

The Plight and Exploitation of Children Characters in Charles Dickens' "Oliver Twist"

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Abstract: Oliver Twist, a novel by Charles Dickens, is a potent critique of the social and economic circumstances in Victorian England. The book also tells a powerful tale of the human spirit's tenacity, especially in the face of hardship. Dickens's portrayal of children in Oliver Twist is especially moving because he emphasizes how innocent and vulnerable young people are in an often brutal and unfair society. There are two main categories of Oliver Twist's juvenile characters: those who are actively involved in crime and those who are victims of circumstance. Many of the abused kids, like Oliver, are orphans or hail from low-income homes. They are frequently abused physically and psychologically, and they are frequently made to work long hours for little pay. Children who have turned to crime, like Nancy and the Artful Dodger, have done so out of need or because of the influence of adults. Even so, there are some redeeming qualities in these kids.

Dickens presents children in Oliver Twist in a sophisticated and nuanced way. He does not just elevate the minors who commit crimes as adults or merely demonize the juvenile offenders. Instead, he demonstrates how the conditions and surroundings of both groups of kids mould them. Dickens was not only the first great urban novelist in England, but also one of the most important social commentators who used fiction effectively to criticize economics, social and moral abuses in the Victorian era”(Dinejko,1990)

Keywords:- Child Labour, Trauma, Psychological condition, Exploitation, Victorian, The Act of 1834

Introduction: Charles Dickens' literary works are known for their unflinching exploration of the social issues and injustices prevalent in Victorian England. "Oliver Twist" is no exception, and it delves deeply into the plight and exploitation of children during this era. In this paper, we will examine how Dickens employs various child characters in his novel to illuminate the harsh realities of child labor, poverty, and abuse. These issues remain significant today, making Dickens' portrayal of child exploitation in "Oliver Twist" an enduring and relevant topic. In this novel we will talk about the harsh reality of child labour, child misery and social, economical and political changes on the Age of Industrialization also. Rise of industrial revolution affected middle class family badly and people are moved from the countryside to the cities in expectation of happy life. In London, during this time children were forced to do hard work in challenging situation for minimal pay. Another aspect of this research paper is also show how children were forced into labour, mistreated, exploited and deprive from their fundamental rights. We can not deny the fact that industrial revolution made London a hub of manufacturing and help to grow Britain in abnormal manner but this advancement didn't safeguard children's basic right,right of education, right to live in peaceful environment ,right to food. Charles Dickens reveals the plight of child labour not only in this novel but also in another text written by him. He adds many autobiographical elements including working in Boot-Blacking factory when he was just nine years old.

Child Labor in Victorian England: A Historical Context : Before delving into the characters in "Oliver Twist," it is crucial to understand the historical context of child labor in Victorian England. During the 19th century, child labor was widespread, and it was not uncommon to find children as young as six or seven working in factories, mines, or as chimney sweeps. The exploitation of child labor was driven by economic factors, as employers preferred children for their cheap labor and malleability. These conditions set the stage for Dickens' exploration of child exploitation in "Oliver Twist." This novel is an early example of a novel that alerts readers to societal

issues, such as class inequality, workhouses, child labor, and young children's involvement in criminal activity.

Dickens presents these concerns compassionately and bitterly in this work, emphasizing genuine circumstances with dark humor (Didelyté, 2008). The experiences of Oliver Twist represent the state of children residing in workhouses. Dickens tried to depict the conditions of the workhouses in Oliver Twist. Though the workhouses were intended to aid the impoverished, in reality, they functioned as hubs for child abuse and occasionally resulted in deaths. Dickens attempted to reveal the reality of the government's efforts to conceal the horrible treatment through his work. He desired to display What inhumanity and decay the workhouses had. The speaker discussed the Poor Law Amendment of 1834 and its terrible consequences as problems. Charles Dickens wrote *Oliver Twist* to portray the lives of individuals in need and going through difficult times.

It also aims to raise the voice of the lower class, which is often ignored or just discarded as a disruptive noise. With a focus on the circumstances in the workhouses, the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, and criminal life, I hope to illustrate what life was like for the general populace in 19th-century London, especially for the lower class and their children (Didelyté, 2008). In Dickens's *Oliver Twist*, one of the central issues is the plight of orphans. Oliver was one of many children at that time who were orphans. Additionally, these unlucky children suffered from parental neglect, abuse, and maltreatment at school or in homes where they were supposedly adopted. Some were placed in workhouses, while others went out on the streets for work. They developed into repeat offenders or alcohol addicts on the streets. They suffered in the corrupt system since the government did nothing to assist them. Moreover, these children were adopted (Tekin & Janet, 2006).

About Oliver:

Oliver Twist is the title character in Charles Dickens' novel "Oliver Twist," and his life is marked by significant misery and plight throughout the story. Oliver's suffering and hardships serve as a central theme in the novel, highlighting the social injustices and inequalities of Victorian society. Here are some key aspects of Oliver's misery and plight:

1. Orphaned and Neglected: Oliver is born in a workhouse, and his mother dies shortly after giving birth to him. He grows up an orphan, with no knowledge of his family background. His life begins with the misery of being abandoned and neglected.

