



LUND UNIVERSITY

Joint Faculties of Humanities and Theology

Centre for Languages and Literature

English Studies

The Role of the Orphan Child in Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*

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ENGK01
Degree project in English Literature
Fall 2016
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Abstract

Charles Dickens was one of the most popular and influential authors of the 19th century, and through his novel *Oliver Twist* he portrayed the lives of marginalised groups of Victorian society, with the orphan as a main focus. This essay examines how the role of the orphan child is employed within the novel and how the interplay between novel and reality affects the reading. By situating *Oliver Twist* in its contemporary social context, the essay discusses how the social situation influenced Dickens and his readers, including how the author chose to construct the character and how the reading public responded to it. The discussion reveals that the orphan child was a useful literary figure, as it appealed to Victorian sentiments and could thereby constitute the foundation for the author's moral claim. Additionally, Victorian readers were indeed influenced by their social context when reading the novel, as fiction and reality reciprocally illuminated each other. Thus, Dickens' portrayal of the young orphan boy in *Oliver Twist* invited readers to alter their perception of orphans in real life.

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Introduction

In the 19th century, Britain went through major changes within almost all spheres of society; it is even claimed that by the time Queen Victoria died in 1901, society had undergone such transformation that “the modern world had taken shape” (Mitchell xiv). Although the changes were mainly within areas such as technology, economics and politics, there was also a distinct shift in values and morality. The shift was largely influenced by the Evangelical Movement beginning in the late 18th century, and resulted in a growing awareness of moral responsibility and social concern (Mitchell 256). Due to the close relationship between Victorian society and the written discourse, the social awareness became visible in many Victorian writings, both fictional and non-fictional.

According to Laura Berry, the 19th century was also the time when children became unquestioned public categories, which incited an entirely new social debate about children and society’s responsibility towards them (2). Among children, the most severely exposed group were orphans, who were often the subjects of severe discrimination, because the majority of them were born outside of marriage (Banerjee Section 2). Since there was no official apparatus to take care of these children, except for the workhouse, they were frequently neglected and exposed to dreadful living conditions (Pool 213). Berry argues that the increasing awareness of the fates of these children was especially notable in the early Victorian period, when it was as likely to find writings on child protection within social reform writings as within fiction (2). In addition to calling forth a change in society, the changing attitudes can thus be noticed by the prevalence of the orphan figure within fiction; one can “hardly open a novel by Dickens, the Brontë sisters, or George Eliot without stumbling over at least one orphan” (Peters 1).

One of the major authors of the 19th century was Charles Dickens. His second novel *Oliver Twist* was first published as a serial in *Bentley’s Miscellany* between 1837 and 1839 (Grubb 291); wrapped in a story of the young orphan Oliver, who despite difficulties finally finds his identity and place in society, the novel provides a portrait of society’s ill-treatment of orphan children. According to Lydia Murdoch, the depiction of Oliver became the standard image of a child which lasted for the entire century, and thus to a great extent influenced society’s perception of orphans (1). Although the main focus of the novel is on the orphaned child, it also introduces the reader to other marginalised groups in society, such as unmarried mothers, criminals and prostitutes. The focus on the child is illustrated by the then rather original choice to have a child as the main protagonist and by the several orphan characters

appearing in the novel. Even though the story of Oliver on some points diverges from the historical reality, perhaps most notably in the end, the novel played an important role in the social debate as it strongly criticised the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 and its implementations for the people in need of support (Richardson *Dickens* 6).

Steven Lynn suggests that the contemporary context has an important influence on the understanding of a literary work, and he writes that “a writer’s audience inevitably has knowledge and assumptions that are not immediately available to a later audience, removed in time and space” (24). Since the 19th century is marked by such a distinct correlation between societal attitudes, the social situation and representations within literature, this essay aims to explore how the social context of the early 19th century influenced Charles Dickens in his depiction and his readers in their perception of fictional orphans. As mentioned, the interplay between reality and literature is important for a deeper understanding of the novel; presumably, it is of particular importance when it comes to a writer like Dickens, who intentionally placed *Oliver Twist* at the centre of the ongoing changes in society.

Using *Oliver Twist* as my focal point, I will claim that the frequency of orphans in 19th century fiction can be explained by a combination of public sentiment, social context and literary benefits. Dickens was deeply affected by the situation of orphans, and he therefore dedicated *Oliver Twist* to the humanisation of his society (Carlisle 41). Not only did he use orphan children in order to comment on the faults of society, but they also proved to have an important literary function by appealing to the Victorian reader. Concerning the readers’ perception of the novel, it seems reasonable to assume that their reading was influenced by the social context, since it was so closely related with the reality portrayed in the novel and thus functioned as a complement to the text itself.

In order to discuss how Charles Dickens and his readers were influenced by the social situation, this essay will position *Oliver Twist* in its 19th century social context. While discussing the social situation depicted in the novel, reviews and other contemporary comments will be presented in order to demonstrate how Victorian readers received it. Following the historical section, I will discuss the construction of the orphan figure, including typical traits of orphan narratives, such as vulnerability and goodness, and how these features affected the Victorians. The last section of the discussion concerns narrative techniques, as they reveal the intentions of the author and shape the readers’ perception of the orphan.

