Charles Dickens’ *Oliver Twist*

A Thief or a Victim?
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Summary

Charles Dickens wrote Oliver Twist in order to show what it was like to live in 19th century London. In the novel he emphasizes three essential points of this period: The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, The Workhouse system and the criminal environment of the time. In his novels, Dickens uses various characters and situations to draw attention to social matters. He attacks the falsity and shortcomings of the government and its laws as well as its ways of treating poor people and examines the criminal system. However, Dickens does not propose any solutions; he simply shows the suffering caused by these approaches and their deep inequities.

In this essay I will attempt to examine the social realities of three essential themes in the novel which Dickens writes upon: The Poor Law Amendment Act – especially how poor people were affected by the Poor Law and which created workhouses for the impoverished, the workhouse system and the criminal world. By comparing historical insight of the workhouse to Dickens’s description in the novel, we see that the novel is based on the real events of 19th century Victorian London. A deeper unveiling of the character Oliver, the protagonist, is reached by examining the way he feels, acts and thinks in the novel. I will also provide some historical facts about how and why it was so easy for children to get involved in criminality. I will explore the initial question, who is Oliver Twist - a thief or a victim, by comparing two worlds which Oliver experiences: the criminal underworld where he meets Fagin and his den, versus the security of Mr. Brownlow’s home where he pleads to stay within instead of being sent back to the wretched place he came from and Mrs. Maylie’s environment where the boy experiences love, kindness and goodness, which he has needed from the very beginning of the novel.
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Introduction

In 1837-1839 Charles Dickens published his second novel, *Oliver Twist*. *Oliver Twist* is the first novel in the English language which focuses throughout on a child protagonist as well as on a realistic portrayal of criminals and their degraded lives. An early example of the novel calls the public’s attention to dwell upon various contemporary social issues, such as The Poor Law, workhouses, class differences, child labour and the recruitment of children for criminal work. Dickens shows contempt for the insincerity of the time by encircling the novel’s serious themes with bitterness and dark humour. Nicolas Blincoe in the article printed out in the *Guardian* 2005, points out that the novel may have been motivated by the story of Robert Blincoe (1792-1860); an orphan, whose miseries as a child worker in a cotton mill were recounted by John Doherty in a *Memoir of Robert Blincoe* (Blincoe 18).

As a child and a young man Dickens continuously pays attention to the moral degradation which many of his companions and friends suffer, and these early feelings, influences and impacts never really vanished. In many of his writings (*Sketches by Boz’, Oliver Twist, Hard Times, Christmas Carol, Little Dorrit* and others) he repeatedly expresses the vile features of social life. Eric Walter Frederic Tomlin, in his book *Charles Dickens 1812-1870*, quotes Edgar Johnson who wrote in the book *Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph*: “Dickens opened the floodgates of his sympathy for all the neglected, unloved, and misused, all the innocent and suffering victims of society, all the prisoners of injustice and pain. Their cause became his cause” (Tomlin 132).

Through the first chapters of the novel, Charles Dickens introduces the reader to the main themes of the novel, mainly pointing out the defects of the Poor Law and the workhouse system. The main protagonist, Oliver Twist, is born in a workhouse. Shortly after his birth, his
mother dies. Oliver becomes an orphan left in the workhouse under the care of its authorities. Oliver never gets to see his father; only in the very end of the novel it is revealed to him who his father is by the old gentleman named Mr. Brownlow. In various details Dickens depicts how young juveniles were treated within the workhouse by presenting an illustration of the real workhouses in those times. He expresses his indignation about the treatment of juveniles throughout the novel by focusing on The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 and the people behind it who did nothing to change the state. When Oliver runs to London after being accused of asking “for more” (2007:15) and put to live with people who dislike him, he meets with Artful Dodger who introduces him to the Jew Fagin and his gang who later attempt to train Oliver as one of their best thieves. At this point in the novel Dickens shows how often young homeless children become entangled in the criminal underworld, and as a result became the underdogs of society.

