

General Discussion Questions and Activities

Discussion Questions

Use these questions in this section to inform and enliven your discussion of any Charles Dickens film or book. Consult “[Who Was Dickens?](#)” and “[Down and Out in Victorian London](#)” for background on Dickens’ life and times. You may find additional questions and activities in *Teaching Dickens: A Masterpiece Guide*.

Specific discussion questions have also been provided for each of the four films in *The Tales of Charles Dickens*, airing in 2009: *Oliver Twist*, *David Copperfield*, *Little Dorrit*, and *The Old Curiosity Shop*.

1. MASTERPIECE has featured no less than 13 adaptations of Charles Dickens’ novels, including the three all-new adaptations—*Oliver Twist*, *Little Dorrit*, *The Old Curiosity Shop*—airing in 2009. His famous novel *Oliver Twist* was made into an award-winning musical, and his work is the basis of an entire theme park in Chatham, England. Why do you think people are still drawn to the work of Dickens? What do you find most compelling: plot, character, setting, dialogue, message, or something else?
2. Dickens’ work continues to be so influential that the adjective “Dickensian” is used frequently today to describe something “of or like the novels of Charles Dickens (especially with regard to poor social and economic conditions).” Would you describe something you’ve seen or experienced in your life as “Dickensian”? If so, why?
3. Dickens is a master at describing evil, repellent characters. Who is your favorite Dickens villain and why? How is he or she portrayed in film? Does the performance capture the character’s villainy successfully? What clichés do the filmmakers use or avoid in presenting Dickens’ nasty characters in film?
4. Which is your favorite line from Dickens? Below are some of the most famous ones (or you can supply your own). Which one resonates most with you? Which do you think best applies to our world today?
 - “Please, sir, may I have some more?” (*Oliver Twist*)
 - “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.” (*A Tale of Two Cities*)
 - “No one is useless in this world who lightens the burden of it to anyone else.”

(*Our Mutual Friend*)

- “If there were no bad people, there would be no good lawyers.”
(*The Old Curiosity Shop*)
- “It is a melancholy truth that even great men have their poor relations.”
(*Bleak House*)
- “There are books of which the backs and covers are by far the best parts.”
(*Oliver Twist*)
- “Subdue your appetites, my dears, and you’ve conquered human nature.”
(*Nicholas Nickleby*)

5. Dickens wrote many of his novels in serial form, juggling various locations and plot lines simultaneously, leaving his readers breathless for the next installment. Today’s weekly television series, from dramas to reality shows, use these same serial techniques. Has a television series left you anxiously awaiting the next episode? Why was the series so appealing? How does watching an ongoing series differ from watching a one-time show, from beginning to end, in one sitting?
6. Daniel Webster, a contemporary of Dickens, wrote that “Dickens has done more to ameliorate the condition of the English poor than all the statesmen Great Britain has sent to Parliament” (quoted in *The Friendly Dickens* by Norrie Epstein, Penguin, 2001). What writers do you think have been important in changing political or social conditions? Do you think writers can change the world today? What other art forms, such as music, have been utilized for social and political protest?
7. Consider each of these facts about life in London at the time Dickens wrote. Which shed light on the plots, themes, or characters of the Dickens novel(s) you are reading or watching? How? Which resonate today? If you were to create a similar list for readers of our fiction in the future, which facts do you think would amaze the audience of 2150 about the way we live now?
 - “One hundred tons of horse manure dropped on the streets of London each day..”
 - “[Because of the coal stoves] the fog in London was very real...at a certain time of year a great yellowness reigned everywhere, and lamps were lit inside even during the day... The fog was so thick, observed a foreigner at mid-century, that you could take a man by the hand and not be able to see his face..”
 - “..Until the mid-1800’s, virtually every owner of a business in England was

personally liable to the extent of every last thing he owned—home and furnishings included—for any debt incurred in his business life. Thus, if he went bankrupt, he lost not only his business but, typically, all his personal property as well.”

- “Throughout the [19th] century, the English consumed annually about thirty gallons of beer per capita.”
- “In mid-century working-class areas it appears that 8 percent of the children lost both parents by the time they were fifteen and almost a third had lost at least one.”
- “The [19th] century poured an extraordinary amount of energy into the reuse of its households’ discards and leavings...used tea leaves were employed to clean carpets...bones were sold to the rag-and-bone man as fertilizer...Even the soot swept out of the chimneys by chimney sweeps was turned into manure and insect killer.”
- “[Poor children were] all playing in the streets or crying their wares, holding horses for gentlemen, fetching cabs for theatergoers on rainy nights, carrying packages or opening cab doors or doing cartwheels or handstands in the street in the hope of earning a ha’penny or penny.... There was no compulsory school until 1880, and children under fourteen made up 30 to 40 percent of the London population.”

