UNIT 11 : CHARLES DICKENS: *OLIVER TWIST* II

UNIT STRUCTURE

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11.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to :

- identify the important themes of the novel *Oliver Twist*
- enlist the various characters and place them in the context of the novel
- explain Dickens' narrative style
- discuss the significance of the novel in its totality

11.2 INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit, we have discussed the life and works of Charles Dickens, and the background and summary of the novel *Oliver Twist*. In this unit, you will get an opportunity to read more about the themes, characters and narrative technique used by Dickens in the novel. You will note that *Oliver Twist* is a novel about the problems faced by the common ordinary people during Industrial Revolution in England. In the year 1837, when Dickens began *Oliver Twist* in its episodic form for Bentley's *Magazine*, it was given

the subtitle "The Parish Boy's Progress". This was written with reference to John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*. *Oliver Twist*, as such records the inherent goodness and innocence of the protagonist that succeeds in overpowering all the obstacles and evils that he had to face. At first, Dickens had intended only to show the life and hardships faced by an ordinary parish boy after the passing of the New Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. The writer understood the politics and problems in the Law due to his experience as a parliamentary reporter for the Morning Chronicle. He projected the grim reality of England through his fiction. You will find such instances as you read the novel. For example, when Dickens describes how Oliver was treated.

11.3 READING THE NOVEL

In the following sections, you will get an opportunity to study the various important themes and issues implicit in the novel *Oliver Twist*.

11.3.1 Major Themes

The following are the most important themes of the novel Oliver Twist.

Condition of England :

Oliver Twist was the second novel of Charles Dickens. Many societal issues are explored by Charles Dickens in *Oliver Twist* in keeping with the theme of 'Condition of England'. He had mainly two aims in mind while forming the narrative of the novel. First, he wished to draw the attention of the people towards the appalling condition of the paupers caused by the Poor Law of 1834. Under the directives given by this law, the unemployed, the orphans and the ailing were meant to be placed in the workhouses. The workhouse was a completely exploitative institution that deprived these have-nots even of the basic needs of life. The rules were so rigid and the food so meagre that it seemed worse than a prison. The novel gives an honest representation of the workhouses where the young characters

like Oliver and Dick are sent and subjected to much abuse. Dickens was innovative in the way through which he keeps the child as the protagonist. Unlike the earlier novels that came out during the Victorian era, Dickens had emphasised on the psychology of a child and the way society shapes his or her mind.

Reflection on the Grim and Dark Criminal World of England :

Dickens wanted to represent the grim and dark criminal world of England. He was accused by some critics of glamourising the world of crime. But this was not true since he was more concerned with the degradation and cruelty of the world of crime. He attempted to show how poverty had increased crimes in England, and the Poor Laws were hardly of any use. These laws had only increased the problem as the paupers have no other scope to improve their economic condition. They are forced either to spend a life of exploitation in workhouses, or to become a criminal in order to survive. The world of crime is a trap that has pushed young adolescents like Jack Dawkins, Charley Bates, Nancy, Betsy, Noah and others into an unending vortex.

Issues relating to Identity :

Another thematic aspect of the novel is that of identity. Both the two different worlds of the parish and the criminal den of Fagin either tries to deny Oliver's true identity or attempt to give him a new one. In Victorian England, even identity is based on utility of the person and not on humanity. This fact is ironically shown by Dickens when he refers to Oliver as a commodity "of mortality". Interestingly you will find in the novel that Dickens has made use of clothing as a symbol. For example when Oliver was enclosed in a blanket, he remains anonymous, but the moment he put on some ragged garments, he becomes a parish child, and again when he is given a suit by Mr. Brownlow, he receives a new identity.

