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# **OLIVER TWIST**

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# OLIVER TWIST

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*by*

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# OLIVER TWIST

## ON USING THE NOTES

These Notes are not intended to be a substitute for attentive reading of a novel. But intelligent use of the Notes will help the reader in reviewing *Oliver Twist* and in enhancing his reading enjoyment and mastery of the book.

In approaching a novel—especially a long and involved one—the student is confronted by a particular challenge. Because of length and complexity it is impossible for even the most accomplished reader to retain the details clearly in his mind, so as to regard the work as a unified whole. With other works of art, the endeavor is not quite so formidable. A painting may be viewed as a whole, with the interrelationships of its various elements evident to the sensitive beholder. The same is true of briefer literary works. A short poem and even a drama can also be contemplated as an entity constructed of parts that each contribute to the overall unity.

The principle of unity is one thing that we look for in every well executed artistic work, in the novel no less than in other forms. Every feature of a novel—including story, setting, plot, character, ideas—combine to create the effect for which the author is striving. It is the purpose of these Notes to help you discover the important things and to observe how they contribute to the writer's achievement.

Just as the Notes are no substitute for reading the original, neither can they take the place of repeated readings. The more times that you read a book the closer you come to acquiring a comprehensive grasp of the work in its entirety. As you go over familiar territory, the effort required of the mind in the initial reading is greatly reduced, and attention is liberated to rove about, noting significant details disregarded at first. Thus both pleasure and understanding are augmented. Often it is advisable to undertake separate readings to study specific characteristics. By so doing, one ultimately develops the faculty of reading on several levels simultaneously.

Here again, the Notes will guide your efforts. By pointing out some of the things that the book contains, they will serve as an encouragement to further exploration and as an incentive for the student to formulate his own opinions about the work. Close examination of a literary work is primarily a process of raising questions about it; hence, rewarding study in the main depends upon knowing what questions to ask. In these Notes, we will

look for questions posed by *Oliver Twist*. In penetrating the riches of *Oliver Twist*, you will be enlarging your capacity for the appreciation and comprehension of other novels and, necessarily, of all books.

In studying any work of literature, it should in the first instance be examined on its own merits; that is, the achievement should be considered as an independent work of art, without reference to the circumstances of its creation. It is true, no doubt, that for maximum insight some knowledge of the author's life and times is usually valuable. A measure of background investigation is pertinent in the case of Dickens, for much of the material of his novels was drawn from his early life and experience, which likewise determined his moral outlook. Accordingly, let us next look briefly at the times and conditions out of which *Oliver Twist* developed.

## EARLY NINETEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND

During much of the long period beginning with the French Revolution (1789-92) and the succeeding Napoleonic era, which lasted until 1815, England was entangled in the turbulent events on the continent of Europe, with resultant upheaval at home.

Early in the French Revolution, the overthrow of the old order was welcomed with enthusiasm by many Englishmen. But as the violence and terror in France reached extreme heights, keen partisanship divided English society. The upper strata, comprising the propertied and governing classes, were naturally alarmed at how affairs across the Channel were stimulating radicalism among the populace. On the other hand, the underprivileged and the liberals were encouraged to agitate for improved conditions. Disorder ensued, followed by repressive measures, particularly when England was at war with France.

The struggle on the continent led to acute hardship among the English people. The heavy tax burden imposed for the support of military operations bore hardest on those least able to pay, while the affluent classes were subject to relatively little sacrifice. Rising prices and food scarcity fostered discontent and added to the misery of the people. Their hardships were multiplied when the government issued paper currency, thereby inducing inflation.

At the same time, the prolonged economic struggle between France and her enemies deprived England of most of her markets for manufactured goods. Extensive unemployment brought on acute distress during

the years 1811-13. In 1811, jobless workers in organized groups known as the Luddites roamed the country, destroying the machinery that they held responsible for their plight. In 1812—the year of Charles Dickens' birth—the destruction of manufacturing equipment was made punishable by death.

