



Institutionalized Suffering, Dehumanization Of The Poor In Charles Dickens *Oliver Twist* And *Hard Times*

¹Shivani. A & ²Dr. K P Sai Leela

¹PG student and ²Research supervisor

¹Department of English

¹Sri Sathya Sai University for Human Excellence
Navanihal, Okali Post, Kamalapur, Kalaburgi, Karnataka, India

Abstract: This paper examines the systemic dehumanization of the poor in Victorian England through a close reading of Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* and *Hard Times*. Drawing on the lived realities of workhouses, educational institutions, and industrial factories, the study explores how institutions that were originally conceived to uplift the underprivileged instead became instruments of exploitation and oppression.

The first section analyses *Oliver Twist* to expose the brutal conditions of Victorian workhouses, where children like Oliver were denied basic dignities, forced into crime, and punished for poverty they never chose. Dickens presents Fagin's den and the workhouse system as reflections of a morally bankrupt society that criminalized need while protecting privilege. Oliver's iconic plea for more food becomes a powerful symbol of the collective suffering of the voiceless poor under an unjust social order.

The second section analyses *Hard Times* to investigate how Victorian educational and industrial institutions dehumanized both the mind and body. Through the characters of Gradgrind, Louisa, Tom, and Stephen Blackpool, Dickens critiques a fact-driven education system that suppressed imagination and moral development, producing individuals incapable of meaningful human connection. Simultaneously, the factories of Coketown reduced workers to mere machinery, stripping them of physical wellbeing, emotional dignity, and social mobility.

Together, these novels reveal Dickens as a sharp social critic who used fiction to expose the failures of Victorian institutions. The paper concludes that poverty in Dickens' world was never a personal failing but a structural injustice perpetuated by a society indifferent to human suffering.

Index Terms - Oliver Twist, Hard Times, Failure of Workhouse, Education, and Exploitation of the Poor.

Introduction

Charles Dickens, who experienced poverty firsthand as a child, became one of the strongest voices for the poor in English literature. In his novels *Oliver Twist* and *Hard Times*, he powerfully exposed how Victorian institutions such as workhouses, factories, and schools though built to help the poor actually crushed their dignity, overworked their bodies, and killed their creativity. Through memorable characters like Oliver Twist, Stephen Blackpool, Louisa, and Tom, he showed how these broken systems trapped the poor in a cycle of suffering they could never escape. His central argument was bold and clear: poverty was never the personal failure of the poor, but the result of a deeply unfair

society that punished the weak while protecting the powerful. This chapter explores that argument across both novels, showing why Dickens's critique of institutional cruelty remains as powerful and relevant today as it was in the nineteenth century.

Institutionalized Child - Oliver Twist

The main reason to establish workhouses was to give shelter, food and basic necessities for the poor and also to provide tiny jobs to engage the poor in some or the other work. In 1601, England passed a law called the "Poor Law." This law said that local parishes (church districts) had to take care of the poor. To do this, they built places called workhouses where Poor people could live and work in these places. But things did not go as planned. Instead of helping the poor, these workhouses started treating them very badly. The original idea was to give the poor some work and help them stand on their own feet. But the people running these workhouses only cared about getting cheap labor. "The Victorian Workhouse was an institution that was intended to provide work and shelter for poverty-stricken people who had no means to support themselves"¹ They did not care at all about the health or feelings of the workers. By the 1700s, workhouses had become very crowded and messy places. Old people, sick people, children, and even criminals were all kept together in the same place. "In big once stunning house almost 40 people live in single room in novels Oliver Twist Charles Dickenson explained the mal treatment, poverty and repression."² Nobody looked after them properly, nobody cared about their needs. These workhouses were supposed to help poor people and give them a better life. But the people in charge saw this responsibility as a burden and never did their job properly. There were also church officials called parochial missionaries. Their job was to visit local areas and help the poor. They were supposed to give them food, shelter, clothes, and small jobs. They were also supposed to guide them and support them. But instead of doing this, they blamed the poor for being poor. They treated poverty like a sin or a personal failure; they never saw it as a problem created by society. Workers inside these workhouses worked all day and all night. They did not get proper food; they did not have clean drinking water. The conditions were dirty and unhealthy. "Between 1834 and 1841 the poor law, and most particularly the workhouse system, were subjected to violent attack, both in parliament and the press."³ If any worker spoke up or asked a question, they were punished. These places were built to give the poor some financial support. The idea was simple; let them work a little, earn a little, and live a basic, comfortable life. But the reality was completely different. The poor were treated like machines. Nobody thought about how tired or weak they were. "The mid - Victorian cities were the scene of continual class conflict, which manifested itself socially and ideologically."⁴

