

The Phenomenon of Poverty and Child Labor in Charles Dickens's Novels: Oliver Twist, David Copperfield, and Hard Times

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Article History	Abstract
Original Research Article	<i>Analyzing Representation of Poverty and Child Labor in Charles Dickens's Novels: Oliver Twist, David Copperfield, and Hard Times</i> This article examines Dickens's depiction of the social, moral and psychological consequences of deprivation on children, contrasting the contexts of urban poverty, family neglect, and industrial exploitation. Dickens has portrayed the duality of vulnerability and resiliency among children and has endorsed the influence of social institutions, mentorship, and the act of compassion on child development as a factor in both <i>The London Chronicles</i> and <i>A Tale of Two Cities</i> . Through Dickens's three novels, the evolution of social critique that moves away from the individualized trap of social sympathy and focuses more on the structural and systematic struggle of Dickens's characters, highlighting the works enduring relevance towards raising awareness and social responsibility around child welfare and protection.
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1. Introduction

Often lauded for his blend of storytelling and social critique, Charles Dickens is among the most significant literary writers of the Victorian era. Dickens never had to imagine Victorian poverty, child labor, or class inequality; he lived through all three, witnessing the world of the Industrial Revolution at an experiential level (Himmelfarb, 1984, p. 42). Frankel, and John Carey even suggest that his fiction serves as an entertaining lens into the plight of underrepresented social classes, especially children made to work in brutal conditions (Ledger, 2007, p. 88). Dickens personalizes poverty into relatable characters and plots, challenging readers to feel indignant – moreso, responsible for exerting change.

Some of his major works are *Oliver Twist* (1837), *David Copperfield* (1850), and *Hard Times* (1854), which are vivid depictions of life in poverty and the abuse of children. The plight of orphans and the evils of city life are shown in *Oliver Twist* (Bowen 116), Dickens's own experiences as a child laborer and his being deprived of an education are recounted in the novel *David Copperfield* (Forster, 201, p.116), and the depersonalization of industrial production that turned human lives into insignificant means of

production is played out in his novel *Hard Times* (Collins, 1963, p.59). Collectively, the novels create a textual topos of social injustice, told and resisted.

In this paper, we examine the complex relationship between poverty and child labour, with reference to a selection of Dickens novels, which reflect the contemporary social and political realities of the Victorian society that Dickens lived in, and how Dickensian literature could bring about a change in the Victorian society that Dickens lived in. The study also underlines Dickens as a social reformer by demonstrating how Dickens used children as victims of powerful social and economic forces to provoke public awareness, empathy and ultimately the need for a more human society.

1.1 Historical and Social Background of Poverty and Child Labor in Nineteenth-Century England:

During the Victorian era, England went through a lot of changes in its economy, cities, and industries. This changed the way people lived and worked in Victorian England. The Industrial Revolution, while facilitating unprecedented technological advancements and productivity, also

singularly engendered social inequalities. Many of the jobs that new factories and cities opened were exploitative and paid poorly, but this work hurt the lower classes the most (Himmelfarb, 1984, p. 51). A lot of people were poor, and in the end, many families had no choice but to put their kids to work.

1.1.1 Poverty in England during the Industrial Revolution

Industrial capitalism developed in tandem with the proximity of wealth and poverty. The working poor had to live in small spaces in crowded cities with little or no sanitation or healthcare (Flint, 2012, p. 67), but the middle and upper classes benefited from the economy's growth. Contemporary social researchers documented slums where entire families resided in a single room, eking out a meager existence while remaining unemployed. The 1834 Poor Law, which tried to manage public relief through workhouses, was widely seen as an overly harsh response to poverty, leading to workhouses that were stigmatized, mistreated, and didn't give enough help (Briggs, 1990, p. 143). So, poverty was poverty not only in terms of money but also in terms of how it affected the way society treated the poor.

