

Art et contestation

Les liens qui unissent l'art et la contestation sont multiples. À travers cet axe d'étude, on se penche sur l'utilisation du support artistique pour défendre un point de vue, apporter un témoignage, dénoncer une injustice et s'inscrire ainsi dans les grands débats sociaux ou politiques propres à une époque et à un lieu donnés.

La contestation d'un ordre social établi est souvent directement liée au geste de l'artiste qui s'engage dans un débat pour y prendre position voire qui utilise son art à des fins militantes. L'œuvre d'art peut alors remettre en cause les opinions dominantes et devenir subversive, qu'elle passe par la satire ou la caricature sociale (peintures et gravures de William Hogarth), par la chanson politique (Joan Baez, Pete Seeger), par le roman à visée sociale (Daniel Defoe, Charles Dickens) ou anticoloniale (V.S. Naipaul, Chinua Achebe), ou encore par le détournement pictural (Andy Warhol, K.J. Marshall). En incarnant des idées, en leur donnant chair et forme dans des personnages, des situations, des images ou des sons, en suscitant l'émotion, l'indignation, le rire ou l'enthousiasme, les arts confèrent à ces idées un impact parfois considérable. Nombre d'œuvres d'art ont ainsi permis de sensibiliser le public à une cause, qu'il s'agisse des pièces d'Oscar Wilde ou de Harold Pinter sur les classes sociales au Royaume-Uni, des romans de John Steinbeck ou des photos de Dorothea Lange sur la Grande Dépression, des tableaux de Norman Rockwell sur la ségrégation ou des films de Ken Loach ou de Mike Leigh sur les milieux populaires au Royaume-Uni.

L'art peut aussi contenir une charge dénonciatrice et se révéler porteur d'une contestation de certaines normes sans que l'artiste n'entre pour autant dans une démarche explicite d'engagement, comme on peut le voir par exemple à travers la musique d'Elvis Presley dans Anglais, enseignement de spécialité Langues, littératures et cultures étrangères, classe terminale, voie générale.

L'Amérique des années 1950. La distinction entre la contestation dans l'art et l'art contestataire est alors féconde pour distinguer ce qui relève de l'intention artistique de ce qui est lié à la lecture d'un contexte social.

Cet axe d'étude s'intéresse donc à des situations où les artistes construisent leur œuvre en réaction ou en opposition aux idées et réalités de leur temps – qu'ils se positionnent en témoins et spectateurs ou qu'ils mettent plus directement leur pensée et leur art au service d'une cause. Ainsi, les artistes du monde anglophone ont su exprimer à travers

leurs œuvres une forme de résistance à l'oppression sociale ou politique, aux différents types de discrimination (contre les femmes, les minorités ethniques ou sexuelles, etc.) ; une opposition au colonialisme, à la guerre, au progrès, etc.

Bien que souvent apparentée au progressisme, la contribution des artistes au débat d'idées peut à l'occasion être plutôt qualifiée de conservatrice, nostalgique, voire réactionnaire (le poème « Mandalay » de Rudyard Kipling ; le roman *Brideshead Revisited* d'Evelyn Waugh ; la chanson « If the South Woulda Won » de Hank Williams Jr.) : c'est à travers cette diversité qu'on peut éclairer les thèmes historiques ou civilisationnels qu'explorent les élèves de terminale.

Il convient enfin de s'interroger sur les choix esthétiques qui peuvent constituer en eux-mêmes un engagement (écritures expérimentales à la *Tristram Shandy* de Laurence Sterne ; *street art*).

Les connaissances des élèves, acquises tout au long de leur parcours d'éducation artistique, sont mobilisées et mises en valeur dans cette perspective.

