

# CHARLES DICKENS AT WORK OF “OLIVER TWIST”: HISTORY AND HEROES

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## Abstract

This article represents literature data about the process of creation and the presentation of Charles Dickens' prominent novel "Oliver Twist", written between 1837 and 1839, which reflects the suffering of the people through the fates of its characters. It discusses the history of the work and how the progression of events is portrayed. As readers know, Charles Dickens, in each of his works, depicted the social and political issues of his time as well as the joys and sorrows of the people through the lives of his characters.

**Keywords:** Oliver, workhouse, The Poor Law Amendment, character, social life, hardship.

## Introduction

Literature is a reflection of human life, and literary heritage serves as a priceless collection that showcases the events and phenomena in the lives of writers and their surroundings. From this perspective, literature is esteemed for its artistic works, novels, plays, and poems. One such unique work is "Oliver Twist", which gained significant popularity in its time and is recognized as a people's novel. Its author, Charles John Huffam Dickens, was born in 1812 on the southern coast of England. The writer's life path directly served as the main material for his works. Charles Dickens' father, John Dickens, worked as an official in the Royal Navy but was imprisoned due to debts. At the age of twelve, Charles had to leave school and work. Even after his father was released from prison, Charles continued working in a factory under the pressure of his mother.

## The Adolescent and Youth Years of the Writer

Charles Dickens' teenage and early adult years were filled with financial hardships and discrimination. He became closely acquainted with the harsh lives of workhouses, slums, the poor, and criminals. Later, he vividly and realistically depicted all these experiences in the pages of his books. Dickens is considered one of the pillars of realism, one of the most prominent literary movements in 19th-century European literature. Dickens began his creative career as a journalist. Thanks to his talent and sensitivity to contemporary issues, he quickly gained public recognition and became one of the most renowned authors of his time. This momentum led to the emergence of several of his works in quick succession: the moralistic "Sketches by Boz" and the satirical novel "The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club" (The Pickwick Papers). The latter, in particular, brought him widespread fame among readers,



turning him into a celebrated author almost overnight. His works such as “The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby” and especially “Oliver Twist” painted a vibrant and vivid picture of the shortcomings of English society. “Oliver Twist”, in particular, sparked widespread public outcry and eventually contributed to the softening and even abolition of many cruel laws against the poor and child laborers. In the following years, Dickens delighted his readers with new works such as “Dombey and Son” and the autobiographical novel “David Copperfield”, earning him pan-European fame and leading to the creation of many other notable works.

Despite achieving everything he ever desired, including fame, wealth, and a position as editor-in-chief of The Daily News, Dickens found neither peace nor happiness. His anxious and restless nature prevented him from enjoying family tranquility. Married to Catherine Hogarth, with whom he had eight children, Dickens struggled with personal dissatisfaction during his later years. In the later years of his life, the writer’s talent was also called into question. He wished to see the gradual transformation of the society he lived in, the eradication of social injustice, and to witness everything he had criticized in his books come to an end. However, the changes came very slowly, and the author suffered from the inability to influence the situation in any way. As a solution to these problems, throughout his life, he wrote social, realistic, and populist works, providing resolutions to his dissatisfaction either at the end of his works or through the lives of his characters. The great writer passed away from stroke in 1870. In the period of 1837 and 1839, Charles Dickens presented his second novel, “Oliver Twist” to the public. The story is centered around the life of a boy who never experienced a true childhood and vividly portrays the lives of criminals and their descent into degradation. During its development, however, the novel’s themes were enriched with Dickens’ attention to the pressing needs of society, marking him as a truly national realist writer and foreshadowing his future growth in the literary world. Several factors influenced the creation of the novel, one of which was the Poor Law Amendment in 1834, which led to the establishment of workhouses. Prior to this, local parish authorities and churches were responsible for caring for the lower classes and the poor. The new law mandated the consolidation of all the poor into specific workhouses where they were required to work to cover their daily expenses and basic needs. This system, however, forced many impoverished individuals to abandon their families. The conditions in the workhouses were so harsh that many preferred dying of exhaustion, starvation, or imprisonment for begging over staying in such institutions. Through this novel, Dickens fueled heated public debates about this controversial institution of English democracy. In the unforgettable opening chapters, he harshly condemned the Poor Law Amendment and the exploitation of children in workhouses, vividly depicting Oliver’s birth and the unpaid labor of workhouse children. The novel captured the public’s attention by addressing various social issues such as the Poor Law Amendment, workhouses, social stratification, child labor, and the exploitation of children in criminal activities. Dickens’ usage of bitter and dark humor highlighted serious themes throughout the novel. Some sources suggest that “Oliver Twist” may have been inspired by a newspaper account from 1834, detailing the tragic story of Nicholas Blincoe, an orphan subjected to discrimination and suffering in a workhouse.



In the novel's opening chapters, Dickens introduces readers to its central themes, particularly the flaws of the Poor Law and the workhouse system. The protagonist, Oliver Twist, is born in a workhouse. Shortly after his birth, his mother dies, leaving Oliver as an orphan under the care of the authorities. Oliver never knows his father, and it is only at the end of the novel that a kindly older man, Mr. Brownlow, reveals information about Oliver's parentage.