Contextualising *Oliver Twist*

The historical context constitutes an important aspect when it comes to the understanding of *Oliver Twist* and how the orphan is used as a fictional character; it affects how characters are perceived, by providing information about what is implicitly referred to within the novel. Therefore, this section aims to anchor *Oliver Twist* in its contemporary context. To begin with, I will present some information about Charles Dickens as a writer together with the social situation surrounding the publication of *Oliver Twist*. Further on, the section will also provide some contemporary material describing how the novel was received.

Charles Dickens was one of the most famous writers of the 19th century and he was immensely popular among readers. Due to the changing moral climate and the overwhelming social problems of English society, there was a significant increase of social concern and organised charity (Mitchell 256). Consequently, Dickens' humanity and social concern constituted important keys to his success, since they appealed to the public sentiment and the moral and charitable vein in Victorian society (Cody). Moreover, Paul Morris claims that Dickens was not only an author of texts but also of the moral attitudes of his own and subsequent generations (215); as I will show, *Oliver Twist* was important in shaping societal attitudes as well as the image of the orphan.

Along with the changing attitudes towards children, the child also became a more prominent literary figure, which was made possible by the close relationship between the social discourse and the discourse of fiction (Berry 2). Dickens, perhaps more than any other author, was devoted to the topic of children, which is seen in the great number of child characters in his novels. Morris claims that Dickens was one of the most important forces when it came to ensuring that the topic of children was broadly exposed within both social and literary spheres (218). His ability to feel compassion and his awareness of social injustices, most likely derived from his personal life-experience; as a young boy he was separated from his family and forced to work in a factory, and once he moved to London as an adult he witnessed the miserable living conditions in several areas of the city (Diniejko).

In addition to the fact that children became a common topic in the social debate and in literature, the changes in societal attitudes also influenced *how* children were represented in fiction. Berry observes that authors of fiction gradually left the romanticised image of the child for more realistically and historically correct portrayals of children (Berry 16). A result of this was that 19th-century writers often depicted children as victims, as is visible in *Oliver Twist* (Berry 16). Even though society as a whole was increasingly aware of the situation for

children, few people wanted to think about their actual fates; but by portraying their lives in fiction Dickens invited society to do so (Richardson *Dickens* 280). A possible explanation for Dickens' specific interest in the situation of children is that he was living near the famous Foundling Hospital in London while finishing *Oliver Twist* (Richardson "Foundlings"). The impact of this circumstance is implied in Dickens' article "Received, a blank child", which describes one of his visits to this philanthropic institution. In addition, the fact that he named one of the heroes in *Oliver Twist* after the Hospital's Secretary, Mr Brownlow, and even ascribed the fictional character with similar attributes as the Secretary, further indicates that the Hospital did not only have an important impact on society, but also on Dickens himself (Richardson "Foundlings").

The Foundling Hospital was a private charity founded in 1739, and played an important role in reflecting and shaping the moral changes of English society (Taylor 308). Its aim was to be a home for deserted children and to nurture them until they were able to take care of themselves (Richardson "Foundlings"). When the institution was founded the homeless and often orphan children had been an unsolved issue for Britain for a long time, and the demand of support for children eventually became so considerable that the Hospital had to limit their intake by only accepting the most severely exposed group: illegitimate children younger than one (Banerjee Section 2). The fact that the Hospital was founded at such an early state of the increasing social problems and that it for a long time was the only institution of the kind, indicates how important it was in contributing to the charitable vein permeating Victorian society.

Due to high mortality rates and harsh moral attitudes, orphans and illegitimate children continued to increase in numbers well into the 19th century (Richardson "Foundlings"). Pregnant or newly delivered women often died of weak health – as in the description of Oliver's mother – or abandoned their children to the Foundling Hospital or to the workhouses, as the disgrace and discrimination following illegitimacy was so severe (Richardson "Foundlings"). Of course, the harsh attitudes towards illegitimacy affected children as well as their mothers, and according to Jacqueline Banerjee, illegitimate children constituted the group in greatest need of help as they were entirely exposed to the world and without any adult protection (Section 2). Regarding the relationship between the Foundling Hospital and *Oliver Twist*, Jenny Taylor suggests that the novel highlighted society's want of that kind of institutions. Naturally, the contribution of the Hospital is most fully visible in relation to its larger context, where its work posed a strong contrast in a society where the majority of orphans faced entirely different fates.