Friendship and Kinship :

Friendship and kinship together forms another significant theme in this novel. The story of Oliver Twist contains two different categories of connection. Oliver is an orphan but he is equally claimed by two "families". From your reading of the novel you will find that kinship and friendship is formed in two ways. First is that which is formed with the outlaws and the second relationship is formed with the real or lawful. We see that there is a competition between the community of thieves and apparently Oliver's true guardians (Brownlow and Rose Maylie) to claim their right over Oliver. Fagin and his members sought to take Oliver within their own community as a way of increasing their numbers as well as for personal benefit. Within this section of criminals, however there are variations. We find that the relationship even between these thieving criminals is one that is based on mutual trust as in the case of a real family. Bates and Nancy are best representatives of loyalty. Nancy remains true to Sikes and Fagin's gang even she revealed information about Monks to Rose. When this trust is broken, there is the prospect of being abandoned. This was what happened to Sikes when he murdered Nancy, a member of his own class. He is denied by his own companions. In contrast to the world of the criminals is the true family of Oliver. Rose Maylie's attachment towards Oliver and the latter's concern for her shows the genuine love and affection needed by every human being. Similarly Mr. Brownlow becomes a father figure for Oliver. Under his care, Oliver would never deviate from the goodness which is also inherent in him. On the other hand, Monks who is in reality, Oliver's half-brother becomes his sworn enemy and had cunningly plotted against him in order to destroy him and become the sole heir to Mr. Leeford's property.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: How does the novel reflect the condition of England during Dickens' time?

Q 2: How is the novel *Oliver Twist* connected to the world of crime?

11.3.2 Major Characters

Characters in Dickens' fictional world are strictly represented in terms of either good or evil. Interestingly in *Oliver Twist*, there are many variations in the representation of the evil characters. The first type are those who are officially entrusted with the responsibility of taking care of the orphans like Mr. Bumble, Mrs. Mann and the various members of the Local Board of Guardians who have been assigned to oversee the Poor Law. Mr. Bumble is quintessentially the petty village official and the beadle who bullies the young children and thrives on the profit made by the money given for charity. Similarly, Mrs. Mann is a highly self-centred character who tries to get the most by exploiting the orphans. While the rural characters in *Oliver Twist* represent the legally administered practitioners of the Poor Law, the criminals of the urban London have a more complex background. The second type of villainous characters is found in the urban London. They are driven towards crime because of wants. The scenes of London and the characters are better written. Dickens' own life as a young factory worker in Warren's Blacking Factory is reflected in *Oliver Twist*. Charles Dickens had encountered a boy called Bob Fagin who taught him how to wrap and tie labels on the bottles of blacking. It is very apt that he named a character Fagin in the novel who initiates Oliver in London's dark and grim world of crime.



LET US KNOW

William J. Long asserts that in the novels of Charles Dickens' there are at least three or

four widely used character types. First we have the figure of an innocent little child such as Oliver, Little Nell, David and Pip, whose vulnerability evokes the pity and concern of the readers. Then, secondly, we have the antagonist of the young character who is characterised by a state of physical repulsiveness. Characters such as Fagin, Uriah Heep, Bill Sikes and Quilp represent this character type. The third type of character is marked by essentially kindness and generosity with some humour such as Mr. Micawber and Mr. Losberne. Lastly, there is the presence of a tenderly or powerfully drawn figures such as Nancy, Mr. Brownlow, Mrs. Maylie and Sidney Carton. In the novel *Oliver Twist* we find such character types that the author uses to critique the Victorian society and expose the corruptions and malpractices that ailed the society.

It is further interesting to note that Dickens has divided the characters in his novel according to their social position. For example, there is the class of criminals where each is given a position - Dawkins and Bates are the pickpockets, Noah is the spy, Nancy and Betsy are given responsibilities to move into places such as the court or police station, where they can avoid attention due to their gender. Then again, characters such as Mr. Brownlow, Dr. Losborne and the Maylies represent the urban middle-class. Most of these characters are professionals, engaged either in some kind of trade or occupation. They are the ones who have been sympathetic towards Oliver and tried to protect him. However it does not show that they are entirely free from faults. Mr. Brownlow is a noble character, but he has a streak of impatience that prevents him from understanding the true face of human nature. In a way, these characters shows the shallowness of Victorian society that judges people on the basis of birth. For example, when Rose's real identity and family background was unknown, even Mrs. Maylie was a little hesitant to whole-heartedly support her son Harry's decision to marry Rose.

