A REPRESENTATION OF SOCIAL INJUSTICE IN VICTORIAN ENGLAND: CHARLES DICKENS'S "OLIVER TWIST"

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Abstract: *Throughout his novels, the Victorian novelist Charles Dickens tried to draw the reader's attention to the drawbacks and evils that resulted from the social transformation of his contemporary society, i.e. Victorian England. In many of his novels, the author focuses on the idea of social injustice, a social disease that is many-sided and has terrible consequences on the inner structure of the individuals living within the boundaries of such a world. Dickens's preoccupation with this issue is most relevant in the novel* Oliver Twist, *which contains a harsh critique of Victorian society and its prejudices.*

Keywords: *poor, poverty, workhouse, middle class.*

The story of Oliver Twist is legendary in British and perhaps universal culture; many people have heard of the orphan workhouse boy in need of nourishment who dared to utter the words "*Please, I want more*" in front of the authorities. Due to its author's unique talent of reflecting social issues in literature, the novel that presents his story, entitled *Oliver Twist; or the Parish Boy's Progress* (published as a serial between 1837-1839), has enjoyed great success from the moment its serialization started (it is noted that Queen Victoria read it as soon as she came to the throne) and right up to our times. It is the title of the novel, that reminds the readers of John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress" (1678-1884)*, that somehow explains this enduring fame of the novel, *The Pilgrim's Progress* being, in fact, the most popular account in English literature of "how a struggle against temptation and evil wins at last a secure reward" (Preface to the Oxford Edition, p. *5*)

The novel *Oliver Twist; or the Parish Boy's Progress* is appreciated for its detailed presentation of nineteenth-century Victorian society, in all its intricate mechanisms and complicated structure. Undoubtedly, the novelist's fundamental aim was to expose the social defects in his time and the vices that afflicted the essence of society in that particular age. In conventional terms, the age is associated with industrialization and great progress in almost every area of human life, but Charles Dickens's view mainly suggests that industrialisation and the development it brought along generated significant social problems that were worth being revealed.

The Victorian period was a long period of peace, generally associated with such words as stability, *prosperity*, *progress*, *reform* and *Imperialism*, during which the citizens' grounds for satisfaction were rooted in the abundant evidence of great economic development and technical progress of the nation. It was a time of major changes and breakthroughs in almost every sphere of human existence − from advances in scientific, medical and technological knowledge (for instance, increased specialisation and developments in surgery, anaesthetics and antiseptics, the national railway network) to significant changes in population growth and shifts in people's mentalities. It was a long period of prosperity for the British

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people, since the profits gained from the overseas British Empire, as well as from major industrial improvements at home, allowed the development of a large, educated middle class.

Yet, while from many points of view the Victorian age is identified as England's pinnacle of power and prestige (according to Galea 2), the other side of the coin was represented by the widespread poverty, miserable slums and poor working conditions that existed in many industries of Victorian England. Moreover, as time passed by, the rapid transformation deeply affected the country's state of mind: an era that had begun with a confidence and optimism that resulted in economic development and prosperity eventually gave in to uncertainty and doubt arising from "vast social and intellectual change" (Moran 2).

It is from this latter outlook on Victorian society that the story of Oliver Twist emerges, defined by Charles Dickens himself as very similar to "all good murderous melodramas, to present the tragic and the comic scenes, in as regular alternation, as the layers of red and white in a side of streaky bacon" (*OT*, p. 106). Overall, the plot of the novel "opposes innocence and corruption, good and bad characters, middle-class and underclass cultures, country and city settings" (Westland, Ella, Introduction to the Wordsworth Classics Edition of *OT*, page XII) in its attempt to depict *"a full, true, and particular account of the life and adventures of Oliver Twist?"* (*OT*, p. 89), starting with the moment of his birth in a workhouse, presented as follows:

> "Among other public buildings in a certain town, which for many reasons it will be prudent to refrain from mentioning, and to which I will assign no fictitious name, there is one anciently common to most towns, great or small: to wit, a workhouse; and in this workhouse was born; on a day and date which I need not trouble myself to repeat, inasmuch as it can be of no possible consequence to the reader, in this stage of the business at all events; the item of mortality whose name is prefixed to the head of this chapter" (*OT*, p. 3).

The future condition of the new-born child is consecrated from this initial moment, when, after his mother's death, he was

> "enveloped in the old calico robes which had grown yellow in the same service, he was badged and ticketed, and fell into his place at once- a parish child- the orphan of a workhouse- the humble, half-starved drudge- to be cuffed and buffeted through the world- despised by all, and pitied by none" (*OT*, p. 5).

