ABSTRACT. Victorian Issues in Oliver Twist: A Jordanian Perspective. The purpose of this study is to explore an important topic in the Victorian novel from a Jordanian perspective: Dickens's protest against the social conditions of his age and the moral codes which justified those conditions. In Oliver Twist Dickens describes children as the helpless victims of the new industrial world. He uses particular people and places as a context for his presentation of the “strange disease” of modern life.

Keywords: Victorian, children, exploitation, injustice, silence, silenced

REZUMAT. Aspecte victoriene în „Oliver Twist”: o perspectivă iordaniană. Scopul acestei lucrări este de a exploarea o temă importantă a romanului Victorian, din perspectivă iordaniană: protestul lui Dickens împotriva condițiilor sociale din vremea sa și a codului moral care justifica aceste condiții. În „Oliver Twist”, Dickens îi descrie copiii ca victime neajutorate ale lumii industriale noi. El utilizează anumite personaje și anumite locuri ca și cotext pentru înfățișarea acelei „maladii neobișnuite” a vieții moderne.

Cuvinte cheie: victorian, copii, exploatare, nedreptate, tăcere, redus la tăcere

Charles Dickens (1812-1870) was one of the most popular English novelists of the Victorian era, as well as a vigorous social campaigner. He wrote from his own experience. His enormous warmth of feeling sometimes spilled into sentimental pathos, sometimes flowed as pure tragedy. Dickens was particularly successful at evoking the sights, sounds, and smells of London, and the customs of his day. He criticized the injustices of law, social hypocrisy and evils. Even after many of the ills he had pictured were cured, Dickens still gained more and more readers. Some critics complain of some disorderliness in the structure of his sentimentality, but none has attempted to deny his genius at revealing the very pulse of life.

Dickens's novels were, among other things, works of social commentary. He was a fierce critic of the poverty and social stratification of Victorian society. Dickens's second novel, Oliver Twist (1839), shocked readers with its images of poverty and crime and was responsible for the clearing of the actual London slums.

1Dr. Sabah A. Shakury is associate professor at Jadara University in Irbid, Jordan. His e-mail address is dr.sabahshakury@yahoo.com.
Critics, like George Gissing and G. K. Chesterton, championed Dickens's mastery of prose, his endless invention of unique, clever personalities and his powerful social sensibilities. However, fellow writers such as George Henry Lewes, Henry James, and Virginia Woolf, faulted his work for sentimentality, implausible occurrences, and grotesque characterizations.

In *Oliver Twist*, Dickens provides readers with an idealized portrait of a young boy so inherently and unrealistically 'good', that his values are never subverted by either brutal orphanages or coerced involvement in a gang of young pickpockets. This idealism serves only to highlight Dickens's goal of poignant social commentary. *Oliver Twist* is among the numerous Dickensian novels concerned with social realism and focusing on the mechanisms of social control that direct people's lives.

*Oliver Twist* is a good illustration of Dickens’s belief that the novel should do more than merely entertain. It should be, he believed, directed towards social reform. Although he bitterly attacks the drawbacks of the existing institutions—government, law, education, penal systems—and mercilessly exposes the injustice and wretchedness inflicted by them, he does not suggest the overthrow of the established order. Dickens looked upon almost all institutions with suspicion, including religious movements.

In order to bring about improvements, Dickens thought it was essential to depend upon the goodness that he felt to be inherent in all human nature. He kept a strong belief that people, if they were not stifled, would behave with fairness. As a result, he firmly hated all individuals, institutions, and systems that he thought were standing in the way of natural human goodness. He does not believe this endowment of human goodness is indestructible. In *Oliver Twist*, he acknowledges that the trait of goodness in humanity can be irrevocably lost if it is subjected to ungoverned corrupting influences. Dickens was more concerned with the outer behavior of people than he was with the exploration of psychological depths.

Dickens's experience of temporary orphanhood and the harsh instructions given by a senior boy in the warehouse, where he used to work, find expression in the novel. That instruction was responsible for his complete absorption into the misery of working-class life. That boy's name was Bob Fagin. Dickens's dislike of him appears in the character of Fagin, the villain from the novel.

The intense sentiment behind *Oliver Twist*, shaped partly by Dickens's own childhood experiences and partly by his outburst at the living conditions of the poor that he had could see all along his journalistic career, touched his readers at the time. Greatly admired, *Oliver Twist* was an indirect protest against the Poor Law of 1834, which instructed that all public charity must flow through the warehouses.

