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SOCIAL CRITICISM OF EARLY VICTORIAN LONDON THROUGH CHARLES DICKENS'S OLIVER TWIST

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Abstract

This study examines social criticism in Charles Dickens's Oliver Twist, which reflects the social conditions of London in the early Victorian era. Employing a descriptive qualitative method, the study uses the novel as the primary source and relevant scholarly works as secondary sources. The findings show that Dickens foregrounds three major issues which are poverty, child exploitation, and social class inequality. The novel further critiques the workhouse institution, class-biased legal structures, and the moral insensitivity of Victorian society toward the suffering of the poor. The study concludes that Oliver Twist serves as a medium of social critique against structural injustice.

Keywords: *Charles Dickens, Social Criticism, Victorian Era*

INTRODUCTION

Literature is frequently regarded as a medium that reflects the social environment in which it emerges. Rather than serving purely as a product of imagination, literary texts often represent real social situations and the complexities of human life. Through their works, authors express ideas, offer critiques, and convey reflections on the societal circumstances surrounding them. One literary period notable for its strong engagement with social and moral issues is the Victorian era in England. Spanning from 1837 to 1901 under Queen Victoria, this period is commonly viewed as the peak of the British Empire, marked by rapid industrial, scientific, and colonial advancements (Green, 2021). These developments contributed to large-scale migration from rural to urban areas, a shift that simultaneously exposed communities to serious problems such as poverty, inequality, and the exploitation of marginalized groups. As a result, many writers produced works that captured these

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realities and challenged the injustices of the time (Hughes, 2018). Victorian literature frequently reveals the moral contradictions of industrial society, where economic progress coexisted with significant disparities between social classes (Rahman & Firmansyah, 2021).

Charles Dickens (1812–1870) stands out as one of the era's most influential writers, particularly noted for his attention to the struggles of the lower classes. His novel *Oliver Twist* clearly illustrates the hardships experienced by poor communities in nineteenth-century London, highlighting issues such as poverty, harsh treatment of children, and structural injustice (Aminah, 2018). Dickens often placed poor individuals and abandoned children at the center of his narratives. His empathy toward the poor was shaped by his own childhood experiences, including being compelled to work in a shoe-polish factory after his father was imprisoned for debt. These personal hardships informed his ethical views and later appeared throughout his novels. In *Oliver Twist*, forced labor, child abuse, and entrenched class oppression emerge as major forms of exploitation that Dickens aims to criticize (Prahastini et al., 2019). The novel also provides an accurate portrayal of the difficult conditions faced by the working poor, particularly those living in overcrowded slums or forced to endure the harsh discipline of workhouses (Rusmini et al., 2020). Furthermore, *Oliver Twist* contributes to broader discussions about class conflict and moral values within Victorian literature as a whole (Kumar, 2025). Through the use of satire, symbolism, and social realism, Dickens demonstrates how institutional systems dehumanize vulnerable individuals (Ali, 2022). Additionally, depictions of urban poverty in nineteenth-century English fiction are often linked with wider literary critiques of capitalism and rigid class hierarchies (Pratiwi, 2023).

Published in 1838, *Oliver Twist* remains one of Dickens's most influential works for its vivid representation of the harsh circumstances faced by poor children in early Victorian London. Through Oliver's experiences, Dickens reveals the significant gap between the wealthy and the impoverished, showing how unequal social structures often push vulnerable individuals into crime as a means of survival (Green, 2021). Thus, the novel operates not only as a narrative of personal struggle but also as a form of social commentary that challenges the injustices of British society in the nineteenth century.

A number of previous studies have examined *Oliver Twist* from various perspectives, including childhood themes, morality, and symbolism. Pekařová (2018), in *The Theme of*

Childhood in Oliver Twist, argues that the children in the text represent innocence and moral purity in contrast to the corruption around them. Meanwhile, Fitriani's (2016) work, *An Analysis of Moral Values in Novel Oliver Twist by Charles Dickens*, identifies several moral lessons, such as perseverance, honesty, courage, and cooperation, using functionalist, symbolic, and conflict approaches. Unlike these earlier studies, the present research focuses specifically on Dickens's portrayal of social issues in early Victorian London. This study examines how the novel criticizes poverty, child exploitation, and class inequality that stem from an unjust socio-economic system (Hughes, 2018). The purpose of the study is to analyze the forms of social criticism expressed in *Oliver Twist* and to explain how Dickens presents the novel as both a moral reflection and a commentary on Victorian society.

