

Masks of Morality: Social Class and Hypocrisy in Victorian Fiction Victorian Period English Literature

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Abstract

This study attempts to study the representation of social class and morality in Victorian literature with special emphasis on Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist*. In Victorian literature, the relationship between social class and morality is often fraught with complexity, so in this mini research we will also explore that relationship. It will explore the ways that Victorian novels do an outward-facing upkeep of moral decorum that hides the true social and economic state of things. Through close readings and analysis of pivotal texts from the time, the essay will illustrate how the moral decisions of the characters are influenced by their place in society and how cultural notions of what constitutes morality are repeatedly manipulated in order to sustain class divisions and further the oppressive structure of inequality. There was a lot of industrialization and urbanization during the Victorian era (1837-1901), and this reflected in the themes and characters of literature during this period, as well as a very strict social structure. This, in turn, allowed him to use his writing as a vehicle for social commentary, and ultimately use his writing to call for empathy for the poor. Analyzing *Oliver Twist*, this study exposes how Victorian writers used their works to raise awareness of social issues, often embedding moral lessons to encourage reform.

Keywords: *Victorian period, Victorian Literature, Social Class and Morality*

Abstrak

Mini Research ini bertujuan untuk mempelajari representasi kelas sosial dan moralitas dalam sastra Victoria dengan penekanan khusus pada novel *Oliver Twist* karya Charles Dickens. Dalam sastra Victoria, hubungan antara kelas sosial dan moralitas seringkali sarat dengan kompleksitas, oleh karena itu, penelitian mini ini juga akan mengeksplorasi hubungan tersebut. Penelitian ini akan mengeksplorasi bagaimana novel-novel Victoria menampilkan pemeliharaan norma moral ke luar yang menyembunyikan kondisi sosial dan ekonomi yang sebenarnya. Melalui pembacaan dan analisis mendalam terhadap teks-teks penting dari periode tersebut, esai ini akan menggambarkan bagaimana keputusan moral para karakter dipengaruhi oleh posisi sosial mereka dan bagaimana gagasan budaya tentang apa yang dianggap sebagai moralitas terus-menerus dimanipulasi untuk mempertahankan pembagian kelas dan memperkuat struktur ketidaksetaraan yang menekan. Terjadi banyak industrialisasi dan urbanisasi selama era Victoria (1837-1901), dan hal ini tercermin dalam tema dan karakter sastra pada periode ini, serta struktur sosial yang sangat ketat. Hal ini, pada gilirannya, memungkinkan Dickens untuk menggunakan tulisannya sebagai kendaraan untuk komentar sosial, dan pada akhirnya menggunakan tulisannya untuk menyerukan empati terhadap kaum miskin. Dengan menganalisis *Oliver Twist*, penelitian ini mengungkapkan bagaimana para penulis Victoria menggunakan karya mereka untuk meningkatkan kesadaran akan isu-isu sosial, seringkali menanamkan pelajaran moral untuk mendorong reformasi.

Kata Kunci: *Periode Victoria, Sastra Victoria, Kelas Sosial dan Moralitas.*

1. Introduction

Literature is a kind of imaginative work performed in beautiful language. Literature is the result of human's culture, which refers to the beauty, gentleness, and also the reflection of life. Lucas (1993) states that each great work of literature creates its own world, which is unique and seemingly distinct from 'everyday life. However on the other hand, a literature may simply reflect one's life experience, which is influenced by certain society in a certain time and also contain social value, religion, philosophy, etc. Literature has a function as social documentation, which is seen as a process of society and written in a certain time. Because of that, literature can sometimes help readers in understanding the condition of the society. Charles Dicken's *Oliver Twist* is one of the works of literature that gives a reflection of life and of the society. The story gives a simple reflection about social condition of Victorian England. The story of *Oliver Twist* is quite interesting. It occurs in 19th of London. The story tells and describes many things in London. It also comes up with many crime experiences as the reflections of Victorian era in 19th century such as house-breaker, petty robbery, pick pocketing, and murderer. Those crimes in the story were done by the poor and unemployed people, for example, Mr. Bumble who sells Oliver's identity to Monk for mere twenty pounds, Mr. Fagin who takes the poor children to crime, Dodger who steals Mr. Brownlow's pocket, and Sikes who murders Nancy. They, in this story, who live in poverty, get money from crimes to fulfill their needs.

