

Oliver Twist* and *Great Expectations by Charles Dickens

Charles Dickens' books examine the social conditions of his time – England during the reign of Queen Victoria. He gained fame for his ability to create characters who are representations of the times and unforgettable individuals in their own right. Dickens typically weaved social criticism, strong character development, and powerful detail into novels about contemporary 19th century society.

(Right: The Artful Dodger, by Danny D.)

**Questions for Discussion:**

1. How would you describe England at the time of *Oliver Twist*? *Great Expectations*?

To create a fictional world which seems real to the reader, novelists use five main elements: plot, characters, conflict, setting, and theme. The plot is the novel's story and its underlying meaning. Therefore, when readers describe the plot of a novel, they should describe both what happens to the main characters as well as the meaning of these events.

2. Describe the plot of *Oliver Twist* or *Great Expectations*.

Meaningful characters usually have hopes, concerns, fears, and ambitions readers can recognize. Well-conceived characters do not simply serve as devices to further the plot, they convince readers they have lives beyond the boundaries of the particular story being told.

3. Give examples of the hopes, concerns, fears, and ambitions for Pip and/or Oliver.

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A novelist draws readers into the story by introducing conflict. The conflict can be physical, emotional, or ethical, but it always creates tension which the main characters must resolve.

4. What conflicts did Pip and Oliver face? How did these conflicts effect you? What did they make you care about?

Another element which novelists use to draw readers into their work is the setting. Dickens does an excellent job painting a picture of the setting of his novels.

5. Describe the setting of *Oliver Twist*. *Great Expectations*. Is the setting essential in conveying the book's theme?

(The setting of *Oliver Twist* gives us stark contrasts between poverty and violence versus wealth and luxury.)

(The setting of *Great Expectations* contrasts simple country life versus complicated city life. It also reflects distinctions between class and behavior.)

The 'education novel' describes stages in the life of the main character as the individual develops as a person. For example, in *Great Expectations*, Dickens takes Pip from an impressionable young boy through adulthood – through the challenges he faces as he comes to terms with his own actions.

6. What actions did Pip have to come to terms with? Was *Oliver Twist* an 'education novel' if you use this definition?

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Charles Dickens is criticized for an overuse of coincidence or plausible coincidence. In other words, critics find it improbable that all the characters in his novels would be so closely linked to one another.

7. Do you find these coincidences pleasing or do they cause you to dismiss the credibility of the story? Explain.

8. We often look at the books we read to determine the worldview of the author. Based on these two novels, answer the following questions about Dickens' worldview and give examples to support your opinions.
 - Is justice inevitable?
 - Does he believe in a Supreme Being? Is he sovereign?
 - On what are Dickens' laws of ethics based?
 - How are right and wrong defined?

Activity/Game: In the Style of Dickens

In groups of three or four, write a short story in the style of Charles Dickens. Take turns writing. You have twenty minutes to write, then choose one person from each group to read their story aloud.