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**Developing historical empathy through classical literature
in the ESL classroom: Teaching Dickens' Oliver Twist**

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Abstract

This thesis examines how novels set in the past, either classics or historical novels, can be relevant when discussing and developing historical empathy and awareness. Exploring how children in Charles Dickens' novel *Oliver Twist* (1838) were treated and perceived, the thesis investigates the following research question: *How is childhood portrayed in Charles Dickens' Oliver Twist, and how can this story be relevant to development of historical empathy in the ESL classroom?*

To answer to the research question, I have conducted a literary analysis of sections in the book. Topics that have been in focus in the analysis are poverty, social class, the criminal justice system, and different historical views of the meaning of childhood. After doing the analysis, I found that lower class children in nineteenth-century Britain were treated with little respect and were in real danger of being sent to prison or even executed. Using previous research on similar topics, I discuss how one can use the findings to develop historical empathy in the classroom. I argue that contextualisation, both bringing forth relevant historical surroundings and current topics, are vital when developing historical empathy. In order to develop historical empathy and awareness, the students must identify with, and understand the characters in the stories. This requires adequate knowledge of the time periods, and the historical backdrop surrounding the stories. In the case of *Oliver Twist*, this suggests acquiring adequate knowledge on how children were perceived in the eyes of the law, or to which extent a child's upbringing depended on the social class it was born into.

Keywords: *Oliver Twist*, poverty, social class, ESL, empathy

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1. Introduction

“Upon this, the parish authorities magnanimously and humanely resolved, that Oliver should be farmed.”

- *Oliver Twist* (Chapter II)

Living in an ever more politically polarised world, examining literature set in the past may prevent prejudice, teach empathy toward understanding across cultures. Therefore, this thesis will look at how children in Charles Dickens’ *Oliver Twist* (1838) are treated and perceived. I will look at how adults communicate with children in the novel, and, furthermore, analyse how social class plays a part in treatment of children. After having conducted a literary analysis of the story, focusing on historical contextualisation in terms of class, poverty, and the criminal justice system, I will examine how and why the story can be relevant when working with and developing historical empathy in the ESL literature classroom. Historical empathy refers to being able to perceive and understand historical people and incidents from their viewpoints, rather than merely memorising and recognizing facts (Endacott & Brooks, 2013, pp. 1-2).

Charles Dickens’ *Oliver Twist* was first published as a serial in 1837-1839 and was later published as a book of three volumes (1838). The protagonist Oliver is born into an unforgiving and bleak world. The story is meant for adults, nevertheless, I see the potential of using the story for younger readers. Therefore, I will use an adapted children’s version for the analysis but will also, use Dickens’s original text (the (1993) Norton Critical Edition revised by Fred Kaplan). I have chosen Philip Gooden’s (2020) 94-page version of *Oliver Twist*, in which each page contain approximately 50 words and illustrations. This version would be suitable for 5th and 6th grade ESL students.

The research question is: *How is childhood portrayed in Charles Dickens’ Oliver Twist, and how can this story be relevant to development of historical empathy in the ESL classroom?* In my research question I mention the English second language classroom; however, the thesis will only discuss the story on a theoretical level, and will thus not include specific lesson plans. However, the story will be connected to the English subject curriculum and a few pedagogical recommendations will be added.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Historical fiction and classic literature

Defining historical fiction can be difficult. Historical fiction takes the reader to a period in the past, where the norms and culture is often very different from the society the reader is familiar with. A defining feature of historical fiction is that the story line is set in a time period prior to when it was written. This literary genre, according to Hintz and Tribunella (2019, p. 271), is thought to have emerged in the early 1800s. The Hungarian literary historian and philosopher Georg Lukács distinguished between two types of historical literature (Lukács, 1937, pp. 19-24). The first category of historical fiction is set in an undefined earlier period, where the emphasis on the historical context is of minor importance. The second category, Lukács claims, are true historical novels, as they put an emphasis on the cultural, social and historical context surrounding the plot. In these works of fiction, there is often an aim to portray the cultural scenery as accurately as possible.

It is important to note that the original story of *Oliver Twist* itself is not a historical novel, as the story is written in the same time period as it is depicting. As mentioned, historical fiction depicts an earlier time period than it is written. However, as we will see, modern rewritings and adaptations of the book highlights the cultural surroundings and social issues in a different manner than the original novel does. The children's version that I am employing explains unfamiliar norms and cultural aspects to the reader. Thus, this modern version of the book can be claimed to be a historical novel, or at least have elements of historical fiction, as the cultural backdrop is highlighted.