Charles Dickens' "Oliver Twist" vividly portrays real-life events, human destinies, and the often-overlooked social issues of the working class. At the time of its publication, Dickens' grim depiction of London's rising crime rates and the prevalence of child theft faced sharp criticism. In the preface to the 1858 edition of the novel, Dickens wrote: "When I wrote this book, it was to show how a society that held no place for these people, and whose voice failed to serve a moral purpose, was culpable."<sup>1</sup> The novel's core moral message was rooted in the flaws of the Poor Law Amendment in 1834. The primary aim of "Oliver Twist" was to expose the harsh realities of the Poor Law Amendment, which institutionalized the despair and suffering of impoverished men, women, and children in workhouses. Inspired by his own childhood experiences and observations of the dire conditions in 19th-century England, Dickens sought to depict the loss of childhood innocence among children in workhouses. The novel captures the daily lives of society's lowest classes, their mistreatment, and the injustices they endured.

The enactment of the Poor Law Amendment worsened the lives of the working class. Previously, parishes and churches provided direct support to the poor through food or money. However, the new law shifted the responsibility to workhouses, where individuals had to labor to earn their keep. This law forced families apart, with children separated from parents and spouses divided, sentencing many to grueling work and premature death. The English bourgeoisie, seeking to preserve their wealth, effectively declared war on workers through this system. In "Oliver Twist" (1837–1839), Dickens captures the anger and heartbreak of workhouse conditions. He began working on this novel even before completing his first book. The story opens with the bleak birth of Oliver in a dreary workhouse, followed shortly by his mother's tragic death. Dickens' inspiration for this opening was partly drawn from the year of 1834 ballet "The Revolt of the Workhouse", staged by Gilbert Abbott à Beckett. Furthermore, correspondence between Dickens and à Beckett from as early as in 1833 reveals their shared discussions on this topic.

While reading the novel, the reader witnesses the harsh journey of an orphan with an unknown lineage, whose life is marked by hardships and abuse. This poor, hungry child, mistreated by everyone and deprived of kindness, faces a grim fate. However, an unexpected event occurs. One day, the starving boy courageously extends his empty bowl to the potbellied cook and quietly says, "Please, sir, I want some more." It took great bravery for him to utter these simple words. He had to overcome fear and humiliation and, most importantly, defy the law of obedience, risking death from starvation to take a stand. This scene, described by Dickens, illustrates the struggles of people in workhouses—working for mere pennies while unable to get enough to eat, silently enduring humiliation and injustice. With this cry, the author reflects

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, London, 1998, p. 53



the suffering of ordinary people and reveals the devastating impact of the “Poor Law Amendment” on human lives.

Another concern weighing on Dickens was the social reality of poverty. In subsequent chapters of *Oliver Twist*, as Oliver travels to London, Dickens vividly portrays the “bitter truth” of the lives of the poor. He describes their sorrowful faces, dilapidated homes, constant hunger, and lives steeped in despair. In doing so, Dickens highlights the direct link between poverty and crime, emphasizing that poor living conditions often push people into criminal activities.

Dickens’ *Oliver Twist* not only exposes the grim realities of poverty but also critiques the flawed social structure. He denounces the unjust system and believes that meaningful reform must originate from the educated upper classes. Dickens advocates for reforms, including secure employment for workers and mandatory primary education for all children. This idea is exemplified in the character of Mr. Brownlow, who takes care of the poor Oliver, nurturing his love for books and teaching him moral values gradually. Through these acts, Mr. Brownlow fosters kindness and loyalty in Oliver. Having experienced how poverty, fear, and constant humiliation can corrupt a person, Dickens consciously makes Oliver a symbol of purity untouched by filth. Ultimately, goodness triumphs in *Oliver Twist*—like in a fairytale—evil is defeated, and the honest, kind-hearted Oliver finds happiness and prosperity. However, without Nancy’s help, even noble Oliver might have perished. Nancy is neither educated nor from a refined class; she is entangled in theft and immoral activities. Yet, within her heart lies a spark of goodness. Through this character, Dickens aims to show that even those with tarnished lives or limited education possess redeeming qualities. It is Nancy who learns about the schemes of the villains Monks and Fagin—who try to turn Oliver into a thief and lead him to ruin—and ultimately saves Oliver, sacrificing her own life in the process.

Another character created by Dickens, Rose Maylie, embodies the qualities of Mary Hogarth, whom he deeply admired.

Mary Hogarth was the sister of Dickens’ wife, and letters between them reveal the strong bond and affection they shared. Mary’s sudden death had a profound impact on Dickens. Though she was cheerful and healthy, she unexpectedly fell ill and passed away from a heart attack [11; 27-28]. In *Rose Maylie*, Dickens crafted a symbol of enchanting femininity and loyalty, inspired by Mary. The episode in *Oliver Twist* where Rose falls gravely ill reflects Dickens’ personal grief over Mary’s death. However, unlike Mary, Rose survives in the novel. By sparing Rose’s life, Dickens symbolically rescues his beloved sister-in-law from the clutches of illness, allowing her to live on in the story, experiencing love and joy on the pages of the novel.

In conclusion, **several factors inspired Charles Dickens to create *Oliver Twist*:**

- The dire conditions of children in workhouses,
- The tragic social consequences of the “Poor Law Amendment”,
- The author’s belief in the transformative power of education as a remedy for neglect, which he sought to illustrate in his work.

Every masterpiece has its own destiny, and *Oliver Twist* became a beloved novel of its time, resonating deeply with the public while addressing crucial social issues.



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