



# OLIVER TWIST

**film** education

STUDY GUIDE TO ACCOMPANY THE  
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[WWW.FILMEDUCATION.ORG/OLIVERTWIST](http://WWW.FILMEDUCATION.ORG/OLIVERTWIST)

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# OLIVER TWIST

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Certificate: PG

Running time: 130 minutes

Director: Roman Polanski

## SYNOPSIS

Charles Dickens' classic story of a young orphan boy who gets involved with a gang of pickpockets in nineteenth century London has been re-imagined by the Oscar™-winning director Roman Polanski.

Orphaned at an early age, Oliver Twist is forced to live in a workhouse lorded over by the horrible beadle Mr Bumble and its board of hypocritical 'fat gentlemen'. Desperate yet determined, Oliver makes his escape to the streets of London. Penniless and alone, he is lured into a world of crime by the sinister Fagin – the mastermind of a gang of pint-sized pickpockets. Oliver's rescue by the kindly Mr Brownlow is only the beginning of a series of adventures that lead him to the promise of a better life.

## EXERCISE 1: ADAPTATION

There are many differences between Dickens' book, Oliver Twist, and Polanski's filmed version. For one thing a film like Oliver Twist is the product of many hundreds of people's labour, not just a single man's imagination. Can you think of any other critical differences between a film and a book that would make a film an entirely different experience?

## LENGTH

The screenplay by Ronald Harwood and then filmed by Polanski is hugely different from Charles Dickens' tale and leaves out everything in the novel that provides Oliver's back history.

1. If you know the novel, and once you have seen the film, make a list of all the elements that have been removed and whether or not you feel the story told is stronger or weaker for their absence.
2. Dickens was telling his tale over many weeks writing an instalment at a time for a new and popular magazine. This 'episodic' form is thought to have injected the need to include lots of cliff-hanging moments and occasional switches away from the main action to sub-plot scenes in order to keep the reader tantalised enough to want to buy the next edition. Can you detect this kind of structure in the film version or does it choose to tell the tale in a more linear (direct) way? Is it the stronger, and the more entertaining for doing so?

For further activities on adaptation, visit:

[www.filmeducation.org/olivertwist/adaptation](http://www.filmeducation.org/olivertwist/adaptation)

## EXERCISE 2: 'THEY'LL HANG YOU FOR ANYTHING THESE DAYS'

It is noticeable in the novel how often Fagin and his boys refer to hanging and being hanged. Given their profession, perhaps it is not so surprising. They lived at a time when dozens of crimes carried the death penalty.

This next activity is a chance to draw on Dickens' descriptions, to provide a next-day account of Fagin's own end on the scaffold. Here you will find a set of prompts that will enable you to fill up your reporter's notebook with lots of information before writing your story. There is a wealth of additional information available at Film Education's online Oliver Twist site to support this activity too.

In addition to a written account, you can also provide a front-page set of illustrations showing off the main events leading up to Fagin's end. The front page of the Police Gazette (the newspaper cited in the film) resembled a comic strip – a sign that many of its readers might not have been that literate and also that photography did not exist until later in the century and even then could not be included in cheap newspapers.

## QUESTIONS:

1. In your opening paragraph you will need to explain the who? what? why? when? and how? of your story. The main point of the opening will be to give as powerful a description of Fagin's death and his crimes as possible.
2. You might want to have a description of the crowd that came to see him killed. Hangings of popular or unpopular criminals could attract thousands, and often the atmosphere was more of party than a sombre affair. You could also include interviews from people in the crowd.
3. The reporter might also choose to interview Mr Brownlow or Oliver, having heard that they went to see Fagin just a few hours before his execution.
4. What lastly, is the reporter's view of the event – something that made him proud or ashamed to be British?

Background notes for this activity can be found online at:  
[www.filmeducation.org/olivertwist/hanging](http://www.filmeducation.org/olivertwist/hanging)



## EXERCISE 3: REALITY AND FANTASY

In his notes to *Oliver Twist*, Polanski states that the film is not realistic and that it concerns a series of grotesque characters. Despite this, a huge effort has gone into recreating early Victorian London, basing the characters, their dress and the settings on meticulous research and, in particular, reference to contemporary prints of London and its inhabitants by Gustav Doré.

1. Study the sequence in which Oliver is drawn deeper and deeper into Fagin's world when being guided by the Artful Dodger. The journey he makes off one of the city's main highways – full of traffic and attractive, bustling shops – down an alley way and through some of the slum courts is highly symbolic, but it also represents the way in which films and the novel before them are able to draw our attention to social injustice, to go into places that many of the more wealthy in Victorian Britain were utterly ignorant of. What does this sequence suggest about the lives of the urban poor in 1837? One thing to remember was that gin was incredibly cheap and beer was safer to drink than water at this time – hence the universal drunkenness that confronts Oliver as he vanishes into the backstreets.