As historical fiction, defining a "classic novel" can be equally difficult. However, a suitable definition of a "classic" could be: "A text of enduring and timeless value to the extent that it offers insight into and illumination of our cultural, historical, political, and imaginative experience" (Johnson, 1990, as cited in Brooks & McNair, 2015). This definition applies to the story of *Oliver Twist*, because it is still, after almost 200 years, an immensely popular novel, and still offers insight into cultural, historical, and political heritage. *Oliver Twist* follows an unfortunate child trying to survive in an unforgiving and cruel society, and therefore a careful reading of the novel requires understanding historical models of childhood and social contexts during Dickens' lifetime.

2.2 Historical models of childhood

The manner in which we perceive children and the concept of childhood is dynamic. Hintz and Tribunella (2019, pp. 56-57) present a model of childhood to be used for critical reading of childhood. This model describes how different views childhood have been perceived and depicted, both in literature and in society. It is beneficial to present some features (but not all) of this model, as this is relevant for the analysis and discussion.

The Romantic Child

The Romantic view of the child is when children are depicted as innocent, unspoiled and closer to nature. Children are therefore separated from adults, who have been spoiled by society. Children are still pure, and their minds are “blank slates.” Philosophers, such as John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau argued that the child’s mind would be spoiled if adults interfered too much with the child’s intellect (Hintz & Tribunella, 2019, p. 43). This view promotes childhood and wishes to limit adult interference.

The Sinful Child

A contrast to the Romantic Child is the Sinful Child. This view portrays children as in need of discipline, since children are from birth viewed as sinners. This view of the child is often linked to religion, where God is the only way to prevent the sinful child of falling into despair. There are, however, non-religious portrayals of sinful and untamed children, such as the Heathcliff in Emily Brontë’s novel *Wuthering Heights* (1847). This child is from birth cruel and vindictive.

The Sacred Child

The view of the child as being someone who is delicate and in need of protection became prevalent in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This model can be viewed in comparison to the working child. In this time period, compulsory education was established in many countries. At an earlier stage, the upper-class children were viewed as sacred, but in the working classes, the children were still doing hard labour. When this shift came into place, the view of the child as something sacred became prevalent across all social classes.

The Working Child

The child as someone that attends school, someone that is an economic expense and someone that needs to be protected is not an old concept. The model of the working child was

something that characterised life for most children before the twentieth century. Children were, according to Hintz and Tribunella (2019, pp. 48-49): “useful contributors to the household, as practical additions to families as a source of labour.” This view of the child has been claimed to neither be unusual nor immoral, but it was rather necessary for families to survive.

2.3 Nineteenth century laws

With the working child in mind, it is necessary to introduce and elaborate on some historical contexts in which *Oliver Twist* was written. In 1834, for example, the Poor Law Amendment Act was passed. Prior to this act, each parish in England had to look after the poor (Newman, 2013, p. 123). However, when the act was passed, both local board of guardians and a national Poor Law Commission were set into place, overseeing the poor. This act thus nationalised the responsibility of looking after the poor. The new act was put in to place for several reasons, some of which were: reducing the cost of looking after the poor and making people work harder. When this act was put into action, a series of workhouses were built, where the poor could live and work (Newman, 2013). The workhouses and the Poor Law Act were throughout this period under serious scrutiny, since there were from an early stage rumours of negligence and brutal behaviour from the officers in the workhouses. There were in some cases some truth to the allegations; however, modern historians claim that these accusations have been exaggerated, especially by the opponents of the workhouses, such as Charles Dickens (Crowther, 1992, pp. 183-187). Charles Dickens was known to openly criticise the Poor Law Act and workhouses. Dickens’ *Oliver Twist* first appeared in 1837, and nine years later there were reports in the workhouse of Andover that people were reduced to eat rotting bones, as the workhouse conditions were terrible (Crowther, 1981, pp. 1-4). This illustrates that there was some accuracy to Dickens’ criticism of workhouses. Life in the workhouse could at times be brutal, as well as for the children dependent on them.

