IJCRT.ORG ISSN : 2320-2882

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Capital, Class, And Commodification: A Marxist Reading Of Charles Dickens's Select Novels

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Abstract: Charles Dickens remains one of the most powerful literary voices of the Victorian era in exposing the inequities and contradictions of a rapidly industrializing society. His novels repeatedly confront the realities of class divisions, poverty, and the pressures of capitalist modernity. This article examines Oliver Twist (1838) and Hard Times (1854) through the lens of Marxist literary criticism, with particular attention to how Dickens dramatizes class conflict and the commodification of human life. Drawing on the theoretical insights of Karl Marx alongside later critics such as Raymond Williams and Terry Eagleton, the study interprets Dickens's fictional world as a space where the struggles of the poor, the exploited, and the marginalized are narrated against the dominant ideologies of Victorian capitalism. Methodologically, the article adopts a qualitative, interpretive case study of the two novels, engaging in close textual analysis informed by Marxist concepts such as alienation, surplus value, and commodity fetishism. The findings suggest that Oliver Twist exposes how poverty and childhood itself are commodified within pre-industrial urban England, while Hard Times extends this critique into the mechanized logic of industrial capitalism, where workers and even education become reduced to instruments of production. By situating Dickens within a broader critical framework, the article argues that his novels not only reflect the tensions of nineteenth-century society but also resonate with contemporary debates on inequality, labor, and the commodification of human existence.

Index Terms**:** Marxist Criticism, Class Conflict, Commodification, Victorian Novel, Oliver Twist, Hard Times.

1. Introduction

The novels of Charles Dickens remain some of the most powerful literary responses to the profound transformations brought about by nineteenth-century industrial capitalism. Emerging at a time when Britain was undergoing rapid urbanization, the growth of factory economies, and unprecedented social dislocation, Dickens's works illuminate the lived consequences of a system that placed profit above human welfare. His fiction became not only a form of storytelling but also a moral commentary, foregrounding the tensions between wealth and poverty, privilege and exploitation, progress and dehumanization. In this sense, Dickens occupies a unique position within Victorian culture: his novels expose the realities of class stratification while simultaneously engaging in the wider debates about industrial modernity.

Industrial capitalism reshaped English society by creating new class alignments. The rise of the industrial bourgeoisie challenged the dominance of the landed aristocracy, while the swelling ranks of the working poor became both the backbone and the victims of the industrial system. In novels such as Oliver Twist (1838) and Hard Times (1854), Dickens portrays these tensions with striking clarity. Oliver Twist dramatizes the vulnerability of the destitute child amidst exploitative institutions, while Hard Times stages

the mechanization of human life under the logic of utilitarian efficiency. Both works depict individuals caught within structures that commodify labor, relationships, and even morality. By foregrounding the human cost of industrial capitalism, Dickens reveals the systemic nature of inequality rather than reducing poverty to individual failings.

Marxist literary theory offers a particularly productive framework for understanding these dynamics. Marx's concepts of class conflict, alienation, and commodification provide critical tools to analyze Dickens's representations of industrial society. While Dickens was not a political theorist in the strict sense, his fiction aligns with Marxist concerns about how capitalist structures exploit labor and erode human dignity. At the same time, Dickens's novels complicate Marxist readings by intertwining social critique with moral sentiment, humor, and narrative strategies that appealed to a wide Victorian readership. Examining his works through a Marxist lens allows us to uncover how literature both reflects and critiques the ideological foundations of its time.

The present study focuses on Oliver Twist and Hard Times as case studies for exploring the interconnections between class conflict and commodification in Dickens's fiction. These novels, though separated by more than a decade, collectively illustrate how Dickens's narrative imagination persistently returned to the social fractures produced by capitalism. By situating these texts within their historical moment and analyzing them through the lens of Marxist theory, this article aims to highlight how Dickens's critique of industrial modernity remains relevant to contemporary discussions of inequality and social justice.

Research Questions:

1. How do Oliver Twist and Hard Times represent the realities of class conflict in nineteenth-century industrial England?
2. In what ways do these novels depict the commodification of human life under capitalism?
3. How can a Marxist literary framework deepen our understanding of Dickens's social critique?

