

### Characters' appearances and behaviour

Read through the following descriptions of characters from *Oliver Twist*.

[His] ninth birthday found him a pale thin child, somewhat diminutive in stature, and decidedly small in circumference. But nature or inheritance had implanted a good sturdy spirit in [his] breast: it had had plenty of room to expand, thanks to the spare diet of the establishment; and perhaps to this circumstance may be attributed his having any ninth birthday at all.

He was a snub-nosed, flat-browed, common-faced boy enough; and as dirty a juvenile as one would wish to see; but he had about him all the airs and manners of a man. He was short of his age, with rather bow-legs, and little, sharp, ugly eyes. His hat was stuck on top of his head so lightly, that it threatened to fall off every moment – and would have done so, very often, if the wearer had not had a knack of every now and then giving his head a sudden twitch, which brought it back to its old place again. He wore a man's coat, which reached nearly to his heels. He had turned the cuffs back, half-way up his arm, to get his hands out into the pockets of his corduroy trousers; for there he kept them. He was, altogether, as roistering and swaggering a young gentleman as ever stood four feet six, or something less, in his bluchers.

[His] villainous-looking and repulsive face was obscured by a quantity of matted red hair. He was dressed in a greasy flannel gown, with his throat bare ...

[He] was a stoutly-built fellow of about five-and-thirty, in a black velveteen coat, very soiled drab breeches, lace-up half-boots, and grey cotton stockings, which enclosed a bulky pair of legs, with large swelling calves; - the kind of legs, which in such costume, always look in an unfinished and incomplete state without a set of fetters to garnish them. He had a brown hat on his head, and a dirty belcher handkerchief round his neck: with the long frayed ends of which he smeared the beer from his face as he spoke. He disclosed, when he had done so, a broad heavy countenance with a beard of three days' growth, and two scowling eyes; one of which displayed various parti-coloured symptoms of having been recently damaged by a blow.

Now read through these pieces of information:

Across the nineteenth century broad shifts can be identified in the ways that 'criminals' were perceived. At the beginning of Victoria's reign key commentators like Edwin Chadwick tended to equate the criminal offender with individuals in the lower reaches of the working class who they considered were reluctant to do an honest day's work for an honest day's wage, and who preferred idleness, drink, 'luxury' and an easy life; in their eyes the problem was a moral one. There were also concerns about 'the dangerous classes' who were thought to lurk in the slums waiting for the opportunity for disorder and plunder.

By the middle of the century the term 'criminal classes' was more in vogue; it was used to suggest an incorrigible social group - a class - stuck at the bottom of society. Intrepid explorers of the slums and the 'rookeries' of the poor, like Henry Mayhew, often wrote of this 'class' as if its members belonged to some distinctive, exotic tribe of Africa or the Americas.

Information available at: [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/victorians/crime\\_03.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/victorians/crime_03.shtml)

Victorians also thought they could tell a criminal by their appearance and features that were supposed to 'give away' a criminal included:

A low forehead  
Bumps on head  
Heavy dark eyebrows  
Boils  
A dirty face  
Warts  
Pointed chin

(Source: *The Vile Victorians* by Terry Deary, published by Scholastic Hippo, 15 April 1994)

1. In pairs go back through the descriptions and firstly identify who is being described and then highlight or underline any words or phrases which you think make any of the characters seem sinister or suspicious.
2. Bearing in mind the information you have read above, consider why Dickens might have depicted these characters as he does.
3. In what ways does the description of Oliver differ from the rest?
4. The novel is often seen as a criticism of the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 however you might also view it as a novel which upholds the ideas outlined in the extracts above: that is that a criminal was born rather than made (and could not be changed) and that a villain could be identified by their appearance. Find other descriptions of Oliver, Fagin and Sikes in the novel to see whether you see any patterns which uphold or refute this idea. Look in particular at Oliver's behaviour in certain situations and how others react to him: how he requests more food in the workhouse; how he reacts when beaten at the undertakers; at what point he realises Fagin and the boys are thieves and his response; his reaction to being in court; Mr Brownlow's uncertainty as to his guilt; Oliver's behaviour at Mrs Maylie's – these should all give you some ideas for areas to investigate.