On the other hand, Dickens also portrays the rich people in Victorian era through the characters of Mr. Brownlow, Mr. Grimwig, Dr. Losborne, and the Maylies. Dickens also tries to describe through *Oliver Twist* about social gap in Victorian era. He tries to say through the story that the poor become an entirely different race in the eyes of the rich. Dickens who live at the same time where *Oliver Twist* was written, exposes the criminal world which is experienced by an innocent boy who lives in the lower class society and is uneducated but not influenced by people surrounds him to do crime. In *Oliver Twist*, Dickens describes clearly about crimes in London including the people who lived in London streets. Through *Oliver Twist*, Charles Dickens seems want to satirize the social condition in London especially in Victorian era. He gives his criticism about Victorian England. He encounters the characters of *Oliver Twist* as one of victims of industrial revolution in Victorian England. *Oliver Twist* is also characterized as an unfortunate orphan who is born in the Victorian world and brought to criminal world.

Oliver Twist is an interesting novel of nineteenth century which tells and reflects the social condition in Victorian. The combination of its literary genre keeps the story entertaining and enjoyable. Moreover, the story is written based on Charles Dickens' life experience in Victorian era. Based on the background above, the writer is interested in analyzing deeply about crimes in London especially in Victorian era. The main purposes of the study are (1) to know what kind of crimes happened in the 19th century London as represented in *Oliver Twist*, and (2) to find out the causing factors of the crimes in 19th century London. London in 19th century is also called as the Victorian era. It was the time of Queen Victoria's throne. She became queen for almost 40 of the century from 1837 until 1901. During that time, there was an industrial revolution in Britain that had brought some changes in economic, political, social, transportation, communication, and so on (Samekto 1982:263).

2. Literature Review

2.1. The History of Victorian Period Literature

Victorian literature is the literature produced during the reign of Queen Victoria (1837-1901) or the Victorian era. It forms a link and transition between the writers of the Romantic period and the very different literature of the 20th century. The 19th century is often regarded as a high point in British literature as well as in other countries such as France, the United States and Russia. Books and novels in particular, became ubiquitous, and the "Victorian novelists" created a legacy of works with continuing appeal. Many novels were published in serial form, along with short stories and poetry, in such literary magazines as *Household Words*. The 19th century saw the novel become the leading form of literature in English. The works by pre-Victorian writers such as Jane Austen and Walter Scott had perfected both closely observed social satire and adventure stories. Victorian novels tend to be idealized portraits of difficult lives in which hard work, perseverance, love and luck win in the end; virtue would be rewarded and wrongdoers are suitably punished. They tend to be of an improving nature with a central moral lesson at heart, mixed with a heavy dose of sentiment. While this formula was the basis for much of earlier Victorian fictions; the situation became more complex as the century progressed.

According to George Valsamis: "The Victorian novels acquired a dark and dreary mood, as they proclaimed the uselessness of the social reforms and criticized the class-system. Socialism seemed to be the only way for improvement of society". (2) Charles Dickens was extraordinarily popular in his day. With his characters taking on a life of their own beyond the page, and he remains one of the most popular authors of this era. The Victorian period writers are well known for depicting the issues and problems of the day which are social, economic, religious and intellectual issues. They reflect a picture of people who differ in the social classes in English society of the early of nineteenth century when industrial revolution make change in it as well as the behaviour that each class are dealing with. They also cover a slew of contemporary social issues ranging from the suppression of women and abuse of

children to the undisciplined heart and good versus evil just as Charles Dickens did in his works *Oliver Twist*. Our problem now is: to what extent does Charles Dickens depict the theme of social class difference in his works: *Oliver Twist*? What are the reasons in *Oliver Twist* that make distinctions between classes?