(Extrait, B.O. spécial n° 8 du 25 juillet 2019)

Corpus de documents étudiés

- ▶ DOC 1 *Oliver Twist* (1837) by Charles Dickens
- ▶ DOC 2 *The Moonstone* (1868) by Wilkie Collins
- ▶ DOC 3 *The Great Gatsby* (1925) by Scott Fitzgerald
- ▶ DOC 4 *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) by John Steinbeck

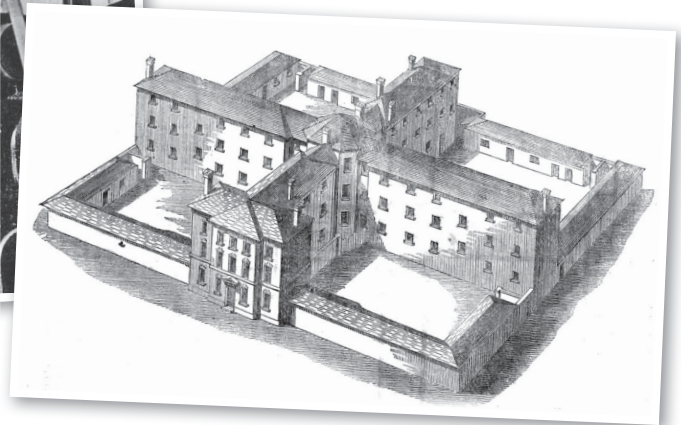
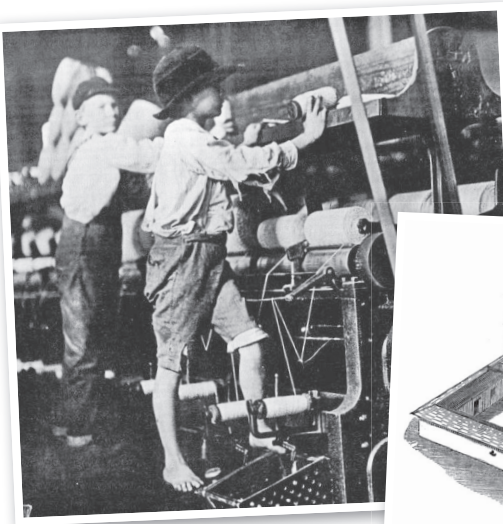
Séquence sur la guerre :

- ▶ DOC 5 *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895) by Stephen Crane
- ▶ DOC 6 First World War poetry by Brooke (1914) and Owen (1918)
- ▶ DOC 7 *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) by Ernest Hemingway

PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

To understand this extract, you need to take into account the historical background:

In *Oliver Twist*, Dickens criticised the way the poor were treated in Victorian society (the 19th century.)



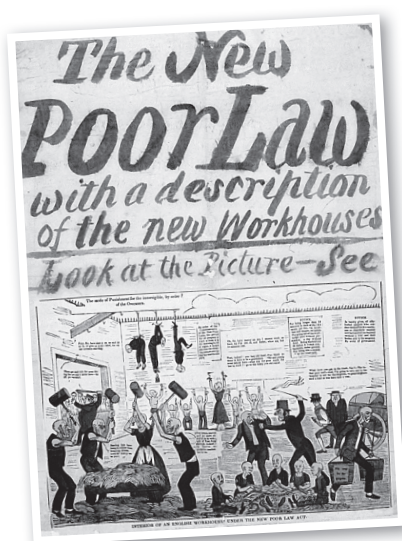
1. Who do you think these children are?
2. What are they doing?
3. Imagine their family background
4. Why do you think the buildings are separated in the picture of a typical Victorian Workhouse?
5. What does it show about the social context?

In 1834, a new law tried to establish what sort of relief the poor should get from local authorities. For each couple of sentences, decide which one was implemented by that law.

We recommend you go online to do some research.

6. Write **R** if you think the sentence is right or **W** if you think it is wrong in the following grid.

The desperately poor were not compelled to go to a workhouse.	
The poor who did not want to go to a workhouse would receive a monthly 'relief stipend'.	
Conditions in the workhouse should be as nice as possible to help the poor recover from their hardship.	
Each family was given its own bedroom in the workhouse.	
Families could work half time in order to find a new job outside the workhouse.	
Poor people had no choice but to go to a workhouse.	
The general rule was that no poor people should receive <i>any</i> relief money outside the workhouse.	
Conditions in workhouses should be as harsh as possible so as to discourage the people from seeking relief in there.	
Families were split up. Even couples could not stay together.	
Everybody had to work very hard in order to make sure they tried to leave the place.	



7. To sum up, write a little paragraph about life under the 1834 Poor Law using the following words:

Poor and destitute • workhouses • working conditions • living conditions • dreadful • starve • separate • children • husband • wife • discourage s.o. from + V-ing

Charles J. H. DICKENS (1812-1870) was an English writer and social critic generally regarded as the greatest novelist of the Victorian period. Dickensian characters are so well known that they have become part of British culture, and in some cases have passed into ordinary language: a scrooge, for example, is a miserly person.



