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INDUSTRIALIZATION: A CRITICAL STUDY OF CHARLES DICKENS'S OLIVER TWIST



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ABSTRACT

This research paper is a consideration of Charles Dickens protest of the deprived in the Victorian civilization and Industrialization. The Industrial deprived members that will be under discussion are the poor, women and children, who are of major concern in Dickens' selected text namely Oliver Twist. It is evident that Dickens noted the impact of industrialization on the Victorian civilization as it created a massive urban development, leading to a higher class division. Initially, the English society consisted of the aristocracy, the landed gentry and the servants who belonged to the lower class. The influx of industrialization created a further division of these classes in which there emerged the capitalists or

bourgeoisie, who were the industrialists like Mr. Bounder by in Hard Times, and the working class, who were the industrial workers.

Although the Industrial Revolution fostered urban growth, it is unfortunate that the number of the poor also increased. Many of them lived under squalid conditions with poor sanitation leading to fatal diseases and even death. Being a socially conscious writer, Dickens depicts the world in which he lives, as a strategy to raise awareness in his readers of what was really happening, and hopefully, to bring social reforms.

KEYWORDS

Industrialization, massive urban development, aristocracy and leading to a higher class division.

RESEARCH PAPER

Introduction:

This research paper deals with a critical analysis of Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist*. He epitomizes of characters who are the deprived members of an industrialized civilization. The middle class was the new emerging class which consisted of the capitalists. A closer deliberation of Dickens' specific novel will provide a deeper understanding of the Victorian culture during the Industrial Revolution and his attitude towards the ideologies of his civilization. Through, a critical analysis of Dickens selected text namely *Oliver Twist*, this research paper aims to show that Charles Dickens is a realist writer whose characters have been created with commitment to the realist and naturalist mode of writing. Being a nineteenth century author, Charles Dickens conforms to the writing resolutions of that period. A realist reading of Dickens texts proves that he depicts the oppressive nature of the nineteenth century civilization and its domination of the poor, children and women.

Industrialization means it is the process by which an economy is transformed from a primarily agricultural one to one based on the manufacturing of goods. Individual manual labor is often replaced by mechanized mass production, and craftsmen are replaced by assembly lines. Characteristics of industrialization include economic growth, the more efficient division of labor, and the use of technological innovation to solve problems as opposed to dependency on conditions outside of human control.

Industrialization is most commonly associated with the European Industrial Revolution of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Industrialization also occurred in the United States between the 1880s and the Great Depression. The onset of the Second World War also led to a great deal of industrialization, which resulted in the growth and development of large urban centers and suburbs. Industrialization is an outgrowth of capitalism, and its effects on society are still undetermined to some extent; however, it has resulted in a lower birth rate and a higher average income.

Moreover, this research paper will further confirm that Dickens criticizes industrialization and its destructive nature. A critical study of Dickens presentation of the living circumstances of the poor will further validate the assertion that Dickens was a social moralist and an author who exposed the harsh reality of the Industrial Revolution. Even though Dickens came from a middle class family, he sympathized with the plight of the poor, and, through his writings; he sought to bring awareness to the Victorian society of the injustice and unbearable living conditions experienced by the poor.

While working at the blacking factory, he dined on a slice of pudding and for his twelve hour daily labor, received meagre wages of six shillings a week. In addition to his miserly existence, he slept in an attic in Little College Street, at Camden Town ("The Complete Works of Charles Dickens"). Such an execrable experience at a tender age led Dickens to understand with the wretched condition of children in his novels, which eventually was parallel to the state of poor children in Victorian society. The period of hardship in Dickens life clearly played an influential role in many of his novels. The aptitude to depict real life situations was greatly influenced by his unfriendly experience as a young man, which included being a victim of child labor. Dickens expressed his anxiety and disenchantment after being exposed to child labor and the loss of an opportunity to be educated:

No words can express the secret agony of my soul as I . . . felt my early hopes of growing up to be a learned and distinguished man crushed in my breast. The deep remembrance . . . of the misery it was to my young heart to believe that, day by day, what I had learned and thought, and delighted in, and raised my fancy and emulation up by, was passing away from me. . . cannot be written. (qtd. by Pykett 1)

After his father's release from debtor's prison, his mother forced him to remain working at the factory, a fact which emotionally scarred him for the rest of his life. His father, however, later allowed him to study at Wellington House Academy in Hampshire Road, London, from 1824- 1827. Dickens was then able to secure a post as a law clerk and later a shorthand reporter at Doctor's Commons. Working as a reporter in the Courts and Parliament provided him with first hand background information of the inner workings of the justice system which would later appear in many of his novels, particularly Bleak House. Being a reporter greatly wedged the writings of his earliest letters which allude to his working experience. Moreover, he developed a more critical perception of society, which enabled him to write his novels from a realistic perspective, connecting real life experiences to his characters. The Parliamentary scenes which he observed provided him with the raw material for later satiric portraits as well as shaping his social vision and his attitude towards bureaucracy, officialdom and the ruling class (Pykett 23). Charles Dickens is to Victorian England what Shakespeare was to Renaissance England as he was able to typify the period his writings disclose and expose (Brown 45). Acclaimed as the greatest genius of his age, Dickens relentlessly called for reform at every level, implored the reader to embrace the disadvantaged for his or her own good, and offered moral values and the image of a warm heart as the emblem of the solution to the cruel and mindless indifference of a society given over to the pursuit of wealth and property or "money, money, money and what money can make of life," as Bella Wilfer says in *Our Mutual Friend* (Merriman).