The following is an attempt at exploring some of the significant characters in the novel *Oliver Twist.*

Oliver Twist :

Oliver Twist uses the child protagonist as a way to highlight the ills of the society and it becomes a kind of melodramatic novel of social protest. *Oliver Twist* is meant to appeal more to our sentiments than to our literary sensibilities, and this was because Dickens had written it keeping in his mind the taste of the readers of his age. For us, however, Oliver is not a believable character, because it is shown that although he is raised in corrupt surroundings among evil companions, his purity and virtue remains stable. Throughout the novel, Dickens uses Oliver's character to challenge the Victorian idea that paupers and criminals are already evil at birth, arguing instead that a corrupt environment is the source of vice. At the same time, Oliver's steadfast goodness undermines some of Dickens's assertions. Oliver is shocked and horrified when he sees the Artful Dodger and Bates pick a stranger's pocket and again when he is forced to participate in a burglary.

Oliver's moral ideas seem inborn in him, just as Dickens's opponents thought that corruption is inborn in poor people. Furthermore, other pauper children use unrefined Cockney language, but Oliver, oddly enough, speaks in standard British English. His grammatical accuracy is also inexplicable, as Oliver presumably is not well-educated. Even when he is abused and manipulated, Oliver does not become angry or indignant. When Sikes and Crackit force him to assist in a robbery, Oliver merely begs to be allowed to go away instead making any personal effort. Oliver does not show the complexity of human mind which is seen in the case of other characters like Nancy. M.P. Ginsberg claims in his essay that this was deliberately done by Dickens keeping in his mind the end of the novel. The Victorian society's admiration and respect for purity and

nobility is reflected in every action done and word spoken by the protagonist. The language remains as civilised as his actions and his thoughts.

As modern readers, we might feel that Dickens's social criticism would have been more effective if he had focused on a more complex poor character, like Dawkins or Nancy, but then again, the audience for whom Dickens was writing might not have been ready to accept such a portrayal. Dickens's Victorian middle-class readers were likely to hold not so favourable opinions on the poor that were only a little less cruel than those expressed by Mr. Bumble, the beadle. In fact, *Oliver Twist* was criticised for portraying thieves and prostitutes at all. Given the strict morals of Dickens's audience, it may have seemed necessary for him to make Oliver an absolutely pure-hearted and honest figure. Because Oliver appealed to the sentiments of Victorian readers, his story may have stood a better chance of effectively challenging their prejudices.

Nancy :

Nancy's character represents a major concern of *Oliver Twist* and it puts forward the question to us whether a bad environment can completely poison someone's character and soul. As the novel progresses, the character who best illustrates the contradictory issues brought up by that question is Nancy. We find that there is constant pull between her duty as a member of Fagin's gang (representing evil) and her moral duty as a human being. Nancy is perhaps the only character in the novel with a strong conscience that allows to take active steps for humanity. Her capacity to undermine personal benefits for the safety of Oliver speaks about her personality. At the same time, she remains loyal to Sikes as well as Fagin's gang in order to keep them safe. As a child brought up in the streets, Nancy has been a thief and an alcoholic. The narrator's reference to her "free and agreeable" behaviour indicates that she

also becomes a prostitute. She is trapped in the vicious world of crime, but she also commits perhaps the most noble act in the novel when she sacrifices her own life in order to protect Oliver whom she loves like her younger brother. Nancy's moral complexity is unique among the major characters in *Oliver Twist*. The novel is full of characters who are all good and can barely understand evil, such as Oliver, Rose, and Brownlow; and characters who are all evil and can barely do anything good, such as Fagin, Sikes, and Monks. Only Nancy comprehends and is capable of both good and evil. As such, for a modern reader, she seems more humane than even the more genteel members of the society. Her ultimate choice to do good at the cost of her life shows the incorruptibility of basic goodness, no matter how many social obstacles it may face. Interestingly this is similar to Oliver who remains a pure-hearted child in spite of the amount of guile and deceit he has seen. But it seems unreal that Oliver manages to avoid any form of vice because it is during childhood that the individual is most vulnerable to influences. Therefore Nancy's representation is more realistic.

