

In-depth appreciation of social inequalities in Charles Dickens's *Oliver twist*

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Abstract: This study intends to appreciate the issues of social inequalities that the world is facing as disclosed in Charles Dickens's *Oliver twist* in the Victorian period. Understanding the historical, social, political and economic contexts in the Victorian Period that paved a way to social inequalities in England is crucial for an in-depth appreciation of the matter. In exploring social realism in Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1837), it becomes obvious that the novel serves as a powerful lens into the harsh realities of Victorian London's social inequalities that the author experienced during his lifetime as British author during the industrial revolution. The stark contrast between the wealthy and the poor, the harsh conditions faced by the working class, and the social injustices prevalent in 19th-century influenced Dickens's portrayal of society in the novel under study through the story of an orphan boy named *Oliver Twist*. The main purpose of this study is to appreciate how social inequalities are demonstrated in England, particularly through Charles Dickens's *Oliver twist* and its impacts or effects on the society and individual. To achieve my goals, I have used qualitative research with Charles Dickens's *Oliver twist* as primary source. Moreover, Marxism, structuralism and New Historicism have been used as appropriate theories. My research reveals that Charles Dickens has used his fictional world to shed light on many social inequalities such as poverty, social stratification and child labor. It illustrates that inequality is source of many offences. Social inequalities appear as an actual fact that makes the balance between the social environment and one living conditions. Thus, this article ends up giving some alternatives on how to reduce social inequalities.

Keywords: *Industrialization, Marxism, Poverty, Social inequalities, Wealthy.*

1. Introduction

Starting from the classical period to the postmodern period of British literature, series of novels have been written by British authors to disclose different social irregularities that affect people's welfare during the Victorian period (1830-1914). Known as one the famous British writers, Charles Dickens reveals many social injustices observed during the Victorian period. Classified among the emblematic figure of British literature under the reign of Queen Victoria, Dickens tackles the question of social discrimination, poverty, and social injustice especially through his novel entitled *Oliver Twist*.

In *Oliver Twist*, Dickens depicts the issue of social inequalities as the genesis of social discrimination. A perusal of Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* helps to caricature how children from poor families suffered from working harshly in uncomfortable conditions. To figure out all these social problems, *Oliver Twist*, the protagonist of the novel, has been chosen as the miserable character that could bring readers to narrow in Dickens's imagination. One could clearly understand that the author uses *Oliver Twist* as reference to abandoned children who are obliged to hustle alone in London streets. After being escaped from the workhouse because of beadle's injustice, *Oliver* has been recruited as pickpocket.

For an in-depth analysis of social inequalities in Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist*, qualitative method has been used with *Oliver Twist* as the primary source. As far as the literary theories are concerned, Marxism, structuralism and New Historicism help to better understand Dickens point of view. So, through social inequalities Charles Dickens appears to be using *Oliver Twist* to criticize the Victorian

idea that the poor were destined for lives of degradation and desperation and to point out the hypocrisy of society and the legislative system.

This research work is subdivided into six parts. Part one focuses on the problem statement, research methodology and conceptual clarification, and the part two deals with the background to the study. Part three is dedicated to Marxism, Structuralism and New Historicism approach, and the part four explores the aspect of social inequalities in Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* through different social classes. Part five gives some of the offences committed in Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* in terms of every social class and the part six handles some alternatives on how to reduce social inequalities in order to achieve sustainable development and to make the planet better for all.

2. Problem Statement, Research Methodology and Conceptual Clarification

2.1. Problem Statement

The issue of social inequalities is known as a great social problem that prevents some classes from living peacefully. One may be touched by the way people of the nineteenth century behave in the community in England. Through this research work, the critical appreciation of the issue of social inequalities would be done.

2.2. Research methodology and conceptual clarification

2.2.1. ° Research Methodology

For the achievement of this scientific work, documentary research has been used with *Oliver Twist* as primary source. Throughout the novel, data have been collected and processed in order to make a good interpretation of the current research problem. For the purpose of my research work, Marxism, Structuralism and New Historicism are used as appropriate theories.

2.2.2. ° Conceptual Clarification

Social inequality¹ is characterized by the existence of unequal opportunities and rewards for different social positions or statuses within a group or society. The major examples of social inequality include income gap, gender inequality, health care, and social class. Social inequality results from a society organized by hierarchies of class, race, and gender that broker access to resources and rights in ways that make their distribution unequal. It can manifest in a variety of ways, like income and wealth inequality, unequal access to education and cultural resources, and differential treatment by the police and judicial system, among others. Social inequality goes hand in hand with social stratification.