The first reliable survey of child labour in Britain was published in 1851 (Kirby, 2003, pp. 11-12). This survey stated that approximately 30 % of all children (10-14 years of age) in Britain had an occupation. In the following decades, the percentage of working children decreased. During the start of the nineteenth century a series of so called “Factory Acts” were passed. The first effective law was passed in 1833, prohibiting children under the age of 9 to work in the textile industry. This law also limited the working day for children to nine

hours per day (prior to this the limit was twelve hours). In 1844, a half-time system was imposed; children could work half the day, and attend school the remainder of the day (Nardinelli, 1980, p. 741). The acts were introduced at approximately the same time as *Oliver Twist* was published. These laws are relevant because *Oliver Twist* depicts what we today define as child labour. Being conscious of the changing views of labour and childhood is clearly significant to the story because it further illustrates how cultures change of time and space. Another example of changing views of childhood could be how children are perceived in the criminal justice system, which will be elaborated in the following section.

As mentioned, children have formerly been perceived as a valuable source in labour and had few or no different rights than adults. The same applied in the criminal justice system, where children also were not exempted from punitive measures. During the last part of the 18th century and the first part of the 19th century, crime rates in England rapidly increased (Bentley, 1998, pp. 15-16). In the first part of the 19th century, criminal responsibility age was commonly, according to Bentley (1998, pp. 15-16), seven years. When attaining this age, children were subject of the same punishment as adults. During this period, children were also subjects to capital punishment, but were often pardoned for the crimes. Throughout the second part of the century, children's rights improved; however it was not until 1908 that capital punishment for children under 16 was abolished. In the next section current rights of the child will be presented, which can be seen in contrast to 19th century laws.

2.4 Convention of the Rights of the Child

In the previous section I have elaborated on relevant historical contexts of the time period the book was written, such as labour laws and how the lower classes of the population were treated. In the following sections I have chosen to add relevant theory on current laws protecting the rights of children, since this reflects current views of the child, and will be relevant in the discussion on how to develop historical empathy.

In 1989, the United Nations signed the Convention of the Rights of the Child, which set the basic rights for children. According to the United Nations (1989), the Convention “has 54 articles that cover all aspects of a child's life and set out the civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights that all children everywhere are entitled to.” Countries that have ratified the convention are obliged by international law to follow it. Articles 19 and 40 are of

particular interest in the discussion of *Oliver Twist* and development of historical empathy. For instance, Article 19 in the Convention of the Rights of the Child states that the government must prevent children from both physical and mental violence, neglect, and abuse. The state is required to provide sufficient support in cases where children are in danger of violence. The second article, Article 40, affirms that children that are being accused of breaking the law shall be treated with respect, and they have the right to legal assistance. The government is obligated to set a minimum age for children to be tried in a court (United Nations, 1989). These articles illustrate that children are to be treated with respect, regardless of background. In the nineteenth century, as we have seen, this was not always the case. I claim that these articles could contribute to development of historical empathy which will be explained further in the following section.

2.5 Historical empathy and relevance in education

2.5.1 Historical empathy

Attention to Dickens' contexts develops an awareness or consciousness of literature's relationship with history, generating what might be called "historical empathy". This term is not self-evident, and because it is an important term in the main research it needs to be explained. Historical empathy in a classroom situation means, according to Endacott and Brooks (2013, pp. 1-2), students' perception and cognitive engagement with historical people and characters. The term includes more than merely recollecting facts and acknowledging the characters' action; it means to understand people's emotions, or how they thought, and view these emotions in a historical and cultural context. One can claim that historical empathy means using the eyes of historical figures, without necessarily agreeing with the views of the time period. This term is mostly used in history and social studies. However, as I will illustrate, historical empathy can be utilised to great effect in the literature classroom.

2.5.2 Relevance in the curriculum

Critical thinking means being able to apply reason in an inquisitive and systematic way when working with specific practical challenges, phenomena, expressions and forms of knowledge (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017). This definition from the Core Values in the Norwegian Curriculum is relevant when reading historical texts, as it is of importance to use common sense and systematic methods to reflect on history and former cultural aspects. I

claim that it is of great significance to understand the “big picture”, and to be able to see more than one side, when being a literate democratic citizen in the modern world.