Further, Nancy's love for Sikes exemplifies the moral ambiguity of her character. As she herself points out to Rose, devotion to a man can be "a comfort and a pride" under the right circumstances. But for Nancy, such devotion only brings about suffering and violence. Her character and life could be compared to that of Rose Maylie. Rose also was destined to lead a life very similar to Nancy after the death of her father and elder sister, but fortunately she found the right kind of guardian in the form of Mrs. Maylie. Rose's life was preserved as she was protected from the vices of the world. Nancy, however was not so fortunate as she was introduced to the world of crime along with Betsy at an early age. Nancy's relationship with Sikes leads her to criminal acts for his sake and eventually to her own death. Thus, Nancy's character suggests that the boundary between virtue and vice is not always clearly drawn. She is the most tragic character in the novel.

Mr. Brownlow :

When Mr. Brownlow is introduced in the middle of the novel, we were not really sure as to what role this character would play in Oliver's life. Initially, he typically seems like a minor character -a generous, old English gentleman who pities the poor child for his misfortune. But, as the plot progresses, we realise that Mr. Brownlow has a far greater role to play. This is suggested by Dickens when the resemblance between Oliver and the lady's portrait in Mr. Brownlow's room is asserted.

Mr. Brownlow, in spite of his kindness and generosity, can be easily swayed to form contrasting opinions. For example, when he took Oliver with him, he saw in him innocence, but no sooner did Grimwig raised a doubt about Oliver, he became suspicious. When Oliver was sent to the bookshop and he did not return, Brownlow instantly formed an opinion that Oliver was dishonest and didn't even consider that the child might have fallen in wrong hands. Mrs. Bedwin, the housekeeper, on the other hand seems more sensible in her understanding of human nature. However, it couldn't be denied that Brownlow represents the responsible guardian that is necessary for both the well being of both Oliver and Rose. When Nancy had revealed the truth about Monks' plan to Rose, the latter found that Mr. Brownlow was the right person to confide everything and ask for his help and guidance. As the plot progresses towards the climax, we realize how important is Mr. Brownlow as a character. Through him, the writer reveals the truth about everyone - be it Oliver, Rose or Monks.

Fagin :

Although Dickens denied any anti-Semitism in the portrayal of Fagin, the Jewish thief's characterisation seems to be influenced by stereotypes. He is described as a physically repulsive, miserly, and deceitful person. The constant references to him as "the Jew" seem to indicate that his negative traits are closely connected to his religious identity. However, Fagin is more than a statement of ethnic

prejudice. His character shows absolute villainy and at times, he seems like a child's distorted vision of pure evil. Beast imagery is used to describe his nature and actions. At times he is a "loathsome reptile" and apparently seems like having "fangs such as should have been a dog's or rat's." Also, Fagin usually moves around the city after sundown associating him with darkness. Other characters occasionally refer to him as "the old one," which is a popular English connotation for the devil. In the narrative of the novel, there are instances when Oliver wakes up to find Fagin nearby. Oliver encounters him in the hazy zone between sleep and waking, at the precise time when dreams and nightmares are born from "the mere silent presence of some external object." Indeed, Fagin is meant to cause nightmares in child and parents alike. To have one's child trapped by a Fagin-like character would seem dreadful for the Victorian readers.

Fagin's greed for money is prominent when he is alone looking at the "treasure" he had gathered after years of commitment to an evil life. He never regrets for having caused the fall of many children like Dawkins, Bates, Nancy and Betsy. Towards the end of the narrative, he becomes disillusioned by life and gradually moves towards madness, before death, which was already there in him from the very beginning.

Bill Sikes :

Bill Sikes is a described as a criminal characterised by his rough and brute appearance. He is constantly accompanied by a repulsive looking dog, Bull's Eye. Sikes is a character who is driven by pure instincts. His physical appearance causes fear in other members of Fagin's gang as much as Fagin. Sikes' only motive is acquisition of money based on a life filled with crimes. Although he creates fear in Fagin's mind, yet in the narrative we find that it is Sikes who becomes a pawn in the hands of Fagin. He is used as a tool to bring about the downfall of Oliver, especially when the latter's name is suggested by Fagin to accompany Sikes in a planned

robbery. Sikes is in a relationship with Nancy that is not based on any emotional bonding. He fails to sympathise with anyone and is driven by instincts rather than rationality.

