

MY LIFE AS AN ALPHABET: EXPLORING NARRATIVE

THINK ALOUD SCRIPT: A CLOSER LOOK AT SETTING AND CONTEXT

Introduce the text

This extract was taken from *Oliver Twist*, by Charles Dickens. Candice McPhee, our protagonist in *My Life as an Alphabet*, only reads Dickens and the dictionary. Dickens published the work as a serialised novel in thirty-three instalments between 1837 and 1839. It was a very successful serialisation, with *Oliver Twist* being the first boy in English literature to be cast as the hero in a novel.

Dickens was critical of aspects of English society, particularly the way it treated the poor. The industrial revolution was in full swing, with many children and adults working long hours in factories for very small wages. The Poor Law of 1834 forced those needing help into the workhouses, where they were badly treated and sometimes starved.

Oliver Twist was an orphan who had been raised by the parish, a church charity that would operate in a particular district or community, under the care of Mrs. Mann. This extract picks up the story when Oliver, now nine years old and old enough to work, was removed from Mrs. Mann's home and is being delivered to the workhouse by Mr. Bumble. It is in the workhouse that that famous scene of Oliver asking for 'more' later occurs.

What the text says	What I say	The comprehension strategy I model
Oliver had not been within the walls of the workhouse a quarter of an hour and had scarcely completed the demolition of a second slice of bread, when Mr. Bumble, who had handed him over to the care of an old woman, returned; and, telling him it was a board night, informed him that the board had said he was to appear before it forthwith.	<p>I like how Dickens uses the word, demolition when describing Oliver eating the bread. It suggests that Oliver was not just hungry, but starving. Mrs Mann had given Oliver bread, "lest he should seem too hungry when he got to the workhouse." The hunger that Oliver experiences is a sign of his neglect.</p> <p>This book has many examples of children being treated badly. The world of <i>Oliver Twist</i> is very different to London today, and the way we expect children to live in Australia today.</p>	<p>Questioning</p> <p>Making inferences</p> <p>Synthesising</p> <p>Understanding author's purpose</p> <p>Monitoring and clarifying</p>
Not having a very clearly defined notion of what a live board was, Oliver was rather astounded by this intelligence and was not quite certain whether he ought to laugh or cry.	<p>I think this passage means that Oliver had no idea about what a live board was and was surprised, scared and amused that he was to appear before 'a board'.</p> <p>Dickens is also letting us inside Oliver's thoughts, what might he have imagined.</p>	<p>Questioning</p> <p>Making inferences</p> <p>Synthesising</p> <p>Understanding author's purpose</p> <p>Monitoring and clarifying</p>
He had no time to think about the matter, however; for Mr. Bumble gave him a tap on the head, with his cane, to wake him up: and another on the back to make him lively: and bidding him to follow, conducted him into a large white-washed room, where eight or ten fat gentlemen	<p>The cruelty of this scene stands out to me. Imagine how Oliver must have felt, just nine years old, leaving the house he grew up in, (even though it may not have been a loving home), then to be hit with a cane on his head and back. He must have been very scared.</p>	<p>Questioning</p> <p>Making inferences</p> <p>Synthesising</p>