The main purpose of building the workhouses could have been to bring change in society, develop the nation, support communities, foster equanimity among everyone, uplift the underprivileged, provide education to the needy, help people who wished to improve their status, provide job opportunities to those who desired them, raise awareness about religion, promote cleanliness and environmental responsibility, teach about great personalities, encourage common people to achieve their desired goals, allow children to think freely without restrictions, provide good medical care, teach good values in schools and colleges, and support weaker sections in developing confidence so that they could build their strength, become independent, and take up responsibilities on their own. These institutions were meant to give hope to the hopeless, strength to the weak, confidence to the fearful, and security to the insecure, helping people in improving their standard of living. The main aim of the workhouse should have been not only to support the public by providing basic needs, but also to give inner strength to the people, assuring them that there were those who cared for them, supported them, and encouraged them. When these institutions provided education, the underprivileged would have felt that their children could benefit, and as they grew, they would become independent individuals capable of leading happy lives free from misery and hardship. "The workhouse was intended to restore essential social values previously undermined by indiscriminate outdoor relief".⁵ Yet these workhouses failed to fulfil their own purpose.

In "Oliver Twist", Fagin's den is portrayed as a grim, underground refuge where desperate people gathered out of sheer necessity. Those who ended up there were the poorest of the poor, people who had nowhere else to turn, hoping for some shelter and care, but finding neither. Rather than encouraging the children in their charge to study and grow, these institutions pushed them toward theft and deception. Children who should have been in school found themselves trapped in a world of crime,

beaten harshly whenever they returned empty-handed. Their very survival depended on what they could steal, not because they chose that life, but because they had no other option. It is deeply painful to see that the very society which should have guided them morally and spiritually instead dragged them deeper into darkness, where no one noticed their suffering and no one came to help. Children who deserved to be carefree and innocent were instead burdened with sorrow, fear, and hopelessness. Fagin's den stands as a sharp reflection of Victorian society cruel, neglectful, dirty, and morally hollow. "Cities were synonymous with dirt, disease, overcrowding and noise, which inevitably rendered them unhealthy places in which to live and in some districts there were more deaths than births."⁶ What Dickens makes clear is that poverty was never a sin committed by the poor; it was a failure committed by a society that abandoned its own people. And adding to that failure was the habit of punishing the innocent while shielding the guilty. Oliver himself was beaten, imprisoned, and publicly humiliated for a theft he never committed, while real criminals walked free. This exposes the deep rot in Victorian law and justice, where social class determined guilt, not truth or evidence.

One of the most powerful moments in "Oliver Twist" is the scene where young Oliver holds up his bowl and asks for more food. It is a simple act, yet it shook the entire workhouse establishment. Oliver's hunger goes beyond just wanting another portion it speaks to the longing of an entire class of people who were denied even the most basic dignities. A society that could not spare a second helping of gruel for a starving child was a society that had lost its humanity. Dickens uses this moment to show not just poverty, but the cruelty of a system that punished need. Oliver's famous words, "Please, sir, I want some more,"⁷ carry the weight of thousands of voiceless poor who lived under laws that kept them hungry and helpless. The irony that Dickens drives home is striking: the very institutions built to protect the poor ended up teaching them to steal, pushing them further into the cycle of poverty and crime.