It was a rare fortune for orphans to end up within the care of the Foundling Hospital, and it is the alternative fates that make up the main social context for *Oliver Twist*. One way to solve the situation of orphans was to place them with relatives; however, this solution was of course restricted to cases where the parentage was known. Those orphans who did not have any known parentage would in most cases end up in the workhouse, which constituted the closest thing to an official apparatus and corresponds to the early childhood years depicted in *Oliver Twist* (Banerjee Section 4). In the system for poor relief that was used prior to 1834, which dated back to the rule of Queen Elizabeth I, illegitimate children belonged to the parish in which they were born; as a result, pregnant single women were considered both a moral and economical burden and were often driven from parish to parish, as is also reflected in the novel through the fate of Oliver's mother (Taylor 326). When children were born in the workhouse and left there as orphans, the custom was to place the infants at branch workhouses in the countryside, so called 'baby farms', where they were reared until old enough to return to the workhouse (Richardson *Dickens* 212). These children experienced awful living conditions and were often severely neglected; it has been estimated that around 60 % died before they reached the age of two (Banerjee Section 4). If the children did survive the baby farm, they faced similar sufferings in the workhouse (Banerjee Section 4). However, the narrator of *Oliver Twist* observes that even though the conditions inside of the workhouse were indeed horrible, Oliver was fortunate to end up there; thereby indicating how terrible the alternatives were (Dickens 1).

The most severely exposed children were the ones that ended up in the streets. The great numbers of homeless children in London had been a social issue even during the 18th century, but by the time of *Oliver Twist* the numbers had grown even further (Banerjee Section 4). The novel refers to this situation through an observation by Oliver when he first arrives in London and witnesses the "heaps of children" in the streets (70). Indeed, the homeless children of London lived rough lives, with scant access either to food or shelter and were involved in all sorts of minor criminality (Banerjee Section 4). The frequency of homeless children is further implied in the novel when Oliver is brought before the magistrate in London; the fact that the officer is able to spontaneously hazard guesses about Oliver's life, implies that he has witnessed several children in similar situations (94). Regarding the outcomes of the homeless children, they vary; but the happy ending provided in *Oliver Twist* was of course of rare occurrence. Thus, based on the discussion so far, even though Victorian society went through changes concerning attitudes towards children, the situation remained very difficult, especially for children who were born out of marriage. Perhaps the extent of

illegitimate children's suffering and vulnerable position in Victorian society is best explained by the fact that nearly half of those who were born in the London area died before reaching adult age (Banerjee Section 4). Although it may seem incomprehensible, when relating *Oliver Twist* with the contemporary social situation, perhaps Oliver was in fact lucky to end up in the workhouse.

Next to the social situation for children, there is another aspect of the social context that needs to be introduced, namely the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 (also known as the New Poor Law). As was pointed out in the Introduction, the novel was known to be an attack on the law and was used to show how unreasonable the law was (Richardson "Oliver Twist"); in the novel we see this in the paragraph describing the structural changes of the workhouse which correspond to the real life implementations following the new law (13). In the old system for poor relief the parish was responsible to provide support for those who were not able to take care of themselves (Richardson *Dickens* 14). Even though, as stated earlier, this responsibility was not always maintained, Ruth Richardson claims that the old system was "rooted in Christian charity, and recognised the humanity of the poor", thus formed a sharp contrast to the ideas of the new system (*Dickens* 15). Instead of maintaining the traditional responsibility towards people in need of support, The New Poor Law aimed to make the workhouse so unpleasant that people would do anything to avoid it (Mitchell 93). The conditions of the workhouses are portrayed in the novel by Oliver's visit to the pauper family together with Mr Sowerberry; even though the family evidently live in miserable living conditions, their situation is preferable to the workhouse. The New Poor Law was received with criticism, and as will be discussed in a later section, *Oliver Twist* became an important part of the public debate against the new law (Taylor 326).

In order to provide an understanding of how Victorian readers perceived the orphan figure in *Oliver Twist*, the discussion will now focus on the reception of the novel and how some contemporary readers commented on it. From the very beginning, the novel was a success with the public (Diniejkó); however, it did receive some negative criticism. Based on Dickens' own words in the Preface of the 1841 edition, it seems as if the criticism mainly concerned his description of criminals: "it was, it seemed, a coarse and shocking circumstance, that some of the characters in these pages are chosen from the most criminal and degraded in London's population" (Dickens xiii). Owing to the literature flourishing at the time of *Oliver Twist*, this criticism was not surprising; its depiction of criminality made people relate it to the popular romanticised tales of London's criminal life, known as 'Newgate Novels' (Collins 8). According to Dickens himself, some readers expected the

somewhat glorified description of the criminal world typical of this genre, and when they were instead introduced to the brutally realistic criminals of *Oliver Twist*, this caused them to doubt the probability of the characters and believing them to be overdrawn (Dickens xvii). Although modern readers might react on the somewhat idealised depiction of Oliver, Victorian readers reacted more on the harsh reality surrounding him and the rough description of the criminals as they were already accustomed to the idealised image of the child.