Looking at the English Subject Curriculum, one can notice several competence aims one would utilise if applying *Oliver Twist* in the English language classroom. After Year 7, the following competence aims are relevant for using *Oliver Twist*: “Read and listen to English-language factual texts and literature for children and young people and write and talk about the content” and “Investigate ways of living and traditions in different societies in the English-speaking world and in Norway and reflect on identity and cultural belonging” (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2019). The former competence aim fits well into teaching about English language literature, even though the book originally was written for adults. This competence aim is very broad, making the children’s literature of choice open. The latter competence aim fits well as it emphasises culture, tradition and history. When reading the book, one understands that society differs across time and space, which is relevant to the latter competence aim.

In the Core Values of the English Subject Curriculum, there are various elements that are applicable when using the book, including: “The subject shall develop the pupils’ understanding that their views of the world are culture-dependent. This can open for new ways to interpret the world, promote curiosity and engagement and help to prevent prejudice.” When reading stories from earlier time periods, it becomes clear that cultures and worldviews are not static phenomena. This core value can be seen in relation to obtaining historical empathy and to critical thinking; one should teach and reflect different world views and cultures.

3. Methodology

The analysis will be on the book *Oliver Twist* and how children are portrayed in terms of labour, social class and mistreatment. I claim that fictional stories are suitable when discussed with certain historical and cultural aspects. As previously mentioned, there are several competence aims in the English subject curriculum that substantiate this argument. The method I have chosen to apply to my analysis can be said to be within the field of qualitative research. The term qualitative research is broad, and thus I have chosen to narrow my analysis into a content analysis. The analysis will be a literary analysis that focuses on contextualising the novel historically in terms of perception of the child, social class and children as workers.

A broad definition of content analysis is, according to Holsti (1969), p. 14, as cited in Stemler (2000, p. 1): “Any technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages”. Content analyses are applicable when identifying certain trends both in written text, but also in oral settings. When analysing the content and characteristics of the book, I have chosen to include a few sub-research questions in order to recognise what I am looking for in the text. These research questions are as follows:

- How do adults communicate with the children in the book?
- What do the pictures say about being a child in 19th century England?
- Which models of childhood can be seen throughout the story?
- How does social class play a part in the views of the child?

The findings will be applied in my discussion, where I will discuss the relevance of using *Oliver Twist* in the classroom, and exploring how the story can be a contributor to increasing pupils’ historical empathy and awareness. To further support my discussion, I have also chosen to include a literary review of articles discussing similar topics. A literature review is defined as:

“The selection of available documents (both published and unpublished) on the topic which contain information, ideas, data and evidence written from a particular standpoint to fulfil certain aims or express certain views on the nature of the topic and how it is to be investigated, and the effective evaluation of these documents in relation to the research being proposed” (Hart, 1998).

Thus, when discussing the importance of using topics (in this case childhood) within classic literature to acquire historical empathy, it is of significance to find previous research that investigates similar topics. Topics I view as comparable could be teaching about “racism”, “poverty” or “portrayal of women” in order to acquire historical empathy and awareness. To find articles on similar topics I have chosen to use the databases Oria.no and Google Scholar, using the keywords “empathy”, “classics”, “Dickens”, “classroom” and “historical”. When choosing articles, I have chosen to only use peer reviewed articles, where date of publication and the expertise of the author is taken into consideration.

4. Analysis

The story of *Oliver Twist* is somewhat complex. Thus, in an English class in the elementary school, it would be beneficial to use an adapted and simplified children's version of the book. I have chosen Phillip Gooden's (2020) children's adaptation in the analysis alongside the original story by Charles Dickens. To differentiate between the novels in the analysis I will place the letter "G" (Gooden) next to the page number when discussing the children's version, and when discussing the original version, the letter "D" (Dickens) will be added. Before doing the analysis, it is of value to summarise the story. I have also chosen to utilise some of the images in Gooden's version, which are added in an appendix at the bottom of the document.

4.1 Summary

Oliver Twist tells the story of a young orphan boy in his struggles to survive in the 19th century England. From childbirth, he is being treated with little respect and is forced to work. Throughout the novel, Oliver encounters several characters, most of whom treat him as a burden or as a means to an end. The undertaker Mr. Sowerberry and his wife make Oliver work for free, official magistrates warn Oliver that he will be executed, and criminals introduce Oliver to an outlaw life. Fortunately, Oliver is taken in by the good-hearted Mr. Brownlow, where he grows and receives a proper childhood.