Charles Dickens wrote *Oliver Twist* in order to reflect the lives of those who were in need and suffering, to lift the voice of the lower class that seemed to be forgotten or simply dismissed as a disturbing noise. In this essay I intend to show what it was like for the population, especially the lower class and their children, to live in 19th century London, concentrating on the conditions within the workhouses, the Poor Law Amendment Act 1834 and criminal life. In chapter one I provide the historical background on the Poor Law Amendment act and the conditions within the workhouses. In chapter two I will introduce Charles Dickens as a Victorian novelist, as well as his perspective on social conditions and consider why he wanted to write *Oliver Twist*. In the last chapter I am going to discuss what it was like for the street children to live in Victorian society; how and why they became criminals; and subsequently I will address the question whether Oliver was really a thief when
he was involved in the robbery of Mrs. Maylie’s house, or whether he was simply forced into it against his own will.
Chapter 1: Historical Background

When the novel *Oliver Twist* was published, Dickens was widely criticized for writing such a shocking tale, which was set in a London inhabited by criminals, child thieves and prostitutes. In the 1998 edition of *Oliver Twist* in the added preface from the 1858 publication, Dickens writes: “I saw no reason when I wrote this book why the very dregs of life, so long as their speech did not offend the ear, should not serve the purpose of a moral” (1998:53). In fact, the essential moral of the novel was to show the imperfection of the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act, which furthermore doomed poverty-stricken men, women and children to a life of despair and hardship in the workhouse.

When The Poor Law Amendment Act 1834 appeared, some of the population welcomed it, because they thought that this act would decrease the expense of taking care of the needy, remove paupers off the streets and help the poor to find work in order to support themselves. Before 1834 the expense of taking care of the poor had been increasing every year. The cost was laid out by the middle and upper classes through their local taxes. Therefore, many middle and upper class citizens began to be sceptical towards the poor, who according to them were simply idle and inactive.

The Poor Law Amendment Act was designed to prevent unemployed people from living off the society; in addition, it combined parishes together into poor law unions and created workhouses. There, the homeless or people with no help were accommodated to work for the parish. In the novel Dickens parodies these facts:

The members of this board were very sage, deep, philosophical men; and when they came to turn their attention to the workhouse, they found out at once, what ordinary folks would never have discovered. - the poor people liked it! It
was a regular place of public entertainment for the poor classes, a tavern where there was nothing to pay, a public breakfast, dinner, tea, and supper, all the year round, a brick and mortar elysium where it was all play and no work. (2007:13)

The Poor Law Act pointed out that each of these unions had to build a workhouse for the particular area. Now paupers could be provided with a place to live, but only if they were ready to depart from their current homes and settle in a workhouse. Consequently, many families were separated by sending their members to different workhouses. Upon entering a workhouse, the poor were required to dress in a uniform and the food was mostly unvaried. Strict order and various commandments existed and needed to be followed. Men and women, young and old had to work hard, doing jobs like picking oakum, breaking stones, wood-chopping, gypsum-crushing or corn-grinding. Children were also hired out to work in places like factories and mines.

The new bill made sure that the poor were contained in workhouses, fed and clothed. Children who would enter the workhouse would be given some basic education. However, the bill indicated, that as the result of this concern, all workhouse paupers would have to work for a few hours every day. Nevertheless, not all Victorians accepted the proposed solution.

Kenneth E Carpenter in his book British Labour Reformer quotes an English Labour reformer, Richard Oastler, who protested against the Poor Law and in his book King of Factory Children called the workhouse “dungeon for the poor” (Carpenter 39). The people themselves despised and dreaded the idea of having to live in the workhouses; and consequently, riots were taking place in the northern towns of London.

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The workhouse was like a small village where all required facilities were available in order for it to function independently. Aside from the basic rooms, such as the dining-hall for everybody to eat and dormitories to sleep, workhouses had their own bakery, laundry, shoe- and tailor-makers, where the poor worked. School-rooms, nurseries, a chapel and a morgue were also available.

