Life in Victorian England: children, poverty and disease

Life in Victorian England was harder than it was today. Remember, there was no welfare state. If someone lost their job or didn’t have enough money to live, there was no such thing as social security to help them. Instead, poor people would go to live in workhouses. Workhouses were big buildings where poor people lived. The living conditions were harsh and people who lived in workhouses were fed very basic food. Often they would be fed on a very thin and watery soup called gruel. Not only that, but if a family had to enter the workhouse, they didn’t get to stay together as a family. They were all split up. Men, women and children all had to go to separate workhouses.

In other ways, life in Victorian England was hard. Medicine was not as good as it is today. Today, we have cures for lots of terrible diseases. In Victorian times, these cures did not exist. People would often die of disease, and people didn’t live as long as they do nowadays. Children were particularly at risk. Nearly half of all children died before the age of 5. Not only that, but childbirth was very dangerous for women. Lots of women would die whilst giving birth.

If both of a child’s parents are dead, we call that child an orphan. In Victorian England, there were a lot of orphans, and they had tough lives. Sometimes, they would be looked after by another member of their family. But if no-one wanted to look after them, they would often be brought up in the workhouse. They would spend their time in the workhouse doing hard and boring work, such as washing bottles, chopping wood, or breaking rocks and stones into smaller pieces.

Some orphans were so unhappy with life in the workhouse that they ran away. However, life outside the workhouse was tough too. Nowadays, there are laws against children having jobs. In those days, there weren’t. Children did hard physical labour. Sometimes they would work as chimney sweeps, because they were so small it was easier for them to climb inside a chimney and clean it. A lot of the jobs that children and adults did were not paid that well. So even outside the workhouse, people would live in great poverty and might not have enough food to eat.

Lots of people moved to big Victorian cities such as London, because there were more jobs available there. As a result, these cities became very overcrowded and dirty. The overcrowding and dirt caused there to be even more disease. There was no proper running water, and no proper toilets. People would often go to the toilet in the river, and still use the water in the river as drinking water! Poor people were more likely to get diseases and die young than rich people. But even rich people were at risk of diseases and of dying young, because there were no cures for lots of these diseases.

Your quality of life during the Victorian times depended on whether you were rich or poor. Overcrowding in the poorer parts of the city quickly led to poverty and disease. Many poor families lived in slums and life was a constant struggle. Parents tried desperately hard to find work to feed their families. Many children had to work, while others were too sick and hungry to play.

Life was different for rich families. They lived in large houses, with a special room for children called the nursery. This was often at the top of the house. In the nursery younger children ate, played and slept. They were looked after by a woman called a nanny. Some rich children saw their parents only in the morning and evening, and were looked after mostly by their nanny and by other servants. Most Victorians thought children should be 'seen and not heard'.
Plot Summary

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. Noah Claypole ( an older boy working for Mr Sowerberry) sees Oliver as a threat and bullies him. 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 wakens 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.
Characters

Oliver Twist

Oliver Twist - The novel’s protagonist. Oliver is an orphan born in a workhouse, and Dickens uses his situation to criticize public policy toward the poor in 1830s England. Oliver is between nine and twelve years old when the main action of the novel occurs. Though treated with cruelty and surrounded by coarseness for most of his life, he is a pious, innocent child, and his charms draw the attention of several wealthy benefactors. His true identity is the central mystery of the novel.

Mr Bumble

Mr. Bumble - The pompous, self-important beadle—a minor church official—for the workhouse where Oliver is born. Though Mr. Bumble preaches Christian morality, he behaves without compassion toward the paupers under his care. Dickens mercilessly satirizes his self-righteousness, greed, hypocrisy, and folly, of which his name is an obvious symbol.

Mr Sowerberry

Mr. Sowerberry - The undertaker to whom Oliver is apprenticed. Though Mr. Sowerberry makes a grotesque living arranging cut-rate burials for paupers, he is a decent man who is kind to Oliver.
Noah Claypole

Noah Claypole - A charity boy and Mr. Sowerberry’s apprentice. Noah is an overgrown, cowardly bully who mistreats Oliver.

Artful Dodger

The Artful Dodger - The cleverest of Fagin’s pickpockets. The Dodger’s real name is Jack Dawkins. Though no older than Oliver, the Dodger talks and dresses like a grown man. He introduces Oliver to Fagin.

Fagin

Fagin - A conniving career criminal. Fagin takes in homeless children and trains them to pick pockets for him. He is also a buyer of other people’s stolen goods. He rarely commits crimes himself, preferring to employ others to commit them—and often suffer legal retribution—in his place. Dickens’s portrait of Fagin displays the influence of anti-Semitic stereotypes.
Mr Brownlow

Mr. Brownlow - A well-off, erudite gentleman who serves as Oliver’s first benefactor. Mr. Brownlow owns a portrait of Agnes Fleming and was engaged to Mr. Leeford’s sister when she died. Throughout the novel, he behaves with compassion and common sense and emerges as a natural leader.

Nancy

A young prostitute and one of Fagin’s former child pickpockets. Nancy is also Bill Sikes’s lover. Her love for Sikes and her sense of moral decency come into conflict when Sikes abuses Oliver. Despite her criminal lifestyle, she is among the noblest characters in the novel. In effect, she gives her life for Oliver when Sikes murders her for revealing Monks’s plots.