According to M. H. Abrams, "criticism or more specifically literary criticism is the overall term for studies concerned with defining, classifying, analyzing, interpreting and evaluation works of literature" (61). Literature is a means of self expression and it behoves writers to make use of this veritable tool to express themselves in the most lucid form and manner for the growth of their society. Writers are greatly influenced by the social, cultural, economic, religious as well as political happenings in the society, and if a writer is true to his art, he ought to use these experiences and create a piece of works whose sole aim is to teach and enhance societal growth. As Terry Eagleton points out, "realist literature mirrors a given society in which it was written. It works primarily by condition and experience. As art, its no doubt has a relation to social reality". The two forces that profoundly affected Victorian life and thought were democracy and science. Though the Reform Bills of 1831, 1867 and 1884 had democratized parliament to a very great extent and though the multitude of reform that were affected had considerably improved the lots of the common man, conditions were far from being satisfactory. There was still a good deal of poverty, ignorance and social injustice to overcome. Socialism emerged as a living force in the 80s and 90s, but it was not so aggressive as it is today. Nevertheless, this condition of England was a major preoccupation of the whole period and is reflected in its literature. Social class differences find its most eloquent utterance; and occupy a large place in the works of Charles Dickens.

Social class became a major issue in the 19th century and this lasted well into the 20th century and it can be distinguished by inequalities in such areas as power, authority, wealth, working and living conditions, life styles, life span, education, religion and culture. Therefore, British society in the 1800s encompasses three primary social classes: the upper class, middle class and lower class. David Cody, Associate Professor of English at Hart wick College describes the Victorian class structure as: Early in the nineteenth century the labels "working classes" and "middle classes" were already coming into common usage. The old hereditary aristocracy, reinforced by the new gentry who owed their success to commerce, industry, and the professions, evolved into an "upper class" (its consciousness formed in schools and universities) which tenaciously maintained control over the political system depriving not only the working classes but the lower classes of a voice in the political process.

Dickens' *Oliver Twist* (1837-39) which represents a radical change in Dickens themes is his first novel to carry a social commentary similar to that contained in the subsequent condition of English novels. According to Louis Cazamia, "the success of *Oliver Twist* confirmed Dickens' determination to write on social topics, and the inception of Chartism means that the burning social issue of the day was the problem of the working class" (164). Dickens explores many social themes in *Oliver Twist* but two are predominant: the abuses of the new poor law system and the evils of the criminal world in London. The critique of the poor law of 1834 and administration of the workhouse is presented in the opening chapters of *Oliver Twist*. Dickens gives the most uncompromising critique of the Victorian workhouse which was run according to a regime of prolonged hunger, physical punishment humiliation and hypocrisy.

In contrast to *Pickwick*, in *Oliver Twist* Dickens shows England as a country of what Discaeli called "the two nations". The rich and privileged and the poor living in abject and inhumane conditions of deprivation, misery and humiliation (61). Dickens was fully aware of the victimization of women in Victorian society. Nancy is forced into prostitution by poverty, hunger and life in a corrupt environment. John Bayley points out that Nancy's living is the living of England, a nightmare society in which drudgery is endless and stupefying, in which the natural affections are warped, and the dignity of man appears only as resolution and violence (61).

According to Cazamia, "*Oliver Twist* can be read as a textbook of social document about early Victorian slum life (44). When Oliver goes with Sowerberry to fetch the body of a woman dead of starvation, he sees an appealing view of derelict shim houses: Some houses which had become insecure from age and decay, were prevented from falling into the street, by huge beams of wood reared against the walls, and firmly planted in the road; but even these crazy dens seemed to have been selected as the nightly haunts of some houseless wretches, for many of the rough boards which supplied the place of door and window, were wrenched from their position, to afford an aperture wide enough for the passage of human body. The Kernel was stagnant and filthy. The very rats, which here and they lay put retying in its rottenness were hideous with famine (44). Dickens succeeds in making Victorian public opinion more aware of the conditions of the poor. He depicts persuasively the disorder, squalor, blight decay, and the human misery of a modern industrial city. Although the initial condition of English discourse changes into a sentimental moral fable on the subsequent pages, *Oliver Twist* is an important manifestation of Victorian social conscience.