In 1815, Napoleon met his Waterloo and was confined to the island of St. Helena for the remainder of his days. After the long period of bloody conflicts, the restoration of peace was greeted with general jubilation. But optimism and high hopes were quickly shattered. The dislocation incident to the cessation of hostilities plunged England into the most ruinous depression that the nation had ever suffered. The aggrieved masses placed the blame for their woes on the landlords and industrialists.

Once again violence and destruction swept the land, with the inevitable retaliation by the authorities. A climax was reached with the "Peterloo Massacre." In St. Peter's Fields, Manchester, on August 16, 1819, a regiment of cavalry charged an orderly assemblage of citizens, killing eleven and injuring four hundred. Fierce public indignation followed the outrage, but officials openly condoned the action.

For a long time one of England's major problems had been the support of paupers, whose numbers steadily increased. Direct relief had been in operation since the days of Queen Elizabeth. This outlay came to require the imposition of crushing parish taxes. Abuses became rampant; many of the able-bodied preferred to live at public expense rather than to seek work. When the practice of supplementing starvation wages with relief payments developed, unscrupulous employers took advantage of the situation, and the independent worker who aspired to be self-supporting was thwarted in his efforts. After the defeat of Napoleon, 400,000 veterans were added to the hordes of unemployed, aggravating the crisis.

In contrast to ugly appearances on the surface, there was an undercurrent of strong forces striving for improvement. The pressure of public opinion supported the efforts of reformers to rectify many old abuses.

In 1800, 220 crimes, many of them obviously minor, were punishable by death. One result of these barbaric circumstances was that juries often refused to convict the accused. At the same time, prominent crusaders were campaigning relentlessly for abolition of capital offenses. By 1837, only 15 crimes were still punishable by execution.



Slavery also came under attack by humanitarian forces. In 1808, the slave trade was made illegal. In 1834, slavery was entirely abolished in British possessions. The objective was quietly achieved through gradual transition and with generous compensation to former slave-owners.

In the elections brought about by the accession of William IV in 1830, the Tories lost control of the government. Assumption of power by the Whigs opened the way to an era of accelerated progress.

Among the most urgently advocated steps was parliamentary reform. In 1829 the first Catholic was admitted to Parliament. In spite of determined opposition in the House of Lords, the Reform Bill of 1832 was passed. The bill eliminated many inequities in representation, and the middle-class franchise was extended.

In 1833 came the beginning of regulation over the employment of children in factories. From that time on, an increased amount of legislation was enacted to control the hours of labor and working conditions for children and women in manufacturing plants.

A new concept was adopted to deal with the vexing issue of pauperism. The Poor Law of 1834 provided that all able-bodied paupers must reside in a workhouse. Inmates of the workhouses became objects of public stigma, and to further heighten the unpopularity of the institutions, living arrangements in them were deliberately made harsh. The plan was successful from one standpoint, for within three years the cost of poor relief was reduced by over one-third. However, the system was sharply censured, and the increased prevalence of crime has been attributed to it. Dickens made the Poor Law of 1834 a conspicuous target of denunciation in *Oliver Twist*.

On June 20, 1837, Queen Victoria came to the throne of England as the long period of middle-class ascendancy was gaining momentum. At that time, Mr. Pickwick had already captured a devoted following, while simultaneously the vicissitudes of *Oliver Twist* were engaging the sympathies of a large, eager audience. The inauguration of the Victorian Age found twenty-five-year-old Charles Dickens firmly established on the road to literary fame that would take him to ever greater eminence throughout his life.

## THE LIFE OF CHARLES DICKENS

Charles Dickens was born February 7, 1812, in Portsea on the south coast of England, while his father was stationed at Portsmouth. The family

was of the lower middle class, with genteel pretensions. John Dickens, the father, was a clerk in the navy pay office. Although he was a man of some ability and advanced in the service, his propensity for living beyond his means eventually led to disaster.