It is Sikes who murders Nancy in a fit of rage and abandons her body. Consequently the entire gang is implicated in this heinous crime. Towards the end we find that the other members of Fagin's gang, especially Bates is disgusted by his presence after Nancy's murder and willingly catches him for his crime. He finally meets a dreadful end at Jacob's Island while trying to escape from the pursuing mob and the police.

Monks :

Monks is another evil character in the novel. His real name is Edward Leeford and he is later revealed to be Oliver's half-brother. He is described as an unattractive character with a red mark on his jaw. He has no moral conscience and is absolutely ruthless about Oliver, even though the latter is just a little child and his half-brother and perhaps his only surviving relative. This is primarily caused by his upbringing. After his parents' apparent separation, his mother had influenced him to hate his father and she had poisoned his mind against Agnes and her unborn child. Due to the absence of morally conscious guardians in his life, Monks happens to fall into bad company and moves towards the evil path. This is necessary for the plot as the character has been established as a foil to the character of Oliver. It is the younger son of Mr. Edwin Leeford, that is, Oliver who turns out to be the worthy heir to his father as his innocence and goodness is preserved in spite of the troubles faced by him. Unlike young Oliver who bravely faces even the worse form of emotional and physical abuse, Monks is essentially depicted as a coward. His fear for the supernatural as shown in the episode where he is speaking to Fagin, represents the burden of guilt that is present in his mind. A similar kind of guilt is seen in Sikes after the murder of Nancy. Both these villainous characters are haunted by their evil deeds.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 3: What are the types of characters introduced by Dickens through his novels?

Q 4: What kind of a character is Oliver?

11.3.3 Narrative Style and Language

Charles Dickens' narrative style has a characteristic dramatic element as it easily moves between tragedy and comedy, and so successfully holds the reader's interest. This is mainly because his novels were printed in the episodic form in the periodicals and so each chapter had to reach come sort of climax. You will see that the writing style of Charles Dickens is marked by abundant linguistic creativity. He succeeds in using different language styles and vocabulary for the different characters based on their societal position. For example, the urban middle class speaks in the refined British English whereas the paupers and the miscreants speak in the typical Cockney style. Also Mr. Bumble, the beadle is shown often confusing the word parochial and pronouncing it as "porochial". As such it is evident that at times the language in his fiction is also used as an instrument to satirise the Victorian society.

In *Oliver Twist*, he has used the third-person narrative form and tries to narrate it from the perspective of an individual who belongs to the nineteenth century London. You will see that the narrative acquires an ***omniscient narrator's*** view, where the narrator knows everything and is recording each important event in the life of the protagonist as well as the other characters.



Omniscient Narrator: the all-knowing narrator who is already aware of the end. Unlike the first-person narratives where the narrator gives only subjective views, who is aware of only certain things, the omniscient narrator is aware of the motives of the characters and this is disclosed gradually.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5: Comment briefly on Dickens' narrative style in *Oliver Twist*.

11.4 CRITICAL RECEPTION

Although his books sold and the audience waited for the next instalment of his works, critics of his time did not favour him much or consider him a serious literary writer. *Oliver Twist* was received in various ways. Many hailed the novel as a classic, poignant tale of loss and discovery, and a deserving successor to the highly popular *Pickwick Papers*. Early reviews from *The Examiner*, September 10, 1837, asserted that this novel was an "exact painting" of the societal reality that Dickens wished to present to the public. Dickens was praised for capturing the emotions surrounding the death of Nancy and the intrinsic detailing of Oliver's life as an orphan. The reviewer was surprised to see Dickens making use of the Poor Law Debates in the first chapters of the novel, and he understood the social cause for which Dickens wrote. In conclusion of this review, the author states: "We leave him most reluctantly, and so will every reader who has any capacity to see and feel whatsoever is most loveable, hateful, or laughable, in the character of the everyday life about him" (Dickens, 401). *The Spectator* states in the November 24, 1838 issue that Dickens "has genius to vivify his observation." The author was appreciated for his powerful use of pathos and his description of grim reality. The reviewer admires Dickens's ability to find good in all humanity despite the dirty surroundings of unfortunate orphans such as Oliver.

