

VICTORIAN STEREOTYPES ON POOR CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO CHARLES DICKENS'S *OLIVER TWIST*

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This paper entitled, Victorian Stereotypes on Poor Children with Special Reference to Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist*, aims to accomplish the Victorian society as reflected by Charles Dickens in his *Oliver Twist*. Dickens wrote *Oliver Twist* in order to show what it was like to live in Nineteenth - century London. Dickens was not the first novelist to draw the attention of the reading public to the deprivation of the lower classes in England, but he was much more successful than his predecessors in exposing the ills of the industrial society including class division, poverty, bad sanitation, privilege and meritocracy and the experience of the metropolis. *Oliver Twist* can be read as a textbook of Victorian child abuse and a social document about early Victorian slum life. Dickens's novels present a portrait of the macabre childhood of a considerable number of Victorian orphans. A social commentator and critic his novels revolve largely around the motif of child abuse. The main objective of this paper is to focus on children and child labour in Victorian England. All of his novels share distinct characteristics that mark them as "Dickensian." Dickens's readers are emotionally engaged reading *Oliver Twist*. Most of his characters are lively. He had the instinctive ability to place humanity under a microscope - meticulously probing, dissecting and analyzing - to collect the fodder for his life's work. His characters play into popular Victorian stereotypes: the innocent orphan, the unscrupulous businessman, and the sleazy criminal

In the middle of the 19th - century crime and poverty were an inseparably mixed matter and most of the youngsters who suffered prison sentences were the preys of poverty; unwanted by their family, church and state. During the Industrial Revolution period, a mass of humanity flowed from the countryside into cities and towns, especially London, without any promise of stable homes or shelters. Children ran wild on the streets, fighting for life as best as they could, oftentimes by crime and only the tough and quick-witted held out. They had no education and did pretty much whatever they wanted. They never heard words of kindness, only the language of the people they met in the streets which they copied: various curses, shouting and vulgar language. Young children, who were running in the streets to fend for themselves, were never taught or told what was right and what was wrong; for instance, they taking food from the market tables without paying for it was wrong and they were going to be punished for it if they were caught. It was more of a game to them which they played daily (Duckworth 11). Jennie Duckworth, in her book *Fagin's Children: Criminal Children in Victorian England* quotes Charles Dickens, who in the preface to the 1841 edition of *Oliver Twist* drew an outline to which many homeless children were connected: "The cold, wet, shelter's midnight streets of London; the foul and

frowsy dens, where vice is closely packed and lacks the room to turn; the haunts of hunger and disease, the shabby rags that scarcely hold together: where are the attractions of these things"? (Duckworth 2). Life for the street youngsters was troublesome and cruel. The authorities regarded them as being only a social inconvenience. If there was enough proper work available, most of them would have been inclined to work, but most turned to stealing. Because many of them did not have any family or home to return to, they looked for lodging houses as a shelter (if the day's stealing had been successful); but if otherwise, they stayed under bridges, or simply slept on the pavement. They were often wet, freezing, hungry and dirty. The behaviour of these children received public disapproval.

Duckworth in the same book quotes James Greenwood, an editor for the Pall Mall Gazette who in 1866 published a short piece about criminal children: "It is an accepted fact, that daily, winter and summer, within the limits of our vast and wealthy city of London, there wander destitute of proper guardianship, food, clothing, and employment 100,000 boys and girls in training for the treadmill, the oakum shed, and the convict's mark. There are those who are born in the workhouse who are abandoned by the unnatural mother" (Duckworth 20). Without a parent or parish help and ethical guidance these wild streets kids were seen behaving with no consideration towards elders and, swayed by those around them, adopted criminal habits. Fagin's group is the criminal of villainy in the novel were the young homeless boys are taken in and taught mischievous trade; trained to become thieves. When Oliver is taken in, in a playful and game-like manner, he is also taught to rob and steal. Many seemed to be born to a life of crime and cruelty but Oliver appears to be different. He is horrified by the brutality and heartlessness around him. During the action of a robbery at the Mrs. Maylie's house, he cries out loud: "'Oh! For God's sake let me go! Let me run away in the fields. I will never come near London-never, never! Oh! Pray have mercy upon me, and do not make me steal: for the love of all the bright angles that rest in haven, have mercy upon me!'" (OT: 205)