3. Background to the Study

3.1. Charles Dickens's Life

Charles Dickens² whose full name is Charles John Huffam Dickens³ was born on 7 February 1812 and died on 9 June 1870. He was an English novelist, short story writer, social critic and is regarded by many as the greatest novelist of the Victorian era.

Dickens left school at age 12 to work in a boot-blackening factory when his father John was incarcerated in a debtors' prison. After three years, he returned to school before beginning his literary career as a journalist and campaigned vigorously for children's right, education and other social reforms. His plots were carefully constructed and he often wove elements from topical events into his narratives.

John Dickens was forced by his creditors into the Marshalsea debtor's prison in Southwark, London in 1824. His wife and youngest children joined him there, as was the practice at the time. To pay for his board and to help his family, Charles Dickens was forced to leave school and work ten-hour days at Warren's Blacking Warehouse, on Hungerford Stairs, where he earned six shillings a week pasting labels on pots of boot blacking. The strenuous and often harsh working conditions made a lasting

<https://www.google.com/search?q=Social+inequality&oq=Social+inequalityE&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8> 16/07/2024 at 16 :51¹
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Dickens, 17/07/2024 at 14 :54²

Idem³

were idle and did not want to work, preferring the help of the government: in the workhouse the orphans are exploited by the adults who are supposed to look after them. The novel also depicts the poor living conditions of some of his characters.

4. Approach of Marxism, Structuralism and New Historicism

4.1. Marxism

Marxism is a literary theory promoted by the philosopher, Karl Marx. Marxism⁷ is a social, economic and political philosophy that analyses the impact of the ruling class on the laborers, leading to uneven distribution of wealth and privileges in the society. It stimulates the workers to protest the injustice. In other ways, reading a novel through Marxism means studying a novel through the lens of Karl Marx. For him, literature works are written to depict problems related to politics or conflict between social classes. This theory serves as a compass to reveal all the different irregularities caused by social classes. It has been chosen as appropriate theory in the frame of this analysis because it emerges as a mean of investigating offences committed by characters according to their social status in the novel under study. Marxist theory helps to classify Dickens's characters respectively in upper class, middle class or lower class. It helps to depict the issue of discrimination without forgetting the repetitive misappropriation of workhouse goods by the middle class. Moreover, the mistreatment of paupers by riches is another issue.

4.2. Structuralism

Structure generally refers to the organisation of a literary work in terms of its plots, divisions into stanzas, sections, symbolism and other patterns. In the view of structuralism critics, the notion of structure refers to the systems of signs that designate meaning (Kofi Agyekum, 2013, p.222)⁸. Even though signs are arbitrary in languages, they are conventionalised and that is why the names of particular objects change from society to society and the same name may refer to different objects and concepts in various languages (Di Yanni Robert, 2002)⁹. Through *Oliver Twist*, one could read Charles Dickens's mind as far as social inequalities are concerned. Oliver Twist's experiences have been well enumerated in a clear language, making use of adverbs and adjective to state his feelings. It further looks at the interpretations of symbols, such as "great" and "small" (Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist* p.3), "troublesome (troublesome practice)", "easy (easy existence)," and "alarming (alarming nature)" (Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, pp 3;381), "old (old woman)" and "young (young woman)" (Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, pp.3;4) and others. All these help the structuralist to analyse and interpret literary work and their components like characterisation, plot, and theme better.

4.3. New Historicism

Historicism emphasises the place and time of the creation of a literary work as very crucial. It is always better to understand fully the socio-cultural and political background of the time and the social world from which the work emanated. The new historicism rather puts much emphasis on historical documents. The New Historicism also examines the power relations of rulers and subjects, the haves and have-nots, employers and employees. By analysing this, we see the social stratification between the marginalized and the suppressed on one hand, and the oppressors and the oppressed on another. It reveals the conflicting power relations that underline all human interaction and the way the oppressed struggle to attain self-confidence and independence, while the dominant group find other ways of maintaining power (Kofi Agyekum, 2013, p.216)¹⁰. It helps to find out what the Victorian period was truly like, how Charles Dickens portrays the facts in terms of social inequalities in *Oliver Twist*, and the factors that cause the division of social class like the industrial revolution. During Victorian period, the conflicts between social classes still continue. The sun of British revolution manifested by the industrialisation stimulates Dickens's mind while choosing workhouse as setting.

https://www.google.com/search?q=marxism+theory&sca_frBJ1106BJ1106&client=gws-wiz-serp,25/07/2024 at 12:45⁷

Kofi Agyekum (2013), *Introduction to literature*, Adwinsa Publication (Gh) Ltd, Legon-Accra, 291 pages.⁸

