



An Anatomy of Inequity: Society under the Lens in Dickens's Oliver Twist

Tusharkumar Ashokbhai Patel

Research Scholar in English, Monark University, Ahmedabad, tp691239@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The shadow of social injustice, a constant across human history, looms large in the literary landscape of 19th-century England. This qualitative study, adopting a sociological lens, dissects Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* to catalogue the specific forms of social injustice embedded in its narrative and to scrutinize the protagonist's reactions to them. The investigation concludes that the novel primarily foregrounds three interconnected plagues upon the lower classes: debilitating poverty, rigid social stratification, and systemic child labor. Faced with a society that offers few legitimate avenues for advancement, characters are frequently depicted as powerless, with many driven to criminality as their sole means of survival. The study posits that the novel serves as a direct mirror, reflecting the grim societal realities of Dickens's own era.

Introduction: -

Prologue: The Author as a Social Chronicler

If a literary work is the author's brainchild, then the author is an inseparable product of their society. Literature, in its very essence, is a creative expression of the life, spirit, and tribulations that surround its creator. This aligns with the view of De Bonald, who posited that "literature is an expression of society" (Wellek and Warren, 1956:95), a conduit for its actual conditions. Thus, literature and the social issues of its time are inextricably linked, with the former acting as a vessel for the author's ideologies, beliefs, and critiques.



In nineteenth-century England, the social novel ascended as a dominant form of entertainment and edification for the burgeoning affluent class. This "social problem novel" dedicated itself to anatomizing the ills of the age: poverty, class prejudice, and the exploitation of children. No writer is more synonymous with this tradition than Charles Dickens, a realist whose fiction serves as a searing indictment of the injustices wrought by the Industrial Revolution. While the era brought national power, it also bred widespread suffering, particularly for the lower classes how crowded into cities to face inequality and discrimination.

Oliver Twist (1837-1839), originally *The Parish Boy's Progress*, stands as one of Dickens's most potent critiques. Tracing the journey of an orphan from a brutal workhouse to the criminal underworld of London, the novel uses its protagonist's ordeal to expose the hypocrisies of Victorian society, focusing sharply on the horrors of poverty, child labor, and the recruitment of the young into crime. This study interrogates this very depiction, seeking to answer two questions: What specific varieties of social injustice are woven into the narrative of *Oliver Twist*? And how does the protagonist react and seek resolution against the systemic inequities that define his existence?

Theoretical Framework: Literature in a Social Context

To analyze a text sociologically, one must first understand sociology as the study of human social life, interactions, and the societal forces that shape behavior (Cragun, 2006:7). It is a scientific inquiry into social institutions and processes (Swingewood in Faruk, 1994:3). Literature shares this concern with human relations within society. A novel, therefore, can be seen as an attempt to recreate the social world, engaging with the same economic and political conditions as sociology (Damono, 2013:9). As Burns (1973:9) notes, both disciplines "attempt to make sense of our lives."

This synergy gives rise to the sociology of literature, which examines the reciprocal relationship between a literary work and the society that produces it. From this perspective, a novel is not an autonomous object but a socio-cultural phenomenon, a product and a reflection of its time. The author, as a member of society, inevitably encodes contemporary social phenomena into their work.

Defining Social Injustice

Social injustice is conceptualized as the unfair and unequal treatment suffered by individuals from marginalized groups. It constitutes a fundamental violation of human rights, manifesting as:

a. An unfair distribution of resources, opportunities, and responsibilities;



- b. Various forms of oppression; and
- c. Systemic barriers that prevent self-determination.

Scholars like Dogra (2013:1-2) and Gil (2013:29) categorize its manifestations, which include poverty, casteism (social stratification), and child labor—the three foci of this analysis.

1. **Poverty:** This is the state of profound material deprivation, a lack of basic necessities like food, shelter, and education. Soekanto (2010: 320) characterizes it sociologically as a failure to meet a community's living standards and an inability to harness one's potential within the social structure.
2. **Social Stratification (Casteism):** This is the structural organization of inequality into a hierarchy (Dobriner, 1994: 214). Victorian England was rigidly stratified into classes such as the Upper Class (royalty, aristocracy), the Middle Class (professionals, merchants), the Working Class (skilled and unskilled laborers), and the Under Class (the destitute, orphans, and paupers).
3. **Child Labor:** Defined as work that deprives children of their childhood and educational opportunities (Dogra, 2014: 3), it often constitutes a form of slavery, exposing them to hazards and stunting their development.

