

Please, Sir, I want some more

from *Oliver Twist* Charles Dickens, 1838

WARM UP

- 1 **Oliver Twist** was the first English novel with a child protagonist. Do you have your own favourite book, TV series or film with a child protagonist? What do you like about this character?

Glossary

- copper** large container for food
pauper very poor
the short commons small amount of shared food
gruel food made of oats (*fiocchi d'avena*) cooked in water or milk, which poor people ate in the past
grace a prayer said before a meal
whisper to speak very quietly
wink to close and open one eye quickly to communicate something or show that something is a secret or joke
nudge to push someone gently, usually with your elbow, in order to get their attention
reckless not worrying about the possible dangerous results of your actions
temerity audacity
gaze to look at someone for a long time
astonishment complete surprise
cling to hold someone or something tightly
blow a hard hit
ladle a large deep spoon with a long handle
pinion to hold someone's arms very tightly so that they cannot move
shriek to make a very high loud sound
beadle an officer in British churches in the past

When British school children hear the name "Oliver" they immediately remember the famous quote "Please, Sir, I want some more!" Oliver Twist is an orphan who grows up in a "workhouse". In 1834 a lot of English towns opened workhouses for poor people without a job or a house. Abandoned children, disabled people, old and sick people and unmarried mothers also lived in those terrible places. In the extract you are going to read, Oliver famously asks for more food.

The evening arrived, the boys took their places. The master, in his cook's uniform, stationed himself at the copper; his pauper assistants ranged themselves behind him; the gruel was served out; and a long grace was said over the short commons. The gruel disappeared; the boys whispered to each other, and winked at Oliver; while his next neighbours nudged him. Child as he was, he was desperate with hunger, and reckless with misery. He rose from the table; and advancing to the master, basin and spoon in hand, said, somewhat alarmed at his own temerity:

"Please, Sir, I want some more."

The master was a fat, healthy man; but he turned very pale. He gazed in stupefied astonishment on the small rebel for some seconds; and then clung for support to the copper. The assistants were paralysed with wonder; the boys with fear.

"What!" said the master at length, in a faint voice.


"Please, Sir," replied Oliver, "I want some more."

The master aimed a blow at Oliver's head with the ladle; pinioned him in his arms; and shrieked aloud for the beadle.

(Chapter II)



► DIGGING INTO THE TEXT

2  **1.186** Read and listen to the text. Underline words or phrases which help the reader to understand what life was like in a workhouse.

3 Choose the correct answer to the following questions.

- 1 What does Oliver's gesture tell you about his personality?
 - a ☐ Oliver is afraid of the master and his assistants.
 - b ☐ Oliver is brave. He is a kind of leader for his mates.
- 2 From the reactions we can understand that Oliver's gesture
 - a ☐ was very common among children in the workhouse.
 - b ☐ surprised all the protagonists of the scene.
- 3 What do you think will happen to Oliver after this episode?
 - a ☐ Oliver will be punished.
 - b ☐ Oliver will lead a revolt to get better conditions.



► WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?

Oliver Twist is the story of an orphan who grows up in a workhouse. After escaping from the workhouse Oliver goes to London where he joins a gang of criminal children. It is the beginning of a life of crime and danger. In the end a wealthy man (actually his grandfather) rescues him but the rest of the gang are not so lucky.

4 Read the quotes (1-3) from different parts of the book and match them to the main themes (a-c) of the novel listed below.

- a poverty and its bad effects on society
- b crime as a consequence of poverty
- c the power of benevolence: it can destroy evil in society

1 "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."

2 I tell you again, it was badly planned. Why not have kept him here among the rest, and made a sneaking, sniveling pickpocket of him at once?

3 "Oh! for God's sake let me go!" cried Oliver; "let me run away and die in the fields. I will never come near London; never, never! Oh! pray have mercy on me, and do not make me steal. For the love of all the bright Angels that rest in Heaven, have mercy upon me!"

5 **PERSONAL RESPONSE** List the things you think all children need to be safe and healthy. After creating your own list share your ideas with a classmate and agree on a common list.

