

Name: _____

Class: _____

Excerpt from *Oliver Twist*

By Charles Dickens

1838

*Charles Dickens (1812-1870) was an English writer and social critic. He is considered one of the best novelists of the Victorian era, the time during Queen Victoria's reign. In this excerpt from Dickens' famous novel *Oliver Twist*, Oliver asks his master at the workhouse for more food. During this time in England, a workhouse was a place where those who were unable to support themselves could find accommodations and employment. As you read, take notes on how the author describes Oliver's experiences at the workhouse.*

Chapter II: Treats of *Oliver Twist*'s Growth, Education, and Board

- [1] The room in which the boys were fed, was a large stone hall, with a copper at one end: out of which the master, dressed in an apron for the purpose, and assisted by one or two women, ladled the gruel¹ at meal-times. Of this festive composition each boy had one porringer,² and no more — except on occasions of great public rejoicing, when 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,³ with the view of catching up any stray splashes 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 (or his father had kept a small cookshop), hinted darkly to his companions, that unless he had another basin of gruel per diem,⁴ he was afraid he might some night happen to eat the boy who slept next to him, who happened to be a weakly youth of tender age. He had a wild hungry eye; and they implicitly⁵ believed him. A council was held; lots were cast who should walk up to the master after



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1. a thin liquid food of oatmeal or other meal boiled in milk or water
2. a small bowl, typically with a handle
3. **Assiduous** (*adjective*) showing great care and perseverance
4. a Latin phrase meaning "per day"

supper that evening, and ask for more; and it fell to Oliver Twist.

The evening arrived; the boys took their places. The master, in his cook's uniform, stationed himself at the copper; his pauper⁶ 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 neighbors 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:⁷

"Please, sir, I want some more."

The master was a fat, healthy man; but he turned very pale. He gazed in stupefied⁸ 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.

[5] "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; pinioned⁹ him in his arms; and shrieked aloud for the beadle.¹⁰

The board were sitting in solemn conclave,¹¹ when Mr. Bumble rushed into the room in great excitement, and addressing the gentleman in the high chair, said,

"Mr. Limbkins, I beg your pardon, sir! Oliver Twist has asked for more!"

[10] There was a general start. Horror was depicted on every countenance.¹²

"For more!" said Mr. Limbkins. "Compose yourself, Bumble, and answer me distinctly. Do I understand that he asked for more, after he had eaten the supper allotted by the dietary?"

"He did, sir," replied Bumble.

"That boy will be hung," said the gentleman in the white waistcoat. "I know that boy will be hung."

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5. absolutely
 6. a very poor person
 7. excessive confidence or boldness
 8. **Stupefy** (*verb*) to make someone unable to think or feel properly
 9. to hold the arms or legs of someone
 10. a church leader
 11. a private meeting
 12. a person's face or facial expression

Nobody controverted the prophetic¹³ gentleman's opinion. An animated discussion took place. Oliver was ordered into instant confinement; and a bill was next morning pasted on the outside of the gate, offering a reward of five pounds to anybody who would take Oliver Twist off the hands of the parish. In other words, five pounds and Oliver Twist was offered to any man or woman who wanted an apprentice to any trade, business, or calling.

- [15] "I never was more convinced of anything in my life," said the gentleman in the white waistcoat, as he knocked at the gate and read the bill next morning: "I never was more convinced of anything in my life, than I am that that boy will come to be hung."

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13. **Prophetic** (*adjective*) accurately describing or predicting what will happen in the future

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: How does the word "festive" in paragraph 1 affect the meaning of the paragraph?
 - A. by adding sarcasm to show the poor quality of the meal being served
 - B. by creating imagery of the elaborate meal that is about to be served
 - C. by providing a description of a special celebration
 - D. by comparing an elaborate holiday meal with a typical meal

2. PART B: Which phrase from paragraph 1 supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "The room in which the boys were fed, was a large stone hall"
 - B. "the master, dressed in an apron for the purpose, and assisted by one or two women"
 - C. "each boy had one porringer, and no more"
 - D. "except on occasions of great public rejoicing"

3. PART A: In paragraph 1, why does the author describe the boy who "was afraid he might some night happen to eat the boy who slept next to him?"
 - A. to show how the adults in charge at the institution treated the boys
 - B. to provide details that develop a major character in the passage
 - C. to illustrate how the boys are affected by the conditions at the institution
 - D. to offer an example of the way the boys govern themselves in the passage

4. PART B: Which TWO phrases offer additional support for the answer to Part A?
 - A. "suffered the torture of slow starvation" (Paragraph 1)
 - B. "one boy, who was tall for his age, and hadn't been used to that sort of thing" (Paragraph 1)
 - C. "A council was held; lots were cast" (Paragraph 1)
 - D. "The master, in his cook's uniform, stationed himself at the copper" (Paragraph 2)
 - E. "he was desperate with hunger, and reckless with misery" (Paragraph 2)
 - F. "The assistants were paralysed with wonder" (Paragraph 4)

5. PART A: How do the other boys provoke Oliver Twist's decision to ask for an extra bowl of gruel?
 - A. They hint that a weaker boy might be hurt while he is sleeping during the night.
 - B. They discourage him from asking and act surprised by his sudden decision.
 - C. They trick him into asking for more by winking and smiling at him.
 - D. They develop a plan, and he is chosen to carry it out.

6. PART B: Which quotation from the passage best supports the answer to Part A?
- A. "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" (Paragraph 1)
 - B. "A council was held; lots were cast" (Paragraph 1)
 - C. "his pauper assistants ranged themselves behind him; the gruel was served out" (Paragraph 2)
 - D. "He rose from the table... somewhat alarmed at his own temerity" (Paragraph 2)
7. What effect do the words "winked" and "nudged" have on paragraph 2?
- A. They highlight the close friendship between Oliver and the other boys.
 - B. They suggest that the boys think Oliver is brave for requesting additional food.
 - C. They convey the seriousness of Oliver's request despite Oliver's casual attitude.
 - D. They portray Oliver's request as amusing despite the seriousness of the situation.