Di Yanni, Robert (2002), *Literary reading Fiction, Poetry and Drama* ; New York : Mc Graw-Hill, 1746 pages.⁹

Kofi Agyekum (2013), *Introduction to literature*, Adwinsa Publication (Gh) Ltd, Legon-Accra, 291 pages.¹⁰

5. Exploring the aspect of Social Inequalities in Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* through Different Classes

5.1. Upper Class

There are many characters in the novel under analysis. For a good understanding, it would be better to study the characters according to their social class. This research categorises the characters regarding their social status as seen in *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens. Dickens has used many characters coming from upper class to convey his message. Here are some:

Mr. Brownlow: He is a rich and gentleman who owns a lot of properties. Throughout the novel, one could understand that Dickens has used him as a model of kindness and humility. Despite his fortune, he accepts the little Oliver Twist to stay with him. With no doubt, Mr. Brownlow is full of virtue and a sense of compassion. Charles Dickens portrays him as a good leader.

Mrs. Maylie: she is an open-hearted person from the upper class. Despite Maylie's financial stability, she behaves like a kind woman. She is the real mother of Harry Maylie but Rose's aunt has been adopted.

Harry Maylie: he is Mrs. Maylie's son. He has been portrayed as an energetic man who desires to become a great politician.

5.2. Middle Class

Middle class refers to the group of people who are not poor or highly rich. It is the centre between the lower class and the upper class. People from the middle class are those people who are successful but not rich. They have the minimum of means to live peacefully, and to feed the members of their family. Even if they do not have a huge amount of money in their Bank account, people from middle class succeed to satisfy their own needs. In the context of this research, are classified among characters from middle class, those who are facing a lot of difficulties before satisfying their desires as far as foods, apartments and dress are concerned. Through Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist*, the following characters may be classified in middle class:

Mr. Bumble: The narrator portrays Mr. Bumble as a church leader who teaches the opposite of his own virtues. Although, he invites people to be humble, kind, open hearted and compassionate, he is an arrogant person who behaves without compassion. He treats harshly the paupers who are under his care instead of treating them with love as prescribed in holy books. He works in the workhouse where Oliver Twist is born. In this novel, Mr. Bumble is viewed as a middle-class man because he does not face the same challenges like Oliver for example. He knows a church official while Oliver becomes a street boy who eats hardly.

Mr. Losberne: He is shown as Mrs. Maylie's family physician. Despite his temper, Dickens portrays him as a very loyal man. His loyalty and kindness towards Mrs. Maylie's family distinguishes him from undisciplined workers. He is also known as a hearted old bachelor. He could be part of the middle class because the narrator does not portray him as orphan or someone who does not have a place to sleep. His living condition seems to be different from the one of different street boys identified in the novel under study.

Mr. Sowerberry: He is introduced as an undertaker and Oliver Twist has been put in his keeping. His position seems to be similar to someone from the middle class because a poor man could not get a maid. Charlotte has been presented as Mr. Sowerberry's maid. This means that his economic situation is good. He may be viewed as a successful man who gets several apprentices such as Noah and Oliver Twist.

5.3. Low Class

In this novel, Charles Dickens makes allusion to characters whose image reflects the lower class of nineteenth century. He prefers to use many orphans as characters in order to let readers have an overview of the nineteenth century living conditions.

Oliver Twist: Through the character of Oliver Twist¹¹, the narrator would like to shed light on the difficulties faced by wretched boys and the risks he encounters while living on the street. In the first pages of the novel, Oliver Twist has been introduced as an orphan whose parents are unknown. In this context, Oliver Twist is obliged to work in harsh conditions in the workhouse.

There again, the young orphan of about nine years faces a lot of injustice. While working with a church official, one could be treated with care, love and compassion but in this novel, Oliver Twist has lived a hell with Mr. Bumble. Out of the workhouse, the wretched boy has been introduced to Fagin's gangster. Oliver Twist becomes unwillingly a pickpocket. However, anyone could guess that the main reason that leads him to such behaviour is poverty. Even if Oliver's mother identity has been finally revealed, it is undeniable that Oliver's living conditions is similar to the one of lower-class people starting from the workhouse to the street. Therefore, Oliver has been presented as an upright person who never wants to become a thief.