Based on this purpose, the study addresses two main questions: (1) How does *Oliver Twist* represent the social conditions of London during the early Victorian period? (2) What forms of social criticism does Dickens convey in his depiction of London's social problems? Correspondingly, the objectives of this article are (1) to describe the socio-historical conditions of early Victorian London as portrayed in *Oliver Twist*, (2) to identify and analyze the elements of social criticism in the novel, particularly those related to poverty, class disparities, and the exploitation of children.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical method, as its primary focus is to understand the social condition and forms of social criticism conveyed by Charles Dickens in the novel *Oliver Twist*. The qualitative approach was chosen to examine in depth the relationship between the literary work and the social realities of London society in the early Victorian period. The data sources consist of primary data in the form of the text of *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens, and secondary data such as literary theory books, articles, scholarly journals, and previous studies relevant to the themes of social criticism and literary sociology. Data collection was carried out through library research by reading, noting, and identifying textual elements that portray social conditions, poverty, child exploitation, and class disparity in the novel.

The collected data were then analyzed using sociology of literature approach, which views literary works as reflections of the social life of society. The analysis was conducted

in several stages, namely identifying relevant data, classifying forms of social issues, and interpreting social meanings based on the context of English society during the early reign of Queen Victoria. Through this approach, the researcher aims to interpret how Dickens delivers social criticism through the depiction of characters, settings, and conflicts presented in the narrative. The results of this analysis are expected to answer the research questions and demonstrate that *Oliver Twist* serves as a form of social protest against the inequality and injustices experienced by the lower classes in London at the time.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Social Conditions of London in the Early Victorian Period as Depicted in Charles Dickens's Oliver Twist

Poverty is a central theme in *Oliver Twist*, serving not merely as the backdrop of the story but also as the moral and social foundation of the entire narrative. Dickens wrote this novel amid significant societal changes in England triggered by the Industrial Revolution. Modernization and technological development, which were initially viewed as signs of national progress, in fact created severe social consequences for the lower classes. Many rural inhabitants who lost their livelihoods due to agricultural mechanization migrated to the city in search of factory work. However, upon arriving in London, they were confronted with harsh realities such as unemployment, low wages, filthy environments, and glaring social inequality. London transformed into a city of dualities, on one side displaying grandeur and wealth, and on the other revealing the suffering of the poor who were marginalized by the social system.

Dickens portrays the misery of the poor realistically and with deep empathy. Through vivid descriptions of squalid living spaces, he presents a cramped and gloomy atmosphere as a symbol of social deterioration resulting from an inhumane capitalist system. In the narrative, Dickens writes,

> "It was a very dirty place. The rooms upstairs had great high wooden chimney-pieces and large doors, with paneled walls and cornices to the ceiling; which, although they were black with neglect and dust, spiders had built their webs in the angles of the walls and ceilings" (Dickens, 2000).

This passage illustrates the severity of living conditions among London's poor. Narrow, damp, and dusty houses symbolize both the physical and moral suffering of the lower classes. Through such detailed depictions, Dickens not only reveals the reality of poverty but also evokes readers' sympathy by highlighting the social injustices that persisted despite England's economic progress. The dilapidated and uninhabitable environment symbolizes the upper class's indifference to the suffering of others.

Beyond the physical portrayal of poverty, Dickens also criticizes the social structures that worsened the suffering of the poor. One institution that becomes the object of his critique is the workhouse, an establishment intended to shelter the poor, but which in practice became a symbol of oppression. Historically, Dickens wrote *Oliver Twist* during the enforcement of the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, a policy regulating the treatment of the poor through the workhouse system. It was within this system that orphans like Oliver experienced cruelty and dehumanization.

