


# Oliver Twist

Dickens' portrayal of conditions –  
the first chapter

Why does Dickens call it this when it quite clearly isn't a 'treat'?

  
Treats of the Place where  
Oliver Twist was Born, and  
of the Circumstances  
attending his Birth

Is Dickens being ironic? Look up the word if you do not know its meaning.

Among other public buildings in a certain town, which for many reasons it will be prudent to refrain from mentioning, and to which I will assign no fictitious name, there is one anciently common to most towns, great or small: to wit, a workhouse; and in this workhouse was born; on a day and date which I need not trouble myself to repeat, inasmuch as it can be of no possible consequence to the reader, in this stage of the business at all events; the item of mortality whose name is prefixed to the head of this chapter.

This is a very long first sentence; why do you think Dickens has written it in this way?

Make a note of what information we actually learn from this opening line; this should help you answer the question.

What do the following words and phrases suggest to you about conditions in the workhouse, what people thought of those in the workhouse, and how well people knew (or wanted to know) those within the workhouse:

There being nobody by, however,  
but a pauper old woman, who was  
rendered rather misty by an  
unwonted allowance of beer; and a  
parish surgeon who did such  
matters by contract

The result was, that, after a few struggles, Oliver breathed, sneezed, and proceeded to advertise to the inmates of the workhouse the fact of a new burden having been imposed upon the parish

The surgeon had been sitting with his face turned towards the fire: giving the palms of his hands a warm and a rub alternately.

"It's all over, Mrs. Thingummy!" said  
the surgeon at last.

"You needn't mind sending up to me,  
if the child cries, nurse," said the  
surgeon, putting on his gloves with  
great deliberation. "It's very likely it  
will be troublesome. Give it a little  
gruel if it is."

But now that he was enveloped in the old calico robes which had grown yellow in the same service, he was badged and ticketed, and fell into his place at once - a parish child- the orphan of a workhouse - the humble, half-starved drudge - to be cuffed and buffeted through the world - despised by all, and pitied by none.