4.2 Literary analysis

In the analysis section, I have chosen to split my analysis into four different sections: the first part of Oliver's life, Oliver at the undertaker, Oliver at the police station, and Oliver's treatment by the upper class.

In the introduction in the book, the main character, an orphan, is given the name Oliver Twist by a local parish official. The phrase "twist" could insinuate to be hanged, as this word formerly alluded to execution by hanging (Dictionary, 2002). When Oliver is given this name, one can clearly see that the local authorities have no faith in this child, and that he will likely be dead before reaching adulthood. Oliver is placed on a farm for orphans, where they are ill-treated. The supervisor did not provide sufficient clothing: "The children were always hungry, and kept most of the money she was meant to spend on the children for herself" (G p. 7). One can understand that orphans were on the lower ladder of social class.

What affirms the claim of neglect is the picture on page 7 (G p. 7, picture found in appendix). The children are crammed up into a corner, they appear to be dirty, and their clothes are mere rags.

One can view social class as crucial to how the child would be perceived. At the age of nine, Oliver was too old to stay in the farm. It was time for him to start working, where his job would be to “unpick old tar-covered stands of ship’s rope” (G p. 5). This section of the story shares clear links to the model of the working child, as seen in Hintz and Tribunella (2019). Oliver had been an economic expense for the authorities too long, and now it was time for him to start working. This was not uncommon in the nineteenth century England. At the age of nine it was legal and common for children to work, especially in the textile industry (Nardinelli, 1980). In this section, a picture (G p. 8-9, picture in appendix) supports the gruesome manner the children were treated. The children are dressed in dirty rags, and the children’s faces are bleak. Oliver can be seen on the second from the right, and he does not particularly stand out from the rest of the children, as they all seem to live hard and unforgiving lives. This could signify that Oliver was one of many children leading this life.

Later in this section, Oliver asks for more food. The cook cannot believe what Oliver is asking, as it is outrageous and greedy of an orphan child to ask for more than what he is given. The cook hits him on the head and brings him to the magistrates of the workhouse. They tell him that he will come to a bad end; “That boy will be hung. I know that boy will be hung” (D p. 26). During the first part of the nineteenth century, it was legal to sentence children to death (Horne, 2009, p. 15). It is evident that the magistrates have no faith in Oliver, and views him as something unwanted in the society. He communicates that orphan children are worthless and someone to exploit to the fullest, as they have no other value than being workers. The magistrate sees Oliver as an offender, which links to the model of the child as a sinner. Oliver needs, according to the county officials, discipline, perhaps through hard labour and lack of food.

In the next part of the story, Oliver is sold to an undertaker, Mr. Sowerberry, since “he thought Oliver could be useful for him, sweeping and cleaning in the workshop” (D p. 16). This once again illustrates the value of Oliver and children employed in the workhouses. The wife of the undertaker also sees little value to Oliver, other than being a useful hand in the workshop. In the original story, the wife of the undertaker claims that parish boys (mostly orphans and poor) “Cost more to keep, than they’re worth” (D p.40). Oliver is perceived nothing but an expense, even though he is working for free. It is not only important to discuss

what is being said, but also to whom it is being said. Oliver is present in this conversation, meaning that he once again hears that he is of no worth, other than being an expense and a worker. The adults do not respect him and show this through comments like these. One can discuss whether adults did not respect any children, or whether it was particular for orphans.

An important comparison one can make is between Oliver and the apprentice Noah, who also works at the undertakers. Noah is not as severely treated as Oliver and is offered more food and protection by the Sowerberry's when they take Noah's side after he says that Oliver's mother deserved to die. Mrs. Sowerberry says: "Your mother deserved what he said, and more" (D p.20). A reason for saying this could be the fact that they believe Oliver to be a bastard and the mother being a prostitute. Oliver's experience with the undertaker reaffirms the fact that he is of no worth.

Another interesting setting to discuss is Oliver being sent to court after being accused of stealing a handkerchief. When inviting Oliver into the courtroom, the police officer screams: "Now, young gallows", referring to Oliver as a child being sent to be hanged (D p. 74). It is evident that everyone believes Oliver to be guilty, even though he has not yet been sentenced for the crime that he is accused of. The magistrate does not allow Oliver to explain himself and without further ado, Oliver is sentenced to three months of hard labour. I claim that, once again, Oliver is viewed as a sinful and cruel child, perhaps because he is a low-born child. The judge views Oliver as someone in need of correction. This setting can be compared to Oliver standing in front of the magistrates asking for more food. The boy is never allowed to explain himself and is dismissed as someone without any opinion. In the children's version of the story, Oliver is not sentenced to do labour work but is nonetheless put in front of the judge. This section describes how the judicial system of the nineteenth century did not take into consideration the age of the person.

