

Child Labour as an Instrument of Social Criticism in Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*

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Abstract: Charles Dickens is a prominent name in Victorian English Literature and his novels are well known for their keen observation on the society, often in a satiric or humorous manner. *Oliver Twist*, which is Dickens' second novel, gives a detailed account of the life and sufferings of its protagonist. Besides, the novel also exposes the cruel treatment of the many orphans in London in the mid-nineteenth century, thus highlighting the theme of child labour. In fact, in *Oliver Twist*, Dickens satirizes the hypocrisies of his time, including, but not limited to, child labour and the recruitment of street children as criminals.

This paper will try to show, how Dickens portrays the evils of the Victorian Society, by highlighting the inhuman conditions the child labourers were subjected to. The paper will also try to prove, on the basis of clear understanding of the Victorian Society, how these child labourers often fell in the company of criminals and resorted to petty crimes to earn a living. Further, the paper will also touch upon certain other writers and their works, for instance, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and her "The Cry of the Children" and Romantic writer William Blake and his "The Chimney Sweeper", to highlight how the problem of child labour preoccupied and troubled many writers.

Key Words: Charles Dickens, Child labour, Social Criticism, Victorian Society.

I. Introduction

It is a common belief that Marxism gives rise to, or at the very least, influences most other social phenomena including social relations, morality and ideology along with political and legal systems. One could therefore infer that a Marxist society, especially in the case of England at the time of the industrial revolution, gave rise to a base and superstructure depicted by the economic system and the resultant social relations respectively. Charles Dickens, in his widely read *Oliver Twist*, exploits this social structure which gave rise to a number of social evils, including child labour, which becomes the central motif in the story.

II. Evils Of The Victorian Society

Dickens begins the story with the criticism of the place and situation surrounding the birth of his central character – Oliver Twist. He does so to highlight, right at the very beginning, how morality or ideology could be considered a very shaky concept in those days. He immediately goes ahead and shares with the readers the manner of upbringing of his protagonist. He says that the Parish authorities, upon learning that the workhouse where Oliver Twist was born, lacked certain means necessary for his nurture and care, "magnanimously and humanely resolved, that Oliver should be 'farmed,' or, in other words, that he should be dispatched to a branch-workhouse some three miles off, where twenty or thirty other juvenile offenders against the poor-laws, rolled about the floor all day, without the inconvenience of too much food or too much clothing" [1].

Even at the workhouse, where Oliver Twist is supposed to have some nurture and care, he is met with "a systematic course of treachery and deception" [1]. Dickens goes ahead with a vivid description of the kind of treachery and deception that is rampant in the workhouse. He says that Oliver was:

under the parental superintendence of an elderly female, who received the culprits at and for the consideration of sevenpence-halfpenny per small head per week. Sevenpence-halfpenny's worth per week is a good round diet for a child; a great deal may be got for sevenpence-halfpenny, quite enough to overload its stomach, and make it uncomfortable. The elderly female was a woman of wisdom and experience; she knew what was good for children; and she had a very accurate perception of what was good for herself. So, she appropriated the greater part of the weekly stipend to her own use, and consigned the rising parochial generation to even a shorter allowance than was originally provided for them. [1]

One can therefore see that right in the very onset itself, Dickens goes to all lengths to prepare the reader for worse to come, so much so that he ends the first chapter with these words: "Oliver cried lustily. If he could

have known that he was an orphan, left to the tender mercies of church-wardens and overseers, perhaps he would have cried the louder” [1]. This only foreshadows the future life events of the child protagonist, which according to Dickens would be a constant reason to make him want to cry and express his helplessness.

The beginning of this paper asserts how Marxism influences certain social phenomena, and it seems prudent to analyze a certain social aspect of this narrative by Dickens, wherein he discusses how the protagonist of his story came to be named. The character of the beadle explains to Mrs. Mann – “We name our fondlings in alphabetical order. The last name was a S,--Swubble, I named him. This was a T,--Twist, I named *him*. The next one comes will be Unwin, and the next Vilkins. I have got names ready made to the end of the alphabet, and all the way through it again, when we come to Z” [1]. This little extract clearly tells of the social structure prevalent at the time where the underprivileged were even deprived the right to name themselves.

It must however be noted that a new born infant is not capable nor intends to name himself / herself. But the point of analyzing this piece of discourse is to put forth the argument that as the chasm between the classes grew wide, it was noted that the upper class or those belonging to an economically stable class did not let go of any opportunity to assert their authority or control over those who were less privileged. Dickens satirizes this very aspect of the society by humorizing the conditions in which his protagonist was named what he was. This is one of the ways that Dickens employs to portray the evils of the Victorian society. In another instance, Dickens satirizes the prevalent laws of England by depicting his protagonist – Oliver Twist, crying himself to sleep – “on a rough hard bed, he sobbed himself to sleep. What a novel illustration of the tender laws of England! They let the paupers go to sleep” [1]!

