



Oliver running away from the scene of a crime that he didn't commit.

# A GLOOMY CHILDHOOD

## Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*

February 2012 is the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Charles Dickens. One of his most popular novels is *Oliver Twist*. Dickens' story of one orphan's rise from poverty to respectability was recently brought to life by director Roman Polanski, whose film *Bridge* presents this month.

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-blackening factory**<sup>5</sup> when his father was sent to a **debtors' prison**<sup>6</sup>. The experience left a lasting

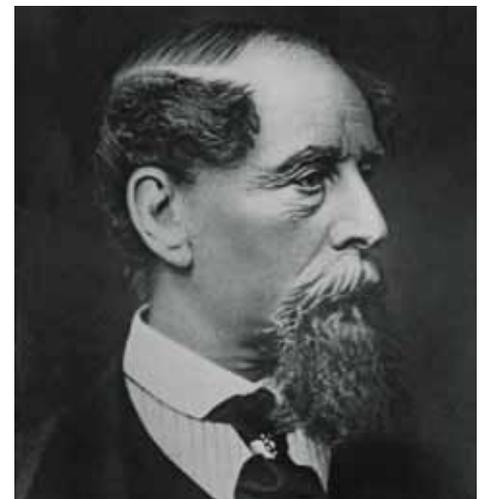
sympathy for the poor. Other details came from Dickens's work as a journalist and the records he made of his times.

### Workhouse blues

In Victorian Britain, when people had no work or were incredibly poor, they went to a **workhouse**<sup>7</sup> similar to the one at the beginning of *Oliver Twist*. A typical job was picking the **fibres**<sup>8</sup> (**oakum**<sup>9</sup>) 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**<sup>10</sup>.

### Dangerous chimneys

When Oliver did not become an **apprentice**<sup>11</sup> to a master **chimney sweep**<sup>12</sup>, he was saved from a **fate**<sup>13</sup> worse than the workhouse. Many real-life Victorian boys were not so lucky, and boys as young as six,



## CHARLES DICKENS (1812–1870)

is the most famous English writer of the Victorian era. In that era, for the first time in history, books were becoming widely bought and read. Thanks to that, Dickens enjoyed greater popularity than any author before him. His works were often first published as series in newspapers. He was a master of realism and comedy, and had a gift for description. His characters are 'larger-than-life' (= have strong, memorable personalities) and immediately recognizable.

## 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**<sup>14</sup>. They could also **become stuck**<sup>15</sup> 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**<sup>16</sup>, dirty cities sharply reduced **life expectancy**<sup>17</sup>. For **undertakers**<sup>18</sup> it was a **boom-time**<sup>19</sup>. 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**<sup>20</sup> from a **coffin-shaped**<sup>21</sup> box.

## Stealing from pockets

The growth of cities in the Victorian era provided many opportunities for thieves. Children were particularly good **pickpockets**<sup>22</sup> as they could move through a crowd more easily than adults and their smaller hands could **slip**<sup>23</sup> 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**<sup>24</sup> or **hung**<sup>25</sup>. Oliver experiences stealing when he meets Fagin's gang (see the excerpt from the book).

**Ryan Scott** (Australia)

## extract

# OLIVER TWIST

In this excerpt, Oliver meets Fagin, a criminal who trains boys to become pickpockets. When Oliver sees the boys learning to steal, he thinks it is only a game. Dickens does this to illustrate how innocent Oliver is.

*When the breakfast was cleared away, the cheerful old gentleman [Fagin] and the two boys played a very unusual game, which was performed in this way: the cheerful old gentleman put a **snuff-box**<sup>26</sup> in one pocket of the trousers, a pocketbook in the other, and a watch in his jacket pocket. He fixed a false diamond **pin**<sup>27</sup> on his shirt, and, buttoning his coat tightly round him, walked up and down the room with a stick, pretending to be an old man walking around the streets. Sometimes he stopped at the fireplace, and sometimes at the door, apparently staring into shop windows. At such times, he would look around him for fear of thieves, and would keep checking all his pockets in turn to see that he hadn't lost anything. He did this in such a funny manner that Oliver laughed until the tears ran down his face. All this time the two boys followed closely behind him, moving out of his sight so quickly every time he turned round, that it was impossible to follow their movements. At last the Dodger accidentally stepped on his toes, while Charley Bates walked into him from behind and in that one moment they took from him, with most extraordinary speed, snuff-box, pocketbook, shirt pin, pocket handkerchief. If the old gentleman felt a hand in any of these pockets, he shouted out its position; and the game began all over again.*

Extract taken from Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*, Penguin Readers, Level 6.

## WHO IS WHO



**Oliver Twist**  
(Barney Clark)  
An orphaned boy who was born in a workhouse and grows up in a harsh, uncaring environment, and poverty.



**The Artful Dodger**  
(Harry Eden)  
A young pickpocket who befriends Oliver and introduces him to Fagin's gang.



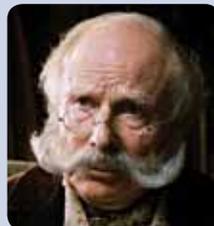
**Fagin**  
(Ben Kingsley)  
A criminal who trains homeless kids to become pickpockets and steal for him.



**Nancy**  
(Leanne Rowe)  
A young prostitute and thief who is in love with Sikes and tries to protect Oliver.



**Bill Sikes**  
(Jamie Foreman)  
A cruel criminal who grew up in Fagin's gang and eventually becomes a murderer.



**Mr. Brownlow**  
(Edward Hardwicke)  
A rich and kind gentleman who takes care of Oliver and gives him a new home.

## → 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

## VOCABULARY

- <sup>1</sup> **gloomy** – pochmurný
- <sup>2</sup> **orphan** [ˈɔːf(ə)n] – sirotek
- <sup>3</sup> **poverty** [ˈpɒvəti] – chudoba
- <sup>4</sup> **respectability** [rɪˈspektəˈbɪlɪti] – váženost
- <sup>5</sup> **boot-blacking factory** – továrna na leštění na boty

- <sup>6</sup> **debtors' prison** [ˈdetəz] – vězení pro dlužníky
- <sup>7</sup> **workhouse** – chudobinec
- <sup>8</sup> **fibre** [ˈfaɪbə] – vlákno
- <sup>9</sup> **oakum** [ˈəʊkəm] – koudel
- <sup>10</sup> **to bleed** [bliːd] – krváčet
- <sup>11</sup> **apprentice** [əˈprentɪs] – učeň
- <sup>12</sup> **chimney sweep** [ˈtʃɪmni swiːp] – kominík

- <sup>13</sup> **fate** [feɪt] – osud
- <sup>14</sup> **soot** [suːt] – saze
- <sup>15</sup> **to become stuck** – uvíznout
- <sup>16</sup> **overcrowded** [ˌəʊvəˈkraʊdɪd] – přelidněný
- <sup>17</sup> **life expectancy** [lɪkˈspekt(ə)nəsi, ek-] – průměrná délka života
- <sup>18</sup> **undertaker** [ˈʌndəteɪkə] – zřizovatel pohřebního ústavu

- <sup>19</sup> **boom-time** – období rozmachu
- <sup>20</sup> **snuff** [snʌf] – šňupací tabák
- <sup>21</sup> **coffin-shaped** – ve tvaru rakve
- <sup>22</sup> **pickpocket** – kapesní zloděj
- <sup>23</sup> **to slip** – vklouznout
- <sup>24</sup> **to whip** [wɪp] – zbičovat
- <sup>25</sup> **to hang** – oběsit
- <sup>26</sup> **snuff-box** – tabatěrka
- <sup>27</sup> **pin** – jehlice, brož