Objectives:

- To examine Dickens's representation of class stratification and exploitation in Oliver Twist and Hard Times.
- To analyze the depiction of commodification of labor and human relations in the selected novels.
- To apply Marxist theoretical concepts in order to interpret Dickens's critique of industrial capitalism.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Overview of Marxist Literary Criticism

Marxist literary criticism originates from the historical and materialist philosophy of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, who emphasized that human consciousness and cultural production are conditioned by material realities. According to the Marxist view, literature is never a neutral or purely aesthetic activity; it reflects and responds to the economic and social structures of its time. Engels, in his correspondence with novelists, often emphasized that literature could illuminate the "real relations" between people within specific modes of production. In this sense, literature becomes a site where class conflict, social contradictions, and ideology are expressed and negotiated.

Throughout the twentieth century, Marxist criticism developed into a diverse field, but its core concern remains the analysis of literature in relation to class structures, commodification, and ideology. The critical lens assumes that narratives, characters, and even language itself may reproduce or resist dominant capitalist ideologies. For instance, the representation of the working class in literature often reveals both the material oppression of laborers and the ideological attempts to normalize exploitation. Dickens' works, with their striking depictions of poverty, industrial labor, and bourgeois hypocrisy, provide fertile ground for such inquiry.

2.2 Development and Supporting Theorists

The application of Marxist thought to literature has been significantly shaped by influential theorists. Georg Lukács, in his theory of realism, argued that literature should be judged by its capacity to represent the social totality. For Lukács, realist novels do not simply tell stories but unveil the underlying contradictions of capitalist society. Dickens' Hard Times, with its panoramic depiction of Coketown, closely aligns with Lukács' idea that literature can reveal structural realities through narrative form.

Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony further expands this perspective by illustrating how ruling classes maintain power not merely through economic control but through the dissemination of ideology. Dickens' portrayal of education in Hard Times—where utilitarian principles reduce students to passive receptacles of fact—serves as a vivid example of hegemonic ideology in practice, legitimizing capitalist efficiency while silencing imagination and resistance.

In the twentieth century, Terry Eagleton became one of the most prominent figures of Marxist criticism, insisting that literary texts should be analyzed as both aesthetic artifacts and ideological forms. His emphasis on literature as an "arena of class struggle" resonates deeply with Dickens' narrative strategies, where comic exaggeration and satire are deployed to challenge the morality of capitalist elites. Fredric Jameson's notion of the "political unconscious" also becomes relevant here: Dickens' novels can be read as symbolic acts that unconsciously encode the tensions of industrial capitalism, such as alienation, commodification of labor, and the loss of human values.

More recently, Raymond Williams and E.P. Thompson have situated literature within broader cultural materialism, emphasizing the lived experience of class. Williams' analysis of the industrial novel is especially useful for Hard Times, while Thompson's history of the English working class contextualizes Oliver Twist in the culture of poverty, crime, and charity. These theorists allow us to read Dickens not only as a moralist but as a cultural critic whose work reflects, critiques, and at times reproduces the ideologies of his era.

2.3 Why Marxist Theory Suits Dickens' Novels

The relevance of Marxist criticism to Dickens lies in the striking parallels between Marx's descriptions of capitalist exploitation and Dickens' fictionalized portrayals of Victorian society. In Oliver Twist, the commodification of human life is evident in the workhouse system, where children are treated as economic units rather than as individuals. The exploitation of child labor and the criminal underworld further highlight the ways in which capitalist structures push the marginalized into cycles of survival and commodification. These depictions align closely with Marx's analysis in Capital of how labor is alienated and reduced to an exchangeable commodity.

Similarly, Hard Times epitomizes the dehumanizing logic of industrial capitalism. Coketown, with its monotonous factories and polluted skies, becomes a metaphor for the alienation of both labor and spirit. The novel critiques utilitarianism, an ideology that serves capitalist interests by reducing human beings to measurable outputs. Dickens' critique resonates strongly with Marx's theory of alienation, where workers are estranged from their labor, their fellow humans, and their own human potential. Through the characters of Bounderby and Gradgrind, Dickens dramatizes the moral bankruptcy of a society governed by profit and fact alone.

Applying a Marxist framework allows for a nuanced analysis that connects Dickens' fictional worlds with broader socio-economic structures. It highlights how his novels both reflect the material conditions of nineteenth-century England and participate in ideological struggles surrounding poverty, labor, and morality. Moreover, Dickens' sympathy for the poor, his critique of bourgeois hypocrisy, and his attention to the lived experience of industrial workers all position his novels as rich texts for Marxist interpretation.

