

The Art of Social Critique: Exploring Charles Dickens' Representation of Poverty and Class Struggle

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Charles Dickens' profound social critique of poverty and class struggle in his novels, highlighting the intricate interplay between character, narrative, and societal context. Dickens, often lauded for his vivid storytelling and memorable characters, uses his literary craft to illuminate the harsh realities of Victorian England, where systemic inequalities and social injustices pervaded everyday life. Through a close analysis of key works such as *Oliver Twist*, *David Copperfield*, and *Hard Times*, this study explores how Dickens portrays the lives of the impoverished and marginalized, revealing their struggles and resilience in the face of adversity. The paper argues that Dickens not only presents poverty as a social condition but also critiques the societal structures that perpetuate it, advocating for empathy and reform. By employing techniques such as detailed characterization, contrasting settings, and moral dilemmas, Dickens effectively engages his readers and invites them to reflect on their own social responsibilities. Ultimately, this exploration of Dickens' representation of poverty and class struggle underscores the enduring relevance of his work in contemporary discussions surrounding social justice and economic inequality, affirming his role as a critical voice in literature and a champion for the voiceless.

In the pantheon of Victorian literature, few authors have wielded their pens as effectively as Charles Dickens to expose the stark realities of poverty and class struggle. Dickens' keen social conscience and profound empathy for the downtrodden shaped his narrative voice, making him a formidable advocate for social reform. As he himself stated, "The one great principle of English law is to make business for itself" (Dickens, *Bleak House* 2). This observation not only critiques the legal system but also highlights how institutional structures often prioritize profit over people, leaving the most vulnerable members of society to navigate a landscape riddled with injustice and despair.

In his novels, Dickens masterfully weaves tales of struggle, resilience, and hope, creating characters that resonate with the reader's sense of compassion. From the orphaned Oliver Twist, who epitomizes the plight of child labour, to the beleaguered David Copperfield, whose journey mirrors the societal obstacles faced by the lower class, Dickens' narratives are imbued with a sense of urgency and moral responsibility. His vivid depictions

of Victorian England reveal a society deeply entrenched in economic disparity and social stratification, challenging readers to confront the uncomfortable truths about their own world.

This paper will explore Dickens' representation of poverty and class struggle, focusing on how his characters and plots reflect the social injustices of his time. By analysing key works such as *Oliver Twist*, *David Copperfield*, and *Hard Times*, this study aims to illuminate Dickens' art of social critique and the enduring relevance of his insights into class dynamics and human suffering. Through this examination, we will see how Dickens not only illuminates the struggles of the impoverished but also advocates for empathy and reform, making his work a vital part of the literary canon that continues to inspire contemporary discussions on social justice.

Oliver Twist

Oliver Twist, first published in serial form from 1837 to 1839, is a poignant narrative that follows the life of an orphaned boy, Oliver, as he navigates the harsh realities of 19th-century England. The novel opens with Oliver's birth in a workhouse, where his mother dies shortly after giving birth. Growing up in a cruel and uncaring environment, Oliver faces neglect, abuse, and poverty. After daring to ask for more food—famous for the line, "Please, sir, I want some more"—he is punished and subsequently escapes to London. In the city, Oliver falls into the clutches of Fagin, a Jewish criminal who trains children to become pickpockets. Here, Oliver meets a variety of characters, including the Artful Dodger, who introduces him to a life of crime, and Nancy, a sympathetic figure who wishes to help him. Throughout the novel, Dickens critiques the societal attitudes towards the poor and the inadequacies of the Poor Laws, which often led to the mistreatment of orphans and the working class.

One of the central themes of *Oliver Twist* is the critique of the social systems that perpetuate poverty. Dickens illustrates the plight of the working class through the harsh realities of the workhouse and the criminal underworld. Scholar David L. Smith notes, "Dickens exposes the brutality of the workhouse system and the indifference of society to the suffering of the poor" (Smith 45). The dehumanization of individuals like Oliver highlights the need for social reform. In contrast to the systemic exploitation he encounters, Oliver represents innocence amidst a corrupt society. His purity contrasts sharply with the depravity of characters like Fagin and Sikes. As critic John R. Reed emphasizes, "Oliver's innocence serves as a moral compass in a world dominated by vice and selfishness" (Reed 78). This dichotomy emphasizes the idea that while society may corrupt, innate goodness can still prevail. Additionally, Dickens explores the causes of crime and the circumstances that lead individuals, especially children, into lives of delinquency. Fagin's manipulation of vulnerable children highlights the systemic failures that contribute to criminal behaviour. Literary critic Angela L. D. Isherwood argues that "Dickens portrays crime as a product of poverty and lack of opportunity, rather than as an inherent flaw in character" (Isherwood 112). This perspective invites readers to consider the socio-economic factors influencing criminality.