In 1814 John Dickens was transferred to London for a tour of duty of unknown duration. By 1817 the family was established in Chatham near the naval dockyard. Thereafter followed the happy years of Charles' childhood. His recollections of early life were centered in Kent and he later regarded himself as of that region. One of the boy's fancies was to own Gad's Hill Place, a stately old dwelling near Rochester. When Dickens was forty-four years old, he was able through a happy chance to purchase the property and it became his permanent residence for the rest of his life.

Young Charles received his first instruction from his mother and later attended regular schools in Chatham. He soon became intimate with his father's small collection of literary classics. The youngster also revealed early signs of genius. John Dickens delighted in exhibiting his son's talents, thus reinforcing the nudgings of young ambition.

The pleasant times came to an end in 1822 when John Dickens was ordered back to London. The elder Dickens' improvident fondness for convivial living had by then got him into financial straits from which he could not extricate himself, and the situation was alarmingly precarious. Mrs. Dickens made a feeble and foolhardy attempt to conduct a school to augment the family resources but only succeeded in further diminishing them.

To lessen the strain Charles, then twelve years old, was put to work in a blacking warehouse at meager wages. Two weeks afterward his father was incarcerated in a debtors' prison, where Mrs. Dickens and their four smallest children joined him. During the melancholy interlude young Charles had only irregular relations with his family.

The next four or five months were a painful ordeal. In addition to degrading labor, Charles endured the indignities of insufficient food, shabby quarters, and the association of rough companions. It was a humiliating trial that left an indelible impression on the proud and sensitive boy. In after years he never alluded to this episode, except in the pages of *David Copperfield*. It is likely that this introduction to the consequences of poverty was instrumental in shaping the pattern of his life. Dickens became distinguished by furious energy, determination to succeed, and an inflexible will.

After John Dickens had been in prison for about three months, his aged mother died. The legacy that he received was sufficient to effect his release and to relieve his immediate financial embarrassments. One boon of this change in fortune was that Charles was taken out of the blacking warehouse a few weeks later and sent back to school. He spent the next two and a half years in an academy, completing all of the formal education that he was to receive.

In the spring of 1827 Charles Dickens, then a youth of fifteen, entered a solicitor's office. While applying himself to the law, he managed in his free time to master shorthand.

About a year and a half later, the energetic young man felt ready to hazard a less tedious and more promising occupation, and he became a free-lance court reporter. For over three years, the future novelist was brought into close contact with grim facets of the city life as exhibited in the courts. His work was seasonal and to some degree sporadic, so he was able to spend much time reading in the British Museum.

In March, 1832, Dickens became a journalist. After serving on two newspapers and acquiring experience as a parliamentary reporter, in 1834 he joined the staff of the prominent *Morning Chronicle*. He gained the reputation of being one of the fastest and most accurate reporters in London. In addition to his metropolitan activities, his assignments took him all over England, mainly to cover political events. With this exposure to the prevailing realities of political life, in Parliament and around the nation, the writer's apprenticeship was receiving its finishing touches.

In the meantime, drawing upon the abundance of material stored in his assimilative mind, Dickens had begun to compose sketches of London life. The first of these was published unsigned in the *Monthly Magazine* of December, 1833. In August 1834, the signature "Boz" made its first appearance, and Dickens' anonymity gradually evaporated.

The indefatigable writer produced numerous sketches while continuing his arduous newspaper life. The records of the reporter's keen observations that were preserved in the vivid pieces later found their way into a profusion of celebrated novels. Finally, on the author's twenty-fourth birthday, February 7, 1836, *Sketches by Boz, Illustrative of Everyday Life and Everyday People* was published in book form. A second series came out later, and the complete edition was issued in 1839.

The following month an even more significant literary event occurred: The first number of *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club* was offered to the public. Instead of being first serialized or released in its entirety, the work came out in individual numbers that were sold separately from March, 1836, to November, 1837. Only 400 copies were printed of the first installment, and the initial reception was inauspicious. But later sales rose spectacularly and printings reached 40,000.