2.4 Framing the Research within Marxist Criticism

Given this background, the present study employs Marxist literary criticism not merely as a theoretical lens but as a methodological framework to interrogate how class conflict and commodification are narrated in Dickens' novels. The focus on Oliver Twist and Hard Times provides contrasting yet complementary contexts: the former captures the commodification of the poor in pre-industrial urban settings, while the latter reveals the systematic alienation of individuals in a fully industrialized society. By analyzing these novels through the works of Marx, Lukács, Gramsci, Eagleton, and Jameson, this article aims to show that Dickens' writing constitutes a sustained critique of capitalist modernity, thereby reinforcing the relevance of Marxist theory for literary and cultural studies today.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Dickens and Social Criticism:

Charles Dickens has long been recognized not only as a novelist of human sentiment but also as a chronicler of Victorian society's injustices. His fiction consistently exposes poverty, institutional corruption, and the hypocrisies of industrial capitalism. Humphrey House, in his influential study The Dickens World, emphasizes that Dickens's enduring achievement lies in his ability to capture the moral atmosphere of nineteenth-century England rather than offering abstract social theories (House 72). Scholars such as Catherine Gallagher argue that Dickens's novels dramatize the tensions between sentimentality and socio-economic critique, creating narratives where compassion for the poor becomes a subtle mode of political resistance (Gallagher 133). Similarly, Gareth Stedman Jones has suggested that Dickens's depictions of urban poverty, particularly in Oliver Twist, offer one of the earliest literary accounts of the "residuum" — the socially excluded underclass of industrial Britain (Jones 212). Collectively, these readings establish Dickens as an implicit social critic who, though never explicitly Marxist, anticipated debates about inequality and class injustice.

3.2 Class Conflicts in Dickens's Novels

Scholars have long debated how Dickens represents class relations. Oliver Twist foregrounds the dispossessed orphan, navigating a hostile social order that commodifies children through workhouses and criminal networks. Critics such as Philip Collins note how Dickens stages class conflict not only through economic exploitation but also through moral binaries that pit the respectable middle class against the marginalized poor (Collins 95). In contrast, Hard Times is more overtly polemical, dramatizing the industrial North and the tensions between mill-owners and factory hands. Raymond Williams, in Culture and Society, identifies the novel as one of the earliest English works to crystallize the cultural costs of utilitarianism and laissez-faire capitalism (Williams 87). More recent scholarship, including that of Jeremy Tambling, reads Hard Times as a meditation on alienation and the degradation of human relationships under industrial modernity (Tambling 176). These interpretations highlight Dickens's sustained engagement with class stratification, suggesting that his novels resist simplistic moralizations by presenting class conflict as systemic and structural.

3.3 Commodification in Victorian Literature

The concept of commodification—where human beings and their labor are reduced to market values—emerges as a central concern in Victorian literature more broadly. Critics influenced by Marxist theory have examined how industrialization transformed human relations into economic transactions. In Oliver Twist, the commodification of children is stark: orphans are quantified in terms of workhouse expenses, food rations, and labor value. As John Kucich observes, Dickens dramatizes how the capitalist order reduces human life to "exchangeable units" (Kucich 154). In Hard Times, this process becomes even more explicit: workers are described as "Hands," stripped of individuality and reduced to their utility in the mill. Terry Eagleton highlights Dickens's scathing critique of utilitarian logic, arguing that Hard Times demonstrates literature's unique ability to resist the language of commodification by restoring human dignity through narrative empathy (Criticism and Ideology 119). This scholarship suggests that Dickens, while writing in a pre-Marxist period, anticipates many of the concerns central to Marxist analysis, making his novels fertile ground for contemporary critical readings.