1.1.2 Child Labor as a Social Reality

One of the most obvious effects of poverty was that children had to work. Some kids as young as five or six were found working in factories, mines, and workshops for 12 to 16 hours a day in unhealthy conditions (Humphries 2010, p.95). Kids were great because they could do a lot of the fine work that needed small hands and dexterity, but they only got paid a small amount of what an adult would make. For the parents of many impoverished families, sending their children to work was not a choice but a necessity, as the combined income of both parents and children barely ensured subsistence (Cunningham, 1991, p. 78).

1.1.3 Social Criticism and Public Awareness

Reformers, journalists, and writers soon began to notice the harsh realities of child labor and poverty. Parliamentary inquiries and reports, including the "Sadler Report" of 1832 and the debates over the "Factory Act," looked into how workers were being treated in factories and mines (Nardinelli, 1990, p. 101). The reports shocked the public and led to progressive changes in the law, like the Factory Acts of 1833 and 1847, which limited the hours that children could work and started the system of compulsory schooling.

2. Dickens's Novels About Poverty and Child Labor

2.1 Child Labor and Poverty in Oliver Twist

Dickens uses his own memories of being poor as a child to show how hard it is to be poor, how social snobbery works,

and how young people are oppressed. He does this through the eyes of innocent children, making a social commentary on institutional neglect, inner-city squalor, and how easy it was for children to get into forced labor or crime to survive (Slater, 2009, p. 112).

2.1.1 The Workhouse and Institutional Poverty

In the earliest chapters of *Oliver Twist* we are introduced to the brutalities of the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 which built workhouses designed to be a deterrent to poverty. These were institutions that were known for their brutality, where they were starving and beaten and received no kindness whatsoever (Englander, 1998, p. 63). This is dramatized through Oliver pleading with the now iconic words, "Please, sir, I want some more" (Wheeler 2011, p. 27) a statement that reflects a hunger but also a problem with institutionalized poverty that strips one of their humanity. The novel reveals the dehumanizing treatment of the destitute children, owing to the workhouse system of the time, which equated poverty with crime and treated the poor as an inessential burden on society.

2.1.2 Social Criticism and Reformist Impulse

Oliver Twist became a key text in the social reform movement, partly due to its vivid representations of malnutrition and child slave labour, but most importantly, and it mirrored the extreme barbarity of urban poverty. Other writers had made the same criticism but Dickens's style brought attention to injustices that official reports or reports of parliamentary debates could not convey with the same emotional force (Hollington, 2013, p. 176).

2.2 Poverty and Child Labor in David Copperfield

Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* (1850) which is full of an autobiographical variety of the struggles of childhood and the social effects poverty in Victorian England. In contrast to Charles Dickens's earlier work, *Oliver Twist*, with its plight of orphans in institutional and urban environments, *David Copperfield* is able to paint family, labor, and social mobility, with broader strokes. Using his own experiences as an example, much of his narrative is autobiographical, reflecting his own experiences of child labour, especially the four months he spent working in a blacking factory at age 12–13 to help his family (Jordan, 2011, p.57).

2.2.1 Early Childhood and Labor Exploitation

David, from the outset, is dealt a hand of loss and deprivation. The line in the book states "His father having died, his 'one and only friend' was typically but unfortunately subjected to work at Murdstone and Grinby's factory - a sordid ground which must represent the fate of millions of children in industrial England" (Sutherland, 2005, p. 102). It is not just a site of alienated labor, but also

a site of emotional and psychological anguish, children are denied "education, recreation and care" in the factory. Through his story of David, Dickens stresses how the poverty force children to work by force, thus taking away their childhood and their identity defined by the suffering.

