Dickens is sometimes considered a ‘difficult’ author because of his complex language. However, Polanski’s richly-detailed film presents the story in an entertaining way. Moreover, he gives a sense of the working and living conditions of Victorian children. Some of the story is based on Dickens’ own life. Though not an orphan like Oliver, he had to work in a boot-blacking factory when his father was sent to a debtors’ prison. The experience left a lasting sympathy for the poor. Other details came from Dickens’s work as a journalist and the records he made of his times.

**Workhouse blues**

In Victorian Britain, when people had no work or were incredibly poor, they went to a *workhouse* similar to the one at the beginning of *Oliver Twist*. A typical job was picking the *fibres* (oakum) from old ropes. Oakum was mainly used for repairing holes in ships. The job was very boring and after a few hours the hands of the people would bleed.

**Dangerous chimneys**

When Oliver did not become an *apprentice* to a master *chimney sweep*, he was saved from a *fate* worse than the workhouse. Many real-life Victorian boys were not so lucky, and boys as young as six,
Children were particularly good pickpockets.

many of them orphans, were apprenticed to master chimney sweeps. The work was very dangerous. Boys could get sick or die from breathing in the soot. They could also become stuck in the chimneys. For all this danger, the boys were not paid and they were fed poorly. As a result, they grew slowly and could work in this terrible job for longer.

Burying the dead

Factory work and life in overcrowded, dirty cities sharply reduced life expectancy. For undertakers it was a boom-time. Apprentice undertakers would help with cleaning the shop, building coffins and preparing bodies. Dickens had a very low opinion of undertakers and thought they only made money from other people’s misery. When Oliver is an apprentice to the undertaker Sowerberry, Polanski highlights this negative opinion by showing Sowerberry taking snuff from a coffin-shaped box.

Stealing from pockets

The growth of cities in the Victorian era provided many opportunities for thieves. Children were particularly good pickpockets as they could move through a crowd more easily than adults and their smaller hands could slip into strangers’ pockets and coats. For the children it was probably a better life than being a chimney sweep, even though they risked being sent to prison with adults, transported to Australia, whipped or hung. Oliver experiences stealing when he meets Fagin’s gang (see the excerpt from the book).

Ryan Scott (Australia)

### WHO IS WHO

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oliver Twist</td>
<td>(Barney Clark) An orphaned boy who was born in a workhouse and grows up in a harsh, uncaring environment, and poverty.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fagin</td>
<td>(Ben Kingsley) A criminal who trains homeless kids to become pickpockets and steal for him.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bill Sikes</td>
<td>(Jamie Foreman) A cruel criminal who grew up in Fagin’s gang and eventually becomes a murderer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nancy</td>
<td>(Leanne Rowe) A young prostitute and thief who is in love with Sikes and tries to protect Oliver.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Brownlow</td>
<td>(Edward Hardwicke) A rich and kind gentleman who takes care of Oliver and gives him a new home.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Artful Dodger</td>
<td>(Harry Eden) A young pickpocket who befriends Oliver and introduces him to Fagin’s gang.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### TASK

Fill in the missing verbs to describe what Fagin and the boys were doing in the extract. Make sure to use correct verb forms.

Fagin and the boys 1 _________ an unusual game. He 2 _________ a watch in his pocket. He 3 _________ his coat. He pretended to 4 _________ into shop windows. The boys quickly 5 _________ out of his sight whenever he turned around.

The Dodger 6 _________ on Fagin’s toes.

**Solution on p. 3**

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### VOCABULARY

- gloomy – pochmurný
- orphan – sirotek
- poverty – chudoba
- respectability – respectabilita
- fibre – vlákno
- oakum – koudel
- to bleed – jehlice
- apprentice – učeň
- chimney sweep – komink
- fate – osud
- soot – kovářská závažná
- to become stuck – znížit
- overcrowded – přelidněný
- life expectancy – zřízenec
- undertaker – zlízečec
- boom-time – období rozmachu
- snuff – sníh
- coffin-shaped – ve tvaru rakve
- pocketbook – kapesní zloděj
- to slip – zklamání
- to hang – obehát
- snuff-box – tabáčník
- pin – jehlice, brož