Nancy: Nancy is used by Dickens to depict that out of toughness that poverty could lead to, prostitution is another issue. In the British nineteenth century, girls are called to protect their dignity and promote good virtues of women. But Nancy who has been presented as seventeen years old like Rose is a prostitute. Unlikely to Rose who is full of virtue, Nancy is one of Fagin's child pickpockets. The most powerful used to express pressure on the lower in order to let them to commit crimes. In this novel, it is rare to find passages where Fagin himself is stealing but he is the one who sends children to do so. As they need money to satisfy their own need, Nancy has accepted to do what Fagin wants after being introduced by Sikes, her boyfriend. Nancy is a good example of wretched character.

Fagin's gang: Known as the head of the gang, Fagin is a tout who employs paupers to commit crimes. He uses them as pickpocket and he has also been introduced as the buyer of stolen goods. In his gang, there are many characters such as Sikes, Artful Dodger, and Nancy and so on. Among Fagin's gang children, Bill Sikes is known as a professional burglar who becomes one of the cleverest pickpocket of the team. Despite his relationship with Nancy, Sikes never hesitated to mistreat both, Nancy and dog Bull. His cruelty brings him to kill Nancy. All the gangsters who work under Fagin have been used by Charles Dickens to illustrate how poverty could lead to vices and crimes. They have been chosen by the narrator to reveal the perpetual struggle in which street boys engage before finding what to eat.

6. Offences Committed in Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* in terms of Every Social Class

Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* is written to depict the issue of social inequalities that pave the way too many other social problems. A perusal of the novel under study helps to know that Charles Dickens portrays offences committed not only by the upper and middle class but also by the lower class in the Victorian period.

6.1. Upper Class

Unlikely, richest men behave like God and think that there are superior to anyone. But the inner secret is that nobody desires to be poor or to be born orphan. In the real life, it is not rare to see people from upper families who refuse that their daughter gets married to someone from the lower class. This social discrimination is known as a dead-ending problem that spreads under Victorian age. The final identity of Oliver Twist's mother may shock readers. One could not imagine that someone from a wealthy family might die in a workhouse like orphan. The fact is that Oliver's mother has decided to leave their family house because she got pregnant of Mr. Leedford and she does not want to tarnish the good reputation of her family. This means indirectly, even if it is not mentioned, that there was an existing pressure that forbids a union between a wealthy girl and a wretched boy. This shows that there is a kind of limit between people from upper family and those of lower class.

As far as offenses are committed, one could mention the hypocritical behaviour or Parish board. Although they are known as God sent who should normally promote justice and equity, they just pretend to do what is right. As a matter of fact, Oliver has been accused for what he has not done: "The

Waleed Alzahlan (2024), *Controlled Childhood and the Moulding of the Children's Characters: Critical Analysis of Oliver Twist, David Copperfield, 11 Hard Times, and Great Expectations*; International Journal of Linguistics, Literature and Translation, march 2024. DOI: 10.32996/ijllt www.kindipublisher.com

policeman, with becoming humility, related how he had taken the charge; how he had searched Oliver, and found nothing on his person; and how that was all he knew about it.” (Dickens, 116)

The extract above shows that the pauper boy has been wrongly accused. After searching Oliver, nothing has been found in his pocket but the parish board continues to threaten the boy. This is unfair. To emphasise their cruelty, Dickens portrays Oliver as a suffering boy who had no energy to defend himself. They might postpone the audience but the magistrate persists on the fact that the little boy should talk. Even the policeman recognises that there is no evidence but Mr. Fang still persists on asking the same question: *Are there any witnesses?* inquired Mr. Fang. *None, your worship,* replied the policeman. (Dickens, 116)

6.2. Middle

In the novel under study, the narrator relates some offenses committed by people from the middle class. Under the nineteenth century, many British leaders use their position to steal some public goods or to mistreat people under their care. These offences are one of the crucial problems that Charles Dickens discloses in his fictional world. Dickens takes this bias to depict the harsh treatment inflicted to paupers under nineteenth century. While reading *Oliver Twist*, one could easily understand that middle class men have no pity for people from lower class. Mr Bumble is a real example of middleman who does not care about paupers' welfare.

As main offences committed by middlemen, there is the question of detournement. Mrs Mann is part of those who misappropriates workhouse's goods and allowance. Instead of cooking sufficient quantity of food, they prefer to steal food stocks for their own use. Then, they starve paupers who need foods to boost their energy in the workhouse.

The elderly female was a woman of wisdom and experience; she knew what was good for children; and she had a very accurate perception of what was good for herself. So, she appropriated the greater part of the weekly stipend to her own use, and consigned the rising parochial generation to even a shorter allowance than was originally provided for them. (Dickens, p.8)

So, it is obvious to know that the main reason that paupers are not well fed is with no doubt due to the lack of honesty of the elderly women who are supposed to be affective, sweet hearted and wise, but corporates to misappropriate public goods.