2.2.2. Education and the Limits of Social Mobility

In David Copperfield, education is closely linked to social class and chance. Dickens shows us a big difference between the harsh education Murdstone forces on people and the care good mentors like Mr. Wickfield and Betsey Trotwood give (Bennett, 1997, p. 74). The differences show that poverty not only makes it harder to get the things you need for a good life, but it also makes it harder to live a moral and intellectual life. According to Dickens, child labor and a lack of education help to keep social systems going by passing on cycles of depravity from one generation to the next

2.2.3 Emotional and Moral Impact of Poverty

Dickens also brings forth the emotional toll of child labor in addition to economic deprivation. David's alienation, fear, and insecurity also highlight the psychological consequences of exploitation (Jordan, 2011, p. 63). In his characterization of children, Dickens frames them as moral agents, strong in their ability to endure and rise above adversity, but forever at risk of moral devolution from a society that not only neglects them, but punishes them as well. The Micawbers and the Peggotty family offer brief and tenuous counter voices to the horrors of poverty, making it clear that while some warmth, love and security may ameliorate some of the negative impact of shabby gentility, financial suffering is the rule and only the exceptionally fortunate those who have both conditions can access both.

2.2.4 Labor, Exploitation, and Social Critique

In David Copperfield, child labor in working-class means of getting by is not just a personal dilemma, it connects to larger questions about social norms. The book is another implicit critique of an economic system that commodifies children for the value of their labor at the same time keeping them largely invisible in the public sphere (Bowring, 2003, p. 88). Dickens describes the realistic and actual conditions of the factory but adds a psychological element to it, the inner life of David which makes it less personal and becomes a social commentary. Through his depiction of the physical and ethical sides of child labor, Dickens draws attention to the need for reform, education, and social responsibility. Dickens did not simply incorporate details about child labor and poverty in David Copperfield to create a vivid background, but instead used them as formative experiences that influenced the

development of character, morals, and the resulting path in society.

2.3 Poverty and Child Labor in Hard Times

Hard Times (1854) is an industrial novel in which the city of Coketown stands for the mechanized, ant-like way of life in England in the middle of the 19th century. It shows how society was morally and mechanically poor, and of course, how boring life was in cities that were becoming industrialized, as Charles Dickens wrote about. Hard Times is about poverty and child labor in relation to the larger structure and institutional form of industrial capitalism (Hughes, 2007, p. 45). This is different from the individualistic focus of Oliver Twist and David Copperfield, which are both books about one person's childhood. Dickens posits that the reproduction of society, driven by industrial efficiency and utilitarian principles, emerges as the prevailing objective of society, jeopardizing children, the world, and human emotionality.

2.3.1 Industrialization and the Mechanization of Childhood

Children are seen as pieces of the industrial machine in Coketown. Young workers are employed by factories and mills under awful conditions, working long hours and with inadequate regard for safety or development (Jordan, 2011, p. 104). As with the Mr. Thomas Gradgrind of the novel, the utilitarian schooling of children reveals how the ethos of industry ultimately denies the human capacities for creativity, emotional development, and unique psychological welfare. Dickens, through the connection of education and the spiderweb of labor exploitation, comments on a society that considers children as nothing but productive machines and then fails to realize their humanity (Briggs, 1999, p. 72).

2.3.2 Child Labor and Social Inequality

In Hard Times, the focus is on the overlap of poverty and social class. Crisis shows that children from a lower class family like that of Stephen Blackpool has to work in order to exist and on the other hand, children from the rich class get opportunities of advancement and safety (Tambling, 2009, p. 53). Dickens demonstrates the practical consequences of exploiting labor not only through physical toil but also in moral and psychological terms children sacrifice largesse, face hardship, and meet inhumanity in a world that values pecuniary reward over nurturing. With this, the novel reveals how the poverty that the protagonist faces is structural in nature as there are various systemic systems in place that helps reproduce social inequality.

2.3.3 Social Critique through Narrative Technique

Dickens uses satire, allegory, and plain realism to show how he feels about industrial society. Coketown, a dark,

industrial city that is often shown in black and white with the constant sound of wheels and gears, is a metaphor for a social system that stifles the human spirit and stunts the growth of generations of children (Watson, 1995, p. 66). Dickens contrasts the coldness of his enemies with the warmth of characters like Sissy Jupe, who stands for compassion and emotional intelligence. This shows the need for social change and warns against the coldness of industry and losing sight of what it means to be human.