The Dehumanization of the Mind and Body – Hard Times

In the novel "Hard Times" Dickens brings out the dehumanization of the mind and body. The Educational institutions were powerful Institutions which were actually meant to add bright colors to the children's life by teaching basic things, values and allowing them to imagine by helping them to understand the concepts better. These educational institutions were the one which were meant to shape the personalities of the young minds. They are the one who actually meant to produce future leaders or future generations so that there will be a overall human development in the nation with their creative ideas and innovate skills. "Education is the process of acquiring knowledge, skills, values, beliefs and habits through formal instruction, informal learning or personal experiences."⁸ These Institutions were actually meant to give hope to the hopeless families by providing good education to their children so that they need not depend on anyone and they can lead happy and independent life style; Whereas these Educational Institutions in Victorian period failed in bringing up the bright students instead they taught them facts and rules. In this novel Dickens clearly shows how the education was given based on facts by using Gradgrind as a central character where he tries to remove imagination and creativity from the children. "Gradgrind's educational methods are often described as mechanical and rote. Students are expected to memorize facts and formulas without understanding their broader context or implications."⁹ He thinks that thinking about something or imagining about something is completely waste of time and there is no use such imaginations. He teaches them facts by giving them some silly examples saying that the horses should not be on the paper because they won't live on paper. "You never meet with quadrupeds going up and down walls; you must not have quadrupeds represented upon walls."¹⁰ Similarly, the flowers should not be on carpets because they grow on plants not on carpets. "You don't walk upon flowers in fact; you cannot be allowed to walk upon flowers in carpets."¹¹ By teaching these things he himself thinks that his teachings are helping the children grow. He fails to understand that he actually ruining the lives of children. He never allowed the innocent children to think peacefully and imagine freely. On the other hand, they were always forced to learn only facts and ignore their own creativity. These schools failed in developing strong minds, instead they became more stubborn and failed to make right choices in their life. This clearly seen in the character of Tom where he takes wrong decisions in his life. As Tom grows up in an environment without any happy and joyful childhood makes him hate his family. As a result, he becomes a thief and steals from banks. This clearly show how the education is very important to lead a meaningful and responsible life. Where his

education taught him how to lead a meaningless and irresponsible life which made him a criminal. His sister who grows up with emptiness throughout her life also ruins her life. The Education based on facts made Gradgrind's own daughter to take wrong decisions in her life, as she received only facts and not moral values and thereby, she failed to lead a happy life with her husband. "Gradgrind's rigid educational philosophy has a profound impact on the characters in the novel, particularly his own children, Louisa and Tom, who suffer from emotional repression and lack of fulfillment."¹² The Victorian society has taken so many wrong decisions due to lack of moral values and ethics taught in schools.

Charles Dickens being a social critic he depicted the Dehumanization of the Mind and Body. He showed deep care, responsibility, and sympathy for the poor. His commitment and interest towards society brought awareness in him when he himself was going through suffering. In 1824, Charles Dickens family faced very difficult times. Being the elder son in the family he had to leave school and work in a Warren's boot-blackening factory, because of his father who was put in jail for debt. Though he did not like to work in the factory but the situations in the family made him work, the exposure of working in the factory gave him an understanding of the struggles of poor people and harsh treatment of the factories those situations later helped Dickens in his writings. Because of which he strongly showed in his works about the child-labour, long-working hours with less salary and how people were forced to work like machines. "Industrial novels became textual supplements of reality that did not adequately provide substitutes for nonverbal cues used for interpreting figurative meanings, which became vague and susceptible to literal and factual representation."¹³