2.2. Synopsis Of Oliver Twist

Oliver Twist is born in a workhouse in 1830 England. His mother, whose name no one knows, is found on the street and dies just after Oliver's birth. Oliver spends the first nine years of his life in a badly run home for young orphans and then is transferred to a workhouse for adults. After the other boy bully Oliver into asking for more gruel at the end of a meal, Mr. Bumble, the parish beadle, offers five pounds to anyone who will take the boy away from the workhouse. Oliver narrowly escapes being apprenticed, to a British Chimney sweep and is eventually apprenticed to a

local undertaker, Mr. Sowerberry. When the undertaker's other apprentice Noah Claypole, makes disparaging comments about Oliver's mother, Oliver attacks him and incurs the Sowerberry's wrath. Desperate. Oliver runs away at dawn and travels toward London.

Outside London, Oliver, starved and exhausted, meets Jack Dawkins, a boy his own age. Jack offers him shelter in the London house of his benefactor. Fagin. It turns out that Fagin is a career criminal who trains orphan boys to pick pocket for him. After a few days of training. Oliver is sent on a pick pocketing mission with two other boys. When he sees them swipe a handkerchief from an elderly gentleman, Oliver is horrified and runs off. He is caught but narrowly escapes being convicted for the theft. Mr. Brownlow, the man whose handkerchief was stolen, takes the feverish Oliver to his home and nurses him back to health.

Mr. Brownlow is struck by Oliver's resemblance to a portrait of a young woman that hangs in his house. Oliver thrives in Mr. Brownlow's home, but two young adults in Fagin's gang, Bill Sikes and his lover Nancy capture Oliver and return him to Fagin. Fagin sends Oliver to assist Sikes in a burglary. Oliver is shot by a servant of the house and after Sikes escapes is taken in by the women who live there, Mrs. Maylie and her beautiful adopted niece, Rose. They grow fond of Oliver, and he spends an idyllic summer with them in the countryside. But Fagin and a mysterious man named Monks are set on recapturing Oliver. Meanwhile it is revealed that Oliver's mother left behind a gold locket when she died. Monks obtained and destroyed that locket. When the Maylies came to London, Nancy meets secretly with Rose and informs her of Fagin's designs, but a member of Fagin's gang overhears the conversation. When a word of Nancy's disclosure reaches Sikes, he brutally murders Nancy and flees London. Pursued by his guilty conscience and an angry mob, he inadvertently hangs himself while trying to escape. Mr. Brownlow, with whom the Maylies have reunited Oliver, confronts Monks and wrings the truth about Oliver's half-brother. Their father, Mr. Leeford, was unhappily married to a wealthy woman and had an affair with Oliver's mother, Agnes Fleming. Monks has been pursuing Oliver all along in the hopes of ensuring that his half-brother is deprived of his share of the family inheritance. Mr. Brownlow forces Monks to sign over Oliver's share to Oliver. Moreover, it is discovered that Rose is Agnes' younger sister, hence Oliver's aunt. Fagin is hung for his crimes. Finally. Mr. Brownlow adopts Oliver, and the Maylies retire to a blissful existence in the countryside.

3. Method

This study deals with a novel of *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens, which was written in 1837. The method used in this study is library research (Qualitative) where some reference books, articles, essays, and internet sites which are relevant with the social condition of Victorian era and the background of Charles Dickens were used to interpret this novel. Attar (1993) says Library research is research that is been done in the library, where the researcher gain data and information about the research object through books and other visual stuffs.

The primary literary source used for this research was the novel written by Charles Dickens, entitled *Oliver Twist*, the writer found an interesting idea to describe crime and social gap in London in the 19th century or London in Victorian era. Thus, in the case of this study, sociological approach was used. Sociological approach starts with a conviction that art's relations to society are citally important, and that the investigation og these relationships may organize and deepen one's aesthetic response to a work of art (Scott, 1977). Sociological criticism will reveal social conditions of certain time in certain country.