Even though Oliver's harsh context was sometimes received with disbelief, it seems to have made a big impact on Victorian readers. In 1838, the *Spectator* published a review of the novel which praised Dickens for creating characters who illustrate actual living creatures of London (Collins 43). In the same review, the writer points out aspects of Dickens' social criticism and relates it with the social situation (Collins 43). Consequently, the honest portrayal of reality seems to have been an important narrative feature for this critic, a fact which aligns with the previously mentioned observation that much of Dickens' popularity was based on his ability to appeal to the Victorian charity and interest in social issues. The ability to relate fiction with reality is further exemplified in a diary entry by Queen Victoria from April 1839, where she relates a conversation about the novel with the Prime Minister, Lord Melbourne. In this conversation, Lord Melbourne says that he disapproves of the social situation described in the novel, since he does not approve of it in real life (Collins 44). These examples evidently do not provide a full account of all Victorian readers; nevertheless, they may give some kind of implication as to how contemporary readers responded.

Similar to the review from the *Spectator*, another review from 1838 comments on how Dickens' humanity permeates his writing and directs the attention of the readers towards the helpless victims of society (Collins 73). Readers' awareness of Dickens' values, together with the structure of the narrative, thus seem to have influenced how his characters were perceived and helped the reader to recognise the needs of the destitute. Similarly, in a review from the *Literary Gazette* in 1838, the anonymous writer appears to have recognised the abuse portrayed in the novel and even gives thanks to Dickens for exposing the evil and injustice of society (Collins 80). Once again, this implies that there was an existing awareness of the social situation, and possibly even a tendency to relate the fictional orphans with their real life equivalences.

The examples that have been provided so far do not provide knowledge of the general reading public, as they represent the views of literary critics and not of ordinary readers; however, they do provide a few indications of how the public may have received the novel. In the review from the *Spectator* previously referred to, the reviewer comments on the

“numerous readers who have been moved to laughter or to sadness, led to grave reflection, [...], by some of the passages in *Oliver Twist*” (Collins 42); thus indicating that ordinary readers were also led to a comparison between the novel and reality, and that this was not only restricted to literary critics. Andrzej Diniejko claims that Dickens’ works contributed to the social awareness of the reading public. Since this requires that readers were able to relate *Oliver Twist* with reality, it seems reasonable to suggest that the responses of ordinary readers were indeed similar to those of the critics. Phillip Collins also comments on the general reception of *Oliver Twist* and writes that it was the “pathos of Oliver’s situation” which led to its widespread success (29).

However, in order for Dickens to secure his reader’s affection for the fictional orphan and thereby enable a change in the perception of children in real life, Dickens had to construct a figure whom the Victorian reader would relate to and sympathise with. This will be further discussed in the next section, which will focus on the construction of the fictional orphan.

The Construction of the Orphan

The following section will discuss the construction of the fictional orphan. Not only does this shape how readers perceive the character, but it also reveals what perceptions of orphans that already existed in society. Another aspect which is closely related to the construction of the figure is the illustrations by George Cruikshank; the way they portray Oliver also indicates how the orphan was perceived. The impact of the illustrations was noted by a contemporary literary critic in the *Quarterly Review* in 1839, who writes that “it is difficult to say [...] how much of the powerful impression we are conscious of may be due, not to the pen, but to the pencil” (Collins 86).

Since 19th-century literature does not only involve a prevalence of orphans, but of children in general, this section begins by looking at the broader literary function of children. Fictional children constitute an important function of a literary work, as they enable a personal identification between the reader and the character. Seeing that everyone has been a child, Berry suggests that children have a unique position in the sense that they unify society, thus making it possible for everyone to relate to them (4). Thereby, it can be assumed that the employment of children as literary characters was successful in order to arouse readers’ interest, because they “could be anyone, and everyone” – even the reader himself (Richardson “Foundlings”). Dickens capitalized on this in the very beginning of *Oliver Twist*, where he emphasises the readers’ equality with the main character. By commenting on Oliver’s yet

blank social position, Dickens points to the fact that everyone enters the world in the same way: “he [Oliver] might have been the child of a nobleman or a beggar; - it would have been hard for the haughtiest stranger to have fixed his station in society” (3). With this subtle comment, the reader is invited to identify with Oliver, and once the child becomes morally relevant it also enables the reader to sympathise with the character and his experiences.

Although the figure of the child was powerful in itself, the figure of the orphan child had a specific narrative function, as it portrayed the ultimate victimization. As was briefly discussed in the previous section, Victorian writers commonly portrayed children as victims and there was a widespread fascination in these figures (Berry 3). Perhaps the ultimate way to victimise children, and especially in the Victorian era, is to deprive them of their very foundation: the family. Baruch Hochman and Ilja Wachs reason in line with this and claim that orphan children illustrate the ultimate loss, and since loss is a primary condition of every human life, orphan children evoke the ultimate feeling of recognition (14). A similar note is made by the narrator of *Oliver Twist*, who says that trauma makes all men equals (263); thus confirming that the evident trauma and victimisation of an orphan, might be important features for recognition as it equates reader and character. Consequently, the victimised orphan child proved to be highly efficient as it enabled a personal identification between the reader and the main character, which will be further discussed in the following paragraphs.