Now, YOU CAN READ AND INTERACT WITH THE TEXT

Chapter 2 *Oliver Twist* (1837) by Charles Dickens

Oliver was born in a workhouse. His mother, who had been found lying in the street the night before, died after kissing his forehead. Oliver is sent to a branch-workhouse under the supervision of Mrs Mann by the parish authorities. In the extract, M.Bumble, a beadle from the parish, visits the branch-workhouse on Oliver's ninth birthday.

TREATS OF OLIVER TWIST'S GROWTH, EDUCATION, AND BOARD

For the next eight or ten months, Oliver was the victim of a systematic course of **treachery** and **deception**. He was brought up **by hand**. The hungry and **destitute** situation of the infant **orphan** was duly reported by the **workhouse** authorities to the **parish** authorities. The parish authorities inquired with dignity of the workhouse authorities, whether there was no female then domiciled in 'the house' who was in a situation to impart to Oliver Twist, the consolation and nourishment of which he stood in need. The workhouse authorities replied with humility, that there was not. Upon this, the parish authorities magnanimously and humanely resolved, that Oliver should be 'farmed,' or, in other words, that he should be **dispatched** to a branch-workhouse some three miles off, where twenty or thirty other juvenile offenders against the poor-laws, **rolled about** the floor all day, without the inconvenience of too much food or too much clothing, under the parental superintendence of an elderly female, who received the **culprits** at and for the consideration of sevenpence-halfpenny per small head per week. Sevenpence-halfpenny's worth per week is a good round diet for a child; a great deal may be got for sevenpence-halfpenny, quite enough to **overload** its stomach, and make it uncomfortable. The elderly female was a woman of **wisdom** and experience; she knew what was good for children; and she had a very **accurate** perception of what was good for herself. So, she appropriated the greater part of the weekly **stipend** to her own use, and consigned the rising parochial generation to even a shorter **allowance** than was originally provided for them. [...]

It cannot be expected that this system of **farming** would produce any very extraordinary or luxuriant crop. Oliver Twist's 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 Oliver's 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 birth-day at all. Be this as it may, however, it was his ninth birthday; and he was keeping it in the coal-cellar with a select party of two other young gentleman, who, after participating with him in a sound thrashing, had

been locked up for atrociously presuming to be hungry, when Mrs. Mann, the good lady
30 of the house, was unexpectedly startled by the apparition of Mr. Bumble, the **beadle**,
striving to undo the **wicket** of the garden-gate.

‘Goodness gracious! Is that you, Mr. Bumble, sir?’ said Mrs. Mann, thrusting her head
out of the window in well-affected ecstasies of joy. ‘(Susan, take Oliver and them two
brats upstairs, and wash ‘em directly.) – My heart alive! Mr. Bumble, how glad I am to
35 see you, sure-ly!’

[...]

‘And now about business,’ said the beadle, taking out a leathern pocket-book. ‘The
child that was half-baptized Oliver Twist, is nine year old to-day;

‘Bless him!’ interposed Mrs. Mann, inflaming her left eye with the corner of her apron.
40 ‘And notwithstanding a offered reward of ten pound, which was afterwards increased
to twenty pound. Notwithstanding the most superlative, and, I may say, supernat’ral
exertions on the part of this parish,’ said Bumble, ‘we have never been able to discover
who is his father, or what was his mother’s settlement, name, or condition.’ [...]

Oliver being now too old to remain here, the board have determined to have him back
45 into the house. I have come out myself to take him there. So let me see him at once.’

‘I’ll fetch him directly,’ said Mrs. Mann, leaving the room for that purpose. Oliver,
having had by this time as much of the outer coat of dirt which encrusted his face and
hands, removed, as could be scrubbed off in one washing, was led into the room by his
benevolent protectress.

50 ‘Make a bow to the gentleman, Oliver,’ said Mrs. Mann.

Oliver made a bow, which was divided between the beadle on the chair, and the cocked
hat on the table.

‘Will you go along with me, Oliver?’ said Mr. Bumble, in a majestic voice.