Life is cruel for little Oliver, who, "for the next eight or ten months, (…) was the victim of a systematic course of treachery and deception. He was brought up by hand" (*OT*, p. 5). The hungry and destitute situation of the infant orphan was duly reported by the workhouse authorities to the parish authorities", who decided that Oliver should be "'farmed,' or, in other words, that he should be despatched to a branch-workhouse some three miles off, where twenty or thirty other juvenile offenders against the poor-laws, rolled about the floor all day, without the inconvenience of too much food or too much clothing, under the parental superintendence of an elderly female" (*OT*, p. 5).

From this moment on, Dickens shows how the poor orphan, Oliver, is a victim of social corruption. Brought up in that children's farm managed by Mrs. Mann, he reaches his ninth birthday as "a pale thin child, somewhat diminutive in

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stature, and decidedly small in circumference" (*OT*, p. 6). All the poor children housed in that shelter lived in terrible conditions, deprived of food, money and, most of all affection; in fact, Mrs Mann has made it a habit for her to steal the money allotted for the purpose of feeding the children. After his ninth anniversary, Oliver was

> "led away by Mr. Bumble from the wretched home where one kind word or look had never lighted the gloom of his infant years. And yet he burst into an agony of childish grief, as the cottage-gate closed after him. Wretched as were the little companions in misery he was leaving behind, they were the only friends he had ever known; and a sense of his loneliness in the great wide world, sank into the child's heart for the first time". (*OT*, p. 9)

In the workhouse, Dickens portrays with great detail the terrible conditions in which the poor, and most especially poor orphans, were leading their lives - lives of sheer deprivation and constant fear, where physical abuse, insufficient nourishment and regular painful punishments were the norm. In such places, married couples were separated, children were taken away from their parents and the poor were starved to death. By portraying with such care the constant deprivation that was marking the poor's lives, Charles Dickens intends to verbalise in an obvious manner social injustice and to criticize his society which considered poverty a crime.

> "They established the rule, that all poor people should have the alternative (for they would compel nobody, not they), of being starved by a gradual process in the house, or by a quick one out of it. With this view, they contracted with the water-works to lay on an unlimited supply of water; and with a corn-factor to supply periodically small quantities of oatmeal; and issued three meals of thin gruel a day, with an onion twice a week, and half a roll on Sundays. 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 Doctors' 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!" (*OT*, p. 11)

After three months of starvation, which made one of the children "hint darkly to his companions, that unless he had another basin of gruel (r)per diem, he was afraid he might some night happen to eat the boy who slept next him, who happened to be a weakly youth of tender age" (*OT*, p. 12), "a council was held; lots were cast who should walk up to the master after supper that evening, and ask for more; and it fell to Oliver Twist" (*OT*, p. 12). Though he was a child, he was desperate with hunger and misery. "He rose from the table; and advancing to the master, basin and spoon in hand, said: somewhat alarmed at his own temerity: 'Please, sir, I want some more'." (*OT*, p. 12) Oliver's action is so unexpected that the reaction it causes is described by Dickens as follows:

> "The master was a fat, heatlhy man; but he turned very pale. He gazed in stupefied astonishment on the small rebel for some seconds; and then clung for support to the copper. The assistants were paralysed with wonder, the boys with fear" (*OT*, p. 12).

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As a consequence of his request, Oliver is promptly sold to an undertaker, whose wife locks him up among the coffins as a punishment. At the beginning of Chapter VIII, young Oliver manages to escape his oppressors and flees to London, an action he undertakes because he had heard older men in the workhouse say "there are ways of living in that vast city, which those who had been bred in country parts had no idea of" (*OT*, p. 14). Oliver's intention to discover what these "ways of living" were represents an important part of his progress, and "from the moment he falls in with Artful Dodger what is at risk is Oliver's soul" (*Preface to the* Oxford Edition *of Oliver Twist*, p. 6). At this point, "what began as a topical satire on the workhouse system and the role of the 1834 New Poor Law in fostering criminality, marked by a heavily ironic narrative voice, became a moral fable about the survival of good, a romance in which a cheated orphan is restored to his inheritance" (Preface to the Oxford Edition of *Oliver Twist*, p. 7). The Artful Dodger (Jack) introduces Oliver into a gang of pickpockets and thieves, administered by a criminal mastermind called Fagin (the name of one of Dickens's companions at the blacking factory). "In the social system of the novel, Fagin stands for foreigness and decadence" (Westland, Ella, Introduction to the Wordsworth Classics Edition of *OT*, p. XIII), whose dens are "places of evil, but also of high spirits, strong emotions, clashes of temperament and partnerships in crime" (Westland, Ella, Introduction to the Wordsworth Classics Edition of *OT*, p. XIII).