The plot of *Oliver Twist* is constructed around the different false identities that other characters impose upon Oliver, often for the sake of promoting their own interests. Dickens's portrait of rural life in the novel is more positive, yet far less realistic than his picture of urban life.
The story portrays the hypocrisy of the mean middle class bureaucrats, who treat the orphan Oliver Twist brutally while lending their voice to the belief in the Christian virtue of providing charity to the less fortunate. Oliver's real identity is the central mystery of the novel. In the novel, Dickens portrays the daily existence of the lowest members of English society. As a Jordanian reader I am extremely impressed by the Dickensian approach to poverty, one of the problems that still haunts the twenty-first century world. Dickens reaches beyond the experiences of the warehouse, extending his picture of poverty to London's squalid streets, dark bars, and robbers' dens. He lends voice to those who were voiceless and he builds a connection between politics and literature, and his social commentary.

Oliver's instability prevents him from getting educated and grasping knowledge of the complex realities of Victorian culture. As Westburg points out, "static dualism is alien to any systematic notions of personal growth." A young protagonist, like Oliver, must be receptive to the different languages of social life and able to transfer them to others. The protagonist is less receptive to dialogism than the society where he lives and which proclaims its lack of dynamism in a very clear manner. In my opinion, Oliver is such a character.

The characters' names denote individual characteristics. The name 'Twist', though kept by chance, signifies the ups and downs of fortune that Oliver will encounter. Rose Maylie's name hints at her relation with flowers and springtime, youth and beauty. Toby Grackit's name is an amusing reference to his selected profession of breaking into houses. Mr. Bumble's name points towards his bumbling arrogance; Mrs. Mann's name to her lack of motherly feelings and Mr. Grimwig's to his outward grimness that can be removed as easily as a wig.

Dickens raised his voice against the social circumstances of the Victorian period and the moral codes which accepted horrible social conditions. The novel focuses on children, the helpless victims of the new industrial world. Dickens used particular people and locations as a background for his portrayal of the "strange disease of modern life". In his opinion, this disease was the spiritual/mental kinship which made life more intolerable every new year. Although Dickens hinted at visions that the world could and should change – visions that were not materialistic - he set those visions against a materialistic, revolutionary background. Consequently, in his opinion rough social protests should lead to thoughts of spiritual revolution.

Dickens focuses upon a social problem and then points to a spiritual/mental condition which is affected by the social circumstances in various ways. This is very obvious in his pictures of urban life. The great writer had a vision of the city life. Although he spent his life in London, he considered London a threat to human race because of the poverty and crime that lurk in its poor neighbourhoods. This is how Dickens portrays London in *Oliver Twist*:

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Near to that part of the Thames on which the church at Rotherhithe abuts, where the buildings on the banks are dirtiest and the vessels on the river blackest with the dust of colliers and the smoke of the close-built low-roofed houses, there exists, at the present day, the filthiest, the strangest, the most extraordinary of the many localities that are hidden in London … to reach this place, the visitor has to penetrate through a maze of close, narrow, and muddy streets thronged by the roughest and poorest of water-side people, and devoted to the traffic they may be supposed to occasion. The cheapest and least delicate provisions are heaped in the shops; the coarsest and commonest articles of wearing apparel dangle at the salesman’s door, and stream from the house-parapet and windows. Jostling with unemployed labourers of the lowest class, ballast-heavers, coal-whippers, brazen women, ragged children, and the very raff and refuse of the river, he makes his way with difficulty along, assailed by offensive sights and smells from the narrow alleys which branch off on the right and left, and deafened by the clash of ponderous wagons … Arriving at length, in streets remoter and less-frequented than those through which he has passed, he walks beneath tottering house-fronts projecting over the pavement, dismantled walls that seem to totter as he passes, chimneys half crushed half hesitating to fall, windows guarded by rusty iron bars that time and dirt have almost eaten away, and every imaginable sign of desolation and neglect.

Dickens stresses upon London’s choking, threatening characteristics. He sets his description in the present tense, providing the text with very special immediacy and a permanent aspect. The indication is that one can only roam in this maze but he should not stop. The scene then changes and Dickens focuses on the mental circumstances of the inhabitants who live in these neighbourhoods. When Dickens sends Sikes on his journey which will, finally, lead him to the gallows which he tries to ignore, the writer ultimately locates him in the middle of London’s streets. Nothing can harm Sikes more than his mental fetters of guilt.

Dickens sets the climax of the novel in the midnight life of London. It is Nancy sacrificing herself which will lead to the destruction of the evil world of Fagin. Dickens insists on prostitution in order to indicate a terrible disease of an entire society.

