

Realism in Oliver Twist
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Abstract

The Victorian England which Dickens represented was fraught with massive economic turmoil. The industrial revolution sent shock waves through the established order. The disparity between the rich and the poor, or middle class working class had stretched to an alarming stage. To replenish their coffers the mill owners exploited their employees. They latter had to suffer immensely. They were paid low wages which was far too short in proportion to the time they spent in the factories. The condition of child laborers was even worse particularly the orphan since no body was there to raise protest against the inhuman treatment, they were subject to and the poor fellows had no option but to negotiate with the situation and thus were easily entrapped into the net spread by the cunning and shrewd factory owners. Thus, the mill owners made enormous monetary gain out of this awkward arrangement which made everything in a state of disarray. Workers were no longer treated as men of flesh or blood. They were relegated to the status of 'hands' who were bound to work tirelessly to ensure more dividend to the owners. They had to work for hours in cramped and dangerous factories full of dirt and filth.

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Introduction

The story of *Oliver Twist* revolves around orphan boy who starts his life in workhouse. After consternation by requesting more food he runs away and becomes part of a pickpocket gang. The parish boys' progress, being the subtitle, the novel *Oliver Twist* was a platform for Dickens' to express his concern about the of the flaws of the work house system.

In majority of his novels Dickens has used his characters to expose the huge gulf between the rich and the poor. In *Oliver Twist* to a lively picture of the adverse working condition of the workers in which they have been pitted against has been brought to the surface. They are destined to face acute hardships and there is no remedy to their perennial problem. The entire English society has turned into a factory with people representing two widely different blocks of workers and the owners. The impact of industrial revolution was so deep and potent that it encircled the entire society within its ambit. People were thinking in terms of monetary advancement which they craved for. The middle class was only concerned with making hefty money at the cost of human values which no longer remained the guiding principle of society. Fundamental values of life have been dashed to the ground. Material pleasure ruled the roost which everybody craved form in the more efficient and practical way possible.

Dickens was a novelist with a purpose from first to last. In almost all his novels he set out to expose some specific abuses in the existing system and emerged as the champion of the weak, the outcast and the oppressed. In nearly all the novels there is an attack on some corrupt and inefficient social system which include boarding schools in *Nicholas Nickleby*, the court chancery in the *Bleak House*, the new manufacturing system in *Hard Times*, the warehouses in *Oliver Twist* and authoritativeness of the school authorities in *David Copperfield*. His ideas successfully find expression in his speech he gave in Birmingham in 8044,

“If you would reward honesty, if you would give encouragement to good, if you would stimulate the idle, eradicate evil or correct what is bad education is one they need at the one efficient end.”¹

Dickens intended *Oliver Twist*, first published in monthly installments between Feb 1837 and April 1839, to show the system treatment of an innocent child born and raised in a work house system, where no fault could be ascribed to the child. He shows the boys neglected, ill-treated and experiencing hunger so had that one child

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threatens to eat one of the others if he is not better fed. The brutality of the system is exposed in the description of Oliver's punishment for his request which occupies quite a chunk of the following chapter. Oliver is maligned, threatened with being hanged, drawn and quartered, he is starved, caned, and flogged before an audience of pauper's solitary confined in the dark for days and forced to sleep with coffins.

When Dickens planned and penned Oliver Twist new legislation was just beginning to be implemented across the country.

The work house system was introduced following the enactment of the poor law Act of 1834, it acted adversely to the interest of the elderly, the sick and the poor. The workhouses were treated as a sort of prison instead of providing shelter to the marginalized section. The government's intention was to put down expenditure on poverty by setting up cruelly deterrent regime. No cash support whatever would henceforth be given out were now disallowed. The only option left for the inmates of the workhouses was hard work. Homes were broken up, belongings sold, families separated.

Children were separated and sent away; heads were shaved clothes boiled and uniforms issued. The administration of the workhouse was run over by self-satisfied and heartless men which he called 'the man in white waistcoat'² who personifies the smug viciousness of the guardians in Oliver Twist's workhouse. This is likely to have been something Dickens knew about. Many accurate details in Oliver Twist show that Dickens did a lot of research before he wrote the story. Except for a few exceptions the workhouse system was harsh and austere. The poor were treated punitively as if their predicament was entirely of their own making.

The work house system was hated and people did everything they would to avoid getting entrapped in it. Those finally landed there were either the most vulnerable or the most hardened and brazen. The Victorian poor law system effectively warehoused people the Nazis would have liked to liquidate. Dickens was hurt at heart by the harsh Poor Law Amendment Act 1834. The act which was met with widespread criticism, was designed to reduce the cost of the poor relief by complimenting a centralized workhouse system. This meant the relief – clothing and food – was only given for a grueling manual labor. Families were split into gender divided walls, and once in were prevented from leaving. Conditions in workhouses were so poor that only desperation drove people to seek refuge there.