Dickens is a writer who touched the lives of many and all the people of England enjoyed his novels, including both the lower and upper classes. The events in his childhood created the richness and pathos which he uses for the representation of the characters in his novels. The main focus that his novels entail is on the poor population which connects to his own personal conflicts and frustrations of his childhood (Brown 44). His early life is a recurrent element in his childhood novels such as *Oliver Twist* and *Great Expectations*. The unpleasant childhood that Dickens experienced is noted in his biography by John Forster and one can read the bleakness and the bitterness:

"It is wonderful to me how I could have been so easily cast away at such an early age. It is wonderful to me that, even after my descent into the poor little drudge I had been since we came to London, no one had compassion on me a child of singular abilities, quick, eager, delicate and soon hurt, bodily or mentally to suggest that something might have been, to place me at my command school. Our friends, I take it, were tired out. No one made any sign. My father and mother were quite satisfied. They could hardly have been more so, if I had been twenty years of age, distinguished at a grammar school, and going to Cambridge". (23)

Dickens' early childhood experiences prejudiced him into becoming a realistic novelist, and he based his novels on the social conditions surrounding him (Baker 2). It is even believed that before writing any of his novels, he visited the places on which he based his themes. For

example, when preparing for *Hard Times*, he visited Preston to observe the effects of a strike in an industrial town. This is an indication of how he stressed the importance of connecting reality to his novels. Dickens' main focus was the poverty-stricken parts of England which influenced him to sympathize with people who were neglected, unloved and suffering. His characters not only represented the public, but they also connected with the readers.

Dickens' popularity is due "to his intense human sympathy, his unsurpassed emotional and dramatic power and his aggressive humanitarian zeal for the reform of all evils and abuses, whether they weigh upon the oppressed classes or upon helpless individuals" (Fletcher). Dickens has been considered one of the most moving spokespersons that the poor have ever had. The pathos and tragedy of their experiences, aged and honest toilers subjected to pitiless taskmasters or the yoke of social injustice, lonely women uncomplainingly sacrificing their lives for unworthy men, such as Nancy in *Oliver Twist*, recur in Dickens' novels. Sad faced children, the victims of cold hearted parents, for example the Pockets children in *Great Expectations* and the Gradgrind children in *Bleak House* or children of the worst criminals, for example Esther in *Great Expectations* is also another feature that appears in Dickens' works (Fletcher). In the foreground, there is a definite humanitarian aim, an attack on social evil, the poor house system, the cruelties practiced in private schools and the oppression of women by the patriarchal Victorian society (Fletcher).

One of the novels selected for this study is *Oliver Twist* (1837-1839), which portrays the misery and degradation of destitute children and adults (Stowell 140). A victim of child labor, Oliver is sold to an undertaker and later escapes the horrid experience and goes to London where he is exposed to the criminal activities of a gang led by Fagin. The foreshadowing misfortunes of Oliver's life haunt him at his birth:

But now he was enveloped in the old calico robes, that had grown yellow in the same service; he was badged and ticketed, and fell into his place at once a parish child the orphan of a workhouse the humble, half-starved drudge to be cuffed and buffeted through the world, despised by all, and pitied by none. (5)

The vivid description of Oliver's dressing sets the tone for the events in his life. The color yellow is a symbol of dullness and, in the case of Oliver, sadness as confirmed by the harsh experiences at the workhouse, undertaker's house and in London. The terms "badged" and "ticketed" show the commodification of Oliver and all the other babies born at the parish. Instead of treating the children as human beings, they are labelled as if they were products or objects. In the workhouse, the children lacked individual identity leading to their isolation and abuse in the world. Similarly, Oliver's life is characterized by loneliness and lack of parental care and protection because he is an orphan.

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The image of the coffin represents death and reminds the reader of Oliver's circumstance that he is an orphan. Death is a symbol of loss of life, just like Oliver has lost his parents. Dickens also uses powerful imagery and language to highlight the poverty and starvation of the poor as evidenced in the scene when Oliver and Mr. Sowerberry go to collect a dead woman's body and the husband says:

I say she starved to death . . . and then her bones were starting through the skin. There was neither fire nor candle; she died in the dark – in the dark. (42)

The poverty of the lower class is depicted through starvation and disease, which shows that the society did not do much to assist the poor. The passage also heightens emotions in the reader as one is forced to imagine someone dying from starvation and disease. This grim reality sets a sad tone in the novel, which parallels the misery of Oliver's life.

All of Dickens works are social critiques which attack the institutions that do not perform the roles for which they were created and thus fail to reform society. He has also written other novels such as *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-37) which is an allusion of the Victorian class struggles at the backdrop of the Industrial Revolution (Terpening). *Our Mutual Friend* (1865) is a representation of the fragmented human bodies which are used as metaphors for divided human relationships, families and societies, which further parallel the extremely dehumanized and acquisitive Victorian civilization (Mitsuharu).

In the conclusion has shown that Charles Dickens life experiences played a major role in determining his writings. At the age of twelve, he became a victim of child labor as he was forced to work at a blacking factory after his father was imprisoned for debt. Due to the painful experience as a child laborer, Charles Dickens was able to identify with the plight of minors subjected to factory work at a tender age. Judging from his biography, one can note that literary art mirrors the artist's life. Therefore, life experience inspirations the writings of many artists as evidenced through Charles Dickens. The negative impact has also been further validated by reference to historical records and testaments of child laborers who continued damages and also appeared to being exploited through physical abuse and unbearable working conditions.

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