3.4 Gaps in Scholarship

While Dickens's role as a social critic has been extensively studied, there remain significant gaps in scholarship. Much existing research highlights either Dickens's sentimentality or his humanistic critique of industrial society, but fewer studies systematically apply Marxist categories such as class conflict and commodification to his novels in a comparative framework. Furthermore, while critics have examined Oliver Twist and Hard Times individually, fewer works place them side by side to trace Dickens's evolving critique from early representations of poverty and orphanhood to later industrial and political concerns. Another notable gap lies in the tendency of some critics to underplay Dickens's economic insights in favor of his moral and emotional appeals. By foregrounding Marxist theory—particularly through concepts of alienation, commodification, and ideological critique—this article aims to address these omissions. It situates Dickens's fiction not merely as moral commentary but as an imaginative discourse that reveals the structural contradictions of Victorian capitalism.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design, rooted in the traditions of literary analysis and cultural criticism. The primary focus is on close reading, textual analysis, and contextual interpretation rather than quantitative measurement. By employing Marxist literary criticism, the article examines how class conflict and commodification are represented in Dickens's fiction, and how these literary representations reflect and interrogate the socio-economic realities of nineteenth-century England.

4.2 Research Approach

The study follows a thematic-analytical approach, combining textual analysis with theoretical framing. Two of Dickens's novels—Oliver Twist (1837–1839) and Hard Times (1854)—are selected for their thematic richness and historical positioning within Dickens's career. Oliver Twist represents Dickens's early exploration of poverty and institutional neglect, while Hard Times marks his more explicit confrontation with industrial capitalism and utilitarian ideology. Together, these novels provide a continuum through which Dickens's evolving engagement with class conflict and commodification can be traced. The analysis applies key Marxist concepts—alienation, commodification, and class struggle—through the works of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Raymond Williams, and Terry Eagleton, among others.

4.3 Scope of the Study

The scope of this research is deliberately limited to two novels, in order to allow for depth of analysis. While Dickens's broader oeuvre contains multiple representations of social inequality, focusing on Oliver Twist and Hard Times ensures a balanced case study: one novel engages with urban poverty and the underclass, while the other addresses industrial exploitation and ideological control. The scope is further narrowed to the lens of class conflict (the struggles between socio-economic groups) and commodification (the reduction of human beings and relationships to market values). Other thematic dimensions of Dickens's fiction—such as gender roles, religion, or narrative technique—are acknowledged but remain beyond the primary focus of this study.

4.4 Limitations

As with all interpretive literary studies, certain limitations must be recognized. First, the analysis does not claim to represent Dickens's entire corpus; rather, it offers a focused reading of two major novels that exemplify his social critique. Second, while Marxist criticism provides a powerful framework, it does not exhaust the possible interpretations of Dickens's fiction. Postcolonial, feminist, or psychoanalytic readings, for example, might yield different insights. Third, this study relies on textual and historical evidence rather than empirical field data; its conclusions are therefore interpretive and argumentative rather than measurable or universally generalizable. Finally, Dickens's position as a Victorian novelist, not a political theorist, means that his engagement with class and commodification is often indirect, shaped by narrative conventions, sentimentality, and middle-class readership expectations.

5. Analysis and Discussion

This section offers a sustained, theme-based reading of Oliver Twist (1838) and Hard Times (1854) through a Marxist lens centered on class conflict and commodification. The analysis keeps close to the texts while drawing selectively on three theorists: Karl Marx (class struggle, alienation, commodity-form), Georg Lukács (realism and social totality), and Terry Eagleton (ideology and the literary). Read together, the two novels chart a historical arc from the Poor Law's moral economy to the factory town's industrial logic. The discussion proceeds novel by novel and concludes with comparative insights that address the research questions and objectives set out in the introduction.

5.1 Oliver Twist: Charity, Crime, and the Commodification of Childhood

Dickens situates Oliver Twist in the shadow of the new Poor Law, where "relief" operates less as care than as cost accounting. From the opening chapters, the workhouse reduces human life to ledger entries. Food, clothing, and survival itself are calculated against institutional budgets; the famous mealtime scene—less for its line than for its staging—shows a child's hunger adjudicated by committee. In Marx's terms, the child's body becomes an expendable unit of labor-power, valuable insofar as it can be disciplined, fed cheaply, and put to work. The workhouse board translates need into figures; its moral language is the idiom of exchange.

Mr. Bumble exemplifies how petty functionaries internalize a ruling ideology: he polices the poor not only to maintain order, but to stabilize a fiction that poverty is a moral deficiency. That fiction is itself ideology in Eagleton's sense—an apparently "natural" story that authenticates the economic order. Bumble's swagger, his relish in punishment, and his devotion to petty rules are not merely character quirks; they enact the state's complicity in commodifying the poor. He is the human face of a system that treats the orphan as a budget line, the unmarried mother as a cautionary tale, and death as a savings.