Actually, before opting for the career of a full-time novelist he had worked as parliamentary reporters. He has watched the foul practices of the parliamentarians through his naked eyes which turned him dispassionate towards these fellows. He had the opportunity to listen to various debates on public issues which the parliamentarians were indulged in which revealed the hollowness and their attitudes towards the fellow countrymen which was worth mentioning. Dickens used his novels as a medium to bring to public the foul practices and inhuman behavior of the law-makers which could hardly find an access in civilized world and should be condemned in the strongest possible words since it is an act of great injustice with the interest of the oppressed classes.

Dickens decided to share his experiences with the people through his novel *Oliver Twist* when he was barely 25 years old. He was aware of the grim reality that an individual was vulnerable to desperation hunger, cruelty and crime out of either taking birth in poor family or due to abject circumstances he was pitted against. His own personal life taught him plenty in this regard which forced him to express solidarity with the poor fellows facing innumerable hardships in the workhouses. His own family had to suffer immensely and had been imprisoned in debtor's prison. Although there was no let up to their suffering in the debtor's prison still it was preferable to the life in the work house since the family was at least allowed to remain together which was largely denied to the inmates of the work houses. His family had to settle close to the Cleveland street workhouse which provided him ample opportunity to see the terrible condition the children in the workhouses had been subject to. The family's lodging was above a food shop, and it was quite possible that young Dickens felt deeply sensitive about the suffering he knew was going on inside the institution close by.

It has now been proved through the evidences gathered from various sources than there is a striking similarity between the picture of the poor law Dickens had painted in *Oliver Twist* and the real things which were practiced inside the multi-storied work house in Cleveland street in London. The punishing regime used to discipline Oliver in the like manner as if prevailed at the time in Cleveland Street. The official workhouse regulations published by Covent Garden parish specially forbade second helpings of food which clearly speak of a parallel circumstance Oliver was bitted against which speak in volume of Oliver showing proximity with the conditions prevailed in the London workshop Oliver's famous comment, "Please sir, I want some more"³ which was repeated used on several occasions is sufficient

enough to show the predicament of the original workhouses from which Dickens borrowed immensely in *Oliver Twist*.

The workhouse inhabited at closed space but it was not entirely a closed institution. The things happening inside the workhouse lent a deep and potent influence outside its surroundings which included the region where Dickens' family lodged. The many windows of the buildings' front gate overlooked the street, so from across the road faces might be seen behind the glass and perhaps human voices heard, yet other evidence were brought to the surface to show the proximity between the workhouse where Oliver and others were lodged and that we experience at the Cleveland workhouse housed in the vicinity of the city of London. For example, Oliver's cap is described as being of brown cloth which in identical manner reminds of the uniforms in the Cleveland street workhouse.

It is clearly evident from the memoirs of Dickens' life of 1872 that the 12-year-old Dickens was forced to work in Warren's blacking factory pasting labels on blacking bottles following the imprisonment of his father for debt. This experience was written large on his face throughout his life though he came out successfully from the mess and formed the stricture of many of his successful novels which included *Oliver Twist*. He remembered the experience both as a humiliation and as a descent into the amoral world of the London lowlife,

"But for the mercy of God I might easily have been for any care that was taken for me, a little robber or a little vagabond"⁴

Dickens sees the possible other path his life might have taken when he declares in his 1841 preface to *Oliver Twist* that,

"I wished to show, in little Oliver, the privilege of good surviving through every adverse circumstance, and triumphing at last"⁵

Dickens' preference for pickpockets, prostitutes, murderers and housebreakers horrified many of his readers since they were not expecting these outlaws enjoying special leniency through the length and breadth of the country. In the preface to the 1841 edition of *Oliver Twist*, Dickens wrote,

It is, it seems, a very coarse and shocking circumstance, that some of the characters in these pages are chosen from the most criminal and degraded population of London's population, than which is a thief, and Fagin a receiver of stolen goods, that the boys are pickpockets, and the girl is a prostitute... it appeared to me.. to baint them in all their deformity, in all their wickedness, in all the squalid poverty of their

lives, to show them as they really are, for evel skulking uneasily through the distiest paths of life, with the grent bleck ghastly gallows closing up their preo pack”

Many readess were startle by the sum he tonesof The Picknick papers, his first novel which was followed by Oliver Twist which painted an ether wise gloomy picture. Actually, as he matured age Dickens increasingly saw himself as serious written with a mission to speak for the poor and the homeless. He told one of hiscritics in 1852,

“pray do not, suppose that I ever write merely to amuse, or with out on object”⁶

References:

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