Filmophilia

So far there have been more than 400 films and TV adaptations based on Dickens's works. No other novelist has been adapted for the screen so often. His works have even inspired the Muppets in an adaptation of *A Christmas Carol*.

Oliver Twist is the novel with the most films. There is also a musical adaptation, *Oliver!* (1968). In 2005 Roman Polanski directed a famous film adaptation of *Oliver Twist*.



6 Look at the film poster of Polanski's *Oliver Twist* and answer the following questions.

- 1 What can you see in the background of the poster? And in the foreground?
- 2 Where do you think the scene takes place? In a town or in the countryside?
- 3 What is Oliver doing? What do you think has just happened to him?
- 4 He looks ... (you can choose among: relaxed – worried – scared – tired – happy – shy)

Use your answers to write a short paragraph about the film poster.

▶ THE CHARACTERS' GALLERY

Charles Dickens is one of the greatest champions of childhood. Some of the most famous child characters can be found in the following works by Dickens:

- ▶ *A Christmas Carol* (1843): **Tiny Tim** is a sickly little boy who walks with a crutch. He will die if his family cannot find the money to buy medicine and better food.
- ▶ *David Copperfield* (1850) tells the story of the title character and protagonist of the novel. **David Copperfield** was born six months after his father's death. After his mother remarries, his stepfather treats him cruelly, then sends him to a boarding school. David's mother dies when he is still a child and his stepfather sends him to work in a factory.
- ▶ *Great Expectations* (1860) tells the story of the unfortunate life of **Pip Pirrip**, an orphan being raised by his cruel older sister and her generous husband. It also tells about **Estella**, herself an orphan adopted by Miss Havisham.

7 Read the information above about some child characters in Dickens' works. What do they have in common with Oliver?

▶ THE BOOK AND ITS TIME

Charles Dickens used the story of *Oliver Twist* to draw attention to the numerous social problems of his time. In particular, Dickens uses *Oliver Twist* to speak against the workhouse and the treatment of the poor during this period. At the time, being poor was a crime: poor people had to be punished for this.

8 What was it like in a workhouse? Fill in the text with the words given. There are two extra words.

husbands • children • worked • hands • hungry • prisons • separated • parents • scarce • cutlery • meet • workhouse

The buildings looked like ¹.....
In a workhouse women were ²..... from all men, including their ³..... Husbands, wives and ⁴..... all lived in different parts of the workhouse. They couldn't ⁵..... even in the common areas. People of all ages, including children as young as 4 or 5 years old, ⁶..... from early in the morning till late in the evening. People ate meals in silence, and there wasn't any ⁷..... – they used their ⁸..... These meals were dull, tasteless and so ⁹..... that people called them “a slow process of starvation” (people were always ¹⁰..... as in the extract you have just read).

► THE LANGUAGE OF BOOKS

Charles Dickens is one of the most popular writers of English literature and one of the most influential in the English language. With his numerous works he helped to spread new words and new meanings. Apart from words, phrases and slang expressions Dickens used names to evoke a character's personality. Some of his characters' names have entered the dictionary. Here are some examples:

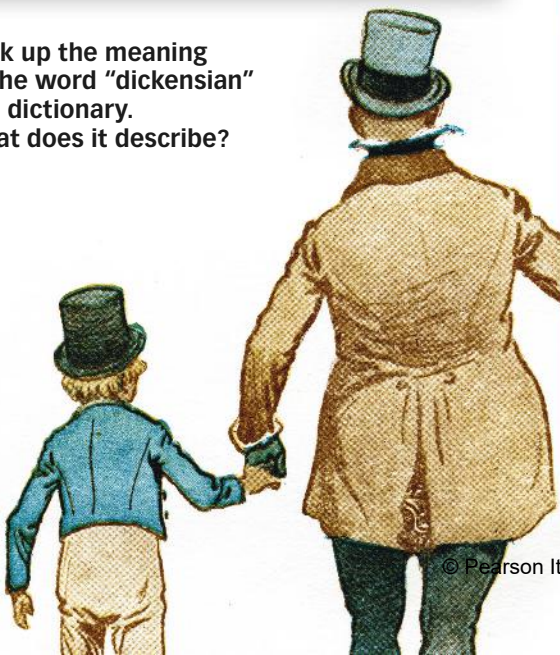
- **Scrooge** in *A Christmas Carol* is a character who hates spending money but learns how to be generous. Now the word refers to someone who hates spending money.
- **Fagin** is a character in the book *Oliver Twist*. Fagin is the leader of a group of young thieves, who collect and then sell the objects that they have stolen. The term is now used to describe a person who teaches crime to others.
- If you are **Pickwickian** you are like Samuel Pickwick in *The Pickwick Papers*: jovial, naive and generous.