According to Laura Peters, there are three common strategies used by Victorian writers when it comes to the construction of orphan narratives: the mysterious foundling, the criminalised orphan and the association with travelling peoples (31). Since *Oliver Twist* does not concern any travelling peoples, the discussion will focus on the first and the second strategy. The foundling orphan is a mysterious character, and the narratives usually contain unknown parentage, threatened inheritance and the final revelation of the child’s origin (Peters 33). Not surprisingly, *Oliver Twist* contains all these elements and the quest of the novel is even described as “the discovery of Oliver’s parentage, and regaining for him the inheritance of which, [...], he has been fraudulently deprived” (396). In the very first chapter, the reader is introduced to Oliver’s rootlessness as he enters the world without anything to identify him with. Another consequence of the mystery surrounding the fictional foundling is that it places the child outside the social system with no clear belonging, either to class or any other community (Mullan). Of course, this is in accordance with reality as orphans were discriminated against and not included in the community, and their status as outcasts is reflected in the novel when the narrator says that Oliver is “despised by all, and pitied by none” (Dickens 4). The sense of not belonging is further emphasised by the illustrations;

throughout the novel, Oliver is portrayed as an outsider, either by being distanced from the other characters, or being notably different in appearance.

The second common strategy when constructing an orphan character is that of the criminal orphan, which is very well illustrated by *Oliver Twist*, as Dickens relates how an unprotected orphan is exposed to the harsh realities of the criminal world. In criminal orphan narratives, such as *Oliver Twist*, the child is born into a violent world and is deprived of the “sheltering presence of parents” (Hochman 13). From the very beginning, Oliver experiences deprivation and adversity, and the first two chapters of the novel depict the brutal and neglectful institutions in charge of his childhood. A fundamental principle for the success of the orphan narratives, and perhaps most especially when it comes to the criminal sort, was the Victorian public sentiment together with the authors’ firm belief in their readers’ ability to sympathise (Carlisle 5). In other words, authors to a great extent relied on the fact that readers would feel with their characters. Obviously, this tendency was enforced by different narrative techniques, but nonetheless, society was strongly influenced by an inherent ability to feel sympathy which likely made readers more receptive to a character like the criminal orphan.

As mentioned earlier, the pitiful situation of a child lacking a family appealed to Victorian sentiments. Oliver is often depicted as experiencing this aloneness, for instance when he is brought from Mrs Mann’s farm, and “a sense of his loneliness in the great wide world, sank into the child’s heart” (11). According to Diniejko, Oliver’s loneliness and victimisation appealed to Victorian readers in a way that is unfamiliar to modern readers. Very likely, the powerful impact of Oliver’s lack of familial relations was based on the fact that English society at that time put such an emphasis on the family (Peters 40). Thus, since the plot of the novel concerns Oliver’s lack of and search for identity, and all of the difficulties he faces derive from this loss, his story ought to have been even more heart-rending for Victorians than it is for modern readers.

Oliver’s loneliness highlights his vulnerability and dependency, which are important features of orphan narratives. Since Oliver has been deprived of both parents, he is forced to move between the clutches of different authorities. Brian Gibson discusses the presence of adult power throughout the novel and points to the fact that as an orphan in the 19th century, Oliver is exposed to the harsh world of adults in which he is entirely dependent on their individual actions in order to survive (103-105). This dependency is also emphasised by the illustrations, where Oliver often is portrayed as anxious and helpless, surrounded by the people who are in charge of his destiny. An example of Oliver’s vulnerability and dependency is the illustration of Nancy and Sikes reclaiming him after he has been taken in by Mr

Brownlow, which depicts a small child being trapped by big adults (Dickens 138). Gibson suggests that these kinds of illustrations strongly signal the fact that Oliver is constantly under the threat of adult power (100); naturally, the inferiority and threatening ambience highlights Oliver's vulnerable and helpless position.

According to Gibson, Oliver's dependency affects the role of the narrator as well as the reader in the way that they recognise and sympathise with his need of care and protection (103). Throughout the novel, Oliver's life is orchestrated by the people who are in charge of him and he is recurrently literally led by the hand towards his destiny, in a way which further emphasises his utter dependence on adults. Mr Bumble is accessory to this on several occasions, for example when leading Oliver to his apprenticeship with Mr Sowerberry, but there are other examples as well, such as Nancy who brings Oliver to Sikes before the burglary, and thereafter Sikes himself who "clasped [Oliver's hand] firmly in his, and, [...] led him away" (Dickens 33, 190, 193). A result of these situations where Oliver seems confined or victimised by adult power, is that the reader unquestionably takes his side, convinced that he needs someone to help him (Gibson 103). Likewise, the reader's desire to protect Oliver is further elicited when the narrator overtly sympathises with him by using expressions such as "poor little Oliver" (91).