Dickens exposes this irony through one of the novel's most iconic scenes, when Oliver bravely asks for more food, "Please, sir, I want some more" (Dickens, 2000). This simple line conveys deep hunger and suffering, yet beneath its simplicity lies a sharp critique of a social system devoid of humanity. Instead of being met with compassion, Oliver is punished for violating rules. This scene becomes a symbol of resistance against oppressive systems and illustrates the moral failure of Victorian society, which prioritized superficial morality over compassion and justice. Dickens skillfully uses irony to expose the hypocrisy of the ruling class, especially officials and workhouse administrators who were more concerned with their reputation than with helping the poor.

Dickens's critique of poverty is rooted in his moral perspective on social responsibility. For Dickens, poverty was not the result of laziness or moral weakness but rather the outcome of an unjust and unequal economic system. In the novel, he depicts a society that has lost its sense of empathy and justice. The poor were seen as burdens, not as victims of economic policies that disadvantaged them. By presenting the suffering of Oliver and other impoverished characters, Dickens attempts to inspire readers to adopt a more humane understanding of poverty.

Furthermore, Dickens uses poverty as a moral mirror for English society. He aims to show that true prosperity cannot be measured solely by industrial progress, but by how

society treats its most vulnerable members. *Oliver Twist* thus becomes a protest against the dehumanization brought by industrialization and capitalism. Here, literature becomes a moral and social tool to awaken human conscience among middle- and upper-class readers. Therefore, Dickens does not simply portray poverty as a narrative setting; he elevates it as a symbol of collective suffering resulting from the social and moral failures of Victorian society. Through moving and realistic depictions, he invites readers to witness the darker side of London, long obscured by industrial grandeur and upper-class luxury. *Oliver Twist* thus stands as a moral call for society to become more sensitive to social injustice and to take an active role in advocating for collective welfare.

Child exploitation is one of the most serious social issues in early Victorian England and constitutes a major focus of Dickens's critique in *Oliver Twist*. During the Industrial Revolution, the demand for cheap labor forced many children from poor families to work in factories, mines, or as domestic helpers for extremely low wages. They worked in dangerous conditions, endured long hours, and received no legal protection. Dickens, having personally experienced forced labor in a shoe polish factory when his father was imprisoned for debt, possessed deep emotional insight into the suffering of impoverished children. This childhood trauma shaped his concern for the oppressed and strongly influenced his depiction of child exploitation in *Oliver Twist*.

In the novel, Dickens presents various forms of exploitation, such as economic, social, and moral. The character Fagin represents the most explicit embodiment of a system that exploits children for personal gain. He is portrayed as a cunning and manipulative criminal who trains orphaned boys to steal for his benefit,

> "He was a villainous-looking and repulsive man... surrounded by a number of boys, none older than twelve, who were busily engaged in making handkerchiefs, disappear" (Dickens, 2000).

This passage shows how children who should have received care and education were instead molded into petty thieves. They grew up in an environment that normalized criminality because they had no alternative means of survival. Dickens skillfully demonstrates how a failed social system pushes vulnerable children into criminal worlds, with Fagin serving not only as an individual villain but also as a symbol of a corrupt and exploitative social structure.

Dickens also uses the characters Bill Sikes and Nancy to illustrate the long-term effects of such exploitation. Nancy, formerly one of Fagin's child recruits, represents the tragic cycle wherein victims ultimately become perpetrators. Her attempt to save Oliver, which leads to her tragic death at the hands of Sikes, underscores the destructive consequences of systemic exploitation. Through Nancy's fate, Dickens highlights that child exploitation destroys not only individual lives but also perpetuates moral and social decay.

Dickens's critique also extends to the legal system, which he depicts as biased and unjust. When Oliver is wrongfully accused of theft, he is treated as a criminal despite his innocence. Dickens writes, "The law takes no account of a man's misery" (Dickens, 2000). This reflects the reality that the law lacked empathy toward the suffering of the poor, while protecting the interests of the upper class. By placing a childlike Oliver at the mercy of a flawed legal system, Dickens urges readers to question the moral integrity of a society that appeared religious and virtuous but allowed injustice to persist.