The success of the *Sketches by Boz* had elevated Dickens' confidence in the future and sufficiently improved his income to enable him to assume the responsibilities of matrimony. On April 2, 1836, two days after the first of the *Pickwick Papers* went on sale, Charles Dickens and Catherine Hogarth were married. The bride was the oldest daughter of George Hogarth, the editor of the *Evening Chronicle*, an affiliate of the newspaper for which Dickens wrote. The couple had ten children, but after twenty-two years the marriage ended in dissension and separation.

When the success of the *Pickwick Papers* was assured, the star reporter resigned from the *Morning Chronicle*. Within a few months, however, he had become editor of a new periodical, *Bentley's Miscellany*. The February, 1837, issue began the serialization of *Oliver Twist; or, the Parish Boy's Progress* by Boz, even though the busy editor was still at work on the *Pickwick Papers*. Before *Oliver Twist* had all appeared, several numbers of Dickens' next novel, *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-39), had been printed. *Oliver Twist* was completed in September, 1838, and was issued in book form before the end of the year, although serial publication ran until March, 1839.

Dickens relinquished the editorship of *Bentley's Miscellany* after two years, but his astounding literary productivity went on with few intermissions until the day of his death. His many books followed one another at regular intervals: *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-41), *Barnaby Rudge* (1841), *American Notes* (1842), *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843-44), *Dombey and Son* (1846-48), *David Copperfield* (1849-50), *Bleak House* (1852-53), *Hard Times* (1854), *Little Dorrit* (1855-57), *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), *Great Expectations* (1860-61), *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-65), *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870—unfinished).

Besides his output of books, Dickens' other literary pursuits were impressive. Among his best-known short stories are *A Christmas Carol* and *The Cricket on the Hearth*. He wrote miscellaneous sketches, travel accounts, articles, and dramatic pieces. In 1850 he assumed the editorship of *Household Words*, and from 1859 until the end of his life he edited the successor of that periodical, *All the Year Round*.

Dickens' non-literary activity alone would have taxed the stamina of an ordinary person. He had a boundless zest for life, and everything that he did was undertaken with vigor and dispatch. He enjoyed an active social life and was a prolific letter writer. Many relatives and his own numerous family commanded much of his attention—and material assistance. Some of his time was taken by his interest in organized charity. His travels took him to the continent and twice to America. There were several changes of residence, including sojourns in Italy, Switzerland, and France. In spite of all this, Dickens managed to indulge in rather strenuous physical activity. Horseback riding was a favorite recreation of his; he was also fond of taking brisk walks of up to twelve or fourteen miles.

While still a child Dickens developed an enduring attachment for the theater. At one time in his youth, Dickens made an attempt to become a professional actor. As an adult he delighted in arranging amateur performances, at various times writing plays, managing productions, or acting.

His dramatic predilection later found expression in the famous readings from his own works. These started with a benefit in 1853 and professional appearances began in 1858. Dickens' second trip to America in 1867-68 was a reading tour that proved to be immensely lucrative. He threw himself with intense gusto into the oral interpretation of his works, sparing neither himself nor his audiences. After presenting the murder of Nancy from *Oliver Twist*, Dickens commonly had to leave the stage for a period of recuperation before proceeding. The swooning of females in the audience was a regular feature of these occasions.

Beginning with his early successes, Dickens' literary career was an unbroken triumphal procession. His popularity grew enormously and everywhere he came to be regarded with almost reverence. His cosmopolitan reading public reached an astounding magnitude, and every addition to his writing was awaited with wild expectation. Dickens was universally beloved as probably no other living writer has ever been.

On June 8, 1870, Charles Dickens, working on the manuscript of his last book, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, wrote longer than was his usual practice. At dinner time he collapsed and sank into a coma; he died in the evening of the following day. The news of Dickens' death was carried on a shock wave of grief to remote regions of the earth. As his body was interred in Westminster Abbey, the whole world mourned.