6.3. Lower

The heart of all offences is located in the lower class. Stealing, pickpocketing, murder and prostitution are the offences committed by Fagin and his gangsters. Sikes is the key figure of Fagin's gang and is known as the cleverest. He does not hesitate to murder Nancy. This is one of the greatest offences committed in this novel. Out of the role of pickpocket played by Dickens's characters, the issue prostitution is another problem. As street girl, Nancy starts from pickpocket and ends with prostitution.

Moreover, Charles Dickens describes one's environment as source of sudden changes. For instance, Oliver has been presented as honest boy in the first chapters of the novel but his recruitment in Fagin's gang seems very bizarre. Through this introduction to the world of pickpocket, the narrator would like to highlight what street life looks like. Starting from Nancy who has been introduced to Fagin by his boyfriend, Sikes to *Oliver Twist*, one could retain that one's environment affects somehow people's behaviour. Even if Oliver has been introduced to the gang, the following passage clearly shows that was under protest:

“Oh! for God's sake let me go!” cried Oliver; “let me run away and die in the fields. I will never come near London; never, never! Oh! pray have mercy on me, and do not make me steal. For the love of all the bright Angels that rest in Heaven, have mercy upon me!” (Dickens, 254)

From this passage, Dickens reveals *Oliver Twist*'s sense of preserving his dignity and his status of honest character infallible to manipulation. He does not want to be involved in such practices. In fact, *Oliver Twist* was afraid of the pistol used by Sikes during their operation: *‘Get up!’ murmured Sikes, trembling with rage, and drawing the pistol from his pocket;* (Dickens, 254)

Accordingly, characters from the lower class have committed a lot of crimes. This reflects the reality of nineteenth lower class. Paupers are mostly involved in robbery, stealing and many vices. The

extract below summaries all some of the offences committed by paupers in *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens: *And now, for the first time, Oliver, well-nigh mad with grief and terror, saw that housebreaking and robbery, if not murder, were the objects of the expedition.* (Dickens, 254)

7. Some Alternatives on how to Reduce Social Inequalities

Social inequalities¹² threaten long-term social and economic development, harm poverty reduction and destroy people's sense of fulfillment and self-worth. Reducing social inequalities requires transformative change. Greater efforts are needed to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, and invest more in health, education, social protection and decent jobs especially for young people, migrants and refugees and other vulnerable communities. Within countries, it is important to empower and promote inclusive social and economic growth. Equal opportunity can be ensured and inequalities be reduced of income if discriminatory laws, policies and practices are we eliminated.

Governments and other stakeholders can:

- Promote safe, regular and responsible migration, including through planned and well-managed policies, for the millions of people who have left their homes seeking better lives due to war, discrimination, poverty, lack of opportunity and other drivers of migration.
- Ensure equal opportunity and reduce inequalities of outcome, including by eliminating discriminatory laws, policies and practices and promoting appropriate legislation, policies and action in this regard¹³
- Adopt policies, especially fiscal, wage and social protection policies, and progressively achieve greater equality
- Reduce inequality through tax relief and income support or transfers (government programs like welfare, free health care, and food stamps), among other types of policies.
- Ensure universal access to housing, water, sanitation and electricity, as well as essential social services such as nutrition, health, early childhood development, education and well-designed social protection is important for reducing poverty and promoting equality of opportunity
- More spend on public health and education.
- Ensure equal opportunity regardless of race, religion, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation.

High unemployment is a significant driver of inequality, especially for young people. Gender, race, and land ownership are three other main causes

8. Conclusion

The issues of social inequalities that the world is facing as disclosed in Charles Dickens's *Oliver twist* in the Victorian period are extant. In exploring social realism in Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*, it becomes obvious to notice the division of social class into three parts such as the upper, middle and lower class. The stark contrast between the wealthy and the poor, the harsh conditions faced by the working class, and the social injustices prevalent in 19th-century influenced Dickens's portrayal of society in the novel under study through the story of an orphan boy named Oliver Twist. Through *Oliver twist*, Charles Dickens reveals the roles and the offenses that each social class commits and its impacts or effects on the society and individual. To achieve my goals, I have used qualitative research, and Marxism, structuralism and New Historicism as appropriate theories. My research reveals that Charles Dickens has used his fictional world to shed light on many social inequalities as social stratification and the living conditions of people in the Victorian people. Social inequalities appear as a factual fact that makes the balance between the social environment and one living conditions. We cannot achieve sustainable development and make the planet better for all if people are excluded from the chance for a better life.

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