Dickens also raises his voice against children’s treatment by those who are their so-called guardians. He speaks against the false pretence of institutionalized religion. He also provides the ironical answer where neat and tidy children would be found. For instance, Oliver is ‘farmed out’ to a warehouse founded by a crafty overseer, Mrs. Mann. When Bumble comes to take Oliver, the following scene takes place:

Mrs. Mann, the good lady of the house, was unexpectedly startled by the apparition of Mr. Bumble, the beadle, striving to undo the wicket of the garden-gate. ‘Goodness gracious! is that you, Mr. Bumble, sir?’ said Mrs. Mann, thrusting her head out of the window in well-affected ecstasies of joy. ‘(Susan, take Oliver and them, two brats up stairs, and wash ‘em directly.).’

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Clearly the façade of good care is maintained for Bumble. The “inspection” of the parish is also talked about at length.

Besides, the board made periodical pilgrimages to the farm, and always sent the beadle the day before, to say they were going. This children were neat and clean to behold, when They went; and what more would the people have!\(^4\)

Children are also employed for gaining publicity for the church and raising funds. Dickens severely criticizes these hypocritical “spiritual institutions”. His protest has materialistic grounds but then he evolves by pointing to the necessity of a spiritual revolution.

In the most popular scene of Oliver Twist the protagonist does and says something he gets up and demands for more. The hyperbolic horror and the outrage with which this act is encountered seem to highlight not only Dickens's satirical irony, but the unexpectedness of the situation when any boy from the class can and does speak up. When we have gone through most of the novel, we feel there is reason for further surprise and Oliver is the mouthpiece of this excitement.

Anywhere else in the book, Oliver appears as the mute witness of events with a sympathetic expression on his appealing countenance. Oliver's expressions speak more than his actions. It is very much like the dumb picture of his mother which talks forcefully to him. It is a fact that Oliver flees away from Sowerberry's to try his fortune in London after turning on Noah Claypole. However, this a reaction to his situation more than a bold decision. His initial appointment as an undertaker's Mute is again due to the suggestive pathos of his tender body and pale countenance. Oliver is neither Dick Whittington, nor Samuel Smiles in spite of the sub-heading: “A Parish Boy's Progress”. Definitely, the hint is at the legend behind Oliver's tale and this only increases the contrast.

Oliver is a victim of industrial and urban society. In terms of social realism, Oliver is presented as a passive hero. He also has to maintain his innocence in this corrupting world. He always has a bond with the unworliday image of his mother's spirit and the Maylies' pastoral retreat, even though the world continuously tries to imprison him. He represents a noble but static Christian virtue. This suggests that it is the more dominant vehicles of evil who seem to be colorful centers of dramatic captivation, Fagin being the most popular and unforgotten character. At the beginning of the narration Oliver has no identity because of his mother's mysterious identity. The novel is his tale, but he cannot narrate it for himself. Different persons make up identities for him and provide him with a composite character. Oliver is given his name by others. When he begins to speak for himself at the end of the story, he is forced back into the background. Oliver is displaced by the usurping voice of the narrator.

Oliver’s silence can be viewed as the symbolism of the unspoken truth. His non-identity stresses upon the hustle and bustle of people surrounding him.

\(^4\) Ibid., p.5.
author lends his voice to express some very serious social concerns. He leaves an impression of easiness about the unutterable peculiarities of moral and social contradictions. *Oliver Twist* dramatizes, but does not express clearly - at least not in this novel - the factor that charity minus general social reform just drives towards inequality.

Oliver's eloquent dumbness is a necessity and completely goes along with the writerly and the social design. The story suggests that we can only have unworldly purity and even this one not permanently and not completely but in accordance with hellish impurity. When encountering opposition, common humans become speechless and roam around without purpose and in moral bafflement although they are optimist that the Providence will send its agents in order to protect them. However, humans are not able to name these agents or claim they know their real identity when they recognize them.

Oliver can be redeemed exclusively through the deeds of Brownlow as a generous father-figure; but Brownlow has constricted the fortune that permits him his benevolence within the very system that has exploited Oliver. Dickens constantly turns to the root of Britain's prosperity in colonial expeditions. As a Jordanian reader, this Dickensian interest in colonial issue is another proof that the writer is also a moral conscience.

In the novel, it is the crafty Dodger who is sailed off to Botany Bay. Oliver's silence is a symbol of the author's own encounter with the unspeakable at the core of British gentility.