Other literary magazines such as *The Literary Gazette*, and *Journal of the Belles Lettres* declares on November 24, 1838, that Dickens has "dug deep into the human mind; and he has nobly directed his energies to the exposure of evils- the workhouse, the starving school, the factory system, and many other things, at which blessed nature shudder and recoiled." The ability of Dickens to capture the trials and tribulations faced by Oliver captured the attention of its readers. Those who are far removed from the factories and the workhouses became suddenly aware of the plight of the poor and the corruption done in the name of the Poor Laws. *The Quarterly Review* of 1839 also published a glowing review of the novel. The reviewer believed Dickens to be "a sign of the times" and that the author wrote with enough

vigour to demand that the public read the next instalment. His popularity was unparalleled and his episodes were always immediately read. Dickens manages to tell of "real pain" while the novel lacks in false sentimentalism (Dickens, 405-408). The reviewer wrote that, "He deals truly with human nature, which never can degrade; he takes up everything, good, bad, or indifferent...He is natural, and that never can be ridiculous" (Dickens, 406).

In spite of being socially relevant, *Oliver Twist* too had to face criticism. The novel didn't go down well with the Jewish population, and other critics also complained that the novel seemed too sentimental and lacking. One of the major issues raised by the Jewish community against the novel was connected to the derogatory portrayal of Fagin, the Jew. In his article "Charles Dickens, Fagin and Riah" Milton Kerker states that Fagin is the "most grotesque and villainous Jew in all of English literature." Fagin was found by the Jewish community to be a ruffian with the devil dwelling within his cold heart. In 1854 the *Jewish Chronicle* was outraged and presented the public with a criticism of Dickens. Despite the fact that Dickens maintained his innocence, Dickens did attempt to make alterations in the next edition of the novel to correct this offensive implication. In the 1867 edition of chapter 38, Fagin is referred to as "the Jew" more than 250 times. However, in later chapters he is referred to as "the Jew" only 32 times. This is thought to have been Dickens's attempt to reconcile Fagin's character with the Jewish community. Despite this characterisation of Fagin and Dickens's wording changes, Dickens never openly abused a Jewish person nor did he openly practice anti-Semitic opinions.

In a similar vein, the *Monthly Review* of January 1839 demanded that Dickens used characters that are so low that sympathy cannot be created. The reviewer felt that although there were comic pieces worth noting, the ending does not comply with the standard notion that the evil ones must face strict consequences while the just are rewarded. The reviewer does not go so far as to claim Dickens to be an immoral writer but he does not treat the characters with the morals that would classify Dickens with the "highest rank of our moral fictionists." Just as the Monthly Review

questions the worth of such characters as Nancy, Dickens has been criticised for his choice of characters and setting. At times the novel tends to shift to a sentimentality that seems more repelling to the readers.

It, however, cannot be denied that the novel performs a great social responsibility by condemning the world of the Poor Laws, its minute detailing of the life of a prostitute, orphan, gang of thieves, and other social miscreants who are otherwise ignored or neglected by the so-called civilised classes. After all, Dickens' motive was to describe the reality of where and how Oliver lived and survived the streets of a city that did not want him. The novel depicts the best of human nature in contrast to the worse sides of human nature. It is for this very reason that Charles Dickens remained one of the most popular as well as significant author of his times.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 6: Discuss how *Oliver Twist* was received after its publication.



11.5 LET US SUM UP

After going through this unit, you have succeeded in understanding the historical background of the age and the way it had influenced the writings of Charles Dickens. Dickens had written a realistic novel based on his observation of some of the social as well political issues of his times. For a long time, *Oliver Twist* much like some his other novels was seen as a book for children. However, if you read the novel closely you will see the different societal and political concerns at work within its narrative. Victorian England was marked by social division based on wealth, class and position. This characteristic is present in the novel as it projects the numerous classes within England: the rural and the urban middle-class, paupers, the petty criminals. The novel portrays how this social division affects the society. The failure of the Poor Law Act to look into the interests of young children

like Oliver and Dick was essentially caused by such divisions and corruption in Victorian England. For your benefit, a list of books has been provided in the following section so that you can do your own reading as per your interest. The themes that appear within the text are the delineation of good vs evil, the hypocritical attitudes and behaviours of public institutions, and the ultimately flawed theory of individualism. Dickens uses the motif of mistaken identities and familial ties to create a story, which closely details the journey of a virtuous orphan through the mean streets of poverty.