2. Oliver's journey to London is an interesting mix of the idyllic and the horribly real. Recall the journey as it is depicted in the film and consider the elements that appear most realistic or the most exaggerated? For example – how does the sequence suggest in Oliver's appearance and physical condition the difficulties of the journey? Also, how does it represent the range of reactions to the lone child in Victorian Britain – which do you feel is the more 'realistic' – Oliver's treatment by the indifferent girl and her father at one farm and his reception by the old lady at another?

3. The film is a highly constructed thing – a work of art in which scenes and incidents can take on particular meanings and sub-text. Consider how the following elements of the film take on added significance as part of this constructed narrative:

– (Function) Bullseye – Bill Sykes' dog. What different functions (jobs) does the dog perform during the film? It plays a number of roles and its importance as a signifier both of Sykes' cruelty and violence changes completely around by the end of the story.

– (Pattern) Oliver's gazing up at the inter-warehouse aerial walkways as he is taken to meet Fagin is significant given events later in the film – look out for other such examples of pattern – an important element of any well-made film and a key part to their enjoyment, but also more to do with artistic values than actual lived reality.

– (Symbolism) Study Sykes' escape into the country following his murder of Nancy – how is the landscape and the way Sykes is framed highly suggestive of his guilt and paranoia? Similarly consider the symbolism and very filmic discovery of Nancy's body by her friend – how does Polanski make this scene dramatic and shocking?

– (Restraint – perhaps due to this being a children's film seeking a PG certificate from the British Board of Film Classification) Consider how the film depicts violence in as tasteful a way as possible – do you find the murder of Nancy more or less shocking for this restraint? Also, consider the depiction of Nancy, who has almost certainly been a prostitute since a very tender age and is shown co-habiting with Sykes – a man many years her senior. Do you feel the film is right to gloss over these details? (Dickens in his day was criticised from both directions, for choosing to write about such unseemly topics and people, but at the same time failing to represent the true harshness of their lives.)

4. The happy ending? Do you feel all is too easily resolved at the end of the film? Or, alternatively, do you feel that Brownlow's house is really shown to be a tiny oasis of calm surrounded by threats on all sides? Unlike the novel, those that seek to recapture Oliver trace him to the very garden gate of his sanctuary – what is the effect of this? Also – as the credits roll, we are not shown happy images of Oliver in the garden, but reminded through the use of Doré's illustrations of the world he has left behind. Again – what impact does that choice of ending have?

For further activities around the ideas of realism and fantasy, visit: [www.filmeducation.org/olivertwist/realism](http://www.filmeducation.org/olivertwist/realism)





## EXERCISE 4: CHARACTERISATION

Charles Dickens is famous for the creation of vivid characters – even those that play very small roles in his novels are wonderfully presented, full of strange quirks and mannerisms that make them distinctive. Comment on how Polanski chose to represent these characters in his film version by answering the following questions:



**A.** Consider the following list – how do each of these contribute to making Oliver a more sympathetic character?

1. His physical appearance – clearly a lot of thought went into the casting of Barney Clark in the role.
2. Times when events are shot from his point of view such as when he is selected to go and ask for more food or when he approaches the workhouse staff with the boys' request.

3. The catalogue of injustices he suffers as he makes his progress in the world and the almost casual violence that adults feel free to dish out against him even though he is a very slight child. What impact does the fact that he has been named according to Mr Bumble's infallible alphabetical system have on you?

4. The fact that Oliver seems to have a developed sense of cleanliness – he even pauses on his route to London to wash in a puddle.

5. The moments when people treat him with a little compassion – such as the justice that takes pity on his tears and refuses to sign him over to the chimney sweep Mr Gamfield.

6. The fact that he goes back to see Fagin in his prison cell – how does this incident in the film add to our feelings for Oliver?

**B.** Is Fagin the devil? When we first meet Fagin in the novel he is brandishing a fork with a sausage on the end. Not only is he transgressing his Jewish dietary laws but Dickens is making a none-too-subtle suggestion that this man is almost evil incarnate. The film also creates a very vivid depiction of Fagin, but is he entirely unsympathetic? As you watch or recall the film, consider how your feelings altered towards Fagin say in the opening scene when he talks to his hidden plunder, or when he cares for Oliver by dressing his shotgun wound. And what about his depiction in his final scene in Newgate – how does that contribute to our understanding and feeling for the character?

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**S T U D Y G U I D E**

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