3. Expanded Comparative Analysis of Poverty and Child Labor in Dickens' Novels

While Dickens's novels always focus on social problems with poverty and child labour, we can't compare his works without having to look for their individual perspectives and narrational strategies. *Oliver Twist* thematizes the suffering of orphans in the city and the institution, *David Copperfield* presents a semi-autobiographical representation of the experience of child labour and affluence, and *Hard Times* poses an analysis of systematic exploitation in the industrial city. A comparison between the two novels reveals Dickens's multifaceted and conflicted critique of Victorian society and his (sometimes) half-hearted commitment to social change. (Slater, 2009, p. 118)

3.1 Portrayal of Poverty

Poverty in *Oliver Twist* is visceral, palpable and harsh. Its setting, the workhouse, is a harrowing portrayal of how society has institutionalized the neglect of children. Orphans such as Oliver represent only the victims of what Dickens presented as a discipline and control system against the poor rather than a helping hand (Englander, 1998, p. 63). Outside of the workhouse environment, London streets engulf children in hunger, crime, and immorality. Through the dramatization of these conditions, Dickens is reminding his readers of their social responsibility, and in doing so, he is engaging their sympathy (Wheeler, 2011, p. 33). For instance, when Jakey describes Oliver as 'fresh and innocent' compared to 'Fagin, who was for all intents and purposes a bit of a creep', it shows the contrast between the innocent child character and the thieving creep, and through this contrast, the failing of society to protect the most vulnerable children.

Poverty through the dual lens of the external and internal in *David Copperfield*. We can see how economic exploitation compounds emotional neglect and individual and moral character formation by looking at David's factory work under Murdstone (Bennett, 1997, p. 74). Dickens stresses not only the conditions of staying alive or not, to highlight the issue of poverty, but also caste, identity, reputation, aspirations, and self-development. The novel depicts how family situation, social pressures and economic conditions limit children's formative experiences.

What Dickens is showing us in *Hard Times* is that poverty is both systemic and deeply woven into the fabric of our lives. Hughes (2007) and other economic sociologists have described the industrial city of Coketown as a crawling grid of smoke-filled sorrow and normative monotony (Hughes, 2007, p. 45). Kids become part of the workforce as a common practice as a normalization of economic exploitation. Or perhaps even more so than Dickens, tracing structural poverty itself, industrial and social forces that create and enable the reproduction of inequality, thereby building on the more individual portraits of poverty characteristic of his two earlier novels, *Oliver Twist* and *David Copperfield*.

3.2 Representation of Child Labor

All three novels contain children who work, although in various forms. Children in *Oliver Twist* have a combination of both formal and informal labor: they experience the brutal relations of the workhouse, of apprenticeship, street labor, and a form of carceral labor under the guidance of the criminal exploit Fagin (Garis, 1965, p. 144). Dickens gives us kids and their moral sensibility caught in circumstances, a tension between innocence and corruption.

In *David Copperfield*, just like so many novels and feature presentations that chronicled actual child labor, the theme of child labor rests decidedly on the shoulders of the family and/or certain domestic situations surrounding the child. The pressure is a reflection of the abuse and neglect (Sutherland, 2005, p. 108) intertwined in David's forced labor, as much as it is of economic necessity. So, Dickens here is both commenting on a social wrongdoing "forcing children to work rather than letting them study, play and feel grieve" and a personal tragedy, in how labor deprives children of the things they need in life.

Child labor is common and accepted here. In Coketown, for instance, the children who work in its factories are overworked in boring conditions. This shows a utilitarian view of how people should live to serve the machine, with no thought given to anything other than productivity (Tambling, 2009, p. 53).

3.3 Moral and Psychological Aspects

Dickens shows how poverty and child labor affect people's minds and morals in these three books. *Oliver Twist* illustrates the susceptibility of children to moral degradation (Stone, 1994, p. 52) due to exposure to criminality and neglect. Next, we have *Oliver and the Artful Dodger*.