Beyond social commentary, child exploitation in *Oliver Twist* carries deeper symbolic meaning. Children in Dickens's works often represent purity and moral hope in a corrupt world. Despite growing up in an environment filled with crime, Oliver maintains his innocence and kindness. Dickens writes, "There is a stubborn something in human nature which can always rise to goodness" (Dickens, 2000). Through Oliver's character, Dickens affirms his belief in the resilience of human goodness, suggesting that society has a moral responsibility to protect children as the guardians of the future.

Dickens employs social realism to reinforce his critique. His depictions of children in workhouses, like hungry, cold, and brutally treated, are deliberately harsh and concrete. Such realism had a powerful emotional impact on middle-class readers, inspiring social change, including reforms to child labor practices and improvements to social institutions. Overall, through the theme of child exploitation, *Oliver Twist* functions as a moral and social protest against the oppressive forces of early capitalism. Dickens does not merely describe suffering; he calls for collective responsibility, asserting that the welfare of children reflects a nation's moral integrity. In this sense, *Oliver Twist* serves not only as a literary work but also as a social document reflecting humanity's struggle against structural injustice during England's industrial era.

In addition to poverty and child exploitation, *Oliver Twist* also explores another major theme characteristic of Dickens's works: social class inequality in 19th-century England. As a keen social observer, Dickens vividly illustrates the vast divide between the wealthy bourgeois class and the impoverished masses in London. During this period, the Industrial Revolution generated remarkable economic progress; however, wealth accumulated in the hands of a select few, while the majority lived in destitution. Dickens portrays this reality through striking contrasts between the luxury of the wealthy and the suffering of the poor.

One clear example appears in the description of Mr. Brownlow's home, a respectable and compassionate gentleman who helps Oliver. Dickens writes, "The room was a large one, well lighted, and hung round with pictures... while a cheerful fire burnt in the grate" (Dickens, 2000). This depiction highlights the warmth, comfort, and stability enjoyed by the upper class. In stark contrast, Oliver's experiences in the streets reveal a world that is dark, filthy, and dangerous. Through this visual and emotional contrast, Dickens conveys a powerful social message about the deep inequality that plagued England. He does not merely describe material differences but also exposes the moral divide between the classes. The wealthy lived in comfort and safety, while the poor struggled for mere survival in an environment that was harsh and dehumanizing.

Social Critique of Social Problems in London through Oliver Twist

Oliver Twist is one of the literary works that most explicitly represents social criticism of various societal issues in early Victorian London. Through this novel, Dickens not only provides descriptive portrayals of social conditions but also articulates a moral protest against social, economic, and legal systems that failed to protect vulnerable groups, particularly the poor and children. This social critique emerges through Dickens's use of setting, characters, conflicts, and symbols to highlight the structural injustices embedded in London's urban life. By combining realism, irony, and satire, Dickens exposes the true face of London hidden behind the grandeur and moral claims of Victorian society.

Dickens's critique is primarily directed toward official institutions that should have protected the poor but instead became instruments of oppression. The workhouse, a product of the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, receives the sharpest criticism. In the novel, Dickens depicts the harsh and inhumane nature of this institution, which viewed poverty as a moral failing rather than a result of systemic inequality. The workhouse officials are

portrayed as hypocritical figures who prioritize economic efficiency over humanity. When Oliver asks for more food, the violent response of the officials reveals their complete lack of empathy. Dickens writes, *"The master aimed a blow at Oliver's head with the ladle; pinioned him in his arms; and shrieked aloud for the beadle"* (Dickens, 2000). Instead of offering help, they perceive Oliver's simple request as a threat to institutional order. This scene serves as Dickens's critique of poverty-management institutions in England, which focused more on punishment than assistance. Through such portrayals, Dickens underscores the low regard for the dignity of the poor in the eyes of the government and the upper classes.