4. Result and Discussion

4.1. Result

- Critique of Victorian Society

By highlighting both the cruelty and benevolence present within Victorian society, Dickens critiques the era's rigid social hierarchy and challenges the notion that wealth is synonymous with virtue. In portraying the struggles and mistreatment of the poor, Dickens's work calls for social reform, urging the upper classes to recognize their responsibility toward the less fortunate. Here are key aspects of this critique:

1) Urban Decay and Criminal Underworld

The novel vividly depicts the squalor and moral corruption of London's slums, presenting them as breeding grounds for crime and despair. Dickens describes the filth, overcrowding, and lawlessness of areas like Jacob's Island, emphasizing the neglect of urban poor communities.

Fagin's den symbolizes the degradation and moral ambiguity that arise from such an environment, where survival often necessitates unethical choices.

2) Social Class and Economic Disparity

In *Oliver Twist*, Dickens presents a vivid portrayal of poverty and the harsh realities faced by the lower class. The character of Oliver Twist, an orphan raised in a workhouse, embodies the plight of the vulnerable and the oppressed.

“The room in which the boys were fed, was a large stone hall, with a copper at one end: out of which the master, dressed in an apron for the purpose, and assisted by one or two women, ladled the gruel at mealtimes; of this festive composition each boy had one porringer, and no more — except on occasions of great public rejoicing, when he had two ounces and a quarter of bread besides.

The bowls never wanted washing. The boys polished them with their spoons till they shone again; and when they had performed this operation (which never took very long, the spoons being nearly as large as the bowls), they would sit staring at the copper, with such eager eyes, as if they could have devoured the very bricks of which it was composed; employing themselves, meanwhile, in sucking their fingers most assiduously, with the view of catching up any stray splashes of gruel that might have been cast thereon.”

In this passage, Dickens depicts the miserable conditions of poor children in workhouses who are given very little food, while they are constantly hungry. This scene reflects the inequality between the upper class, who live in luxury, and the lower class, who live in almost inhuman conditions. Through Oliver’s interactions with various characters, Dickens highlights the lack of empathy among the wealthy. The workhouse system, depicted as cruel and dehumanizing, represents the government’s failure to protect society’s most vulnerable members.

- **Morality and Compassion**

Dickens often depicts social injustice and inhumane treatment of the poor, while showing the importance of human compassion: as quoted from the Oliver Twist passage below:

“Please, sir, I want some more”.

The master was a fat, healthy man; but he turned very pale. He gazed in stupefied astonishment at the small rebel for a few seconds, and then clung to support the copper. The assistants were paralyzed with wonder; the boys with fear.

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

‘Please, sir,’ replied Oliver, ‘I want some more.’

The master aimed a blow at Oliver’s head with the ladle; pinioned him in his arm; and shrieked aloud for the beadle.”

This passage reflects a moral irony: orphans like Oliver, already suffering from hunger, are punished simply for daring to ask for more. Dickens uses this moment to criticize Victorian society, which was often cruel to the less fortunate.

Dickens integrates themes of morality throughout Oliver Twist, often presenting characters who embody either moral virtue or moral corruption. For instance, Mr. Brownlow, a wealthy but kind man, contrasts with the self-serving figures in Oliver’s life, such as Fagin and Bill Sikes, who exploit the weak for their gain. Through these contrasts, Dickens suggests that true morality is found in compassion and social responsibility, regardless of social class.

Charles Dickens’ Oliver Twist is a rich narrative that explores themes of morality and compassion, particularly as they relate to social injustice, poverty, and the human condition. These themes are central to the novel and reflect Dickens’ critique of Victorian society, which he portrays as deeply flawed and often lacking in humanity. Below is a detailed analysis of how morality and compassion manifest in the novel:

- **Morality in Oliver Twist**

Morality in Oliver Twist is explored through the contrast between virtue and vice. Dickens uses the characters and their circumstances to illustrate moral dilemmas and societal failings.

1. The Struggle Between Good and Evil

Oliver as a Moral Touchstone: Oliver Twist, the protagonist, represents innate goodness and purity. Despite being born into a harsh and corrupt world, he maintains his moral integrity. His innocence serves as a foil to the cruelty and immorality surrounding him. **Fagin and Sikes:** These characters embody vice and moral

corruption. Fagin's manipulation of children into crime and Sikes' violent, self-serving nature highlight the depravity that emerges in a society lacking compassion.