Living conditions are also bad in London City. When Mr. Sowerberry bought Oliver from workhouse and came to home he was forced to sleep under coffin. Mr Sowerberry said to him:

“ Then come with me....your bed's under the counter You don't mind sleeping among the coffins,I suppose? But it doesn't much matter whether you do and don't,for you can not sleep anywhere else. Come.....! (Dickens,1994)

2. Workhouse Life: Oliver's early years are spent in a harsh and unfeeling workhouse. The conditions in workhouses were notoriously cruel, and the children, like Oliver, endured meager rations, overcrowded living conditions, and harsh discipline.

Oliver is forced to make at every term. Administration of Workhouse called him “rabble rouse”. When administration bid for Oliver in 5 Pounds, Gamefield, the chimney-sweep wants to buy it but Oliver doesn’t want to go with him. He said;

“Oliver fell on his knees, and clasping his hands together, prayed that they would order him back to dark room- that they would starve him-beat him- kill him if they pleased-rather than send him away with the dreadful man”. (Dickens,1994)

3. Escaping to a Life of Crime: After running away from the workhouse, Oliver falls into the clutches of Fagin, a sinister character who runs a gang of child thieves. Under Fagin's influence, Oliver is introduced to a life of crime and is forced to participate in various illegal activities, including pickpocketing.
4. Mistreatment and Abuse: Oliver's experiences on the streets of London are filled with abuse and exploitation. He is often mistreated by older boys in Fagin's gang and encounters various dangerous situations, including the infamous thief Bill Sikes.

We encounter a significant theme of class-division by the relationship between Noah Claypole and Oliver and it exemplifies the Victorian England class distinction. Oliver Twist was also victim of this system and attacked Noah when he criticized his late mother. Noah feel insecure because of rapid development of Oliver Twist. Oliver beat Noah for his mother insult and that made him culprit and all three house member lock him in dark room. The conversation between Noah and Oliver is as follows:

‘Work us,’ said Noah, ‘how’s your mother?’

‘She’s dead,’ replied Oliver; ‘don’t you say anything about her to me!’

‘What did she die of, Work us?’ said Noah.

‘Of a broken heart, some of our old nurses told me,’ replied Oliver: more as if he was talking to himself than answering Noah. ‘I think I know what it must be to die of that!’

‘Tol de rol lol lol, right fol lairy, Work us,’ said Noah, as a tear rolled down Oliver’s cheek.

‘What’s set you a snivelling now?’

‘Not you,’ replied Olive, hastily brushing the tear away.

‘Don’t think it.’

‘Oh not me, eh!’ sneered Noah.

‘No, not you,’ replied Oliver, sharply. ‘There; that’s enough. Don’t say anything more to me about her: you’d better not!’

‘Better not!’ exclaimed Noah. ‘Well! Better not! Work us, don’t be impudent. Your mother, too! She was a nice ‘un, she was. Oh, Lord!’ And here, Noah nodded his head expressively; and curled up as much of his small red nose as muscular action could collect together, for the occasion.

‘You know, Work us,’ continued Noah, emboldened by Oliver’s silence, and speaking in a jeering tone of affected pity: of all toes the most annoying: ‘You know, Work us, it can’t be helped now; and of course you couldn’t help it then; and I’m very sorry for it ; and I’m sure we all are, and pity you very much. But you must know, Work us, your mother was a regular right-down bad ‘un.’ ‘What did you say?’ inquired Oliver, looking up very quickly.

‘A regular right-down bad ‘un, Work us,’ replied Noah, coolly. ‘And it’s a great deal better, Work us, that she died when she did, or else she’d have been hard labouring in Bride well, or transported, or hung: which is more likely than either, isn’t it?’ (Dickens, 1838: 51)

5. Unjust Accusations: Oliver's innocence is frequently misunderstood, and he is falsely accused of crimes he did not commit. This leads to further suffering, as he is hunted by the authorities and wrongly blamed for various thefts.

6. The Grim Workhouse: After his capture, Oliver is brought back to the workhouse, where he faces the grim prospect of returning to the life he so desperately tried to escape. The conditions are no better than before, and he remains miserable and confined.

The psychological aspect of an abused adolescence in *Oliver Twist* is an extremely significant characteristic of the story. A recurring element in Oliver's vicious childhood is bullying. Whether it's by Mr. Bumble, Noah Claypole, the undertaker's beginner, or the evil culprit Bill Sikes, Oliver is subjected to bullying by a number of adults in the book. It is an interesting incident in workhouse when Oliver said:

'Please, sir, I want some more.'

The master was a fat, healthy man; but he returned very pale.

'What!' said the master at length, in a faint voice.

'Please, sir,' replied Oliver, 'I want some more.'

The mater aimed a blow at Oliver's head with the ladle; pinioned him in his arms; and shrieked aloud for the beadle.