Apprenticeship to the undertaker intensifies the novel's critique. Oliver is hired not because he is educable but because he is cheap. The undertaker profits from funerals; young boys in black are props that enhance the spectacle of bourgeois mourning. Dickens exposes a grim market where grief itself is commodified: sorrow becomes ceremony; ceremony becomes revenue. Lukács's idea of realism as a representation of a social totality is useful here. Through the undertaker's shop, Dickens refracts a network of relations—parish politics, small businesses, and the price of respectability—so the reader apprehends how the smallest transaction belongs to a larger economic pattern.

When Oliver falls into Fagin's den, the novel shifts from state-managed poverty to a criminal economy that mirrors the official one. Stolen goods circulate; children are trained as instruments; loyalty is priced and betrayed. The boy is inducted into an alternative market where bodies and skills are capital to be invested and expended. Even affection is transactional: protection is traded for obedience, and disobedience is punished to preserve value. Here Marx's concept of alienation clarifies the structure: Oliver is estranged from his labor (he cannot control what his hands do), from others (relationships are instrumental), and from himself (his identity is reduced to a function in a gang). The criminal underworld does not simply oppose "society"; it exposes society's logic in the negative, an inverted mirror that reveals the same calculus of use and exchange.

Nancy's arc concentrates Dickens's social indictment. Her labor—sexual, emotional, physical—is continually monetized by the men who control her. She lives at the intersection of class oppression and gendered exploitation; her value is assessed by what service she can perform and at what risk. Dickens refuses to romanticize the costs of loyalty: her sacrifice is tragic precisely because the social order provides no secure category for uncommodified care. Nancy's fate is not an accident but the price exacted by a system that has no non-economic measure for a woman like her.

Against these economies of charity and crime, the novel stages philanthropy through Mr. Brownlow and others. Their benevolence is real; yet Dickens presents it with a tension that a Marxist reading cannot ignore. Philanthropy rescues the exceptional child but leaves the system intact. In Lukács's terms, the realist novel can reveal social contradictions even when its plot offers individual resolution. The benevolent guardian restores Oliver to a world beyond price, but the workhouse remains, the undertaker

continues, the gang finds new children. Dickens thereby dramatizes a central contradiction: individual goodness cannot, by itself, dethrone a structure that makes commodification appear inevitable.

Finally, the novel's language itself resists commodification. Dickens's irony strips away official euphemism; his humor delegitimizes the solemnities of the Poor Law; his sentiment refuses the ledger's cold arithmetic. Eagleton reminds us that literature is an arena where ideologies clash; Dickens's narrative voice-by ridiculing authority and amplifying the child's vulnerability-counter-ideologizes the world it depicts. Oliver Twist thus answers our first research question by staging class conflict as institutional practice and our second by showing how childhood, labor, and even mourning become market forms.

5.2 Hard Times: Fact, Factory, and the Price of Human Life

If Oliver Twist anatomizes pre-industrial urban poverty, Hard Times looks directly at the industrial city. Coketown is less a setting than a system. Its chimneys, its soot, its repetitive architecture—all announce a world organized by exchange-value and productivity. The workers do not have names but are "Hands": a synecdoche that condenses Marx's analysis of reification—persons reduced to functions, qualities reduced to quantities. Where Oliver Twist showed the auctioning of bodies at the margins, Hard Times depicts the transformation of people into inputs at the center.

Thomas Gradgrind's pedagogy is the novel's ideological engine. "Facts" are not a neutral preference but a method of producing subjects who are calculable and compliant. In Marxist terms, Gradgrind runs a school for interpellation: children are hailed into an identity where imagination is waste, empathy is inefficiency, and knowledge must be measurable to be real. The classroom thus becomes an annex of the factory: it standardizes perception, commodifies learning, and manufactures a workforce that accepts the world as given. Eagleton's account of ideology illuminates Dickens's strategy: by satirizing utilitarian schooling, the novel exposes the language that naturalizes exploitation as common sense.

Bounderby personifies the capitalist myth of self-making. His boastful origin story—later unmasked as fabrication—performs the ideological work of legitimating privilege as merit. He needs the fiction of hardship overcome so he can deny responsibility for the workers' present hardship. His marriage to Louisa is openly transactional, a contract that confuses affection with acquisition. In treating companionship as a bargain, Dickens reveals how commodity logic invades intimacy. When Louisa confronts her father and confesses the hollowness at her core, she embodies the psychic dimension of alienation: a life taught to compute cannot discover how to value.

