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Oliver Twist

Charles Dickens · *1838 · original English text*

A parish orphan is thrown from the workhouse into a network of thieves, and the question is whether a child can be claimed by kindness before crime finishes its work. Dickens sets mercy, truth and courage against hunger, calculation and fear, and he will not let the reader treat any of them as a joke.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

Can mercy reach a child whom the law and the streets have already priced and used?

"Please, sir, I want some more."

Oliver · Chapter II

Oliver asks for more and is treated as a rebel. The book answers not with institutions but with costly kindness: Brownlow's patience, Rose's compassion, and Nancy's warning given at the risk of her life. Crime has a long chain; love, late and dear, still breaks it.

KEY CHARACTERS

Oliver Twist
the parish child; innocence under pressure

Fagin
the trainer of thieves

Nancy
pity and courage, still bound

Bill Sikes
violence that cannot be reasoned with

Mr. Brownlow
patient, investigating kindness

Rose Maylie
compassion that acts

Monks
the half-brother; envy of a name

The Artful Dodger
wit already sold to the trade

Mr. Bumble
the beadle; official hardness

A BEADLE ON THE LAW

> *"If the law supposes that," said Mr. Bumble, squeezing his hat emphatically in both hands, "the law is a ass—a idiot."*
>
> **Mr. Bumble** · Chapter LI

Grades 6–8

Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01
The Parish Boy
CHAPTERS I–VII

Hunger, a name, and a first escape.

- Oliver is born in a workhouse; his mother dies without giving her name
- He is farmed out, then returned to pick oakum among other starving boys
- Chosen by lot to ask for a second helping, he says the famous sentence and is advertised for sale
- Apprenticed to the undertaker Sowerberry, he is bullied by Noah Claypole and runs away toward London

> *"Please, sir, I want some more."*
>
> **Oliver** · Chapter II

02
Fagin's School
CHAPTERS VIII–XV

A door opens in London, and it is the wrong one.

- The Artful Dodger leads the footsore boy to **Fagin**, who trains children to pick pockets
- Oliver is taken out with the Dodger and Charley Bates; a theft is blamed on him
- Mr. **Brownlow** has him arrested, then, seeing his face, takes him home and tends him
- A portrait in the house seems to know the boy; Fagin's people are already watching

03
Taken Back
CHAPTERS XVI–XXII

Kindness is interrupted; the thieves want their tool.

- Sent on an errand with books and money, Oliver is recaptured by **Nancy** and Bill Sikes
- Nancy, already miserable in that life, first shows pity for him
- Fagin and the mysterious **Monks** have an interest in keeping the boy a thief
- Sikes forces Oliver into a housebreaking in the country; the boy is shot and left behind

04
The Maylie House
CHAPTERS XXIII–XXXVI

A second home, and a plot against it.

- The wounded boy is taken in by Mrs. Maylie and her niece **Rose**
- He recovers in a country household that treats him as a child, not as a case
- Bumble and his wife sell what they know of Oliver's birth to Monks
- Monks is revealed as a figure who wants the boy ruined, not merely used

05
Nancy's Warning
CHAPTERS XXXVII–XLVII

A girl still bound to her old life tells the truth anyway.

- Nancy overhears Monks and Fagin, and carries the warning to Rose on London Bridge
- She will not leave Sikes, though she loathes the life that holds her
- Noah Claypole spies on the meeting and reports it
- Sikes, told of the betrayal, murders Nancy

> *"I am chained to my old life. I loathe and hate it now, but I cannot leave it."*
>
> **Nancy** · Chapter XLVI

06
The Account Settled
CHAPTERS XLVIII–LIII

Crime falls; the hidden name is spoken; mercy remains.

- Sikes, hunted, dies in a terrible fall from a rooftop
- Monks is forced to confess: he is Oliver's half-brother and has tried to destroy the boy's inheritance and character
- Fagin is condemned; Oliver visits him in the condemned cell
- Oliver is claimed by Brownlow; Rose's own hidden kinship is cleared; the boy is home at last

Mercy · Courage · Hunger & Want · Crime's Chain · True Home · A Hidden Name

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 6–8

1. Oliver asks for more in Chapter II. Watch who treats that sentence as rebellion, and who later treats the boy as a person.
2. Nancy is not freed by her warning. What does it cost her to tell the truth while still "chained to her old life"?
3. Brownlow is kind, but he also investigates. Mercy in this book is not the same thing as being easily fooled.
4. Monks wants Oliver ruined as well as robbed. Why is a good name more dangerous to him than a lost will?
5. Bumble's joke about the law comes very late. Set it beside the workhouse, the courtroom, and the condemned cell.
6. Dickens gives the thieves comedy and terror by turns. Do not let the jokes blunt what Nancy's death is for.

Quotations are verbatim from the original English text, Project Gutenberg #730, Oliver Twist, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/oliver-twist/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.