

Reflections:

A Student Response Journal for...

Oliver Twist
by Charles Dickens

written by Jennifer Knotts and Virginia Pleasants

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ISBN: 978-1-58049-849-4

Item No. 201476

About the author and novel

1. When reading a classic novel such as *Oliver Twist*, knowing some background helps you to appreciate such a novel even more. Most of the action takes place in London, England, before 1850. Do a small outline drawing of England, Wales and Scotland and with a circle show exactly where London is located on the map. Write your researched answers after the following questions:
 - Who was the ruling monarch of England when Dickens published *Oliver Twist* there?
 - To whom was this monarch married and was it a long, happy marriage?

The Author's preface (1841)

2. We are fortunate to have Dickens' own words in the 1841 Preface. Because of them, we know what his intentions were in creating the characters in the novel. The skill of summarizing is one that will come in handy in all students' lives. In the format shown, please summarize how Dickens feels other writers handle evil characters and how he feels evil characters should be portrayed. Use the words from the Preface, being careful to use quotation marks. The first one is given as an example.

Characters/Other Writers

"seductive fellows, faultless in dress"

Characters/Dickens

"dim the false glitter"

3. Write a brief paragraph about what features most characterize what we know today as "The Victorian Age." Include your feeling about whether or not you would like to be living today in such an age and why.

Chapters 1 - 3

4. As an infant, Oliver Twist is placed in a house with twenty or thirty other children under the care of an elderly woman named Mrs. Mann. Under Mrs. Mann's care, the children are underfed and ill-treated, yet when nine-year-old Oliver is being led away by Mr. Bumble, he begins to cry. For the first time, Oliver feels a sense of loneliness.

Think of a time when you were going through difficult circumstances, but were then faced with a change to something unfamiliar. If you kept a journal, what would you write in your journal entry to describe your thoughts and feelings as you tried to anticipate your unknown future?

5. Charles Dickens gives us a description of the horrible conditions in the workhouse where Oliver is now living; and, yet, Dickens calls the members of the board who oversee the workhouse "very sage, deep, philosophical men" who make "many...wise and humane regulations." One of the board's regulations includes feeding the workhouse inhabitants watered-down oatmeal. Dickens vividly paints the picture of starving, emaciated paupers who are served this watery gruel for their meals.

Using Dickens' sarcastic style, write a letter to the manager of a restaurant where you have been served the worst meal you've ever had by the worst server ever to wait on you.

6. Oliver and the other boys in the workhouse have been fed three small bowls of gruel a day, two onions a week, and half of a roll each Sunday; and they are starving. Little Oliver is chosen to ask for more food, and utters the book's most famous line, "Please, sir, I want some more."

Most of us have never experienced this degree of hunger, but we have experienced wanting something to eat that we're told we can't have. Imagine it is the day before Thanksgiving, and your grandmother has baked your favorite pie. However, she says you're not allowed to have any now; you have to wait until tomorrow. In a few sentences, give the most convincing argument you would use to get your grandmother to let you have a piece today.

Oliver Twist

7. Mr. Gamfield's cruel beating of the donkey shows just what kind of wicked man he is. Oliver is rightly terrified to be put to work as an apprentice under him. We see that this chimney sweep is even paid (albeit only three pounds) to accept Oliver, which brings to mind slave conditions. Remember, it is 1830 in England and at that time slavery was still legal in the United States.

Imagine that you are the real Charles Dickens. Write a real letter that he would have written to the editor of the London Times, which tells of his rage at the inhuman conditions suffered by English orphans and American slaves. Use the following format:

To the Editor of The London Times:

I am outraged to learn of the plight of a ten-year-old orphan named...

Sign your letter:

"With every respect,
Charles Dickens"

Chapters 4-6

8. Oliver is taken to the shop of the undertaker, Mr. Sowerberry, to become his apprentice. The undertaker's wife is a harsh woman who complains about having to feed Oliver and pushes him down the stairs to the cellar. When Oliver devours the scraps even the dog wouldn't eat, Mrs. Sowerberry looks on in shock. She is not, however, horrified by the apparent starvation Oliver's actions reveal, but by the thought of having to feed someone with such an appetite.

Writing as if you are a woman in the neighborhood who witnesses Mrs. Sowerberry's treatment of and attitude toward Oliver, what could you say to Mrs. Sowerberry that might help change her opinion of poor, parish children? Think not only of the words you would use, but also how you would say them so as not to offend Mrs. Sowerberry, and how you could, perhaps, get her thinking about her prejudices and callous attitudes.

9. It is hard to believe that people actually starved in England's capital city, London. Dickens describes this happening with regularity a little over a hundred fifty years ago. Unfortunately, there are countries in our present day where men, women, and children are also starving to death. One example of this is in the African country of Sudan. Please research this country and write a brief report about it and why there is starvation there. Write your report as if you were going to be called upon to make it orally to your class. You might begin your report with the following opening, or write one of your own:

The Sudan is a country which...

10. Oliver endures Noah's mean comments and ill treatment for months until, one day, Noah insults Oliver's mother. At this, Oliver becomes enraged and grabs Noah by the throat, knocking him to the ground. Noah's cries for help bring Charlotte and Mrs. Sowerberry to the scene, where they pull Oliver off Noah and lock Oliver in the dust-cellar.

Pretend you are a school principal, and an incident similar to this happens in your school. A student who is constantly picked on by other students lashes out at a known bully. In phone conversations with the parents of each student, what will you tell them about the incident?

Chapters 7 - 9

11. Dickens doesn't give us the name of one member of the workhouse board, but simply calls him the "gentleman in a white waistcoat." This person has formed an unfavorable, and undeserved, opinion of Oliver Twist.

Perhaps you've had to deal with someone who has the wrong idea about you. Write a poem that expresses your feelings of being misunderstood and of being misrepresented by this person to others.

12. The title of this chapter tells in a word, "refractory," what Oliver's behavior is.
- A) Look up the meanings of the word "refractory" in a dictionary and write down the one that applies to Oliver.
 - B) Review the chapter to find all the examples of Oliver's "refractory" behavior. Copy down the phrases or sentences which describe each of these behaviors.
13. Oliver has walked for several days; and he is tired, sore, cold, and hungry. As Oliver waits at the foot of a steep hill, a stagecoach approaches. Instead of allowing Oliver to hitch a ride, even just to the top of the hill, the passengers tell him they'll give him a halfpenny to see how far he can run up the hill.

Imagine you are a wandering minstrel who composes songs about the people and sights you see in your travels. You have just witnessed this scene with a little beggar boy and some passengers on a stagecoach. Write down the lyrics to a song you would compose about what you have seen.