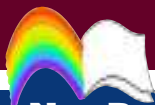


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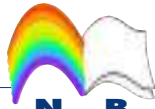
R A I N B O W S

# Oliver Twist

Charles Dickens



edisco



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Charles Dickens

# Oliver Twist

Adaptation, dossiers and activities by  
Paola Massara



**edisco**

# Oliver Twist

*Project editor:* Raffaele Polichetti

*Revisor:* Stephan Cooper

*Design:* Manuela Piacenti

*Illustrations:* Emanuele Bartolini

*Quality controller:* Paola Ghigo

*Page layout:* Costantino Seminara

*Computer to Plate:* Imago s.r.l.

*Printing:* La Grafica - Boves



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Our email address: [info@edisco.it](mailto:info@edisco.it)

Our website address: <http://www.edisco.it>

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Via Pastrengo 28

10128 Torino (Italy)

Tel. (+39) 011.54.78.80

Fax (+39) 011.51.75.396

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# The author

## Charles Dickens



**Life.** Charles Dickens (1812–1870) was born in Portsmouth on February 7<sup>th</sup> to John and Elizabeth. He was the second child of eight. His early years were hard because his father had financial problems.

The family moved to London in 1824. At the age of 12, Charles' schooling ended and he was sent to work in Warren's Blacking Factory because his father was imprisoned for debt. The entire family, apart from Charles, were sent to Marshalsea, a prison for debtors. Here Charles went to visit them on Sundays. When John was released, he saved his son from work, and Charles returned to school; but he never forgot this experience. His father's inability to manage money continued all his life and Charles modelled Mr Micawber, a character from his most autobiographical novel, *David Copperfield*, on his father.

At 15, Charles went to work as a clerk in the offices of *Ellis and Blackmore*, who were lawyers<sup>1</sup>. Everybody liked him there because of his good nature and his ability to imitate people. From this experience he probably learnt about the absurd nature of the legal system, a frequent theme in his writing.

In the same period, Charles became a Parliamentary reporter. He went to work for the *Mirror of Parliament*, a periodical that belonged to his uncle, John Henry Barrow (his father also worked there at this time).

Charles worked hard as a journalist in Parliament, and became sensitive<sup>2</sup> to the problems of people, particularly of the weakest. He was critical of laws that were not just<sup>3</sup>, as we see in his novels. *Oliver Twist* is the first English novel with a child as its central character and is also Dickens' attack on the Poor Law<sup>4</sup> and the workhouse system.

1. *lawyer*: advocate, legal advisor.

2. *sensitive*: able to understand what other people need.

3. *just*: right, fair.

4. *Poor Law*: set of rules passed by Parliament (from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century) to solve the problems of the

poor. In 1834 they forced poor people without a home to live in workhouses where life was unpleasant and inhuman. Families were separated because women and men lived in different areas.

In these years he met and fell in love with Catherine Hogarth and they got married in 1835. Once married, they lived with Catherine's younger sister, Mary, and Charles' younger brother, Fred. They had ten children. The following years were very busy. Charles started writing many novels that became very popular.

The Dickens travelled a lot, too. They sailed to Boston in 1842. While he was in the United States, he lectured against slavery<sup>5</sup> and the social problems of the time. He liked visiting unusual places to find inspiration for his works. He also went to Italy with his family and visited Genoa, Pisa, Rome, Pompeii, Naples. It was in Italy that he started writing his final unfinished novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*.

In 1858 he separated from his wife and had a relationship with the actress Ellen Ternan. He continued to live a full life but his health became worse after his last American tour. He died on 9<sup>th</sup> June 1870 with his children all present.

He was buried in the Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey.

**Works.** *Sketches by Boz* (1836) – *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-37) – *Oliver Twist* (1837-38) – *A Christmas Carol* (1843) – *David Copperfield* (1849-50) – *Hard Times* (1854) – *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) – *Great Expectations* (1860-61)

5. *slavery*: the practice of having slaves, that is, people that are legally owned

by another person and are forced to work for them.



A scene from the opening pages of *The Pickwick Papers* (C. A. Waltner, 1868).



### BEFORE READING

**1** Oliver Twist is set in the Victorian period. Check what you know about this period and write true or false for each statement.

- |   | T                        | F                        |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| a. It is called Victorian after Queen Victoria.           | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| b. She ruled England for a very short period.             | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| c. England was becoming an industrial country.            | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| d. England was a poor country.                            | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| e. Poor children were often ill-treated and sent to work. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| f. Alcoholism was a common problem among the poor.        | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

**2** Oliver lives in a “workhouse”. Here is a definition of this word in scrambled order. Put it in the correct order with numbers.

- ... where they were fed and housed
- ... work done.
- ... In the past it was
- ... for the poor
- ... a place provided by the government
- ... in exchange for

**3** Look at the illustration on p. 8 and answer the following questions.

- a. Who do you think the child in the foreground is? .....
- b. What is he doing? .....
- c. What clothes is he wearing? .....



A workhouse in Leicester (c.1840).