Before 1834, poor labourers were given a little amount of money by their parishioners to prevent them from hunger, added to their fixed agricultural earnings. The Royal Commission that proposed the new method declared that the order in workhouses had to be less pleasant than those of the poorest workers, as Dickens points out:

They made a great many other wise and humane regulations having reference to the ladies, which it is not necessary to repeat; kindly undertook to divorce poor married people, in consequence of the great expense of a suit in Doctor’s Commons; and, instead of compelling a man to support his family as they had theretofore done, took his family away from him, and made him a bachelor!

There is no telling how many applicants for relief under these last two heads would not have started up in all classes of society, if it had not been coupled with the workhouse. But they were long headed men, and they had provided for this difficulty. The relief was inseparable from the workhouse and the gruel; and that frightened people. (2007:14)

The workhouses were intentionally made into undesirable places to be in, so that people would not benefit from this public service.

Dickens looked about him and saw the miserable conditions of the poor and their children in the workhouses of England in the early 19th century, and he wrote *Oliver Twist* (Adderley 112). Dickens put in his novels what he noticed around him. The author used events derived from the daily lives of the society in which he lived. He saw mistreatment,
injustice and miserable conditions of the lowest class citizens and their children and put it into his writings.
Chapter 2: Charles Dickens on *Oliver Twist*

The Victorian period was a significant stage of the English novel—genuine, filled with characters, thickly plotted and extensive. It was an excellent form to portray modern life and to amuse and occupy the middle and working class.

During the mid-Victorian Period, which is called “The Times of Economic Prosperity, the Growth of Empire and Religious Controversy,” followed by the “Times of Troubles,” some Victorian writers, such as Charles Dickens continued to disapprove shortcomings of the societal situation (Christ and Ford 1862-1864).

Charles Dickens’s novels, such as *Oliver Twist, David Copperfield, Great Expectations, Hard Times* and *Our Mutual Friend*, demonstrate and reveal his great ability to create various characters in order to satirize and criticize the middle and upper classes and to show Victorian society of the 19th century. The novels of Charles Dickens are filled with humour, drama and plot complexity; nevertheless, he spares nothing in his description of what urban life was like for all the different social classes.

Karen Chase, in her book *Eros and Psyche*, quotes T. S. Eliot, the 20th century poet and critic, who said: “Dickens’s characters are real because there is no one like them” (Chase 98). Dickens’s novels censure the inequality and injustice of his time, particularly, the grim and ruthless condition of the poor in urban society. He displays this criticism through the heterogeneous characters used in his novels.

Charles Dickens’s novel, *Tale of Two Cities*, opens with words that show a very clear picture of the period of time in which the author lived and wrote:

> IT WAS the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of
incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the
spring of hope, and it was the winter of despair [...] (13)

Between 1837 and 1838 in the monthly magazine called Bentley’s Miscellany a novel by
Charles Dickens called The Parish Boy’s Progress appeared in serial form. That was the very
first title of the novel that later became Oliver Twist. Dickens’s aim was to illustrate for his
readers what it was like for a parish boy to live in the years after the new Poor Law
Amendment Act was passed in 1834. Being a parliamentary correspondent for the Morning
Chronicle, Dickens saw The Poor Law Amendment Act being intensely debated, and in
relation to it, he would keep on to ambush it in his novels and journals continuously.

The novel Oliver Twist opens with the birth of the main character, Oliver, and the
death of his mother, Agnes Fleming, in a desolated workhouse: “Among other public
buildings in the town of Mudfog, it boasts of one which is common to most towns great or
small, to wit, a workhouse; and in this workhouse there was born on a day and date which I
need not trouble myself to repeat, the item of mortality” (2007:1). Dickens chooses very
specific wording in his novel, in that way pointing out various details about the Victorian
society of the 18th century; for instance, as it is mentioned above, the author did not write “a
child was born”, but “the item of mortality.” To my opinion Dickens wants to accentuate that
people of lower class were not even considered to be human beings but some kind of living
things – items.