Stephen Blackpool stands at the pivot of class conflict. Dickens refuses both the sentimental saint and the radical firebrand. Stephen is patient, wounded, insistently dignified. He will not join Slackbridge's union because collective anger, as it appears in the novel, mimics the authoritarianism of capital; yet he will not flatter Bounderby's arrogance. This double refusal is not political ambivalence but moral clarity: Stephen seeks justice without reproducing domination. His story—divorce denied, work imperiled, exile enforced—exposes how the law participates in class discipline. When he falls into the Old Hell Shaft, the image is both literal and allegorical: the ground of industrial wealth is a pit into which the poor disappear. That his death occasions belated pangs of conscience among the powerful does not cancel the calculus that made his life expendable.

Rachael, like Nancy in Oliver Twist, interrupts the logic of commodification. Where the system prices bodies, she confers worth. Her tenderness is not sentimentality; it is an ethical critique. In Lukács's sense, she restores a wholeness that the social order has torn apart: subject from object, labor from life, person from person. The novel's counter-figures—Rachael and Sissy Jupe—are not mere foils; they propose a rival measure of value grounded in care, imagination, and non-instrumental relation.

Bank robbery and blame-shifting expose the moral geometry of class power. Tom Gradgrind's crime and Bounderby's eagerness to accuse Stephen show how quickly the system seeks a convenient proletarian culprit. Truth must be recovered against the weight of presumption. Dickens thus dramatizes ideology not only as false belief but as institutional habit: the poor are presumed guilty because the world is arranged to secure that outcome.

Coketown's total design—factory, school, bank, law—answers Lukács's demand that realism reveal a totality of relations. Every local detail points back to the same core: an economy that converts human powers into commodities and calls the conversion progress. If Oliver Twist indicted the ledger, Hard Times indicts the machine. Together they reveal the continuity of commodification across eras, even as its forms change.

5.3 Comparative Insights: From Poor Law to Factory Law, from Rescue to Resistance

Placed side by side, the novels chart a movement from moralized poverty to mechanized production. In Oliver Twist, the poor are policed through parochial institutions that measure worth in rations and rules; in Hard Times, workers are organized by the clock and the loom. The one naturalizes inequality through a discourse of deserving and undeserving; the other, through a discourse of efficiency and necessity. Both, however, participate in the same underlying process that Marx names: the conversion of living labor into dead labor, of persons into prices.

Forms of commodification differ. Oliver Twist exposes the pricing of life at the margins—children hired out, funerals monetized, criminal skills bartered. Hard Times reveals commodification at the center—education rendered instrumental, marriages transacted, labor abstracted. In both novels, Dickens shows that commodification is not confined to the wage relation; it permeates culture, family, language, and law. This diffusion of market logic into intimate life is where Eagleton's sense of ideology as "the lived relation" between people and their conditions becomes crucial: ideology is not only what characters say; it is how they feel what is possible.

Agents of resistance also differ. In Oliver Twist, resistance often takes the form of philanthropy that saves the exceptional victim. The system is indicted but not overthrown; the narrative restores one child while acknowledging the persistence of the workhouse. In Hard Times, resistance appears as ethical counter-cultures—Sissy's imagination, Rachael's fidelity—that challenge the reduction of value to fact or price. These are not programs for political revolution, but they persistently denaturalize commodification by refusing its terms. Dickens's critique is thus both structural and affective: he shows how institutions produce exploitation and how alternative feelings can unmake its legitimacy.

From a Lukácsian angle, both novels meet the realist demand to render a social horizon larger than individual fates. They offer character as a relay through which we perceive class structures. Yet a Marxist reading must also register Dickens's limits. The plots tend toward moral restoration rather than collective transformation; class justice is imagined as enlightened authority rather than organized power. That tension does not invalidate the critique; it identifies the historical location of Dickens's imagination—a middle-class moral radicalism seeking human decency within, and sometimes against, a capitalist world.