Though surrounded by evil, the young boy manages to keep away from the usual business of the gang and is temporarily saved from their hands by Mr. Brownlow, a very respectable-looking elderly gentleman who takes a liking to Oliver, even if the latter was (wrongfully) suspected of having stolen the man's handkerchief. Oliver is very happy with Mr. Brownlow, but Fagin and his co-conspirators are not happy to have lost Oliver, who may give away their hiding place. So one day, when Mr. Brownlow entrusts Oliver to return some books to the bookseller for him, Oliver is kidnapped and taken back to Fagin. Afterwards, he is forced to participate in a house-breaking action, but it fails and Oliver ends up shot by one of the servants of the house. The woman whose house had been broken into by Oliver turns out to be his aunt. Good eventually defeats evil: Oliver inherits a decent sum of money and thereafter lives a respectable life.

The impact of the novel is very much related to the setting in which the action of *Oliver Twist* is projected. Oliver's boyhood adventures in the countryside (more precisely, near a small town) do not promote the notion of an idealized rural setting. "Dickens's unequivocal message is that poverty and institutionalized bullying in the rural parishes of England cause as much miseries as any urban squalor" (Westland, Ella, Introduction to the Wordsworth Classics Edition of *OT*, p. XVI). However, from the viewpoint of the individual born and raised in the countryside, the city might seem a much more dangerous place. To illustrate that, Dickens reproduces a dialogue between Mrs Mann and Mr Bumble, in which the latter informs the former of his intention of going to London by coach, in view of a "legal action… about a settlement" (*OT*, p. 108):

> " 'Mrs Mann, I am a-going to London.'
> 'Lauk, Mr Bumble! cried Mrs Mann, starting back' " (*OT*, p. 108)

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London's chaotic underworld makes it hard for Oliver himself to adapt to its harsh realities. The young boy never identifies with the city, which remains a place of terror and "epitomizes an urban environment almost beyond social control" (Westland, Ella, Introduction to the Wordsworth Classics Edition of *OT*, p. XVI). The streets, even those from respectable neighbourhoods, are far from being a secure place: they are populated by pickpockets and danger seems to be present at each and every corner of the city.

With its presentation of the characters and the setting, *Oliver Twist* is a powerful satire on the inhuman cruelties of the New Poor Laws of 1834, which stipulated that society's jobless and desperate should be virtually imprisoned in harsh institutions known as workhouses. "The Poor Laws came as a result of Britain's beliefs about the poor. Because of their rigid social structure, the middle class wanted to distinguish themselves from the lower classes as much as possible, and the poor became stereotyped as lazy and born of bad blood" (Preface to the Oxford Edition of *Oliver Twist*, p. 20). This perspective is often identified in *Oliver Twist* as Oliver is assumed throughout the work to be evil merely because he is a poor orphan; this is the same sort of prejudice that Dickens himself bore when he was temporarily an orphan. In the alteration of the state of the poor an important role was played by Christianity as well. The English bourgeoisie firmly believed that God rewarded the virtuous with wealth and worldly goods, therefore the middle class was inherently good, whereas the poor, lower class was evil. This is the conception held by Mr. Bumble, whose attitude towards the work house paupers is one of contempt. For him, the death of a woman in the parish is nothing more than an irritation. He condemns the ingratitude of the paupers and criticizes the rudeness of the dead woman's husband who has refused to take an improper medicine sent to his wife by the parish. He fails to recognize that the parish actually contributed to the poor woman's demise and overlooks the fact that the woman died of hunger and neglect.

The novelist attempts to challenge such a misconception by creating characters, such as Monks, Oliver's half-brother, that are wealthy, but vicious and corrupt. As a counterpoint, he also created poor characters that are good and innocent, in spite of their low social status. Therefore, what Charles Dickens aims to demonstrate in this novel is that some people are inherently good, whilst others are inherently bad, but that does not depend on the social class the respective people belong to.

Through the novel that has been under analysis, Charles Dickens attempted to approach the social misconceptions and treatment of the poorer classes of Victorian. London. In order to achieve the purpose of demonstrating how badly poor people were treated in society at that time and how they were forced to stay in such a misery because of the laws set in place, he resorted to autobiographical elements and to his rich journalistic experience (Cf. Morris 3), the result being a powerful novel with a strong impact of the consciousness of readers in all times.

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