** : He is the beadle of the parish, a fat and choleric man who takes great joy in abusing those below him, and is often offended by their impositions on him.

**Bill Sikes** : A stoutly-built man in his thirties, Bill is a vicious housebreaker and thief who often works with Fagin, and is involved with Nancy. He often mistreats, and eventually kills her.

**Noah Claypole** : He is a charity-boy with a fierce look who works for the undertaker and enjoys bullying Oliver. He later, with Charlotte, steals from the Sowerberrys and runs away to London, where he joins Fagin's gang.

### **An overview of the novel:**

*Oliver Twist* is the story of a **young orphan, Oliver**, and his attempts to stay good in a society that refuses to help. Oliver is born in a workhouse, to a mother not known to anyone in the town. She dies right after giving birth to him, and he is sent to the parochial orphanage, where he and the other orphans are treated terribly and fed very little.

When he turns nine, he is sent to the workhouse, where again he and the others are treated badly and practically starved. The other boys, unable to stand their hunger any longer, decide to draw straws to choose who will have to go up and ask for more food. Oliver loses. On the appointed day, after finishing his first serving of gruel, he goes up and asks for more. Mr. Bumble, the beadle, and the board are outraged, and decide they must get rid of Oliver, apprenticing him to the parochial undertaker, Mr. Sowerberry. It is not great there either, and after an attack on his mother's memory, Oliver runs away.

Oliver walks towards London. When he is close, he is so weak he can barely continue, and he meets another boy named Jack Dawkins, or the artful Dodger. The Dodger tells Oliver he can come with him to a place where a gentleman will give him a place to sleep and food, for no rent. Oliver follows, and the Dodger takes him to an apartment in London where he meets Fagin, the aforementioned gentleman, and Oliver is offered a place to stay.

Oliver eventually learns that Fagin's boys are all pickpockets and thieves, but not until he is wrongfully accused of their crime of stealing an old gentleman's handkerchief. He is arrested, but the bookseller comes just in time to the court and says that he saw that Oliver did not do it. The gentleman whose handkerchief was taken, Mr. Brownlow, feels bad for Oliver, and takes him in.

Oliver is very happy with Mr. Brownlow, but Fagin and his co-conspirators are not happy to have lost Oliver, who may give away their hiding place. So one day, when Mr. Brownlow entrusts Oliver to return some books to the bookseller for him, Nancy spots Oliver, and kidnaps him, taking him back to Fagin.

Oliver is forced to go on a house-breaking excursion with the intimidating Bill Sikes. At gun point Oliver enters the house, with the plan to wake those within, but before he can, he is shot by one of the servants. Sikes and his partner escape, leaving Oliver in a ditch. The next morning Oliver makes it back to the house, where the kind owner, Mrs. Maylie, and her beautiful niece Rose, decide to protect him from the police and nurse him back to health.

Oliver slowly recovers, and is extremely happy and grateful to be with such kind and generous people, who in turn are ecstatic to find that Oliver is such a good-natured boy. When he is well enough, they take him to see Mr. Brownlow, but they find his house empty—he has moved to the West Indies. Meanwhile, Fagin and his mysterious partner Monks have not given up on finding Oliver, and one day Oliver awakens from a nightmare to find them staring at him through his window. He raises the alarm, but they escape.

Nancy, overhearing Fagin and Monks, decides that she must go to Rose Maylie to tell her what she knows. She does so, telling Rose that Monks is Oliver's half-brother, who has been trying to destroy Oliver so that he can keep his whole inheritance, but that she will not betray Fagin or Sikes. Rose tells Mr. Brownlow, who tells Oliver's other caretakers, and they decide that they must meet Nancy again to find out how to find Monks.

They meet her on London Bridge at a prearranged time, but Fagin has become suspicious, and has sent his new boy, Noah Claypole, to spy on Nancy. Nancy tells Rose and Mr. Brownlow how to find Monks, but still refuses to betray Fagin and Sikes, or to go with them. Noah reports everything to Fagin, who tells Sikes, knowing full well that Sikes will kill Nancy. He does. Mr. Brownlow has in the mean time found Monks, who finally admits everything that he has done, and the true case of Oliver's birth.

Sikes is on the run, but all of London is in an uproar, and he eventually hangs himself accidentally in falling off a roof, while trying to escape from the mob surrounding him. Fagin is arrested and tried, and, after a visit from Oliver, is executed. Oliver, Mr. Brownlow, and the Maylies end up living in peace and comfort in a small village in the English countryside.

**Themes:** **Charity and love** are themes because even though Oliver is treated horribly by most people, he is shown love by a few good people. Those people are Mr. Brownlow, Mrs. Maylie, and even Nancy. Greed and corruption are also themes because of how people take advantage of Oliver. He is taken advantage by Mr. Bumble at the workhouse, and the thieves. Mr. Fagin tries to control Oliver, to use him for his own wealth. Monks tries to steal his identity, and his inheritance. Other themes are : 1. The powerlessness of children 2. Child Labour 3. Children criminals 4. Misused women 5. Justice for the rich 6. City versus countryside 7. Social inequality 8. The inhuman treatment of children.

### **Question:**

Assess Charles Dickens' Satire of Victorian Culture in *Oliver Twist*

In the novel *Oliver Twist*, Charles Dickens ridicules Victorian society; he focuses on the Poor Law system, orphans, workhouses, and the characterization of Oliver and Nancy, using sarcasm, and the comparison between the real world and the world of Oliver. When Dickens was just a child, a lot of traumatic things happened to him. At twelve, his father went to prison. He then had to work in a shoe blacking factory. He knew poverty and that's why he was aware of social problems and had deep feeling of social commitment. Dickens was one of the most important social writers of history.

He criticized moral, social, and economic problems in the Victorian era through his fiction works. While writing the book, Victorian themes like poverty, injustice, mean characters, and punishment were all live issues in the world. Dickens didn't like the 1834 New Poor Act, which criminalized the poor. He didn't like the harsh utilitarian ethics of it. The Poor Law Board thought that people that could do work didn't get anything better than the poorest worker.

Due to the emergence of trade unions, the Poor Law system fell into decline. There were liberal welfare reforms during the twentieth century; it wasn't until 1948 when it was officially abolished. Illustrated in *Oliver Twist*, Dickens showed the reading society the harsh symbol of realities in the Victorian era. In the novel, there are a lot of orphans. Dickens depicts them as poor, underfed, oppressed, and severely punished. The fear of destitution and poverty was always present in the minds of adults, and children alike in Victorian society.