However, the reader's sympathy for Oliver is also elicited in the few instances within the novel when Oliver *is* treated with care. Two examples of this are when Oliver meets with a compassionate lady on his walk to London, and his meeting with a kind cart driver before the burglary (Dickens 66, 196). Such moments of care towards the orphan contrast with the adversity of his childhood and reminds the reader of his need of shelter and love. By emphasising Oliver's dependency, through both suffering and the lack of love in his life, Dickens thus invites the readers to extend their identification with the child, to feelings of compassion for him. Thereby, the construction of the character has the ability to shape the readers' perception of the orphan.

The idealised children constituted important narrative tools for Victorian readers, even though they may seem somewhat unrealistic to modern readers. Victorian authors often represented children more realistically which distinguished them from the Romantic idealised child; however, Dickens did not altogether abandon the former tradition but retained some Romantic elements in some of his child characters. Since *Oliver Twist* was his second novel it seems reasonable to assume that Oliver also has somewhat more Romantic features than Dickens' later characters (Morris 219-220). In relation to the Romantic description of some of Dickens' child characters, Morris suggests that the goodness and innocence influenced by the

Romantic tradition adds to “their characterisation as human beings particularly worthy of pity and sentimental identification” (220). Thus, the romanticised nature of Oliver seems to have been an important part of the construction of the orphan, not only because the Victorian readers were familiar with the somewhat idealised child, but also because it would more easily appeal to their natural tendency to feel sympathy.

The idealised nature of Oliver is distinguished by his goodness and innocence; therefore, these character traits will now be discussed in more detail. The first one to be discussed is Oliver’s inherent goodness, which plays an important role for how he was perceived by the readers. In the Preface to the 1841 edition, Oliver’s character is described by Dickens as “the principle of Good surviving through every adverse circumstance” (xiii). Oliver is indeed exposed to adverse circumstances, and he does not only flee the brutal powers trying to corrupt him, but he manages to do so with his purity kept intact. This is even observed by Fagin, who says that “he was not like other boys in the same circumstance”, thus pointing to Oliver’s goodness which prevented Fagin from corrupting him (245). Peters claims that the heroism of nineteenth-century orphan characters is based on the very circumstance that they endure all the difficulties and that they, despite sufferings, manage to remain good (65). In other words, the moral character of the protagonist had a certain narrative power over Victorian readers. In Dickens’ novel, this is further established at the revelation of Oliver’s parentage, which is not focused on the material inheritance, but on his mother’s pure character and the fact that Oliver’s goodness has triumphed; in other words, it is not the revelation of “royal origins, but rather to the recovery of an unknown heritage of moral purity” which matters (Berry 53). Consequently, Oliver’s endurance and goodness secured his position as the protagonist of the story, as it made him worthy of the public’s liking and support.

In addition to what was discussed in the previous paragraph, Oliver’s goodness is not only important for how readers perceive the character, but it also plays a crucial role for the development of the story and Oliver’s ultimate redemption (Peters 42). On three occasions adults recognise the purity in Oliver’s appearance and as a result of this intervene and change his course of life: when Oliver appears before the magistrate, his first meeting with Mr Brownlow, and when he meets Rose and Mrs Maylie (27, 90, 274). Dickens’ intention, as stated in the Preface, bears witness to the emphasis on moral goodness pervading Victorian society. If the intention of the novel was to humanise society and the character of Oliver was used as a means to make people care for real life orphans, Dickens had to make them care for Oliver first and thus ascribe him with an amiable character.

The second prominent character trait of the idealised child is innocence. This character trait is important for the perception of the fictional orphan figure in several ways. To begin with, Oliver's innocence affects the reader's perception of his surroundings. *Oliver Twist* is narrated from a third person omniscient point of view, and even though the story is not narrated through Oliver, much of the action is perceived through his eyes, and by providing the reader with his inner feelings, the narrator reveals Oliver's innocence and ignorance (Lankford 23). Perhaps one of the clearest examples of his innocence is the passage describing the burglary, when Oliver does not understand the true aim of the expedition until they hoist him over the wall (205). Accordingly, William Lankford suggests that the reader's awareness of Oliver's nature results in both sympathy and trust in his experience (23). Naturally, his innocence elicits compassion as it indicates his need of help and his good heart. Additionally, the trust in his experience is an important aspect when it comes to conveying a sense of reality.

Through Oliver, Dickens reveals the harshness and suffering that a child easily can be exposed to and according to Gibson, Oliver's innocence is necessary for this, since it makes him a "spotless looking glass" in which the brutality of society can be mirrored (105). Presumably, no matter if it is in fiction or reality, a natural result of a child's naivety is that the child reacts to a situation based on its actual experience. Thus, the readers of *Oliver Twist* may assume that Oliver provides an impartial and non-prejudiced account of his surrounding, and thereby his naivety reveals the qualities of others. In the novel, this is demonstrated by the scene when Fagin admires his treasures, convinced that Oliver is sleeping, and the readers are provided with Oliver's simple and naïve interpretation of the event (76). While Oliver is not capable to understand the situation, the readers *are* and use their imagination to perceive the situation for what it really is. Thus, by emphasising the innocent nature of Oliver, the readers are lead to trust his account and from that draw their own conclusion. Consequently, the innocence of Oliver is used to elicit sympathy for him and to point to the fact that even though he belongs to the class of illegitimate children, he is just a child who is exposed to things that no child should experience. Thereby, the readers are invited to change their perception of the orphan child, both in fiction and reality, which will be further discussed in the next section.