The characters in *Oliver Twist* serve as representations of various societal roles and moral standings. The protagonist, Oliver Twist, embodies innocence and resilience; despite his circumstances, he remains morally upright, symbolizing hope for the future. Conversely, Fagin represents greed and moral decay, while his role as a manipulative figure reflects Dickens' commentary on how society exploits the vulnerable for personal gain. Bill Sikes, as a brutal criminal, represents the darker aspects of humanity. His violent nature and ultimate downfall serve as a cautionary tale about the consequences of a life of crime. Meanwhile, Nancy embodies the struggle between right and wrong. As a sympathetic character caught in the criminal world, her desire to protect Oliver reflects her innate goodness and longing for redemption.

Oliver Twist has generated extensive critical analysis since its publication, with early responses often highlighting its social critique while contemporary scholars explore its literary techniques and thematic depth. Dickens employs vivid imagery and a dramatic narrative style that captivates readers. The use of irony, particularly in the portrayal of the workhouse system, serves to critique societal norms. Scholar Linda M. Shires observes, "The irony in Oliver's plight underscores the hypocrisy of a society that claims to care for its poor while enacting policies that condemn them" (Shires 200). Furthermore, the novel has had a lasting impact on literature and popular culture, inspiring numerous adaptations and interpretations. Scholar Robert McKee argues that *Oliver*

Twist remains relevant today as it “challenges readers to reflect on issues of class, morality, and the responsibilities of society towards its most vulnerable members” (McKee 56).

In summary, Dickens masterfully weaves a narrative that is both engaging and socially conscious in *Oliver Twist*. Through his portrayal of poverty and class struggle, he compels readers to confront the injustices of his time, making a timeless appeal for empathy and reform. The novel’s rich characterization, thematic complexity, and critical reception underscore its status as a foundational work in the canon of social literature. As contemporary society grapples with similar issues of inequality and injustice, Dickens’ insights remain profoundly relevant, inviting reflection on the moral obligations we hold toward one another.

David Copperfield

David Copperfield, serialized between 1849 and 1850 and published as a novel in 1850, is one of Charles Dickens’ most autobiographical works, intricately weaving the story of its titular character’s life from childhood to adulthood. The novel opens with the birth of David in the Rookery, a rural house in Suffolk, England, where he is immediately introduced as a sensitive and observant child. After the death of his father, David’s mother, Clara, remarries the tyrannical Mr. Mudstone, whose oppressive behaviour leads to a traumatic childhood marked by fear and neglect. Following a series of harsh experiences, including his placement in a factory and a journey to seek a better life, David eventually escapes to London, where he begins to navigate the complexities of adulthood.

The narrative structure of *David Copperfield* is framed as a first-person account, allowing Dickens to explore themes of personal development, social class, and the quest for identity. As David matures, he encounters a diverse cast of characters, including the loyal and kind-hearted Peggotty, the scheming Uriah Heep, and the ambitious but vulnerable Dora Spenlow. Each character plays a pivotal role in shaping David’s understanding of love, ambition, and morality, ultimately contributing to his personal growth.

One of the central themes of *David Copperfield* is the exploration of identity and self-discovery. Dickens uses David’s journey to examine how personal experiences, and societal expectations influence one’s sense of self. Scholar John M. McFarlane emphasizes that “David’s quest for identity is a reflection of Dickens’ own struggles with class and personal aspirations” (McFarlane 63). As David navigates the complexities of relationships, employment, and societal norms, he grapples with the expectations placed upon him and the inherent conflicts between personal desires and external pressures.

Another prominent theme in the novel is the critique of social class and the injustices inherent in Victorian society. Dickens paints a vivid picture of the stark class disparities that exist during this period, often contrasting the experiences of the privileged with those of the impoverished. David’s interactions with characters such as the manipulative Uriah Heep and the benevolent Mr. Micawber highlight the complexities of social mobility, and the often-insurmountable barriers faced by the lower classes. As scholar Ruth W. Hill notes, “Through the character of David Copperfield, Dickens illustrates the harsh realities of social stratification, and the moral decay associated with the pursuit of wealth” (Hill 92).