# Oliver Twist

## Oliver's early life

### Chapter 1

Oliver Twist was born in a workhouse<sup>1</sup>. Two people were present: an old woman and a doctor. The woman was always drunk<sup>2</sup> and the doctor had little interest in his patients.



There was another person in the room. It was Oliver's mother. She was young and beautiful but very weak<sup>3</sup>. She whispered<sup>4</sup>, "Let me see the child and die." The doctor gave the child to her. She kissed him and died.

The old woman said, "Poor dear", then she put a bottle of gin in her pocket. The doctor put on his coat. Before going away, he told the nurse to give the child a little milk. Then he asked: "Who was his mother?" The nurse answered that nobody knew her. Somebody found her in the street the night before the child's birth. She was exhausted<sup>5</sup> and her shoes were old and dirty<sup>6</sup>. She had no wedding ring<sup>7</sup>. "It's always the same old story," the doctor said sadly.

Oliver was just a baby and no one could look after<sup>8</sup> him, so he was sent to a children's home to live with other children.



Mrs Mann was responsible for them. She was an old woman. She didn't care about the children and she kept for herself the money from the workhouse board<sup>9</sup> for the children.

The board made periodic visits to the children's home and always sent Mr Bumble, the policeman, the day before to say that they were coming. So Mrs Mann could prepare the children. They were always clean on the day of the board's visit and everybody thought Mrs Mann was doing a good job.

1. *workhouse*: see note 4 p. 4.

2. *was... drunk*: drank too much alcohol.

3. *weak*: not strong.

4. *whispered*: said with little voice.

5. *exhausted*: very tired.

6. *dirty*: not clean.

7. *wedding ring*: a circular piece of gold that you wear on your finger when you are married.

8. *look after*: take care of him like a mother.

9. *board*: group of people that make decisions.





Oliver grew up to the age of nine. On his ninth birthday, Mr Bumble arrived. As usual, Mrs Mann saw him through the window and quickly ordered the assistants to wash the children.

The policeman was a big, fat man; he was often angry and he always felt very important. Mrs Mann offered him a glass of gin. While he was drinking, he explained why he was there.

“Oliver is nine years old today. We don’t know anything about his family and he can’t stay here any longer. He must come back to the workhouse.”



Oliver was happy to leave, but when he met the board, he felt miserable again. Ten fat men were sitting around a table. Oliver, thin and white, stood in front of them.

“What’s your name, boy?” asked a man with a round, red face.

Oliver started to cry. The policeman hit<sup>10</sup> him.

“The boy’s a fool!” said one.

“Why is he crying?” said another.

“Do you know you are an orphan and you are here to be educated?” added a third one.

“Yes, Sir” answered Oliver in a whisper.

“You will start working here tomorrow at six o’clock”, and that was the end of his meeting with the board.



The next day Oliver started his new life. He slept in a large room with other boys and they ate in a very big room. The food was poor for the orphans: a bowl<sup>11</sup> of soup three times a day and bread on Sundays. All of them were thin and white in the face. The boys were so hungry that they cleaned their bowls until they shone<sup>12</sup>.

One day one of the boys said, “I’m so hungry that I will eat one of you in a short time!” His eyes were wild<sup>13</sup> so the boys believed him. They took a decision: one of them should ask for more soup at supper. It was decided that Oliver had to do that.



The evening arrived. Oliver was really frightened<sup>14</sup>. He had

10. *hit* (*hit-hit-hit*): touched (him) with force with his hand or with an object.

11. *bowl*: round container for food.

12. *shone* (*shine-shone-shone*): looked

bright, very clean.

13. *wild*: violent, uncontrolled.

14. *frightened*: feeling fear.

his bowl in his hands and said to a fat, healthy man with a red face, “I want some more, Sir”.

The man could not believe his ears. “What?” he replied while his face became red.

“Please, Sir, I want some more.” Oliver repeated.

The board was really surprised. Somebody wanted to hang<sup>15</sup> Oliver. They locked<sup>16</sup> him in a room and decided to send him to work somewhere else. During the day he cried and at night he was afraid of darkness. Everyday Mr Bumble beat<sup>17</sup> him as a warning<sup>18</sup> to the other boys.

One day Mr Bumble met the local undertaker<sup>19</sup>, Mr Sowerberry, and offered him five pounds to take Oliver for work.

Mr Sowerberry thought a little, then he made his decision. “Yes, I’ll take the boy. He will help me in my work.”

The board was happy to see Oliver go. Oliver’s poor things were put into a box and Mr Bumble took him to Mr Sowerberry’s house. While they were walking, Oliver was very sad, and even Mr Bumble was a little sorry for him.



15. *hang*: kill someone by putting a rope around their neck.

16. *locked*: closed a door by using a key.

17. *beat* (*beat-beat-beaten*): hit somebody many times.

18. *warning*: when you tell someone that they will be punished if they behave in a bad way.

19. *undertaker*: a person who arranges funerals.



Oliver and the other children having dinner (from R. Polanski's film).