The last section that will be discussed is how Oliver is being treated as a child in the upper class. On page 55 (G), Oliver is taken in by an upper-class family called the Brownlows. At this point, Oliver's identity is not yet discovered, nonetheless, he is treated in a different manner than when he was on the streets; "Oliver was well fed and allowed to sleep in as long as he liked" (G p.55). In this part it becomes evident that although Oliver is not an upper-class child, he is treated like one. He is allowed rest and leisure. Similarly, in the original novel, Oliver is treated equally well. One could question whether it is only this particular family that is portrayed in this benevolent manner, or if Dickens wanted to portray

the entire upper class in such a way. When Oliver is taken in by this family, he is viewed as a sacred child, allowing him to rest and grow. In the original story (D p. 359) Dickens writes: “How Mr. Brownlow, filling the mind of his adopted child with stores of knowledge, and becoming attached to him more and more, as his nature developed himself.” This section clearly illustrates that when Oliver is taken in as a part of the upper class, he is treated differently. Oliver is being protected and being viewed as a delicate being, which can be seen in direct contrast to working lower class children. As discussed, when Oliver is living in the workhouse, he is not considered fragile. Mr. Brownlow wishes to fill his adopted son with important knowledge, simultaneously allowing his mind to grow by itself. Allowing the mind to grow by itself, rather than from adult interference can be view in context with the romantic child, as discussed in Hintz and Tribunella (2019). This model of childhood depicts children as innocent and closer to nature, where children should by themselves develop, with limited adult interference. This section, which has focused as Oliver as an upper-class child, could illustrate that children in the upper class were viewed someone differently than lower class children. They were to be treated as innocent and delicate beings in development.

4.3 Findings

In *Oliver Twist* it is evident that children were treated and perceived differently than how children are viewed today. In the analysis I have discovered that lower-class children often were treated with no respect and were forced to work from a young age. One can see clear elements of the model of the Working Child, as Oliver is forced to work in a workhouse and being sold to an undertaker. Oliver is viewed as a sinful child on the basis of being an orphan and a lower-class child. In the time the book was written, capital punishment for children was legal, which is evident since Oliver repeatably is threatened with being “twisted.” In the upper-class, however, Oliver is being treated as someone sacred and someone to be protected from hazard. The analysis illustrates the difference between the social classes in 19th century England. What I have examined in the analysis will be reflected on in the discussion, where I examine how historical empathy can be developed through using literature.

4.4 Literature review

In the discussion I will examine why the story of *Oliver Twist* can be relevant in the English second language classroom and how one can develop historical empathy through talking about nineteenth-century literature. It is therefore valuable to examine previous research and

articles addressing historical empathy and historical fiction and classics in the English Classroom. In the literature review chart, I have summarised the aims and results found in relevant and similar articles. These will be utilised to affirm the statements that will be explored in the discussion.

4.3.1 Article X: Historical Fiction in English and Social Studies Classrooms: Is It a Natural Marriage?

Author(s):	KaaVonnia Hinton, Yonghee Suh, Lourdes Colón-Brown, Maria o’Hearn
Published:	2014
Purpose and findings:	This article looks at how one can use social studies/historical studies together with English literature to create a deeper understanding and context when reading stories set in the past. The researchers claim that when discussing historical details, one should contextualise the surroundings before reading. Contextualising would thus contribute to developing historical empathy and to understand the characters more. The article uses <i>The Book Thief</i> (2005) as an example on how to teach about World War II.
Reference:	Hinton, K., Suh, Y., Colón-Brown, L., & o’Hearn, M. (2014). Historical Fiction in English and Social Studies Classrooms: Is It a Natural Marriage? <i>English Journal</i> , 103.