<p>were sitting round a table. At the top of the table, seated in an arm-chair rather higher than the rest, was a particularly fat gentleman with a very round, red face.</p>	<p>This tell us something about the way children were treated in England during this period. Children have more rights today. In Australia, the Human Rights Commission outlines the rights of the child. They include: to be treated fairly, to live and grow up healthy, to be safe, to be cared for and have a home and to receive an education. The historical social context of Oliver Twist is very different to that of today in Australia.</p> <p>Dickens creates a visual image in this scene, of a poor, confused hungry Oliver, being led into a room where men who had power over him sat. Here Dickens is inferring the status of these men. They were fat ‘gentleman’, suggesting they were wealthy, and one that was particularly fat, sitting higher than the others, was the most powerful.</p>	<p>Understanding author’s purpose</p> <p>Monitoring and clarifying</p>
<p>'Bow to the board,' said Bumble. Oliver brushed away two or three tears that were</p> <p>lingering in his eyes; and seeing no board but the table, fortunately bowed to that.</p> <p>'What's your name, boy?' said the gentleman in the highchair.</p>	<p>Although Dickens does come right out and say it, he implies that Oliver is powerless and the men on the board have all the status and power. Dickens tells us that they are ‘ten fat gentlemen’, with the most important or powerful among them being ‘particularly fat’ and sitting on the highest chair. Fat men would not know hunger like Oliver and the children who grew up in parish houses.</p>	<p>Questioning</p> <p>Making inferences</p> <p>Synthesising</p> <p>Understanding author’s purpose</p> <p>Monitoring and clarifying</p>
<p>Oliver was frightened at the sight of so many gentlemen, which made him tremble: and the beadle gave him another tap behind, which made him cry. These two causes made him answer in a very low and hesitating voice; whereupon a gentleman in a white waistcoat said he was a fool. Which was a capital way of raising his spirits and putting him quite at his ease.</p>	<p>With this line, “Which was a capital way of raising his spirits, and putting him at ease,” Dickens is acknowledging the cruel and insensitive treatment of Oliver. He is using sarcasm, pointing out that hitting Oliver and calling him a fool would only have made him feel more frightened.</p> <p>Again, this passage is referring the cruelty that orphan children experienced in London during this particular historical period.</p>	<p>Questioning</p> <p>Making inferences</p> <p>Synthesising</p> <p>Understanding author’s Purpose</p> <p>Monitoring and clarifying</p>
<p>'Boy,' said the gentleman in the highchair, 'listen to me. You know you're an orphan, I suppose?'</p> <p>'What's that, sir?' inquired poor Oliver.</p> <p>'The boy IS a fool--I thought he was,' said the gentleman in the white waistcoat.</p> <p>'Hush!' said the gentleman who had spoken first. 'You know you've got</p>	<p>The words, ‘weeping bitterly’ are important here. They let us know how Oliver is feeling.</p>	<p>Questioning</p> <p>Making Inferences</p> <p>Synthesising</p> <p>Understanding author’s purpose</p> <p>Monitoring and Clarifying</p>

<p>no father or mother, and that you were brought up by the parish, don't you?'</p> <p>'Yes, sir,' replied Oliver, weeping bitterly.</p>		
<p>'What are you crying for?' inquired the gentleman in the white waistcoat. And to be sure it was very extraordinary. What COULD the boy be crying for?</p> <p>'I hope you say your prayers every night,' said another gentleman in a gruff voice; 'and</p> <p>pray for the people who feed you and take care of you--like a Christian.'</p> <p>'Yes, sir,' stammered the boy. The gentleman who spoke last was unconsciously right. It</p> <p>would have been very like a Christian, and a marvellously good Christian too, if Oliver had prayed for the people who fed and took care of HIM. But he hadn't, because nobody had taught him.</p>	<p>I think that Dickens is drawing attention to the horrible conditions of the parish homes that boys like Oliver would have grown up in. He is implying that they were neglected. Dickens also mentions the corruption of the people in charge of these homes, taking money for themselves that was meant to provide food and shelter for the children in their 'care'.</p>	<p>Questioning</p> <p>Making Inferences</p> <p>Synthesising</p> <p>Understanding author's purpose</p> <p>Monitoring and Clarifying</p>
<p>'Well! You have come here to be educated, and taught a useful trade,' said the red-faced</p> <p>gentleman in the highchair.</p> <p>'So you'll begin to pick oakum to-morrow morning at six o'clock,' added the surly one in the white waistcoat.</p> <p>For the combination of both these blessings in the one simple process of picking oakum, Oliver bowed low by the direction of the beadle, and was then hurried away to a large ward; where, on a rough, hard bed, he sobbed himself to sleep. What a novel illustration</p> <p>of the tender laws of England! They let the paupers go to sleep!</p>	<p>Dickens is again using realistic events and practices to tell his story. If you were poor in England at this time, adult men and women would be sent to the 'workhouse' where they had to work for a living. Young boys like Oliver would also have to work. Imagine being nine years old, starting work at 6:00 in the morning, in London, it would be cold, and they probably would have had no warm clothes.</p> <p>I wonder what <u>oakum is, and what picking it entails?</u></p> <p>You follow the above link and demonstrate answering this question, providing further information on the historical and social context of the novel.</p> <p>I think Dicken's is showing sympathy with children like Oliver and drawing attention to the cruelty and hardships they faced.</p>	<p>Questioning</p> <p>Making inferences</p> <p>Synthesising</p> <p>Understanding author's purpose</p> <p>Monitoring and clarifying</p>

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