Throughout the novel the reader can notice repeatedly how Charles Dickens underlines the features of Oliver's appearance which singles him out from the rest of the crowd: "I shall be glad to have him away from my eyes, and to know that the worst is over. I can't bear to have him about me: the sight of him turns me against myself and all of you" (OT:238), Fagin screams out. Oliver is born in a society which does not welcome him in a pleasant or loving way. He is one out of millions whose fate shows some mercy upon him, but what about the rest? Many young juveniles were caught in the action brought in front of the magistrate and sentenced to go to prison or to hang. Just like the young Artful Dodger: "'they'll make Artful nothing less than a lifer'" (OT: 415). While Charles Dickens was writing his novels, public punishments were taking place in London. The authorities believed that watching so-called lawbreakers being punished openly would discourage others from the criminal life. For instance, public hangings were held to be as some kind of entertainment. Sometimes there were more than 20,000 people who showed up to watch it (Mc Donald and Weldon 23). People would pay money for the better seats where they could see the action

clearly. Dickens himself once paid for a good seat to watch people hang so that he could write about it. He thought the action was brutal (McDonald and Weldon 23). In the fourteenth chapter, when Fagin is arrested, Dickens describes in small details the process when justice had been made:

A slight bustle in the court recalled himself, and looking round, he saw that the juryman had turned together to consider of their verdict. As his eyes wandered to the gallery, he could see the people rising above each other to see his face: some hastily applying their glasses to their eyes, and other whispering their neighbours with looks expressive of abhorrence. A few there were who seemed unmindful of him, and looked only to the jury in impatient wonder how they could delay, but in no one face-not even among the women, of whom there were many there-could he read the faintest sympathy with him, or any feeling but one of all-absorbing interest that he should be condemned.(OT:509)

Oliver Twist-who is he, after all, a thief or a victim? The story does have a happy ending. The boy's fortune and circumstances are favorable towards him, but the questions remains: if Oliver had been, a regular orphan, so to speak, and Mr. Brownlow had never entered the story, would Oliver after all have ended as a criminal like Fagin and Artful Dodger or would the boy simply have died out of starvation because he refused to steal and rob? In my opinion, Oliver would have simply become a thief, against his own will, one of Fagin's top quality thieves, as Monks wanted him to, because the boy would never be given an opportunity to experience anything better. To understand Oliver Twist better, I would have to accustom myself into his role or in other words- his shoes.

It is not easy to understand human nature. Some are born with good qualities while others have the constant desire to do evil deeds. Oliver is the one who wants to turn away from all wickedness. The features on his face reflect the inner qualities of his soul. The readers find in the novel again and again how Mr. Brownlow, Mr. Sowerberry, and Fagin stress Oliver's face, which left a trace in their memory. Oliver is not like every other child. His thoughts are filled with "angles, heaven, kind faces" and the idea of being sent to jail frightens him (OT:63). He wants to be a good boy, and this he expresses in the dialogue with Mr. Bumble: "'I will be good indeed; indeed. Indeed, I will, sir!'" (OT:34). Even in his speech Oliver is polite. In his communication with elders, he uses words like "sir or please" (OT:34) and bows them, which shows the qualities of being polite and respectful towards others. Oliver is only eight years old. He wants to be loved and needed, exactly what a child calls for in that age; but instead, he feels lonely, hated and little: "'so lonely, sir- so very lonely,' cried the child. 'Everybody hates me'" (OT:34).

When Fagin tells Oliver that by becoming good at pick pocketing, it will make him "the great man of all time" (OT:81) in contrast, Oliver wonders to himself "what picking the old gentleman's pocket in play had to do with his chances of being a great man" (OT:81). It shows that the boy already has a formed opinion about what it means to be a great man and Fagin's method does not correspond to his formed idea. Children learn from adults, by watching and imitating them. Oliver respects Fagin who is his senior, so he

watches and follows his moves in silence. But what good could a child learn from a man who thinks only of golden items, teaches him to pickpocket and makes him stay in a dark and secluded place? Oliver feels as if he is not in the right space. But according to Oliver's opinion when he is given a chance to experience a different type of environment- Mr. Brownlow's home, where "kindness and solicitude which knew no bounds" (OT:96). Chapter twelve gives many answers to the readers. When Oliver wakes up from the deep sleep, he sees that it is not the same place where he closed his eyes the last time. After his first conversation with Mrs. Bedwin, Oliver realizes how everything is different; people, surroundings and the way he feels. For the first time, the boy gets lots of care, tenderness and comfort. He feels "cheerful and happy" surrounded by people who look after him (OT: 100). He sees many different objects, like paintings and books which look so new to him, and he does not know yet if he likes it or not, he is still absorbing. After being for a few days around people who share nothing but love, kindness and shows lots of attention towards him, in chapter thirteen we find a clear answer where Oliver expresses his opinion about the place he came from: "'Oh, don't tell me you are going to send me away, sir, pray!' exclaims Oliver, alarmed by the serious tone of the old gentleman's commencement; 'don't turn me out of doors to wander in the streets again. Let me stay here and be a servant. Don't send me back to the wretched place I came from'" (OT: 121). Oliver would rather be a servant in some good home than to wander the streets or go back to the wretched place. He is pleading not to be sent back. Here we find proof that Oliver Twist longs to remain to remain with people who love and care about him and vice versa, he wants to love and have people to take care of. Oliver does not belong to the criminal world. As he himself states, he "wants to be good" and indeed he likes to be good! (OT: 34).