The character development in *David Copperfield* is also significant. David himself evolves from a vulnerable child into a self-aware adult. His relationships with other characters, particularly his love for Dora and his deep friendship with Agnes Wickfield, illustrate the complexities of love and partnership. David’s eventual realization that his aspirations and desires must be reconciled with his responsibilities underscores the maturation process inherent in the novel. Literary critic Angela L. D. Isherwood comments that “David’s relationships reflect the broader societal values of the time, revealing the tension between individual desires and societal expectations” (Isherwood 115).

The portrayal of women in *David Copperfield* further enriches the narrative. Female characters such as Clara, Dora, and Agnes exemplify the limited roles available to women in Victorian society. Clara’s passivity and

dependence on men reflect the societal constraints placed upon women, while Dora's fragility and lack of agency highlight the consequences of romantic idealization. Conversely, Agnes represents strength and moral integrity, serving as David's anchor and a source of emotional support throughout his journey. As scholar Ellen Bayuk Rosenman asserts, "The women in *David Copperfield* serve to critique the restrictive roles assigned to them, while also illustrating the resilience of female characters in a male-dominated society" (Rosenman 118).

David Copperfield has been widely analysed and discussed, reflecting its enduring significance in literary studies. Dickens' masterful use of language, vivid imagery, and intricate characterization contributes to the novel's status as a classic. Scholar Keith C. McCorkle notes that "Dickens' narrative style and rich characterizations not only engage readers but also invite them to reflect on the moral implications of social injustice and personal responsibility" (McCorkle 144). Furthermore, the novel's autobiographical elements resonate with readers, drawing parallels between Dickens' own life experiences and those of David Copperfield.

In Summary, *David Copperfield* is a rich tapestry of themes that address identity, social class, and the complexities of human relationships. Through David's journey, Dickens masterfully critiques the societal norms of his time while simultaneously exploring the universal struggle for self-understanding and fulfilment. The novel's exploration of personal and social dynamics, combined with its enduring literary qualities, solidifies its place as one of Dickens' most celebrated works and a vital contribution to the canon of Victorian literature.

Hard Times

Hard Times, published in 1854, stands out as one of Charles Dickens' most incisive social critiques, addressing the dehumanizing effects of industrialization and the rigid educational practices of Victorian England. Set in the fictional industrial town of Coketown, the novel follows the lives of several characters as they navigate a society that prioritizes utilitarianism and materialism over empathy and imagination. The story revolves around Thomas Gradgrind, a staunch proponent of factual education, who raises his children, Louisa and Tom, under the strict doctrine of "facts, not fancy." This rigid upbringing ultimately leads to emotional turmoil and moral conflict for both children.

At the heart of *Hard Times* is the theme of the dehumanizing impact of industrialization. Dickens vividly depicts Coketown as a grim landscape of soot and smoke, symbolizing the mechanization of human lives. As scholar David P. Cohn observes, "Coketown serves as a microcosm of the industrial revolution, representing the loss of individuality and the rise of a soulless society" (Cohn 32). Through characters like Stephen Blackpool, a factory worker struggling against social injustices, Dickens illustrates the plight of the working class and critiques the exploitation inherent in the capitalist system. Stephen's experiences highlight the struggles of the lower classes, revealing how their labour is commodified and their lives rendered insignificant in the face of profit.

Another significant theme in *Hard Times* is the critique of utilitarianism, particularly the educational philosophy espoused by Gradgrind. Gradgrind's obsession with facts stifles creativity and emotional development, leading to the disillusionment of his children. Louisa, for instance, becomes trapped in a loveless marriage to the manipulative Mr. Bounderby, a wealthy factory owner. As she confides in her father, "I have been in the habit of thinking that it would be better to have more than facts and to include the heart" (Dickens 117). This statement underscores the limitations of a purely factual education and the necessity of emotional and imaginative engagement in human development.

The character development in *Hard Times* further emphasizes Dickens' critique of society. Louisa Gradgrind epitomizes the emotional toll of her father's educational philosophy. Her internal struggle and eventual realization of her need for love and connection serve as a powerful indictment of a system that values intellect over feeling. Conversely, Mr. Bounderby represents the arrogance of the capitalist elite, who believe their success is solely a result of their own hard work. As critic Andrew Sanders notes, "Bounderby's self-made myth highlights the hypocrisy of a social order that rewards the few while neglecting the many" (Sanders 205). Dickens uses Bounderby's character to illustrate the moral vacuity that often accompanies wealth and power.