Nancy's Moral Ambiguity: Nancy is a complex character who exists in a gray area of morality. Although she is part of Fagin's gang, she shows compassion and a desire for redemption, particularly in her efforts to protect Oliver. Her ultimate sacrifice underscores the theme of moral complexity.

2. Critique of Institutional Morality

Dickens critiques the moral hypocrisy of Victorian institutions like the workhouse and the legal system. The workhouse is depicted as a place devoid of compassion, where the poor are treated with contempt rather than care.

The characters representing authority, such as Mr. Bumble and Mrs. Mann, often act in self-interest, exposing the lack of genuine morality in the systems meant to help the vulnerable.

- Compassion in Oliver Twist

Compassion is depicted as a vital but often scarce quality in the world of *Oliver Twist*. Dickens emphasizes the importance of empathy in overcoming societal and individual challenges.

1. Acts of Kindness

Mr. Brownlow: As a benefactor, Mr. Brownlow is one of the few characters who shows genuine compassion towards Oliver. He provides him with a safe home and education, offering hope amidst the harshness of Oliver's life.

Nancy's Compassion: Despite her circumstances, Nancy demonstrates remarkable empathy, particularly in her interactions with Oliver. Her protection of him and her moral struggle highlight the redemptive power of compassion.

2. Lack of Compassion in Society

Dickens critiques the indifference of the wealthy and privileged classes toward the suffering of the poor. Characters like the workhouse authorities treat poverty as a moral failing rather than a condition deserving empathy.

The exploitation of children, such as Oliver and the other pickpockets, underscores the societal failure to care for its most vulnerable members.

3. Redemption Through Compassion

Compassion is portrayed as a transformative force. For example, Nancy's love for Oliver leads her to defy Fagin and Sikes, ultimately sacrificing her life to save him. Dickens suggests that societal reform and personal redemption are only possible through acts of empathy and kindness.

4.2 Discussion

The analysis of Victorian fiction reveals a pervasive theme of social class-based hypocrisy, often masked by a facade of moral uprightness. Characters, particularly those belonging to the upper echelons of society, frequently adhere to strict social codes and moral doctrines while secretly indulging in vices and engaging in immoral behavior. This discrepancy between public image and private reality highlights the performative nature of Victorian morality, where social standing and reputation were paramount.

For instance, in Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*, the seemingly respectable Miss Havisham, despite her wealth and social standing, is consumed by bitterness and cynicism, harboring a deep-seated resentment towards men and society. Her extravagant and eccentric lifestyle, while outwardly eccentric, serves as a mask for her inner turmoil and disillusionment. Similarly, in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Lord Henry Wotton, with his cynical wit and hedonistic philosophy, embodies the hypocrisy of a society that values appearances over genuine morality. He encourages Dorian to pursue pleasure and self-indulgence while maintaining a façade of respectability.

The exploration of social class further complicates the understanding of Victorian hypocrisy. Characters from lower social strata often faced harsher judgments and stricter moral codes, while the upper classes enjoyed greater freedom and leniency. This disparity highlights the inherent inequities within Victorian society and the way in which social class influenced the perception and enforcement of morality. The findings of this study resonate with contemporary discussions on social performance, authenticity, and the construction of identity. The Victorian era, with its emphasis on appearances and social conformity, provides a valuable lens through which to examine contemporary anxieties about authenticity and the performance of self in the digital age.

5. Conclusion

Through *Oliver Twist*, Charles Dickens provides a powerful critique of the social inequalities and moral issues prevalent in Victorian society. Dickens's portrayal of social class divisions and the complex moral struggles within Victorian England reflects his belief in empathy and social justice. The novel's emphasis on compassion and moral responsibility resonates with readers even today, as it speaks to universal issues of inequality and ethics. Dickens's work serves as both a reflection of his time and a call to action, emphasizing literature's role in advocating for social change.

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