Methodological Approach

This study employs a descriptive qualitative design, analyzing descriptive data from the primary text, the 2003 Barnes and Noble Classics edition of *Oliver Twist*. Secondary sources provide theoretical context. The methodology involves:

1. A close reading of the novel.
2. Identifying and extracting quotations that illustrate social injustice.
3. Categorizing these fragments according to the themes of poverty, social stratification, and child labor.
4. Interpreting the classified data through the sociological approach of Wellek and Warren, treating the novel as a document reflecting social history.

Findings: The Face of Injustice in *Oliver Twist*

1. The Scourge of Poverty



Dickens portrays poverty not as an abstract condition but as a visceral reality of squalor and physical decay. The environment itself testifies to the deprivation of its inhabitants:

"The houses on either side were high and large, but very old, and tenanted by people of the poorest class: as their neglected appearance would have sufficiently denoted..." (Dickens, 2003: 63-64).

The precariousness of life is emphasized by descriptions of buildings shored up by beams, "firmly planted in the road" to prevent collapse. This physical instability mirrors the fragile existence of the poor. Furthermore, poverty is shown to be dehumanizing, as seen when Oliver observes a poor family and notes, "They seemed so like the rats he had seen outside" (Dickens, 2003: 64). This powerful simile reduces human beings to scavenging creatures, stripped of dignity by their circumstances.

2. The Rigidity of Social Stratification

The novel delineates a clear class hierarchy, focusing on the upper middle class (Mr. Brownlow), lower middle class (Mr. Bumble, Mr. Sowerberry), working class (Mrs. Corney), and the under class (Oliver, Fagin's gang). The prejudice of the upper classes is starkly revealed in Mr. Grimwig's suspicion: "Bad people have fevers sometimes; haven't they, eh?..." (Dickens, 2003: 134). This reflects a worldview that automatically associates poverty with moral corruption.

The power imbalance allows for systemic violence against the lower classes. Mr. Bumble casually administers "a tap on the head... and another on the back" to Oliver (Dickens, 2003: 35-36). Furthermore, the lower classes are easily scapegoated, as seen when Noah Claypole falsely accuses Oliver, leading to a request that Mr. Bumble "flog him" (Dickens, 2003: 75). The threat of violence is a constant tool of control, exemplified by Bill Sikes's threat during a burglary: "Get up, or I'll strew your brains upon the grass" (Dickens, 2003: 197).

3. The Exploitation of Child Labor

Oliver's childhood is systematically erased by labor. He is condemned to the monotonous and grueling task of "picking oakum" at six in the morning (Dickens, 2003: 37). His apprenticeship to Mr. Sowerberry is another form of exploitation, consuming his days with "professional missions" that preclude education and leisure (Dickens, 2003: 63). This system, which offers minimal sustenance in place of wages, is a clear violation of a child's right to development and a normal childhood.



Oliver's Resistance: A Voice Against Injustice

While many characters succumb to passivity or crime, Oliver occasionally demonstrates resistance. His most famous act of defiance is a direct response to the injustice of hunger: "Please, sir, I want some more" (Dickens, 2003: 39). This simple plea is a profound challenge to authority. He also fiercely reacts against false accusations, passionately declaring, "It wasn't me indeed, sir... it was the other boys" (Dickens, 2003: 100). Though his protests are often ignored, these moments reveal a spirit struggling against the oppressive forces that seek to define him.

Synthesis: The Novel as Social Document

The analysis confirms that *Oliver Twist* is a profound exploration of social injustice. Poverty is depicted as a systemic trap, with the dreaded workhouse serving as a supposed solution that only deepens misery. Social Stratification is shown to be a rigid hierarchy that perpetuates inequality and justifies the oppression of the lower classes by those above them. Child Labor is exposed as a widespread practice that robs children of their future, a direct consequence of the poverty afflicting the lower classes.

Viewing the novel through the sociological lens of Wellek and Warren, it becomes clear that *Oliver Twist* is more than a story; it is a social document. Dickens channels the realities of his time—the stark class divisions, the desperation of the poor, and the exploitation of the innocent—into a powerful and enduring critique of Victorian England.

Conclusion

This research has identified and analyzed the manifestations of social injustice in Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist*, focusing on poverty, social stratification, and child labor. The findings illustrate that the poor, trapped in a vicious cycle, are often forced to choose between the brutality of institutional "relief" and a life of crime. The novel paints a picture of a society rigidly divided into classes, with the under class facing systemic prejudice and violence. Furthermore, the exploitation of children through labor is shown to be a pervasive evil, denying them their rights and their childhood.

Ultimately, this study concludes that *Oliver Twist*, interpreted through a sociological framework, serves as a powerful and accurate reflection of the social injustices that defined nineteenth-century England, cementing Dickens's legacy as a critical chronicler of his age.



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