Intentional Narratives

According to Janice Carlisle, the structure of the narrative reveals the intentions and aims of the author; therefore, the following section will provide a discussion of some more general

narrative techniques in *Oliver Twist*, as they will reveal how Dickens was influenced by his context, and how it thus was integrated in his writing and ultimately influenced his readers (Carlisle 4). In addition to the structure of the narrative, the readers' perception of the novel was also influenced by the ongoing public debate about the system for poor relief; since Dickens intentionally placed *Oliver Twist* at the centre of the debate his intentions with the novel were further emphasised, and this will be discussed later in this section.

Carlisle observes that in many Victorian novels, the narrative technique exposes the author's moral concern (4). Dickens' humanitarian attitude in *Oliver Twist* is both explicit and implicit; the satirical tone permeates the entire novel, and many of the narrator's comments are very straight-forward. In addressing the reader with these issues, the author can be assumed to convey his own moral concern and his perception of the situation. Carlisle further claims that Victorian novelists commonly defined their writing in relation to the needs of their readers; in other words, they considered themselves as having a moral responsibility towards society (1). As a result, authors strived to convey moral claims in their writing and the narratives were thus shaped to make a change in their audience's perception of society; the readers were, literally, invited to see the world in a new way (Carlisle 2). This is clearly exemplified in the Preface to the 1841 edition of *Oliver Twist*, where Dickens writes that "to do this, would be to attempt a something which was needed, and which would be a service to society" (xiv). Clearly, Dickens' moral concern and personal attitude shaped the narrative, and were thus ultimately conveyed to the readers; presumably, with the intention to influence them to reflect on their own surrounding.

A fundamental requirement for the author to exercise his moral responsibility, was that the reader would be able to see the moral relevance of the narrative (Carlisle 16). Carlisle suggests that "unless the narrator [...] can persuade the reader [...] to see his or her connection with the character depicted, the story can have no meaning" (20); consequently, the Victorian authors' desire to teach their readers something relied on them being able to create characters to whom the readers could relate. As readers could relate to the figure of the orphan, this character provided the novel with a sense of moral relevance, which in turn constituted the foundation for Dickens' moral claim. The bond created between reader and main character was also used as a foundation for other narrative techniques, in order to further add to the readers' perception of the fictional orphan.

Carlisle suggests that the Victorian novelists viewed the characters as the primary aspect of the reader's experience of the narrative (45). By creating literary figures to whom the readers could easily relate and whose fates were comparably uncertain, the authors would

ensure the readers' interest in the stories. The scope of the Victorian readers' interest in characters is implied in *Oliver Twist* when the narrator explains himself by ensuring his readers that "leaving young Oliver Twist in situations of doubt and difficulty, and then flying off at a tangent to impertinent matters" is not done to provoke them, but to provide them with the entire story (154). Based on the shape of the narrative, it seems as if Dickens was familiar with his readers' curiosity and the characters' impact on the reading experience, which gives further significance to his choice to place an orphan at the centre of the narrative.

The orphan figure was certainly useful when wanting to appeal to the curiosity of the readers, as its fate was naturally uncertain; throughout the novel, it remains indefinite whether Oliver will discover his identity or not, or even survive. Moreover, Dickens seems to have made use of his readers' curiosity by recurrently changing the focus of the action between chapters. One example of this is when Oliver gets severely hurt during the burglary at Mrs Maylie's house, and the final sentence of the chapter reads "a cold deadly feeling crept over the boy's heart, and he saw or heard no more" (209). However, it is not until several chapters later that the reader is told what has happened to Oliver and that he indeed has survived. Thus, Dickens relies on his readers' interest in Oliver and by the suspense derived from the withholding of information, he elicits further devotion and compassion for the orphan boy.

Carlisle states that another way in which the author could utilise the bond created between reader and main character, was to evoke further sympathy for other characters in the narrative (53). Once the reader has established a bond with the main character, it is easier for the narrator to make the reader sympathise with other characters. One way in which this is visible in *Oliver Twist* is through Dickens' attempt to humanise the criminals. In the first part of *Oliver Twist*, the narration is almost entirely restricted to Oliver's point of view, but as the story goes on the reader is introduced to the thoughts of other characters as well: perhaps most noticeably to Sikes and Fagin in the third part of the novel. Since the reader has already established a bond with Oliver, the change of focus and narrative voice enables the humanisation of the former villains, as the reader is invited to sympathise with them too. This reveals Dickens' deeply humane character; he had realised that "accidents of birth or circumstance could make ordinary individuals vulnerable to desperation, hunger, cruelty and crime" (Richardson "Oliver Twist").