When Oliver Twist is “despatched” out to Mrs. Mann’s “branch – workhouse” with
“twenty or thirty other juvenile offenders against the poor – laws” (2007:5), Charles Dickens
referred to the real life practice of the time. Pauper children were farmed in workhouses
where various sorts of mistreatment took place because nobody in the government regarded
children to be anything but a burden. A children in the workhouse would be, so to speak, left
on its own: “it did perversely happen in eight and a half cases out of ten, either [...] it
sickened from want and cold, or fell into the fire from neglect, or got smothered by accident [...]” (2007:6). To the Mrs. Mann who is in charge of the farm, children are a good deal of income, “under the parental superintendence of an elderly female who received the culprits at and for the consideration of seven pence–halfpenny per small head per week” (2007:5).

Dicken’s account was brought into public consideration, but nothing was done about it until after 1848, when a disease, called cholera, brought governmental attention to Drouet’s farm at Tooting. 1,400 omitted children were board in Drouet’s farm under rough conditions (Glancy 42). In 1953, Edgar Johnson, in his book Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph, quotes Charles Dickens who wrote an article “The Paradise at Tooting” for the Examiner about the children at Drouet’s farm: “brutally conducted, vilely kept, preposterously inspected, dishonestly defended a disgrace to a Christian community, and a stain upon a civilized land” (Johnson 663).

The first chapters in Oliver Twist clearly show how children were treated by the people who were responsible for them. Mrs. Mann, who was in charge of looking after the infants, is described as being “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” (2007:5). Dickens gives an example of a philosopher, whom he compares to Mrs. Mann’s regard of the children she is appointed to take care of:

   Everybody knows the story of another experimental philosopher, who had a great theory about a horse being able to live without eating, and who demonstrated it so well, that he got his own horse down to a straw a day, and would most unquestionably have rendered him a very spirited and rapacious animal upon nothing at all, if he hadn’t died, just four-and-twenty hours before he was to have had his first comfortable bait of air. (2007:5)
*Oliver Twist* mostly bares the truth about the conditions of children treated by adults in various branch-workhouses in London. As mentioned above, appointed caretakers, for instance, Mrs. Mann “a good lady of the house” (2007:7), did not show true desire to provide children with needed care, like tenderness and love. On the contrary, they took in children not because they wanted to take care of them or keep them off the streets and hunger, but because a decent amount of money was offered for that type of job. Another example furthermore reveals the condition within the workhouse Oliver was in, in that way juxtaposing with the reality of the times that Dickens lived in and wrote about:

Occasionally, when there was some more than usually interesting inquest upon a parish child who had been overlooked in turning up a bedstead, or inadvertently scalded to death when there happened to be a washing, (though to a washing being of rare occurrence in the farm,) the jury or the parishioners would rebelliously affix their signatures checked by the evidence of the surgeon, and the testimony of the beadle; the former of whom had always opened the body, and found nothing inside (which was very probable indeed), and the latter of whom invariably swore whatever the board made periodical pilgrimages to the farm, and always sent the beadle the day before, to say they were coming. The children were neat and clean to behold, when they went; and what more would the people have? (2007:6)

Living under described circumstances children simply could not be healthy looking and happy: “It cannot be expected that this system of farming would produce any very extraordinary or luxuriant crop. Oliver Twist’s eight birth-day found him a pale, thin child, somewhat diminutive in stature, and decidedly small in circumference” (2007:6).

When Oliver is too old (eight years old) to stay in the farm for infants, he is taken back to the workhouse by Mr. Bumble: “[…] Oliver was then led away by Mr. Bumble from
the wretched home where one kind word or look had never lighted the gloom of his infant years” (2007:11). Oliver being brought in front of the board, where ten fat, red round-faced gentlemen sit in front of the round table, he is told that he came to the workhouse to “be educated and taught a useful trade” (2007:13). Dickens mentions that Oliver had to start to work the next day at six o’clock by picking oakum: “‘so you’ll begin to pick oakum tomorrow morning at six o’clock,’ added the surly one in the white waistcoat” (2007:13). As mentioned above, this was the usual time when people got up to work which they did.