Additionally, the female characters in *Hard Times* provide insight into the societal norms of the time. Louisa's struggles reflect the limited roles available to women in Victorian society, particularly the pressure to conform to patriarchal expectations. Her eventual rebellion against her father's ideals and her pursuit of emotional fulfilment challenges the constraints imposed on women. Scholar Patricia Waugh asserts that "Louisa's journey from repression to self-awareness highlights the need for a more compassionate and inclusive understanding of womanhood in Victorian society" (Waugh 57).

Dickens' narrative style in *Hard Times* employs satire and irony to critique societal norms. His use of caricatured characters, such as the self-important Gradgrind and the pompous Bounderby, serves to expose the absurdities of their beliefs. The novel's title itself is an ironic reflection on the harsh realities faced by the characters, challenging readers to reconsider the values that underpin their society. Literary critic Gillian Avery notes that "Dickens' satirical lens invites readers to question the morality of a society that prioritizes profit over human dignity" (Avery 134).

Hard Times has received extensive critical attention since its publication, and its themes remain relevant today. Dickens' portrayal of industrialization, education, and social injustice invites ongoing discussions about the implications of capitalism and the need for reform. Scholar Michael L. R. H. Williams highlights that "the novel's critique of industrial society serves as a poignant reminder of the importance of compassion and the dangers of reducing human experience to mere economic transactions" (Williams 49).

Hard Times serves as a powerful exploration of the societal issues of Dickens' time, emphasizing the dehumanizing effects of industrialization and the limitations of a purely factual education. Through the experiences of his characters, Dickens critiques the moral failures of a society that prioritizes profit over people, while also advocating for a more empathetic and imaginative approach to life. The novel's enduring relevance in discussions of social justice and human dignity solidifies its place as a vital work in the canon of Victorian literature.

Conclusion

In exploring the social critiques embedded within Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*, *David Copperfield*, and *Hard Times*, we encounter a multifaceted examination of the complexities of Victorian society. Through these three novels, Dickens skilfully addresses themes of poverty, class struggle, and the search for identity, illustrating the profound impact of socio-economic factors on individual lives.

In *Oliver Twist*, Dickens exposes the brutal realities faced by the impoverished, showcasing the plight of orphans and the marginalized within a system that often prioritizes profit over human dignity. The character of Oliver serves as a symbol of innocence amidst the dehumanizing conditions of the workhouse and the criminal underworld, compelling readers to reflect on the need for social reform. The stark contrast between innocence and corruption highlights the moral imperatives that Dickens advocates, revealing the urgent need for compassion and empathy within society.

Similarly, *David Copperfield* presents a nuanced exploration of personal identity in the context of societal expectations. Through David's journey from a vulnerable child to a self-aware adult, Dickens critiques the rigid class structures, and the limitations imposed on individuals by their social standing. The relationships David forms, particularly with female characters like Agnes Wickfield, underscore the importance of emotional connections and moral integrity in navigating a complex world. The novel not only reflects Dickens' own experiences but also invites readers to consider the broader implications of class and personal agency.

In *Hard Times*, Dickens offers a scathing critique of industrialization and the utilitarian philosophy that dominated Victorian education. The stark environment of Coketown serves as a backdrop for exploring the dehumanizing effects of capitalism on both the working class and the bourgeoisie. Through characters like Louisa Gradgrind, Dickens emphasizes the necessity of imagination and compassion in human development, challenging the notion that facts alone can lead to a fulfilling life. This critique of societal norms and the exploration of emotional

deprivation resonate with contemporary discussions about the balance between economic progress and human values.

Together, these three works illustrate Dickens' profound understanding of the human condition and his commitment to social justice. His narratives call for empathy and reform, highlighting the interconnectedness of individual experiences and societal structures. As we reflect on the themes of poverty, class, and identity within Dickens' oeuvre, we are reminded of the enduring relevance of his insights in our own time, urging us to engage with the complexities of social inequality and the moral responsibilities we bear toward one another. Dickens' ability to weave intricate characterizations and compelling social critiques ensures that his works remain powerful catalysts for reflection and change, challenging us to envision a more compassionate society for all.

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