Dickens uses "The Hands of Coke Towns" as a strong symbol which itself describes it as a suffocated place. "The story is set in a fictitious city named Coke town, popular for its factories."¹⁴ These factories were built to give financial support to the poor so that they can work and earn a bit and live a simple and comfortable life. Whereas these factories made the poor workers to work like machines and used to punish them when they raise questions. When they were built many people would have thought that these institutions will definitely help them in raising their livelihood and might have developed a hope for a better standard of living. Whereas they failed to realize its own purpose and tortured the workers for more labour work in spite of thinking about their physical strength. These factories were not clean and hygienic all the workers of different age groups were dumped together for the labour work. The harsh conditions show that there was no proper sanitation that was maintained in the factories. By using fictional characters like Stephen Blackpool, Dickens clearly depicts the harsh realities of the factories, where the poor workers were exploited. The workers used to work day and night for long hours at a stretch without any break that too with very little payments. The workers were not paid for any extra work that they do, though they are tired or exhausted their feelings were never understood by the factory owners, they never even bothered about the workers mental and physical health conditions they are always asked to work not even ask but order them, scare them and punish them without any concern. When the crowd in the factories were more the owners not even bothered about their living conditions and the workers hunger, health, and feelings were never paid attention by the owners. Though the Factory Act 1833 was introduced there was not much change in the factories still the harsh conditions continued and did not have much effect.

Dickens also explains in this novel how Social Mobility has failed in Victorian Society by using Stephen Blackpool's Character. He is a poor factory worker who was working at Mr. Bounderby's factory. Though he was poor his character was honest and hardworking worker but married to a woman who is an alcoholic though he wants to divorce her as he was not allowed to do so because he is poor and poor cannot divorce. He wants to divorce her and marry a factory working woman named Rachel who is also working in the same factory. Though his love for Rachel is pure and true still he is not allowed to do. This is because of the social status. This clearly shows how Social Mobility has failed Victorian society. The rich were the only ones who are allowed to divorce if they won't like their partners and are allowed to marry their beloved ones. Though Stephen was very innocent, humble and honest, due to poverty he was falsely accused of bank robbery. This shows how Victorian society used to blame the poor by putting all the criminal activities upon them and the rich who are the actual criminals used to escape. This shows how unfair the system was. Here, Stephen represents the poor society, and he cannot escape poverty because of social norms.

REFERENCES

- [1] Corbett, Ewan, “*The Victorian Workhouse*,” Historic UK, (2023), p.1
- [2] Rani, Sunita. “*Industrial Revolution and its Positive and Negative Effects on Victorian Period Literature*”, International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention, India, (vol.08, no.2, 2019), p.21&22
- [3] Crowther, M. A. “*The Workhouse*,” Proceedings of the British Academy, UK, (vol. 78, 1991), p.186
- [4] Tholfsen, Trygve. “*Working Class Radicalism in Mid- Victorian England*”, Routledge, UK, (2020), p.12
- [5] Crowther, M. A. “*The Workhouse*,” proceedings of the British Academy, UK, (Vol. 78, 1992), p. 185
- [6] Duckworth, Jeannie, “*Fagin’s Children: Criminal Children in Victorian England*”, Bloomsbury Publishing, London, (2002), p. 6
- [7] Dickens, Charles. “*Oliver Twist*”, Project Gutenberg, United States, (1 Nov. 1996 [eBook #730])
- [8] Sumithra, A, “*Exploring Education in the Victorian Era through Charles Dickens’ Hard Times.*” Contemporary Literature, Sri Bharathi Women’s Arts and Science College, India, (2024), p. 372
- [9] Ibid, p. 374
- [10] Dickens, Charles. “*Hard Times*”, Project Gutenberg, United States, (1 Jan. 1997[eBook #786]), p. 8
- [11] Ibid, p. 8
- [12] Sumithra, A, “*Exploring Education in the Victorian Era through Charles Dickens’ Hard Times.*” Contemporary Literature, Sri Bharathi Women’s Arts and Science College, India, (2024), p. 375
- [13] Murry, John Condon. “*Technologies of Power in the Victorian Period: Human Labor in Charles Dickens’s Hard Times*”, Cambria Press, (2010)
- [14] Akermi, Yamina. “*Analysis of Metaphor in Charles Dickens’ Hard Times*”. Diss. KASDI MERBAH UNIVERSITY, Algeria, (2016), P. 3

