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Teachers' Notes

Author / Work: Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist*
Theme: Poverty, the Poor Laws and the Workhouse

**Rationale**
In this lesson, students will explore aspects of the social and economic background underpinning *Oliver Twist* and discover Dickens’s preoccupations with these subjects not only as a novelist, but also as a campaigner. Students are encouraged to draw comparisons between Dickens’s works of journalism and his fiction, and to discover the similarities Dickens exposes between workhouses and prisons. In addition, students will consider the philosophy behind the notorious 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act; explore the implications of being poor in the 19th century; the consequences of debt; and the ease with which it was possible to become destitute.

**Content**
**Literary and historical sources:**
- Outline of the New Poor Law Amendment Act (1842)
- Manuscript of the Preface to the 1850 edition of Charles Dickens’s *Oliver Twist* (1850)
- Printed sketch of The Rookery in St. Giles (1817)
- Article by Henry Mayhew on the cholera districts of Bermondsey, London, from the *Morning Chronicle* (1849)
- Chart listing workhouse tasks (1852)
- *Mary Wilden, a victim to the New Poor Law* by Samuel Roberts (1839)
- *The Rookeries of London, a survey of London’s poorest quality housing* by Thomas Beames (1850)
- Penny dreadful, *The Poor Boys of London* (1866)

**Recommended reading (short articles):**
- *Oliver Twist and the workhouse* by Dr Ruth Richardson
- *Slums* by Judith Flanders
- *Henry Mayhew’s London Labour and the London Poor* by Mary L. Shannon

**Documentary films:**
A selection of short documentary-style films (approx. 10 minutes each):
www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/videos

**External links:**
www.workhouse.org.uk
Dickens’s works of journalism and short stories can be found in Dickens’s *Sketches by Boz*
(Penguin Classics 1995) and Dickens’s Selected Journalism (Penguin Classics 1997)
http://www.victorianweb.org/victorian/authors/dickens/index.html

Key questions
• What was new and revolutionary about the Act in terms of provision for the poor?
• What were the main social and economic developments that dominated the early 19th century and how were ordinary working people affected in terms of housing and budgeting?
• Why were the workhouses such hated institutions?
• How did critics, like Dickens, explore the reality of the poor and their treatment at the hands of both the authorities and the criminal class?
• What was new about the way in which Dickens represented the poor?

Activities
1) The following three views underpinned the 1834 New Poor Law:
• Poverty was caused by personal failure of the individual concerned.
• Hard work, thrift and sobriety would lead to prosperity and respectability. Anyone could escape poverty by adopting the values of self-help.
• Giving money to the poor would encourage dependency and further corrupt the working classes.

Find evidence from the novel that clearly challenges the view that poverty was the result of moral failure.

2) Compile a profile of the new working class created by the Industrial Revolution listing the trade and occupations of working people. Students will gain insight into the ways by which city dwellers earned a living, and discover the growing divisions this brought about in terms of rank, status and wealth.

3) Investigate the reasons why ‘good housekeeping’ was so important in a society where credit was hard to obtain. Who was usually responsible for balancing the books in a household? Debate whether or not child labour was a necessary evil for most working families, and determine Dickens’s views on the subject.

4) Investigate the rookeries (slums) of London and compare Dickens’s description of Jacob’s Island with contemporary works of journalism. Students could compare the description of the slums of Jacob’s Island with contemporary accounts of the same area written by Mayhew and Thomas Beame.

5) Study the beginning of Oliver Twist and note the conditions of the workhouse. Students should read two articles by Dickens’s: A Walk in a Workhouse (1850) and Pet Prisoners (1850) and make comparative notes on dietary allowance, sleeping conditions, work, education, discipline and punishment. Which institution does Dickens think the more favourable?

6) Conditions in the workhouse were deliberately harsh to deter people from entering. Investigate the daily regime in the workhouse and possible punishment for insubordination.
7) Create a drama activity by reading extracts from the two articles and deciding which details belong to which institution. Students will discover that the workhouse regime was harder than the prison.

**Extension activities**

- Invite students to read aloud the Introduction to the 1850 Cheap Edition to *Oliver Twist* in which Dickens challenges his critics' opinion that Jacob's Island is a figment of his imagination (published as an Appendix in *Oliver Twist* Penguin Classics).
- Discover the topography of London by downloading a map and identifying areas named in the novel, including those notorious for slums and crime (Jacob's Island and Field Lane, for example). In addition, they can plot the location of workhouses and prisons. Students can extend this activity by looking at Charles Booth's poverty maps and assessing how areas changed during the 19th and 20th centuries: [http://www.bl.uk/learning/artimages/maphist/wealth/boothextract/boothslondonpovertymap.html](http://www.bl.uk/learning/artimages/maphist/wealth/boothextract/boothslondonpovertymap.html)
- Throughout his career, Dickens continued his invective against the Poor Law, the workhouse and how the poor survived. In *Oliver Twist*, London is the primary symbol of national life, depicted as a chaotic maze, a wilderness or wasteland. Images of crime, poverty, neglect and disease characterize his descriptions. Ask students to make a comparative study of how other 19th-century writers depicted the new industrial landscape.
- Invite students to compare and contrast differing connotations of the word 'debt' as it is used now, and as it was used in the 19th century. Do our views of borrowing now differ? What is considered a basic standard of living today? How does this compare to 19th-century requirements?
- Dickens's own father was incarcerated in the Marshalsea Prison for debtors. Research how such prisons were operated (see Dickens *Little Dorrit* 1851). How did such prisons compare with workhouses and new prisons, like Pentonville?