## A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

In his preface to *Oliver Twist*, Dickens emphatically declares an article of his artistic credo. He expressed resentment at the practice in popular

literature of depicting rogues, like Macheath in *The Beggar's Opera*, as dashing figures leading gay and colorful lives. He considers such misrepresentations as a potentially baneful influence on impressionable minds. Dickens firmly maintains that the nature and behavior of his depraved characters reflect truth without distortion, however implausible they may seem.

Dickens is frequently charged with offering a view of the world that does violence to reality. A novelist, however, communicates his interpretation of life through the medium of fiction. His accomplishment grows out of an amalgam of experience and imagination. In judging the writer's success, we have to grant his purposes and goal. Dickens was fascinated by the grotesque and had a peculiar talent for exaggeration. For him real life was the springboard for fancy. Thus he created a fictive world that is a mirror in which the truths of the real world are reflected.

( *Oliver Twist* conclusively demonstrates that Dickens accepted the prevailing doctrine that the novel should be directed toward social reform. Dickens was not, however, a propagandist espousing utopian panaceas for the ills of the world. He bitterly attacks the defects of existing institutions—government, the law, education, penal systems—and mercilessly exposes the injustice and wretchedness inflicted by them. But he does not suggest the overthrow of the established order; neither does he offer any concrete alternatives or solutions. )

Dickens would seem generally to approve of the organization of the English state and society. He could not have attained his enormous popularity if he had not in a large measure voiced sentiments and values congenial to his times. Dickens looked upon almost all institutions with suspicion, including religious movements. In *Hard Times*, trade unionism is depicted as fraught with incipient perils, in the manner of all oppressive forces when the wielders of power fall prey to corruption and abuse. Dickens had little confidence in systems as agencies of good but placed his faith in people.

To bring about improvements, he depended upon the release of the goodness that he felt to be inherent in all human nature. Dickens retained a fervent belief in the natural benevolent impulses of people that would manifest themselves if not stifled. Accordingly, he implacably hated all individuals, institutions, and systems that he regarded as inimical to the flow of natural human goodness. He does not, nevertheless, believe that this endowment is indestructible. As he makes starkly clear in *Oliver Twist*, he acknowledges that under the impact of evil influences the trait of goodness in humanity can be irretrievably lost.

For this reason, Dickens lays great stress upon the efficacy of environment in the development of character and regulation of conduct. While having little faith in the operation of politics, he rested his hopes for progress on education. But schooling must be well conceived and administered. In many of his books, Dickens assails the perversion of education with the full strength of his satiric lash. It is noteworthy that whenever *Oliver Twist's* fortunes begin to rise, his benefactors immediately take an interest in his education.

Dickens is often accused of being deficient in character portrayal. But in this regard, as in other feats of execution, it was the exercise of the novelist's own distinctive gifts that yielded the most remarkable creations. Dickens was primarily concerned with the external behavior of people and little occupied with the exploration of psychological depths. For the most part, his characters are "flat," that is, they do not reveal varied facets of personality. Moreover, they do not develop, but remain unchanged through the course of events and interaction with other characters. Since they are not gradually built up into complex human beings, characters may sometimes suddenly act contrary to expectations.

Dickens' caricatures may seem overdrawn, but they usually discharge a serious function in the fictional milieu. They are not to be looked upon as representative types of actual humanity. Subordinate characters regularly are given identity upon first introduction by being labeled with some idiosyncrasy. They are readily remembered thereafter by the recurring peculiarity of speech or behavior, even when they have little to do with the mainstream of action. Thus, Dickens' secondary characters are usually the most memorable. Likewise, his unsavory figures tend to stand out more than the models of rectitude and propriety—goodness being a quality difficult to dramatize or signify by a phrase or gesture. Hence, the protagonists are frequently pallid, unconvincing figures without the vitality and individuality that distinguish the villains and supernumeraries.

Dickens had an inveterate relish for melodrama and his characters reflect this. The principals fall into two groups whose natures are predominantly white or black. The serious characters between whom the essential conflict takes place therefore embody the extremes of virtue and viciousness.