- 9** The names of Dickens' characters often hold clues to their personality. Read the dictionary definition for "twist" and comment on the name given to the young protagonist of the novel.

TWIST noun [countable]

an unexpected feature or change in a situation or series of events: a new/cruel/unexpected/strange etc twist; the robbery took a deadly new twist as the robber pulled out a gun; an unexpected twist in the plot

- 10** Look up the meaning of the word "dickensian" in a dictionary. What does it describe?



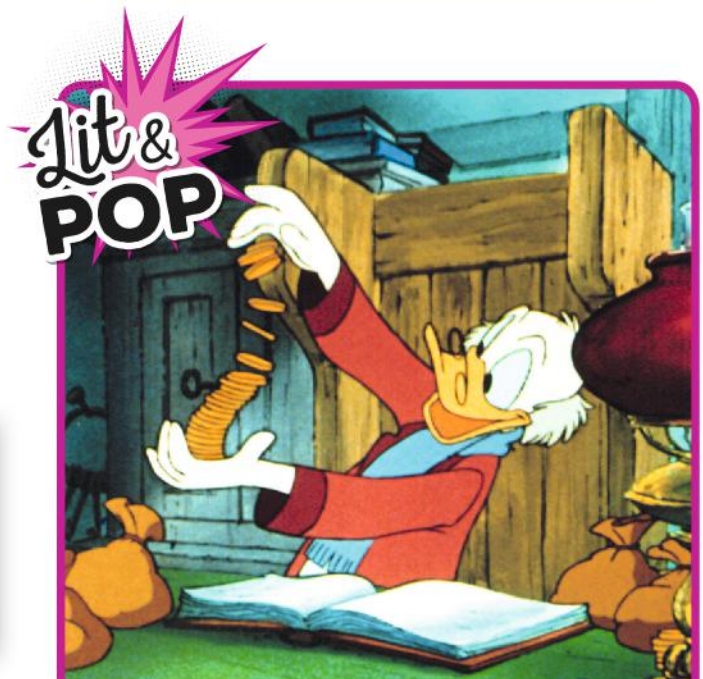
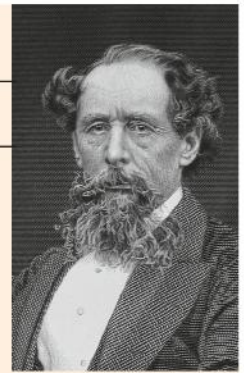
Let's meet the author

Charles Dickens (1812-1870)

Charles Dickens was born in England into a very modest family. When he was 12, his father was sent to prison for debt and Dickens was obliged to work in a factory to help his family. He worked there for three years. The conditions were very bad. He never spoke of that experience, even to his own wife.

He started to write as a journalist. His first successful book was *The Pickwick Papers* in 1837, the year Queen Victoria came to the throne.

Dickens wrote a lot during his life: he wrote novels, hundreds of short stories and non-fiction works. He wrote plays, thousands of letters and edited two journals. He is buried in Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey.



- **Scrooge McDuck**, or **Uncle Scrooge**, made his first appearance in a Donald Duck comic in 1947. He is Donald Duck's wealthy uncle. He is one of the richest and stingiest ducks in the world. He was named after Ebenezer Scrooge from *A Christmas Carol* (1843) a novel by Charles Dickens.
- In Chatham, England, you can go to **Dickens World**, the only Charles Dickens-themed amusement park in the world. Attractions include a replica Victorian schoolhouse and you can buy gruel at a stand, too.
- Charles Dickens is so popular that he has appeared on the **British £10 note**.