

Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist*

Oliver Twist is an orphan who spends the first nine years of his life at a 'baby farm' where he is brought up with little food and few comforts. On his ninth birthday, Mr Bumble, a parish beadle, takes him to work picking oakum at the main branch-workhouse. Here he is sold to an undertaker as an apprentice, but he is ill-treated and goes to London.

In the city he falls into the hands of an infamous Jewish criminal known as Fagin with his band of young pickpockets. Oliver realizes too late who they really are, and, though he is innocent, one day he is hunted down and arrested. The old wealthy gentleman, Mr Brownlow, that Oliver is presumed to have robbed, takes Oliver home and cares for him.

But one day Oliver is kidnapped and quickly taken back to Fagin who forces him to participate in a burglary. The robbery goes wrong, however, and Oliver is shot. He recovers and after many adventures he is adopted by Mr Brownlow, who turns out to be an old friend of Oliver's father.

The workhouses Dickens describes in the first few chapters of the novel were institutions that the Victorian middle class established to raise poor children. Since it was believed that certain vices were typical of the poor and that poor families encouraged such vices, poor husbands and wives were separated in order to prevent them from having children and expanding the lower class. Poor children were taken away from their parents in order to allow the state and the church to raise them in the manner they believed most suitable.

In the passage below *Oliver Twist* is in the workhouse. The boys with him are starving and he is chosen to ask for more food.



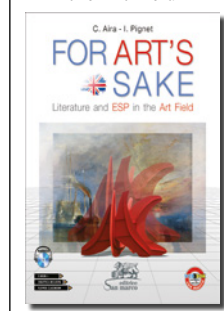
Back to the Workhouse

The room in which the boys were fed, was a large stone hall, with a copper¹ at one end: out of which the master, dressed in an apron for the purpose, and assisted by one or two women, ladled² the gruel at meal-times. Of this festive composition each boy had one porringer,³ and no more – except on occasions of great public rejoicing, when he had two ounces and a quarter of bread besides. The bowls never wanted washing. The boys polished them with their spoons till they shone again; and when they had performed this operation (which never took very long, the spoons being nearly as large as the bowls), they would sit staring at the copper, with such eager eyes, as if they could have devoured the very bricks of which it was composed; employing themselves, meanwhile, in sucking their fingers most assiduously, with the view of catching up any stray splashes⁴ of gruel that might have been cast thereon. Boys have generally excellent appetites. Oliver Twist and his companions suffered the tortures of slow starvation for three months: at last they got so voracious and wild with hunger, that one boy, who was tall for his age, and hadn't been used to that sort of thing (for his father had kept a small cook-shop), hinted⁵ darkly to his companions that unless he had another basin of gruel per diem, he was afraid he might some night happen to eat the boy who slept next him, who happened to be a weakly youth of tender age. He had a wild, hungry eye; and they implicitly believed him. A council was held, lots were cast who should walk up to the master after supper that evening, and ask for more; and it fell to Oliver Twist.

The evening arrived: the boys took their place. 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 each other, and winked at Oliver; while his next neighbours nudged⁶ him. Child as he was, he was desperate with hunger, and reckless⁷ with misery. He rose from the table and advancing to the master, basin and spoon in hand, said: somewhat alarmed at his own temerity:

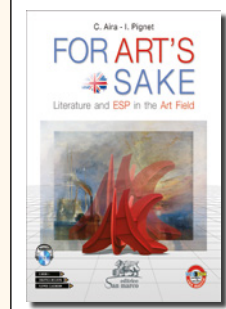
"Please, sir, I want some more."

C. Aira - I. Pignet
**FOR ART'S
SAKE**
Literature and ESP in
the Art Field



GLOSSARY

- 1 big bowl
- 2 gave out with a large deep spoon
- 3 small bowl
- 4 occasional drops
- 5 insinuated
- 6 pushed him with their elbows
- 7 too hasty



ACTIVITIES

- 1 Fill in the passage with the words given below in scrambled order.

at – boys – fell – for – his – ladled – large – one – to – until – walking – with

The room was a 1 stone hall, 2 a copper at 3
end. The master 4 the gruel 5 meal times. The bowls were
never washed and the 6 polished them with their spoons 7
they shone again. Oliver and 8 companions suffered starvation 9
three months until they decided 10 ask for more gruel. The task of 11
..... up to the master 12 on Oliver.

- 2 Choose the correct alternative.

- 1 The tone is:
ironical – dramatic – humoristic – sad – dreadful
- 2 The novel is:
narrative – descriptive – social – dramatic – horrific
- 3 The narrator is:
first person – third person – omniscient – obtrusive