The novelist projects the tensions of his work onto the emotionalized figure of the 'fallen woman'. Oliver's mother reflects the destiny of Nancy who both validates and questions the soothing tale of Rose Maylie's adoption and Oliver's acceptance into society. Motherhood and womanhood, as the starting points of inherent virtue, are the exclusive actual points of contact between the gutter and the cottage; an ambivalent symbol of redemption and degradation, assertion and dependency. There is an element of pathos in the works of Dickens and *Oliver Twist* makes no exception. The writer takes up the challenge on behalf of the helpless sacrificial victim, and in doing so he hardly permits him or her to speak. We can feel sympathy, regard, even praise for the victim as far as he/she is kept away, “preserved” in well-guarded traditional books that lend him/her their voice but rarely permit them to speak without in-between.

Dickens provides a kind of solace by displaying a reductive enclosure of gentility and noble feelings. This complex emotional mixture is always exposed to interference by rival forces. The writer insists on the boundaries between the city and the rural side, the class and the crowd, God and human, values and survival, in any form except when demonized during scary visitations. These Gothic moments are to deny the possibility of order and goodness and they warn about the possibility of well-guarded social improvement.

According to Victorian norms, the home must be the exclusive place where children can be rendered immune to the temptations of modern life, and the bread
earner can feel comforted and revitalized from his everyday struggle to get the necessities of life. That is why Oliver is represented as incorruptible and enters the novel with a completely formed personality rather than realistically impressionable. This cultural approach is, anyway, fraught with anxiety. Surely, Dickens is not embarrassed at all when it comes to his bestowing upon his protagonist that "inert nobility" that Mikhail Bakhtin finds characteristic of the archaic "Novel of Ordeal". In such literary works the hero's identity is not changed but merely affirmed by dire experience.\(^5\)

As far as Oliver's state of incorruptibility is concerned, Dickens makes use of ambiguous passages such as the following in which the narrator tells the reader that "nature or inheritance [has] implanted a good sturdy spirit in Oliver's breast."\(^6\) In another relevant passage Rose maintains that "that Power which has thought fit to try him beyond his years, has planted in his breast affections and feelings which would do honour to many who have numbered his days six times over."\(^7\)

Physically, Oliver has a likeness to his progenitors and the suggestion of his resemblance to Brownlaw's pictures and memories is that his middle-class traits spring from the same source. Even Rose and the narrator's efforts to give adequate equivalents cannot escape from the genteel tendency to cultivate figures of speech. The fantasy which is inherent everywhere is that Oliver's 'blood' is behind his immune personality. This is not in accordance with the novel's structure and politically it is at odds with itself.

There is no explanation in the novel that can seriously compete with heredity when explaining Oliver's protection from ethical contamination. Dickens seems to say that virtues can be hereditary, they are not at all influenced by upbringing. Dickens perceives noble features in Oliver's nature. The moral of Oliver's life is that 'breeding will tell', a moral anathema to various middle-class habits of mind. However, if we think of the whole Dickensian work, the author seems to disagree with himself on this issue. Other characters show that Dickens is completely committed to the notion that surroundings form personality. Here is, for instance, Nancy talking to Rose, "Thank Heaven … that you had friends to care for and keep you in your childhood, and that you were never in the midst of cold and hunger, and riot and drunkenness, and – and something worse than all — as I have been from my cradle."\(^8\)

This emphasis upon the formative environment also appears in the portrayal of Noah and even Sikes. Generally speaking, and outside the area of the novel's political fantasy, the author is typically Victorian in his assumption of the formative power of surroundings and circumstance.

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\(^6\) Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, p.4.

\(^7\) Ibid., p.262.

\(^8\) Ibid., p.255.
Here it should be remembered that ideology is always individual and psychology is forever social. The childhood trauma clearly influenced Dickens' imagination. The writer cultivated both fantasies and fears about “blood” proving stronger than circumstance. He never completely recovered from his experience of social dispossession.

To some extent, *Oliver Twist* is a biographical novel. There is a reiteration of Dickens' own juvenile hopes in some manifestations of Oliver's middle-class parentage. These would serve to set Oliver apart from the low company and would bring him back to a world of Brownlow and the Maylies.

The boy stirred, and smiled in his sleep, as though these marks of pity and compassion had awakened some pleasant dream of a love and affection he had never known; as a strain of gentle music, or the rippling of water in a silent place, or the odour of a flower, or even the mention of a familiar word, will sometimes call up sudden dim remembrances of scenes that never were, in this life; which vanish like a breath; which some brief memory of a happier existence, long gone by, would seem to have a wakened, for no voluntary exertion of the mind can ever recall them.\(^9\)

Oliver has never heard of his mother, but he acts to defend her honor, which appears to change him into a completely different person.