The very notion of the society shaping the social behavior and customs is brought forward by yet another instance where a certain Mr. Gamfield, belonging to the working class, is denied the right to take in Oliver Twist from the workhouse to make him an apprentice in his chimney sweeping business.

‘When I says I will, I means I will,’ replied Mr. Gamfield doggedly.

‘You’re a rough speaker, my friend, but you look an honest, open-hearted man,’ said the old gentleman. [1]

This particular narrative brings into mind George Bernard Shaw’s *Pygmalion*. The very concept of that play was to depict to the audience that society and upbringing can in fact shape the language of the public. Dickens uses the same concept in this narrative which Shaw only does in greater detail in his play which appeared almost half a century later.

III. Criminals And Crime For Living

The entry of Sowerberry and the consequent treatment of Oliver Twist as his apprentice only paves the way for him to run away to London and that part of the narrative provides the second point of focus for this paper. It is on his way to London when Oliver meets a certain character named Dodger. This paper will try to show how this character and his friend Charlie Bates exemplify the criminals who resort to petty crimes to earn a living. As the story progresses, Dodger and Bates are seen as protégés of an older character named Fagin who trains them in the art of picking pockets of unsuspecting strangers. These aforementioned characters provide Oliver with lodging and boarding with the hopes that they shall be able to train him in the art too and thereby garner more money and precious items.

The characters of Dodger and Bates are often seen practicing their skills with the help of Fagin who stuffs a variety of things into his pockets and “trotted up and down the room with a stick, in imitation of the manner in which old gentlemen walk about the streets any hour in the day. Sometimes he stopped at the fire-place, and sometimes at the door, making believe that he was staring with all his might into shop-windows” [1]. At this point, Dodger would accidentally step on his boot or Bates would bump into him and with the stealth of experienced pickpockets, do away with either Fagin’s handkerchief or his snuffbox. “If the old gentlemen felt a hand in any one of his pockets, he cried out where it was; and then the game began all over again” [1]. Oliver is also made to practice in a similar way, although at that point he fails to realize the real motive of the seemingly harmless game. It is only later when he is sent out with Dodger and Bates, and when he sees the two boys in action, does it dawn upon him what the game was meant for.

What was Oliver’s horror and alarm as he stood a few paces off, looking on with his eyelids as wide open as they would possibly go, to see the dodger plunge his hand into the old gentleman’s pocket and draw from thence a handkerchief! To see him hand the same to Charlie Bates; and finally to behold them, both running away round the corner at full speed! In an instant the whole mystery of the handkerchiefs, and the watches, and the jewels, and the Jew, rushed upon the boy’s mind. [1]

This exploit, not only exposes the reality of the Victorian society which was then prevalent, it also conveys a social message. Dickens appeals to the readers, through his narration of *Oliver Twist* to leave the vulnerable children where they belong, i.e. in play and education; and to not use them as tools to earn a living. With this preliminary reading of *Oliver Twist*, it is clear that Dickens highlights the malpractices of the Victorian society by depicting the inhuman ways the child labourers were subjected to. He also makes a strong statement by highlighting the need for abolition of child labour altogether.

IV. Other Writers And Their Views

Very similar to Dickens, “who had already engaged in his own more systematic attack on English Society” [2], Elizabeth Barrett Browning too uses her work to shape the sentimentalities of the prevalent Victorian society, especially with regards to child labour. Peaches Henry notes in his essay how “she viewed herself as a poet-prophet speaking at the centre of culture to an audience and seeking to influence that audience” [3]. She does so using these lines:

But the young, young children, O my brothers,
They are weeping bitterly!
They are weeping in the play time of the others,
In the country of the free. [4]

Here, the direct reference to ‘O my brothers’ signifies Barrett Browning’s appeal to the Victorian society to notice the plight of the young children who were forced to work while their age was to play.

William Blake was a romantic poet who also penned the plight of child labourers. He did so in his poems titled “The Chimney Sweeper” which appears in both anthologies, viz. ‘Songs of Innocence’ and ‘Songs of Experience’. In the former anthology, Blake describes how an angel rescues the unfortunate boys, who met their end as child labours, from their coffins and takes them to a sunny meadow. In the latter anthology the speaker of the poem encounters a child chimney sweeper abandoned in the snow while his parents are possibly dead, where the “church” refers to being with God.

V. Conclusion

One can therefore conclude that the social problem of child labour troubled many writers across the age and many of those writers raised their voice against this malpractice by way of their works.

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