The novel *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens with its remarkable characters, probable events, humour, and peculiar location, highlights real insights into the social status of Victorian days and the way that ordinary people were affected by them. Charles Dickens was the great Victorian writer to wade into the vital modern problem of dissatisfaction of the urban society and shows, "things as they really are" (Bayley 49). London did not expand into a great manufacturing city overnight it had continuously developed into a commercial centre, a port and a core of government, finance, law, and fashion the largest and richest of European city it was the period of industrial revolution which changed Britain for ever. London is depicted as a harsh and grim city but it can be escaped as Oliver did. The novel stands as solid evidence taken from daily life which portrays the social evils as they were then. It is a story of a child who was born in the workhouse and nursed by Parish overseers. The novel is a series of scenes from the tragic lives of the lowest outcast scene of crimes and carelessness. This study reveals how Oliver the little hero is squeezed in the miserable crowd-Victorian Society under various hardships. The study also reveals Oliver's misery of childish grief being taken away from the branch-workhouse a home which is associated only with the sufferings and slow starvation and no kind words or looks.

The theme of good versus evil runs through the novel. Dickens showed that no matter with difficulty with various circumstances, good will prevail in the end. It did end happily for Oliver but that was not the case for other children in actuality. Poor children who had never been thought the concepts of good versus evil also had to face the brutal consequences of execution. *Oliver Twist* is a novel which shows the Victorian society, its system, law and state authority and how it worked within the society. *Oliver Twist* is the first novel in the English language which focuses on a child protagonist as well as on a realistic portrayal of criminal and their degraded lives. Dickens's calls the public's attention to dwell upon various contemporary issues such as the poor law, workhouse, class differences, child labour and the recruitment of children for criminal work. Dickens shows contempt for the sincerity of the time by encircling the novels serious themes with bitterness and dark humour. As a child and a young man, Dickens continuously pays attention to the moral degradation which many of his companions and friends suffer and their early feelings influences and impacts never really vanished from his mind. In many of his writings *Oliver Twist*, *Hard Times*, *Christmas Carol*, *little Dorrit*, he repeatedly expresses the vile features of social life. Eric Walter Frederic Tomlin in his book *Charles Dickens 1812-1870* quotes Edger Johnson who wrote in the book *Charles Dickens: his tragedy and Triumph*: "Dickens opened the floodgates of his sympathy for all the neglected, unloved and misused, all the innocent and suffering victims of society, all the prisoners of injustice and pain. Their cause becomes his cause." (Tomlin 132)

But what was the real purpose for writing *Oliver Twist*? Was it just an entertainment novel for the Victorian citizen to read? The answer could be yes and no! Charles Dickens wrote fiction events based on real facts. *Oliver Twist* is a novel which shows the Victorian society, its system laws and state authority, men and manners and how it really worked within the society. To conclude Dickens successfully introduced unpleasant events but facts to the consideration of his readers and the society. To see the ugliness one has to look into the minor. No doubt Dickens Oliver was like a minor who exactly reflected the Victorian stereotypes on Poor children life for the street youngsters was troublesome and cruel. The society regarded them as being only a social inconvenience. If there was enough proper work available, most of them would have been inclined to work, but must have turned to stealing as many of them did not have parents family or home to return to, they looked for lodging homes as a shelter if the day's stealing had been successful. Dickens uses various characters and situation to draw attention to social matters. He also attacks the shortcomings of the Government and its laws as well as its ways of treating poor children. *Oliver Twist* can be read as a text book of Victorians child abuse and as a social document about Victorian public opinion more aware of the conditions of the poor. He depicted persuasively the disorder, squalor, blight, decay and the poor children's misery and so doubt *Oliver Twist* is an important manifestation of Victorian Stereotypes on poor children.

The novel deals mainly with poverty and crimes, the results of abandoning the rules and practices of social awareness and compassion. The criminal elements do represent the outcasts of society who lurk inside crumbling ruins. In Dickens's description, the words 'neglect' and 'decay' recur insistently. The novel is a clear evidence of the neglect of the human values that has fostered the spiritual decay that it is so aptly reflected by Dickens in the novel which clearly reflect the anti-society of the Victorian England.

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