The novel has a very close description of the workhouse where Oliver stays for three months to the genuine picture of the 19th century workhouse, which I have described above:

Oliver bowed low by the direction of the beadle, and was then hurried away to a large ward, where, on a rough hard bed, he sobbed himself to sleep. The room in which the boys were fed, was a large, stone hall, with a copper at one end, out of which the master, dresses in an apron for the purpose, and assisted by one or two women, ladled the gruel at meal-times; of which composition each boy had one porringer, and no more, – except on festive occasions, and then he had two ounces and a quarter of bread besides. (2007:14-15)

After being through much ruthlessness at the hand of the parish masters and villagers, for whom he is put to work, the boy runs to London where he is befriended by the jolly Artful Dodger (or Jack Dawkins) and drawn into a group of pickpockets which is run by the wicked Fagin: “‘This is him, Fagin,’ said Jack Dawkins; ‘my friend, Oliver Twist’” (2007:72).

In his conveyance of Fagin’s den and its environment, Dickens proposed to show the real picture of crime. He wanted realistically to illustrate and explain the criminal concept, because it was very easy for abandoned children to get involved in crime, which usually ended in their transportation abroad or death. Even though some readers disapproved of Dickens for his vicious portrait in the novel (the novel was banned for some years), others
supported his moral purpose in presenting criminal life. Fagin’s group was made to represent the gang groups which existed at that time in London; and his contemporary readers immediately spotted the reality behind the account:

It appeared to me that to draw a knot of such associates in crime as really do exist; to paint them in all their deformity, in all their wretchedness, in all the squalid poverty of their lives; to shew them as they really are, for ever skulking uneasily through the dirtiest paths of life, with the great, black, ghastly gallows closing up their prospect, turn them where they may; it appeared to me that to do this, would be to attempt a something which was greatly needed, and which would be a service to society. And therefore I did it as I best could. (1998:54)

The story goes on, and later we get to know, that Monks, Oliver’s half-brother, has discovered his location and uses Fagin to turn Oliver into a thief, so that he never finds out about the heirloom left to him by their father: “Why not have kept him here among the rest, and made a sneaking, snivelling pickpocket of him at one? If you had had patience for a twelvemonth at most, couldn’t you have got him convicted and sent safely out of the kingdom, perhaps for life?” (2007:243) One day, Oliver is allowed to go out to work with “his two companions”-Dodger and Charley Bates (2007:81): “At length one morning Oliver obtained the permission he had so eagerly sought” (2007:82). Unfortunately, the old gentleman whose pockets have been emptied by the two boys sees it and start shouting, “Stop the thief” (2007:85)! Oliver starts running but is stopped by the crowed and brought to the magistrate. There, an old gentleman (a bookstore keeper) reveals that he is not the boy who was stealing and he is announced innocent: “The robbery was committed by another boy. I saw it done, and I saw that this boy was perfectly amazed and stupefied by it” (2007:94). Mr. Brownlow who somehow gets completely charmed by Oliver’s face takes him with to live in his house: “‘There is something in that boy’s face,’ said the old gentleman to himself as he
walked slowly away, tapping his chin with the cover of the book in a thoughtful manner ‘something that touches and interests me’” (2007:88).

An image of the magistrate (Fang) was also taken from the real life. It was based on a specifically unpleasant magistrate in London. A friend of Dickens, who worked in the court, secretly took him in, so that Dickens could illustrate the magistrate’s image more precisely (Glancy 43). Dickens’s aim was to picture him in such a way that people would recognize the illustration right away. Madeline House and Graham Storey in their book The Letters of Charles Dickens, quote one of Charles Dickens’s letters which he wrote to his friend Thomas Haines describing the wanted magistrate’s image: “a magistrate whose harshness and insolence would render him a fit subject to be “shewn up”” (House and Storey 267).