11.6 FURTHER READING

1) Birch, Dinah. (ed). (2009). *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*. Oxford: OUP.

2) Bloom, Harold. (ed). (2013). *Charles Dickens*. New York: Infobase Learning.

3) Jordan, John O. (2001). *The Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens*. Cambridge: CUP.

4) Lankford, William T. (1978). "The Parish Boy's Progress: The Evolving Form of Oliver Twist." *PMLA* 93.1: 20- 32, JSTOR. Web.

5) Long, William J. (2006). *English Literature*. New Delhi: A.I.T.B.S, (rpt.).

6) Meyer, Susan. (2005). "Anti-Semitism and Social Critique in Dickens' Oliver Twist." *Victorian Literature and Culture* 33.1, JSTOR. Web.



11.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: *Oliver Twist* helps to discuss how following the Poor Law of 1834, the unemployed, orphans and the ailing were meant to be kept in the workhouses. The rules in the workhouses were so rigid and the food so meagre that it seemed worse than a prison, often subjecting its inmates to much abuse.

Ans to Q No 2: Dickens through this novel exposed the grim and dark criminal world of England. He was concerned with the degradation and cruelty of the world of crime. He tried to show how poverty had increased crimes in England, and the Poor Laws were hardly of any use as reflected through characters like Jack Dawkins, Charley Bates, Nancy, Betsy, Noah and so on.

Ans to Q No 3: Characters in Dickens' fictional world are strictly represented in terms of either good or evil. *Oliver Twist* portrays two different types of evil characters. The first type is represented by Mr. Bumble, Mrs. Mann and the various members of the Local Board of Guardians who have been assigned to oversee the Poor Law. The second type of villainous characters is found in the urban London. They are basically driven towards crime because of their necessities.

Ans to Q No 4: Oliver Twist is the child protagonist who exposes the ills of the society. Dickens uses Oliver's character to challenge the Victorian idea that paupers and criminals are already evil at birth, arguing instead that a corrupt environment is the source of vice. Oliver's moral ideas seem inborn in him. Unlike other such children, Oliver speaks in standard British English. The Victorian society's admiration and respect for purity and nobility is reflected in every action done and word spoken by Oliver.

Ans to Q No 5: Charles Dickens' narrative style moves between tragedy and comedy, and successfully holds the reader's interest. The writing style of Charles Dickens is marked by abundant linguistic creativity. He succeeds in using different language styles and vocabulary for the different characters based on their societal position. In *Oliver Twist*, he has used the third-person narrative form and tries to narrate it from the perspective of an individual who belongs to the nineteenth century London.

Ans to Q No 6: Initially, his contemporary critics did not consider Dickens to be a serious literary writer. Early reviews from *The Examiner*, September 10, 1837, asserted that this novel was an "exact painting" of the societal reality and that Dickens could very well understand the

social causes for which he wrote. *The Spectator* stated in the November 24, 1838 issue that Dickens "has genius to vivify his observation." The author was appreciated for his powerful use of pathos and his description of grim reality.



11.8 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q 1. How far does Charles Dickens succeed in showing the problems caused by the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 in his novel *Oliver Twist*? Illustrate with examples.

Q 2. Write short notes on the following:

a. Fagin

b. Oliver Twist

c. Nancy and Rose Maylie

d. Corruption and other malpractices in workhouses

Q 3. W. J. Long asserted that Dickens' novels comprise least three to four character types. Examine this statement based on the characterisation in *Oliver Twist*.

Q 4. Discuss the themes explored by Charles Dickens in *Oliver Twist*.

Q 5. Discuss Dickens' narrative style with special reference to his novel *Oliver Twist*.

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