4.3.2 Article X: Empathy in the English Classroom: Broadening Perspectives Through Literature

Author(s):	Alanna Jamieson
Published:	2015
Purpose and findings:	This article is a novel study on <i>Oliver Twist</i> in an eleventh grade English Classroom. Although this article focuses on older students, I still find ideas and data collected relevant to my study. The researchers investigate how one can teach empathy, and when concluding the study, the researcher begins to see the value of using the novel to discuss social injustice and marginalised groups in society. The researchers also investigate the engagement of the pupils, and whether they are motivated by reading classic literature.
Reference:	Jamieson, A. (2015). Empathy in the English Classroom: Broadening Perspectives Through Literature. <i>Learning Landscapes</i> , 8, 229-244.

4.3.3 The Paradox of Fiction and the Ethics of Empathy: Reconceiving Dickens's Realism

Author(s):	Mary Catherine Harrison
Published:	2008
Purpose and findings:	The article investigates empathy, and how this differs between empathising with fictional and non-fictional people. Harrison also looks at how Charles Dickens wished for people to empathise and help the real lower classes through his fictional characters in his novels, such as <i>Oliver Twist</i> and characters in <i>Hard Times</i> . What is of interesting is that the author notes that the characters must represent a group that the reader can relate to. It is also claimed that through reading stories and empathising for the characters, the human species has become more understanding and empathic.
Reference:	Harrison, M.-C. (2008). The Paradox of Fiction and the Ethics of Empathy: Reconceiving Dickens's Realism <i>Narrative</i> , 16(3), 256-278.

5. Discussion

In this thesis I claim that *Oliver Twist* can be used in the English second language classroom to teach historical empathy. It is a story that uncovers topics such as child labour, class difference and neglect. In this section I will discuss why one can develop historical empathy through using the story of *Oliver Twist*, using my findings as examples.

Harrison (2008) states, when discussing narrative empathy, that readers must identify with the characters in the story, meaning that they must be representative of a group that one can recognize. She also claims that Dickens himself intended for the readers during his time to both identify and engage when reading about the group in question. I think this is a beneficial approach to a discussing in an ESL literature classroom; the case of *Oliver Twist* needs to be an example the children can identify with. *Oliver Twist*, as seen in the analysis, is being neglected, ill-treated, and even being sent to court. Historical empathy means taking the time period's perception of children and trying to look at why children were treated this in this manner. Therefore, I claim that one needs to be understanding of the former views of children, but one could nonetheless use current viewpoints to discuss. Hakemulder, as cited in Harrison (2008), has done research on development of empathy in literature. He found that focusing on fictional characters often create more profound impact on the readers than when discussing non-fictional characters discussing the same topics. This supports the statement of

developing historical empathy through using the character Oliver Twist; when discussing empathy in the classroom, the readers must identify with the characters.

In order to develop historical empathy, both for the characters and time period, I claim that contextualising the story is of significance. Hinton et al. (2014, pp. 22-23) discuss how to combine historical fiction and literature, and they claim that contextualising the topic is important when developing historical empathy, meaning that for the students to understand what they are reading, they need to understand the background and the surroundings of the story. They claim that “historical details build empathy and help students understand why characters in historical novels make certain decisions, thus humanizing historical periods and events”, which means that elaborating on time periods, and presenting a neutral standpoint, would in consequence lead to a balanced and non-judgemental view of the period. In the case of Oliver, this would mean presenting information about the time period, about the works of Dickens, as well discussing comparable current affairs. A specific example would be when Oliver is sent to court, and where capital punishment is alluded. Firstly, it would be important to add information about child punishment during this period. For instance, during the first part of the 19th century, it was legal to sentence children to death. Between 1801 and 1835, 103 children between the age of 10-14 were sentenced to death, most of whom had been charged with theft (Horne, 2009, p. 15). I regard this type of information to be crucial when developing historical understanding, as Oliver Twist was one of many children being sent to court for theft. Jamieson (2015, pp. 233-234) supports the view of contextualising before discussing novels. She wished to “give the students a frame of reference” before reading the novel, as she realised that *Oliver Twist* would make little sense to her students if she did not explain important elements in the story, such as the Poor Laws and Charles Dickens’ views of the working class. Contextualising the story could also mean connecting to the present-day society.