Back in the claws of Fagin, Oliver is forcefully involved in a housebreaking with Fagin’s companion, called Bill Sikes, but the burglary is interrupted and again Oliver is declared faultless by the owner of the house, Mrs. Maylie. Oliver’s fate continues to stagger between the wicked world of Fagin’s gang and the good, caring and loving home of Mrs. Maylie, whose young caretaker, Rose, in the end appears to be Oliver’s aunt. The prostitute, Nancy, who tries to save Oliver from the bad deeds of Monks and Fagin, as a result loses her life. Her cohabitor, Bill Sikes, incidentally hangs himself when he falls from a roof. Fagin is found guilty and sentenced to death: “To be hanged by the neck till he was dead” (2007:512). Oliver’s identity is identified, and he is replaced to his family and Mr. Brownlow, the old loyal friend of his father:

How Mr. Brownlow went on, from day to day, filling the mind of his adopted child with stores of knowledge, and becoming attached to him, more and more, as his nature developed itself. (2007:522)
As in many other great novels by Charles Dickens our protagonist’s destiny rises and falls. The incredible selection of characters act out amazing human dramas, by emphasizing such unpleasant social problems of the times as poverty, class difference, laws and criminal life in industrial Victorian society. Dickens never attempted to write novels which would disclose hidden evils. The ill-treatment he exposed had been understood by thousands. He did not examine moral and social themes which were unfamiliar, but he made paupers, abused children, prostitutes, thieves and pickpockets not into some kind of pale creatures, but living human beings. *Oliver Twist* did announce to the world that in Charles Dickens’s rejected, forgotten and misused world there is a glance of hope and right fulfilled justice (Johnson 291).
Chapter: 3 Oliver Twist – A Thief or a Victim?

In the middle of the 19th century crime and poverty were an inseparable mixed matter and most of the youngsters who suffered prison sentences were the preys of poverty; unwanted by their family, church and state. During the Industrial Revolution period, a mass of humanity flowed from the countryside into cities and towns, especially London, without any promise of stable homes or shelters. Children ran wild on the streets, fighting for life as best as they could, oftentimes by crime and only the tough and quick-witted held out. They had no education and did pretty much whatever they wanted. They never heard words of kindness, only the language of people they met in the streets which they copied: various curses, shouting and vulgar language. Young children, who were running in the streets to fend for themselves, were never taught or told what was right and what was wrong; for instance that taking food from the market tables without paying for it was wrong and they were going to be punished for it if they were caught. It was more of a game to them which they played daily (Duckworth 11).

Jeannie Duckworth, in her book *Fagin’s Children: Criminal Children in Victorian England*, quotes Charles Dickens, who in the preface of the 1841 edition of *Oliver Twist* drew an outline to which many homeless children were connected:

The cold, wet, shelterless midnight streets of London; the foul and frowsy dens, where vice is closely packed and lacks the room to turn; the haunts of hunger and disease, the shabby rags that scarcely hold together: where are the attractions of these things? (Duckworth 2)

Life for the street youngsters was troublesome and cruel. The authorities regarded them as being only a social inconvenience. If there was enough proper work available, most of them would have been inclined to work, but most turned to stealing. Because many of them did not
have any family or home to return to, they looked for lodging houses as a shelter (if the day's stealing had been successful); but if otherwise, they stayed under bridges, or simply slept on the pavement. They were often wet, freezing, hungry and dirty. The behaviour of these children received public disapproval.

Duckworth in the same book quotes James Greenwood, an editor for the *Pall Mall Gazette* who in 1866 published a short piece about criminal children:

> It is an accepted fact, that daily, winter and summer, within the limits of our vast and wealthy city of London, there wander destitute of proper guardianship, food, clothing and employment 100,000 boys and girls in training for the treadmill, the oakum shed and the convict's mark. There are those who are born in the workhouse who are abandoned by the unnatural mother. (Duckworth 20)

Without parent or parish help and ethical guidance these wild street kids were seen behaving with no consideration towards elders and, swayed by those around them, adopted criminal habits.