Oliver was about to say that he would go along with anybody with great readiness,
55 when, glancing upward, he caught sight of Mrs. Mann, who had got behind the beadle’s
chair, and was shaking her fist at him with a furious countenance. He took the hint at
once, for the fist had been too often impressed upon his body not to be deeply impressed
upon his recollection.

‘Will she go with me?’ inquired poor Oliver.

60 ‘No, she can’t,’ replied Mr. Bumble. ‘But she’ll come and see you sometimes.’

This was no very great consolation to the child. Young as he was, however, he had
sense enough to make a feint of feeling great regret at going away. It was no very difficult
matter for the boy to call tears into his eyes. Hunger and recent ill-usage are great
assistants if you want to cry; and Oliver cried very naturally indeed. Mrs. Mann gave
65 him a thousand embraces, and what Oliver wanted a great deal more, a piece of bread
and butter, less he should seem too hungry when he got to the workhouse. With the slice
of bread in his hand, and the little brown-cloth parish cap on his head, Oliver was then
led away by Mr. Bumble from the wretched home where one kind word or look had never
lighted the gloom of his infant years. And yet he burst into an agony of childish grief,
70 as the cottage-gate closed after him. Wretched as were the little companions in misery
he was leaving behind, they were the only friends he had ever known; and a sense of his
loneliness in the great wide world, sank into the child’s heart for the first time.

Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, Penguin Classics (1995), pp.30-31

Vocabulary

treachery : *perfidie* • **deception** : *duperie* • **by hand** : (*ici, au biberon*) • **destitute** : *sans ressources* • **orphan** : *orphelin* • **workhouse** : *hospice* • **parish** : *paroisse* • **dispatched** : *envoyé* • **to roll about** : *se rouler par terre* • **culprits** : *coupables* • **to overload** : *surcharger* • **wisdom** : *sagesse* • **accurate** : *précis* • **stipend** : *pension* • **allowance** : *allocation* • **bestead** : *lit* • **beadle** : *bedeau* • **wicket** : *portillon* • **to behold** : *contempler* • **farming** : *culture* • **brats** : *morveux* • **less** : *de peur que*

FOCUS ON

1. There are two main parts in the text. Find them and give a title to each part.
2. To what extent can this extract be regarded as a theatrical scene, as if we were watching a play on a stage?
3. Pick out elements in the text showing that the whole scene with Mr Bumble is stage-managed by Mrs Mann.
4. Meaning in context –the system of *farming*: what is the definition given to someone who is “farmed” at the beginning of the text and what conclusions does the narrator draw at the end of the extract about this system?
5. What do you learn about the workhouse? The branch-workhouse? The parish?
6. What do you think about the fact that Oliver is sent back to the workhouse at the end of this extract?
7. What adjectives would you associate with Mrs Mann? With Mr Bumble? Justify. Nice, hypocritical, trustworthy, overbearing, nasty, selfish, lenient, inquisitive
8. Show how the whole chapter is a criticism of the Poor Laws of 1834 and the system of workhouses.

BRANCHING OUT

1. The Victorian Era and Charles Dickens (see chapter 4)

- a. Guess who wrote this sentence and justify your choice:
“So they established the rule that all poor people should have the alternative (for they would compel nobody, not they) of being starved by a gradual process in the house, or by a quick one out of it.”
- b. Learn more about the Victorian era and Dickens’s greatest heroes!



2. Using a dictionary or the web find out what these three heroes have in common :

Pip • Oliver Twist • David Copperfield

TASK

► WRITING

As an adult 20 years later, Oliver Twist remembers his childhood spent in the workhouse and decides to write about it. Use your imagination and write an article in which Oliver Twist remembers his life in the workhouse using the first person singular (for example: I remember waking up very early in the morning because...)

If you feel like...

Further information to supplement your personal exam file



Reading

- You will easily find simplified versions of *Oliver Twist* in good bookshops which will help you discover the whole story for pleasure. For your information, there is also a comic strip version by Loïc Dauvillier and Olivier Deloye.
- *Shirley* (1849) by Charlotte Brontë
- *Ruth* (1853) by Elizabeth Gaskell
- *Felix Holt* (1866) by George Eliot



Watching

Oliver Twist (2005) directed by Roman Polanski: the most recent film based on the novel.



Listening

Oliver! (1960) by Lionel Bart: a famous musical