Addressing the research questions directly:

1. **Representation of class conflict:** Oliver Twist stages conflict as institutional cruelty and criminal recourse; Hard Times dramatizes it as an antagonism between capital's self-mythology (Bounderby, Gradgrind) and labor's lived reality (Stephen, Rachael). Conflict is not episodic but structural, reproduced by law, education, and economy.
2. **Depiction of commodification:** In Oliver Twist, bodies, grief, and loyalty become exchangeable; in Hard Times, labor, learning, and love become instrumentalized. Commodification is the common grammar through which power is exercised.
3. **Value of the Marxist framework:** Marx clarifies the dynamics of alienation and exchange that shape both plots; Lukács explains how Dickens's realism discloses a total social process; Eagleton helps us see how the novels unmask ideology by making dominant stories sound absurd and by voicing counter-values. Together, these theorists make legible what Dickens intuits and dramatizes: a society that treats people as means will finally be unable to recognize ends.

In meeting the objectives, the analysis has shown how Dickens's narrative craft—satire, melodrama, omniscient commentary—works not as ornament but as critical method. Humor punctures authority; sentiment reclaims persons from price; plot exposes the costs a ledger cannot show. Far from softening the

critique, these devices carry it into the reader's moral imagination, where, as Eagleton suggests, ideology is felt as much as reasoned.

Synthesis: Oliver Twist and Hard Times are not interchangeable protests but complementary inquiries. The first reveals a world where the poor are managed; the second, a world where all are measured. The shift from parish to factory does not end commodification; it perfects it. Dickens's achievement is to make that perfection visible and unbearable—to teach readers that when life is priced, society pays a debt it cannot settle.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The examination of Oliver Twist and Hard Times through the lens of Marxist literary criticism has illuminated the pervasive presence of class stratification and commodification in Dickens's fiction. Both novels foreground the alienating effects of industrial capitalism, whether in the grim realities of urban poverty or in the mechanized rigidity of factory life. By tracing the lives of Oliver and the characters in Coketown, Dickens dramatizes how individuals are reduced to social types—paupers, laborers, capitalists—whose identities are shaped and often constrained by economic systems. This study has demonstrated that Dickens's narratives are not merely moral tales but critical interventions into the social conditions of Victorian England.

The research has also confirmed the utility of Marxist criticism in unpacking Dickens's social vision. Marxist concepts of class conflict and commodification help explain the tension between moral sympathy and systemic critique that runs through these novels. Dickens neither offers a revolutionary solution nor accepts the permanence of industrial oppression; instead, his fiction articulates the contradictions of an age caught between tradition and modernity, paternalism and profit, compassion and capital. This finding addresses the research objectives by showing how Dickens's literary strategies both reflect and resist the commodified values of his time.

Beyond its immediate textual focus, the study contributes to broader debates in Victorian studies and critical theory. It highlights the continuing relevance of Dickens in understanding how literature can shape public consciousness about inequality and exploitation. In doing so, the article underscores the role of literary texts not only as mirrors of historical realities but as sites of ideological struggle where competing visions of society are negotiated.

Recommendations:

1. For Dickens Scholarship: Future research should further explore the interplay between Dickens's narrative strategies and the ideological underpinnings of capitalism, particularly in less-studied novels such as Dombey and Son or Little Dorrit. These texts may yield additional insights into the commodification of family, labor, and emotion.

2. For Marxist Literary Criticism: Scholars should examine the intersections between Marxist theory and other critical frameworks such as postcolonialism and gender studies, especially in Dickens's depictions of marginalized groups. Such interdisciplinary readings could deepen our understanding of how exploitation intersects with race, gender, and empire.

3. For Literary Pedagogy: Given Dickens's accessibility and continued presence in curricula, teachers should employ Marxist readings in the classroom to foster critical awareness among students about the historical and contemporary relevance of class analysis. Comparative exercises linking Dickens's Victorian context with present-day issues of labor precarity and social inequality could enhance students' interpretive skills.

4. For Broader Research: This study is limited to two novels; extending the scope to a larger corpus of Dickens's works, or comparing Dickens with contemporaries like Elizabeth Gaskell or Thomas Carlyle, could provide a richer picture of Victorian social criticism and its literary articulations.

In conclusion, Dickens emerges as a novelist who not only entertains but also interrogates the contradictions of his society. By situating his work within the framework of Marxist criticism, this article affirms the enduring power of literature to expose and challenge the structures of inequality that continue to shape human life.

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