A minute ago, the boy had looked the quiet, mild, dejected creature that harsh treatment had made him. But his spirit was roused at last; the cruel insult to his dead mother had set his blood on fire. His breast heaved; his attitude was erect; his eye bright and vivid; his whole person changed, as he stood glaring over the cowardly tormentor who now lay crouching at his feet; and defied him with an energy he had never known before.\(^10\)

If we want to analyze why the author, consciously or unconsciously, might follow such a line of action, we can go back to Harvey who indicates that "our sense of conditional freedom depends upon a combination of factors which, considered singly, may seem to determine us, but which in association tend to liberate us".\(^11\)

Among the English Romantics, the middle-class mind discovered Wordsworth to be the most congenial to its outlook and the most applicable to its aims.

*Oliver Twist* is meant to appeal more to our emotions than to our literary sensibilities. The protagonist does not present a complex picture of a person divided between good and evil, instead he is an incarnation of goodness. A major concern of *Oliver Twist* is the question whether a bad environment can forever poison a person's character and soul. In much of the novel, morality and nobility are contradictory issues. However, Nancy's character suggests that the line between virtue and vice is not always clearly drawn.

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\(^9\) Ibid., pp.183-184.
\(^10\) Ibid., p.36.
The meeting on London Bridge is symbolic for the collision of two worlds unlikely ever to meet the idyllic world of Brownlow and Rose, or the degrading situation in which Nancy survives. Nancy is given the opportunity to adopt a better way of life but she discards that opportunity and by the time Nancy, Brownlow and Rose have left the bridge that possibility has disappeared for ever.

In the novel's concluding pages Oliver's half-brother is all of a sudden exposed as the very embodiment of all the earlier generation's upper-class vices. Monks is almost exclusively his mother's child. There is a kind of debate for and against nature and nurture concerning the immunity from evil. It is difficult to say for sure whether the conduct of a person is influenced more significantly by nature or by nurture. Brownlow conducts this debate. He recalls his father talking of "the rebellious disposition, vice, malice and premature bad passions of … his only son", while at the same time asserting that the boy had been "trained [by his mother] to hate him".\textsuperscript{12}

The same vagueness appears when Monks takes up his own story.

"There she died," said Monks, "after a lingering illness; and, on her death-bed, she bequeathed these secrets to me, together with her unquenchable and deadly hatred of all whom they involved — though she need not have left me that, for I had inherited it long before."\textsuperscript{13}

This conflict between the innate and the acquired is clearly seen even in such a matter as the villain's venereal disease. Notice the choice of words:

You, who from your cradle were gall and bitterness to your own father's heart, and in whom all evil passions, vice, and profligacy, festered, till they found a vent in a hideous disease which has made your face an index even to your mind.\textsuperscript{14}

We can just indicate that an anxiety over the sustenance of middle-class values in a morally degenerating world appears to have shaped \textit{Oliver Twist} into one of Dickens' most monologic texts. There is a relation between Oliver's immunity from his surrounding and the truth that the middle class and the criminal areas never seem to affect or interpenetrate each other. The contradictions and anxieties of the bourgeois orthodoxies surround the text of \textit{Oliver Twist}.

\textit{Oliver Twist} is a novel teeming with many closely interrelated ideas. There is preoccupation with the miseries of poverty and the spread of its degrading effects through society. With poverty comes hunger, another theme that appears throughout the book, along with Dickens's notion that a misguided approach to the issues of poverty and homelessness brings many evils in its wake.

One of the worst consequences of poverty and being deprived of life’s essentials is crime, with all of its corrosive effects on human nature. Dickens

\textsuperscript{12} Charles Dickens, \textit{Oliver Twist} p.332.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., p.333.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., p.318.
gives a great deal of attention to the painful alienation from society suffered by the criminal who may come to feel completely isolated as the fragile foundations of his own hostile world snap. Crime is bad enough in itself, Dickens seems to be saying. When crime is the result of poverty, it completely dehumanizes society.

On the positive side, Dickens places heavy value on the elevating influence of a wholesome environment. He emphasizes the power of benevolence to overcome depravity. And goodness—like criminal intent—may expect to earn its own suitable reward. Does this sound familiar? The Dickensian theme of virtue being its own reward is rooted in the novels and poems of chivalry and redemption, where the good prosper and the “wicked” are sent packing. This makes Dickensian novels, in general, and *Oliver Twist*, in particular, a reading with general human appeal for any reader regardless his/her ethnicity, religion or personal philosophy.

REFERENCES


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