Moreover, Dickens reveals how Victorian society often masked injustice with false morality. Workhouse officials appear religious and respectable but in reality prioritize personal interests and social reputation. Mr. Bumble, for example, represents a corrupt, incompetent bureaucracy that frequently abuses power. Dickens satirically writes, *"Mr. Bumble had a great idea of his oratorical powers and his importance"* (Dickens, 2000). Through this character, Dickens criticizes public officials who contribute to social problems rather than solving them. This reflects Dickens's belief that poverty cannot be alleviated as long as governance is driven by self-interest.

Dickens's social critique also targets the legal system, which he perceives as biased and unjust toward the poor. When Oliver is accused of stealing a wallet, the court treats him harshly despite his obvious innocence. Dickens writes, *"'He's a hardened young rascal,' said the old gentleman"* (Dickens, 2000). The accusation is unfounded but readily accepted because Oliver comes from a lower social class. Dickens uses this scene to emphasize that the law often sided with the upper classes and criminalized the poor. This injustice forms part of Dickens's broader critique of institutions that claimed moral authority while reinforcing social inequality.

Beyond formal institutions, Dickens exposes the dark side of London's urban society, which is filled with criminal networks emerging from systemic neglect. Life in Fagin's den serves as a disturbing reflection of a society that abandons its children. Dickens writes, *"They were perfectly quiet, and remained so for some minutes"* (Dickens, 2000). The stillness of the boys symbolizes the loss of childhood and innocence under exploitation. Dickens shows that criminality is not a deliberate choice but the result of oppressive living

conditions and the lack of legitimate opportunities. Thus, the novel sharply critiques a society that hastily judges crime without considering the structural causes behind it.

Dickens's critique of class inequality is equally powerful. He juxtaposes the luxurious lives of the wealthy with the destitution of the poor as a form of social commentary. The comfortable and secure environment of Mr. Brownlow symbolizes the privileges of the upper class, while Oliver's earlier life in the slums represents suffering, hunger, and instability. This contrast is not merely descriptive but serves as a narrative strategy to highlight that wealth and poverty are products of a rigid social structure that maintains inequality. Dickens critiques Victorian society for viewing poverty as a personal failure while enjoying prosperity sustained by the suffering of the lower classes. Furthermore, Dickens critiques the social values of Victorian society, which were filled with hypocrisy. Although the Victorians claimed to uphold morality and religiosity, they ignored the suffering of the poor. Dickens exposes this hypocrisy through characters who outwardly appear moral but treat the poor with cruelty. Through irony, Dickens writes, *"The poor people liked Oliver Twist very much"* (Dickens, 2000), suggesting that the poor possessed greater empathy than those with power and status. This underscores Dickens's critique of Victorian moral standards, which were often performative and devoid of genuine humanitarian action.

Ultimately, *Oliver Twist* serves as a comprehensive critique of London's social system in the early Victorian period. Dickens demonstrates that poverty, criminality, child exploitation, and social inequality are not isolated phenomena but interconnected components of a flawed social structure. Through this novel, Dickens urges readers to view social reality with greater critical awareness and humanity. He asserts that a society that fails to protect its children and tolerates extreme inequality is one that has lost its moral foundation. In this way, Dickens not only crafts a compelling narrative but also delivers a powerful moral and political statement about the true condition of London.

CONCLUSION

Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* serves as a powerful representation of social criticism directed toward the various societal problems of early Victorian London. Through realistic depictions of poverty, class inequality, child exploitation, and criminality emerging from

systemic failures, Dickens exposes the darker side of nineteenth-century industrial England. The novel's critique focuses particularly on formal institutions such as the workhouse, which rather than protecting the poor but deepened their suffering, as well as on a legal system plagued by class bias and injustice. Dickens also highlights the hypocrisy of Victorian morality, which claimed to uphold humanitarian values while ignoring the hardships faced by vulnerable groups.

Through the character of Oliver, who symbolizes innocence and moral hope, Dickens demonstrates that human goodness can endure even within corrupt and oppressive environments. Overall, the analysis shows that *Oliver Twist* is not merely a literary depiction of London's lower classes but also a medium of protest against structural injustice. The novel affirms the essential role of literature as a tool for social reflection and moral awakening, illustrating Dickens's commitment to defending humanity amid the sweeping social transformations of the Victorian era.

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