Hard Times shows how moral choices affect people as a whole. The sterile, factory-like environment in Coketown suppresses empathy and creativity, both manifestations of emotional intelligence (Watson, 1995, p. 66). Dickens

shows how people can survive in brutal systems by showing Sissy Jupe and other characters who are kind and caring. But these people are only exceptions to the rule, and the system shows its flaws. The novels revolve around the idea that these struggles are not just physical hardships, but also forces that shape character, mettle, and mental health. They do this by using hangers-on who make fun of childhood poverty and work.

3.4 Critique of Society and the Desire for Change

All three books are ways to criticize society. For example, *Oliver Twist* shows how bad the workhouses are and how bad urban poverty is while also appealing to the readers' sense of justice (Hollington, 2013, 176). *David Copperfield* shows how mentoring, education, and care from family members can help people who are poor (Bowring, 2003,p.88). It also encourages personal and social responsibility. *Hard Times* criticizes structural and institutional explanations of exploitation, which point to the industrial system itself (Briggs, 1999, p. 72).

In these works, Dickens shows us facets of reform personal, pedagogical, judicial, structural that build on each other one that, at its most radical, he might still reject. His novels suggest that addressing the child labor and poverty crisis necessitates a comprehensive moral, social, and institutional remedy that encompasses both narrative and social action.

Conclusion

This research revealed that the novels of Charles Dickens—namely, *Oliver Twist*, *David Copperfield*, and *Hard Times*—offer profound insights into the poverty and child labor of Victorian England. But what stands out the most is how Dickens shows children not just as victims of circumstance, but as complicated people, each with a natural sense of innocence, resilience, and morality that their surroundings need to and do challenge all the time. The novels are different in every way, but they are both important because they show how social neglect hurts the youngest and weakest people.

In *Oliver Twist*, the workhouse conditions and dangers of living on the street turn the idea of poverty into real harm to people and things. The book shows that when society ignores children and doesn't care about them, they can become desperate and even make moral sacrifices. In this way, Dickens shows how important it is to take care of and be responsible for children. Many of the kids who grow up on the street won't become successful men; instead, they'll become members of society's lower classes, which will continue for generations unless something changes. This is a challenge for every society.

David Copperfield, on the other hand, gives a more personal look at how family relationships, the emotional neglect of foundlings, and the need for money affect a child's growth. David's character is shaped by the people and things around him, as well as the guidance and opportunities he is given. This is true even though *Factory* life is hard and people are mean and nice to him.

The novel argues that poverty is a potential hindrance but states that kids who learn to endure difficult circumstances and make prudent choices succeed with guidance, education, and love thus depicting the mixture of self-determination with social conditions.

In *Hard Times* the lens is on structure and institution, industrial society is framed as something of a life system, looking to maximize and priorities outputs and productivity over whatever dignity, flourishing substance of life, all features of introduction or production in the human realm. *Coketown* children are depicted as children created by a mechanical world wherein emotion, psychology, and morality are constantly being neglected. In doing so, Dickens conveys that child labor and poverty cannot be solved by kindness alone, but rather by systematic change in moral priorities, education, and industry.

There are some things that are the same and some things that are different between these books. In all three, there are issues like homelessness, child labor, and moral confusion. In each case, good and bad things are happening, but they are happening in different ways based on how much care, guidance, and luck there is. A recurring theme in Dickens's work is that social conditions leave permanent scars on children during their most vulnerable years. His writings suggest hope in difficult times and stress the importance of civic duty, or else we will have to deal with the effects of our failures as a society.

In short, the study of these stories shows that Dickens was not only a moral voice, but also a realistic voice when it came to caring about the welfare of children. Poverty and labor are not merely economic constructs; they encompass character, morality, and social dimensions. Through Dickens's stories, readers are forced to think about how families, communities, and institutions are responsible for a child and how we as a society must protect, nurture, and guide our most innocent. Seventy years later, the novels still speak to us because we know that to make the world a better place, we need to listen to and help children who are going through tough times.

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