Another approach to contextualise the story is to link how Oliver (and other children) were treated in the book, to current affairs. Oliver is ostensibly a victim of neglect. As far as what one can read from the book, there is no physical abuse; however, neglect is, according to the United Nations, placed in the same category as violence. Article 19 of the Rights of the Child states that children must be protected from neglect and violence (United Nations, 1989). I claim that this would be a suitable manner to contextualise the story, as students today are familiar with the UN Rights of the Child. Article 40 could subsequently be linked with the discussion regarding Oliver’s treatment by the magistrates and the court system. As

mentioned, 103 children in the nineteenth-century England were sentenced to death for crimes. Today, the United Nations' Rights of the Child would most likely have prevented such an incident to take place, as Article 40 states that the government is required to have a minimum age of criminal responsibility, and that children have the right to assistance in a court of law.

One can learn empathy through comparing former and current laws. Jamieson (2015, p. 241) once again supports this view, as the novel is "very much concerned with issues of social justice and with caring for one another, as a platform through which to discuss empathy and promote deeper understanding among my students." Present social issues should be connected to former issues since the present is a result of the past.

Connecting the historical and current societies can be seen in relation to the Core Value of the English subject curriculum, which states that "The subject shall develop the pupils' understanding that their views of the world are culture-dependent" (Ministry of Education and Training, 2019). Circling back to the statement of developing historical empathy through *Oliver Twist*, it is evident that students will acquire understanding that their views of the world depend on when and where they were born. When examining the context surrounding *Oliver Twist* – for example that children from the age of nine had to work – students may understand the concept of culture-dependence.

The Core Values furthermore state that "this can open for new ways to interpret the world, promote curiosity and engagement and help to prevent prejudice". "Developing historical empathy" can be associated with "preventing prejudice" as historical empathy means understanding people and society from their perspectives rather than acknowledging facts. This does not only mean empathising for Oliver and the poor in nineteenth-century England, it furthermore suggests that one must acknowledge all the characters and incidents from their perspectives. An example of this could be the undertaker, Mr. Sowerberry, who treats Oliver harshly. From a present-day perspective he appears to be a cruel man that purchases a young boy. However, from an 1830s viewpoint, it could in fact be normal to buy and foster children that had no prospects in their future. How one understands the story of *Oliver Twist* thus depends on one's culture and place in history.

In this section I have looked at historical empathy and the possibilities for using *Oliver Twist* use this text to discuss child labour, class, and poverty. A crucial element when working with historical empathy is to contextualise the text, meaning that one should present and discuss

the time period, discuss what the author intended with the novel and bring forth current matters that share similar traits. Moreover, it is of significance to explore stories that students can relate to. This would mean that the characters must share elements with groups/characters that they can recognize with. Lastly, in the English subject curriculum it is evident that the story of *Oliver Twist* is well suited in a classroom, as this story can illustrate how one's views depend on the culture.

6. Conclusion

In this thesis I explored and analysed how children were portrayed and treated in the story of *Oliver Twist*. I chose to use both a children's version of the story, as well as using the original story. In an ESL classroom in the primary school, it would be beneficial to mostly use the adapted children's version, as this version simplifies the story for younger readers. However, I still see the value of utilising the original story when elaborating on topics the children's version does not explain sufficiently. I believe that the original story can contextualise and explore the surroundings on a deeper level, whereas the adapted version is suitable for younger readers.

In *Oliver Twist*, the protagonist Oliver is being treated severely. Oliver represents the lower-class, where it is evident that children in the days of Dickens were treated harshly and were forced to work from a young age. Dickens was a social critic and was opposed to the conditions in the workhouses. It is evident that he used Oliver to illustrate the terrible conditions for the lower class. Children during this time period were not exempted from criminal justice, and Oliver once again serves as an example. Repeatedly, Oliver evades the gallows; even the name "Twist" alludes to hanging. Furthermore, I argued why and how the story of *Oliver Twist* can be used to develop historical empathy. I conclude that contextualising, which means to add relevant background theory to the story, is of significance, as the readers will acquire insightful knowledge and awareness of the surroundings, which could generate empathy towards the story and characters. Furthermore, the story must incorporate elements and characters that the reader can identify with. Some elements can be difficult to discover, thus I claim that current affairs and laws can be used to add relevance and understanding to the narrative. Bearing these components in mind, I believe that *Oliver Twist* can be of relevance in an ESL literature classroom. Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* is a historical artifact that can be utilised as a gateway to acquire deeper understanding and awareness of both the past and the present.

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Appendix

	<p>Page 7: Ill-treatment</p>
 <p>though not well – in exchange for work.</p>	<p>Page 8-9: Oliver in the workhouse</p>