The board was sitting in solemn conclave, when Mr. Bumble rushed into the room in great excitement, and addressing the gentleman in the high chair, said, 'Mr. Limbkins, I beg your pardon, sir! Oliver Twist has asked me for some more!'

There was a general start. Horror was depicted on every countenance.

'For more!' said Mr. Limbkins. 'Compose yourself, Bumble, and answer me distinctly. Do I understand that he asked for more, after he had eaten the supper allotted by the dietary?' 'He did, sir, replied Bumble.

'That boy will be hung,' said the gentleman in the white waistcoat. 'I know that boy will be hung.'

(Dickens, 1838: 15)

All of this bullying harms Oliver psychologically, giving rise to him badly nervous, withdrawn, and lacking in dignity. As the child hero of a melodramatic book of social revolt, *Oliver Twist* is implied to dispute more to our emotions than to our academic realities.

The Artful Dodger and His Companions:

The Artful Dodger, one of Fagin's gang members, is another character who exemplifies the exploitation of children in "*Oliver Twist*." His nickname, "Artful," suggests a cunning nature, but it is essential to recognize that he is a child himself. Dodger serves as a mentor to Oliver, initiating him into a world of crime and deception. The children in Fagin's gang are compelled to steal and pickpocket, forced into criminal activities at a tender age. This environment perpetuates a cycle of exploitation, trapping young souls in a life of crime.

The character of the Artful Dodger is a prime example of how children were exploited not only for their labor but also for their potential as criminals. Dickens uses Dodger to emphasize the multifaceted nature of exploitation in Victorian society, where children could be exploited for both economic gain and as tools for criminal enterprises.

Nancy: A Complex Portrait of Exploitation and Redemption Nancy is one of the more complex child characters in "*Oliver Twist*." She is a member of Fagin's gang, but her character represents the moral struggle and internal conflict faced by exploited children. Her love for Bill Sikes, despite his cruelty, reflects the emotional exploitation that often occurred in abusive relationships.

Nancy's character is a poignant reminder that child exploitation can manifest not only in physical labor but also in psychological and emotional manipulation. Her tragic end at the hands of Sikes is a stark illustration of the

devastating consequences of exploitation and abuse, highlighting the urgency of addressing these issues in society.

The Role of Charitable Institutions "Oliver Twist" also critiques the role of charitable institutions in the exploitation of children. The workhouse, where Oliver is born, is intended to provide care and support for the destitute. However, it is portrayed as a place of neglect, harsh conditions, and inadequate sustenance. Dickens exposes how these institutions often failed to protect and nurture vulnerable children.

One such institution, the workhouse, reflects the inefficacy of charitable organizations in safeguarding children's rights and well-being. In the workhouse, children were subjected to harsh discipline, minimal education, and an atmosphere devoid of love and compassion. Dickens uses this setting to demonstrate the failure of institutions that were supposed to protect and care for children.

Throughout his career as a novelist, Dickens has been preoccupied with the plight of society's downtrodden and how their lives may be improved. In order to demonstrate the injustice of laws like the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, he creates fictional victims to use as examples (Swifte, 2006)

Conclusion: The Lasting Relevance of Dickens' Message "Oliver Twist" by Charles Dickens remains a powerful and enduring critique of child exploitation. The novel's depiction of the plight and exploitation of children continues to resonate with contemporary society, as similar issues persist in different forms. Dickens intends to show how terrible life was for children who had to work in factories and mines. He seeks to

persuade parents that it is essential to spend quality time with their children like Oliver by demonstrating the importance of having fun. Dickens thinks Oliver and other children must have a safe place to grow up. Even though it is not what they want, raising criminal offspring destroys their children's futures. Nine-year-old Oliver is assigned to assist a funeral director, handling coffins and deceased individuals. Oliver and other children his age should not have to undertake manual labor like this (Dumovska, 2005).

The exploitation of child labor, poverty, and abuse, which Dickens highlighted in the 19th century, are still relevant today. Children continue to be subjected to harsh working conditions, human trafficking, and neglect, both in developed and developing nations. The enduring relevance of "Oliver Twist" lies in its ability to serve as a reminder of the importance of protecting and nurturing the rights and well-being of children. We can state categorically that his works not only exposed the problems of the Victorian era but also contributed to establishing a brighter future for Great Britain: Dickens has a reputation as a reformer, both during his lifetime and after. Many people have given him credit for fostering the change in public opinion that allowed for criminal legislation, public health, and educational changes, all of which contributed to making Britain a more peaceful and prosperous nation (Cunningham, 1995).

In conclusion, "Oliver Twist" serves as a timeless literary work that sheds light on the exploitation of children in Victorian England and the broader implications of such exploitation in society. Dickens' portrayal of Oliver, the Artful Dodger, Nancy, and the workhouse underscores the multifaceted nature of child exploitation. The novel's lasting relevance emphasizes the urgent need to address the ongoing challenges faced by children, making it an invaluable resource for promoting child rights and social justice.

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