Fagin’s group is the kernel of villainy in the novel where young homeless boys are taken in and taught mischievous trade; trained to become thieves. When Oliver is taken in, in a playful and game-like manner, he is also taught to rob and steal. Many seemed to be born to a life of crime and cruelty but Oliver appears to be different. He is horrified by the brutality and heartlessness around him. During the action of robbery at the Mrs. Maylie’s house he cries out loud: “Oh! For God’s sake let me go! Let me run away in the fields. I will never come near London – never, never! Oh! Pray have mercy upon me, and do not make me steal: for the love of all the bright angels that rest in heaven, have mercy upon me!” (2007:205)

Throughout the novel the reader can notice again and again how Charles Dickens underlines the features of Oliver’s face. There is something about Oliver’s appearance which
singles him out from the rest of the crowd: “I shall be glad to have him away from my eyes, and to know that the worst is over. I can’t bear to have him about me: the sight of him turns me against myself and all of you”” (2007:238), Fagin screams out.

Oliver is born in a society which does not welcome him in a pleasant or loving way. He is one out of millions whose fate shows some mercy upon him, but what about the rest? Many young juveniles were caught in the action, brought in front of the magistrate and sentenced to go to prison or to be hung. Just like the young Artful Dodger: “they’ll make Artful nothing less than a lifer” (2007:415).

While Charles Dickens was writing his novels, public punishments were taking place in London. The authorities believed that watching so called lawbreakers being punished openly would discourage others from criminal life. For instance public hangings were held to be as some kind of entertainment. Sometimes there were more than 20,000 people who showed up to watch it (McDonald and Weldon 23). People would pay money for the better seats where they could see the action clearly. Dickens himself once paid for a good seat to watch people hang so that he could write about it. He thought the action was brutal (McDonald and Weldon 23).

In the fourteenth chapter, when Fagin is arrested, Dickens describes in small details the process when justice had been made:

A slight bustle in the court recalled him to himself, and looking round, he saw that the jurymen had turned together to consider of their verdict. As his eyes wandered to the gallery, he could see the people rising above each other to see his face: some hastily applying their glasses to their eyes, and other whispering their neighbours with looks expressive of abhorrence. A few there were who seemed unmindful of him, and looked only to the jury in impatient wonder how they could delay, but in no one face – not even among the women, of
whom there were many there – could he read the faintest sympathy with him, or any feeling but one of all-absorbing interest that he should be condemned.

(2007:509)

Oliver Twist—who is he after all, a thief or a victim? The story does have a happy ending. The boy’s fortune and circumstances are favourable towards him, but the question remains: if Oliver had been, a regular orphan, so to speak, and Mr. Brownlow had never entered the story, would Oliver after all have ended as a criminal like Fagin and Artful Dodger or would the boy simply have died out of starvation because he refused to steal and rob? In my opinion, Oliver would have simply become a thief, against his own will, one of Fagin’s top quality thieves, as Monks wanted him to, because the boy would never been given an opportunity to experience anything better. To understand Oliver Twist better, I would have to accustom myself into his role or in other words- his shoes.

It is not easy to understand human nature. Some are born with good qualities while others have the constant desire to do evil deeds. Oliver is the one who wants to turn away from all wickedness. The features on his face reflect the inner qualities of his soul. We find in the novel again and again how Mr. Brownlow, Mr. Sowerberry and Fagin stress Oliver’s face, which left a trace in their memory. Oliver is not like every other child. His thoughts are filled with “angels, heaven, kind faces” and the idea of being sent to jail frightens him (2007:63). He wants to be a good boy, and this he expresses in the dialogue with Mr Bumble: “‘I will be good indeed; indeed. Indeed, I will, sir!’” (2007:34). Even in his speech Oliver is polite. In his communication with elders, he uses words like “sir or please” (2007:34) and bows to them, which shows the qualities of being polite and respectful towards others. Oliver is only eight years old. He wants to be loved and needed, exactly what a child calls for in that age; but instead he feels lonely, hated and little: “‘so lonely, sir – so very lonely,’ cried the child. ‘Everybody hates me’” (2007:34).
When Fagin tells Oliver that by becoming good at pickpocketing, it will make him “the greatest man of all time” (2007:81), in contrast, Oliver wonders to himself “what picking the old gentleman’s pocket in play had to do with his chances of being a great man” (2007:81). It shows that the boy already has a formed opinion about what it means to be a great man and Fagin’s method does not correspond to his formed idea. Children learn from adults, by watching and imitating them. Oliver respects Fagin who is his senior, so he watches and follows his moves in silence. But what good could a child learn from a man who thinks only of golden items, teaches him to pickpocket and makes him stay in a dark and secluded place? Oliver feels as if he is not in the right space.