The novels of Dickens are marked—many would insist marred—by an erratic looseness of construction that may be disconcerting to readers habituated to works in which organic unity is patent. In the case of Dickens, it may be difficult to discern what the *center* of a work is—what it is precisely

about—which should be expressible in a succinct statement. The plot is woven out of an involved central intrigue that can be hard to unravel because of the intertwining of subordinate and irrelevant incidents.

The resort to melodrama, particularly in the rendition of great crucial scenes can defeat the writer's designs. When the effort to attain tragic intensity lapses into melodrama and sentimentality, the effect upon the reader is vitiated. Pathos must be utilized with care, for the reader may rebel against having his tender feelings exploited.

In his humor also, Dickens' exuberance carried him beyond the bounds of moderation, but he seldom lost sight of his intentions. He liberally exercised his fertile talent for humorous invention solely to ornament the story and amuse his audience. He also made use of humor for satiric effect by exaggerating weakness or vice to reduce it to maximum absurdity. When particularly aroused by an offense against humanity, Dickens may introduce caustic irony that resolves into open sarcasm.

But whatever faults Dickens may have, they are the faults of genius. Many of the technical flaws in his works were imposed by historical circumstances. He was not only a confirmed moralist but a supreme storyteller. He fully recognized that in order for the world to receive his message his books had to be read. That meant that he had subtly to attract his readers by taking into account their tastes and desires.

When Dickens began writing, the novel had not yet reached the state of development and acceptance that it was later to attain. People who read novels expected to be entertained. Fiction was looked upon as light reading and was widely accounted not altogether respectable, at that. So a shrewd novelist provided his readers with lively diversion while soothing their consciences with moral flavoring.

The novel as a literary kind was still in a formative state, so Dickens followed in the eighteenth-century tradition that favored long, rambling tales freely embellished with uplifting attributes. In addition, the form of Dickens' books was partially dictated by the exigencies of serial publication. Serialization prescribed an episodic structure rather than a tightly contrived plot conveyed by a dexterously linked story. Each installment needed to be in some degree an independent entity having its own center of interest, while at the same time leading up to a height of suspense in anticipation of the next issue.



For Dickens, this mode of distribution was further complicated by conditions under which he labored. He might be writing the installments as needed, sometimes barely keeping ahead of the typesetters. Therefore he had no opportunity for revising and polishing his efforts after a novel was finished, and a work might never be planned as a whole. The author sometimes knew no better than his readers what was to happen next. On November 3, 1837, writing about *Oliver Twist*, Dickens observed to his friend and biographer, John Forster: "I hope to do great things with Nancy. If I can only work out the idea I have formed of her, and of the female who is to contrast with her..." In September, 1838, when the novel was almost completed, he confided to Forster that he had not yet "disposed of the Jew Fagin, who is such an out and outer that I don't know what to make of him..." In that same work, the author had intended to have Rose Maylie die, but he later rejected the opportunity for a pathetic scene and allowed her to recover.

Whatever imperfections Dickens' writing may contain, his extraordinary popularity can leave no doubt that he was the reigning literary potentate of his day. His works represented the confluence of genius with a received tradition that responded to the needs of the times. In spite of his occasional acerbity, Dickens supported the best of which Victorian England was capable. And each succeeding generation has affirmed the original judgment by paying homage to the generosity of his spirit and the immensity of his creative achievement.

## LIST OF CHARACTERS IN *OLIVER TWIST*

### *(In Order of Appearance)*

#### ***Oliver Twist***

A foundling; son of Edwin Leeford and Agnes Fleming. A dear, grateful, gentle child, "instead of possessing too little feeling, possessed rather too much." He had not learned "that self-preservation is the first law of nature."

#### ***Sally Thingummy***

An old pauper woman who is an inmate of the workhouse and later dies there. She attends at Oliver's birth, "rendered rather misty by an unwonted allowance of beer."

#### ***Agnes Fleming***

Oliver's mother; the daughter of a retired naval officer. "She was