Source: *What Jane Austen Ate and Charles Dickens Knew* by Daniel Pool (Touchstone, 1993).

“Novel To Film” Questions

Your Book & Film Club may choose discuss Dickens in various ways. Members may prefer to read the novel in its entirety before viewing the related film; read only excerpts before, during, or after viewing the related film; or watch only the film version.

To accommodate those Dickens fans who may wish to focus on specific film scenes in juxtaposition with the novel, we have included a “Novel to Film” question for each of the titles, and provided links to the specific excerpts. You may also want to consider the following general questions:

1. What does it mean to be faithful to a work of literature—to capture it literally or to capture its spirit? What do you think Dickens would think of these film adaptations of his work? What do you think he might say to the screenwriters, actors, or directors?
2. Open to a scene in any of the four Dickens novels discussed in the Book & Film Club. How much of the text is dialogue? How much is narration? If you were to cut the narration from the page, what would be lost? How do filmmakers replace those elements of storytelling with the tools of film (scenery, lighting, acting, makeup, etc.)?

Activities

Get in the mood to watch or discuss Dickens with these following activities.

Dickens Name Game: Dickens has no peer when it comes to creating memorable characters. According to *Everyone in Dickens* by George Newlin (Greenwood Press, 1995), Dickens created 13,143 separate characters. Each, no matter how minor, is delineated by some idiosyncrasy of speech, dress, or manner. Consider the care with which he named his characters: Uriah Heep, Ebenezer Scrooge, Mr. Murdstone, Miss Havisham, Abel Magwitch, Wackford Squeers, and so on.

In a 1995 op-ed column in *The New York Times*, writer and MASTERPIECE THEATRE host Russell Baker proposed a parlor game for Dickens fans: “Compose a list of 10 well-known living people whose names would have caught Dickens’ eye. Describe the character Dickens would have created for each name. If you feel cocky, fit all 10 into a single plot Dickens might have written...” Before you read the column in which he announces the winners, try the same game yourself. Then visit this link to see how yours stacks up: <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=990CE7DA1E3CF93BA25750C0A963958260&n=Top/Reference/Times%20Topics/People/D/Dickens,%20Charles&scp=3&sq=Russell%20baker%20Dickens%20names&st=cse>

Victorian Vocabulary: How well could you communicate in Victorian England? Play the classic game Dictionary with some Dickensian words:

<i>almshouse</i>	<i>counting house</i>	<i>scullery</i>
<i>apothecary</i>	<i>fortnight</i>	<i>shaver</i>
<i>bank notes</i>	<i>gruel</i>	<i>solicitor</i>
<i>beadle</i>	<i>guinea</i>	<i>toilet</i>
<i>blacking</i>	<i>laudanum</i>	<i>vicar</i>
<i>caul</i>	<i>parlor</i>	<i>workhouses</i>
<i>Cockney</i>	<i>quay</i>	

You can find the rules for the game Dictionary at the Educator’s Desk Reference at eduref.org/cgi-bin/printlessons.cgi/Virtual/Lessons/Language_Arts/Vocabulary/VOC0001.html. Definitions can be found in the Dickens Glossary at charlesdickenspage.com/glossary.html. Note that when a word has more than one meaning, the winning definition should be the one most commonly used in Dickens’ work.

Pitch-and-Toss: In *Oliver Twist*, Fagin envisions how his young criminal protégé the Artful Dodger would spend his days in prison: “Like a gentleman! With his beer every day, and money in his pocket to pitch and toss with, if he can’t spend it” (Chapter 43). Dickens’ reference to “Pitch-and-Toss”—a popular gambling game played with coins—would not have been lost on his Victorian readers. Gather some coins and have the group try playing a round or two of Pitch-and-Toss by following these simple instructions:*

1. Designate a target on the floor and have each player take a turn “pitching” one coin at the target.
2. The player whose coin lands closest to the target gets to gather all the pitched coins and toss them into the air, calling “heads” or “tails” before they land. The “tossers” keeps all those coins that land according to his or her call.
3. If there are any remaining coins, the player whose original coin landed second closest to the target takes a turn at tossing and calling the coins. This phase of the game is repeated by the third closest, fourth closest, etc., until all the coins have been claimed.

*Adapted from www.nationmaster.com/encyclopedia/Pitch-and-toss. There is also a YouTube video available that demonstrates a variation of this “pitch and toss” game at [youtube.com/watch?v=a32E0ytHib4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a32E0ytHib4)



Penguin Classics publishes the companion books to *The Tales of Charles Dickens*.

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