But let us examine Oliver’s opinion when he is given a chance to experience a different type of environment – Mr. Brownlow’s home, where “kindness and solicitude which knew no bounds” (2007:96). In chapter twelve we can find many answers. When Oliver wakes up from the deep sleep, he sees that it is not the same place where he closed his eyes the last time. After his first conversation with Mrs. Bedwin, Oliver realizes how everything is different; people, surroundings and the way he feels. For the first time the boy gets lots of care, tenderness and comfort. He feels “cheerful and happy” surrounded by people who look after him (2007:100). He sees many different objects, like paintings and books which look so new to him, and he does not know yet if he likes it or not, he is still absorbing. After being for a few days around people who share nothing but love, kindness and show lots of attention towards him, in chapter thirteen we find a clear answer where Oliver expresses his opinion about the place he came from: “Oh, don’t tell me you are going to send me away, sir, pray!’ exclaims Oliver, alarmed by the serious tone of the old gentleman’s commencement; ‘don’t turn me out of doors to wander in the streets again. Let me stay here and be a servant. Don’t send me back to the wretched place I came from’” (2007:121). Oliver would rather be a servant in some good home than to wander the streets or go back to the wretched place. He is
pleading not to be sent back. Here we find proof that Oliver Twist longs to remain with people who love and care about him and vice versa, he wants to love and have people to take care of.

Oliver does not belong to the criminal world. As he himself states, he “wants to be good” and indeed he likes to be good (2007:34)!
Conclusion

The novel *Oliver Twist*, by Charles Dickens, with its remarkable characters, probable events, humor and peculiar locations, offers us some real insights into the social state of his day and the way that ordinary people were affected by them. Charles Dickens was the first great Victorian writer to wade into the vital modern problems of the dissatisfaction of urban society, and show us “things as they really are” (Bayley 49). London did not expand into a great manufacturing city overnight; it had continuously developed into a commercial center, a port, and a core of government, finance, law and fashion, the largest and richest of European cities. It was a period of the Industrial Revolution which changed Britain forever. London is depicted as a harsh and grim city but, it can be escaped, as Oliver did.

*Oliver Twist* is a solid piece, taken from daily life, which portrays the world of social evils as they were then. It is a story of a child that was born in a workhouse and nursed by parish overseers. The novel is a series of scenes from the tragic lives of the lowest outcast, scenes of crime and carelessness. The main purpose of the novel was of course to show its little hero squeezed in the miserable crowd, under various hardships. The novel reveals Oliver’s misery of childish grief; being taken away from the branch–workhouse, a home which associated only with suffering and slow starvation and no kind words or looks.

The theme of good versus evil runs through the novel; Dickens showed that no matter the difficulty of various circumstances, good will prevail in the end. It did end happily for Oliver but such was not the case for children in actuality. Poor children who had never been taught the concepts of good vs. evil also had to face the brutal consequences of execution. But what was the real purpose for writing *Oliver Twist*? Was it just an entertaining novel for the Victorian citizen to read? Yes and no! Charles Dickens wrote fiction-events based on real facts. *Oliver Twist* is a novel which shows the Victorian society, its system, laws, and state
authority and how it worked within the society. Charles Dickens successfully introduced unpleasant facts to the consideration of his readers. In order to see the ugliness one has to look into the mirror. In my opinion the novel was like a mirror for the Victorian society to see its deficiencies and advantages. The novel had to have a happy ending otherwise it would have been too harsh for Charles Dickens to show things as they really were. I am quite certain that everybody who read the novel in those times could recognize their society in which they lived.
Works Cited