Bill Sikes

A brutal professional burglar brought up in Fagin’s gang. Sikes is Nancy's lover and he treats both her and his dog Bull’s-eye with an odd combination of cruelty and grudging affection. His murder of Nancy is the most heinous of the many crimes that occur in the novel.
How to structure a paragraph:
Point> Evidence> Technique> Analyse> Link

CHECK YOUR WRITING

• Are all your sentences accurate? Check that there are no run-on sentences or fragments.
• Have you used capital letters correctly? You must use them at the start of a sentence and for proper nouns.
• Have you used the correct tense throughout?
• Do the subjects agree with the verbs?
• Have you used apostrophes correctly?
• Have you used quotation marks correctly?
• Check your spelling, particularly common errors such as there/their and to/too
**Essay structure**

![Essay structure diagram](image)

**Introduction**

The primary purpose of an introductory paragraph is to identify the topic and purpose of the essay.

In your introduction, include:

- ✓ The name of text you are studying: ..........................................................
- ✓ Who wrote the text: ..........................................................................
- ✓ A brief sentence saying what the text is about: .................................
- ✓ The purpose of the essay: (what character will you be focusing on)...........................................

For the best introduction, try to:

- ✓ Include a bold opening statement
- ✓ Give a brief overview of the story
- ✓ List at least three points that will be analysed in the main body of the essay

**Writing a paragraph**

- ✓ When you write a paragraph, it is important to make sure your point matches with your explanation.
- ✓ Your explanation must also match up with the evidence!
- ✓ You must also try not to repeat yourself. Your explanation shouldn’t say the same thing as your first point.

**Conclusion**

Write a conclusion where you sum up all the evidence and make a final judgment about the character.
**‘Oliver Twist’: Knowledge Organiser**

### Plot breakdown
- Oliver is born in the workhouse. When he is a bit older he is nominated to ask for more food because the boys are starving.
- He is kicked out of the workhouse and sold to the Sowerberry family to be an undertaker’s apprentice. He’s bullied by Noah, they fight and he is locked up.
- Oliver runs away to London, meets Dodger and is introduced to Fagin’s gang.
- Oliver is taken out with the gang and is horrified to see Dodger steal a gentleman’s handkerchief. Oliver is wrongly arrested for the theft.
- The gentleman, Mr. Brownlow, takes pity on Oliver and takes him in. The gang plot to get him back in case he reveals information about them.
- Oliver is abducted by the gang whilst running an errand for Mr. Brownlow.
- Oliver is used by Sikes in a burglary. They fail and Sikes runs away. Oliver is left behind but the people who live there feel sorry for him and look after him. They are called Fred and Rose Maylie.
- When Bill and Fagin realise what has happened, they plot to catch Oliver again. Nancy overhears and visits Mr. Brownlow to warn him.
- Fagin tells Bill about Nancy’s betrayal and Bill murders her. Fagin is discovered and sent to prison and Bill dies trying to run away.
- Oliver discovers who his parents were and joins Mr. Brownlow and the Maylies to live happily ever after.

### Key words
- **morality** – a code of right and wrong. People who try to do good can be called **moral** and people who do bad things can be called **immoral**.
- **vulnerable** – in a situation in which you could be easily harmed. People living on the streets are **vulnerable**.
- **brutal** – very violent or cruel.
- **corrupt** – a word used to describe a person who uses their power in a dishonest or illegal way in order to make life better for themselves.
- **villain** – a ‘baddie’ who harms other people or breaks the law to get what they want.
- **malicious** – meant to hurt or upset someone.
- **victim** – someone who has been harmed, often by other people.
- **naive** – if someone is naive if they don’t have experience of how complicated life can be and therefore trust people too much.
- **society** – the people who live in a certain area. This could be a country, town or small group.
- **workhouse** – a place where people who couldn’t support themselves were sent to live and work.

### Background information
- ‘Oliver Twist’ was written in 1837-39.

#### Facts
- It was written by Charles Dickens.
- In was published chapter by chapter in a periodical (magazine).
- Charles Dickens had to work in harsh conditions as a child when his father was sent to prison.
- Dickens wanted to criticise a new change to The Poor Law which happened in 1834 and created more workhouses and show how hard life was for poor people.

### Characters
- **Oliver**
  - He is a ‘pale, thin’ orphan who is treated badly by almost everyone he meets. He tries his best to be a good person and experiences ‘horror and alarm’ whenever he sees crimes being committed.
- **Mr. Bumble**
  - The man who runs the workhouse and gives Oliver his name. He is a ‘fat man’ who enjoys power and doesn’t care about the people beneath him.
- **Noah Claypole**
  - A ‘malicious and ill-conditioned’ boy who bullies Oliver at the undertakers. He eventually runs away to London and joins the same gang as Oliver.
- **Fagin**
  - An old man who runs the gang of pickpockets. He seems kind but his ‘villainous-looking and repulsive face’ reflects his selfish nature as he gets young boys to do his dirty work for him.
- **Jack Dawkins (The Artful Dodger)**
  - A young boy who introduces Oliver to Fagin’s gang who has ‘all the airs and manners of a man’. He’s confident and cunning.
- **Bill Sikes**
  - A ‘rough man’ who has been a criminal for many years. He beats his dog viciously and brutally kills his girlfriend, Nancy.
- **Nancy**
  - Bill’s girlfriend who risks her life to help Oliver escape from the gang. She loves Bill even though he treats her abusively and she feels guilty about the life of crime she has led.
- **Mr. Brownlow**
  - A wealthy older gentleman who takes Oliver in and looks after him. He believes in Oliver’s goodness even when it looks like Oliver has stolen from him and eventually finds out the truth about Oliver’s parents.