As mentioned, Dickens seems to have considered it his responsibility as a writer to humanise his society; however, in order for this to happen the author needed to establish not only a bond between the reader and the characters, but also a bond between the reader and the narrator (Carlisle 20). Moreover, Carlisle claims that the reader's image of the narrator was

based on the perception of the novelist (26); thus, the image of Charles Dickens had an influence on his audience's reading of the novel. Since Dickens attached great importance to establishing himself as a man of the people and often appeared in public, even at this early stage of his career, his audience was familiar with his deep humanity (Cody). As a result, the author could use his public role and his relationship to his audience, to justify the moral claims of his work as well as to support the readers in their personal realization (Carlisle 44). In other words, the public image of Dickens and his bond with his audience, enabled readers to use their own imagination to connect the details of his narrative and thereby perceive the overall message of the story.

In order to support readers in their perception of the overall message of *Oliver Twist*, Dickens employed the interplay of fiction and reality, which clearly reveals his intention with the story. This interplay does not only concern the novel's relation to society, but also concerns the shape of the narrative which alternates between reality and romance, as for example the realistic description of the situation surrounding Oliver's birth versus the romanticised ending. Another significant example from the novel is the portrayal of Oliver's time in the country together with the Maylie's:

It was a happy time. The days were peaceful and serene, and the nights brought with them no fear or care, no languishing in a wretched prison, or associating with wretched men: nothing but pleasant and happy thoughts. (301)

As this short passage illustrates, the description of the time in the country is clearly contrasted to the the brutally realistic portrayal of Oliver's childhood and the criminal world; their stay is marked exclusively by felicity and peace, and the descriptions of their surroundings are unusually idealised.

Carlisle suggests that the interplay of fiction and reality, that is romance and reality, inside of the novel causes the reader to link the story with reality, thus the fiction becomes "determined by the reality beyond it" (62). Thereby the seemingly contrastive elements constitute important features to achieve what Dickens intended, by inviting readers to relate the novel with their real world. This is further supported by the Preface to the 1841 edition, where Dickens responds to some criticism concerning the interplay of fiction and reality as it seems to have caused readers to doubt the probability of the narrative; however, by his response, it becomes clear that the interplay was indeed meant to spur the readers to relate the novel with the real world (Dickens xviii). Thus, once again the shape of the narrative reveals

Dickens' intention to humanise his society, and how the author ultimately managed to influence his readers by drawing attention to the injustices of society.

A final comment on the public debate surrounding *Oliver Twist* is called for, as it played an important role for how the novel was perceived. Charles Dickens was a prominent figure in the social debates and *Oliver Twist* was known as his major attack on the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. His critique of the inhumane ways in which the innocent and helpless were treated is particularly visible in the early chapters, and by placing the novel at the centre of the public debate, Dickens made use of his narrative to strengthen the arguments of the anti poor law-movement (Berry 44). Interestingly, children were common figures in the debate, due to their vulnerability and the fact that they already had an established function as powerful sentimental figures (Berry 36). Since the novel was part of an ongoing public debate, there ought to have been a mutual exchange between the two discourses. In other words, similar to how the anti poor law-movement used *Oliver Twist* to strengthen their arguments, the message of *Oliver Twist* also ought to have benefitted from the public debate. Thus, the contextual public debate would highlight and provide the contemporary readers with relevant aspects, that we as modern readers might lack.

Conclusion

By focusing on Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*, this essay has aimed to explore how the social context of the early 19th century affected the author and his readers. The prevalence of orphans in 19th century literature and the public's fascination in these characters seems to be based on a combination of literary benefits and moral concern. The fictional orphan's relation to real life was important for Victorian readers, and the orphan was also a figure on whom the author could base his narrative and message. To begin with, the victimised child was a character whom the Victorians could relate to and sympathise with, which made the story relevant and thus constituted the foundation for the novel's moral claim. As the discussion has shown, the moral purpose of *Oliver Twist* did not only reveal the author's intention and the fact that he was strongly influenced by the social situation, but also shaped how the narrative was structured; by creating a character that would appeal to Victorian readers, Dickens invited the readers to relate the events of the novel with reality. In brief, the readers' awareness of Dickens' intention together with the structure of the narrative, supported them in their reading of the novel.

The discussion has shown that Victorian society was indeed affected by the portrayal of society provided in *Oliver Twist*. Since the novel contributed to the social awareness of the reading public, it seems reasonable to assume that ordinary readers, similarly to the critics, related the novel with their social context, which is further supported by the fact that ordinary readers were equally influenced by the Victorian public sentiment and exposed to the social context as any critic. This aligns with Morris' idea that *Oliver Twist* shaped Victorian society; through the narrative, the perception of the fictional orphan might have been transferred to the image of real orphans and helped society towards a more humane attitude towards them.

Since Dickens both mirrored and made use of his context, the function of the orphan child in *Oliver Twist* was likely to be reinforced by the social situation. By having a fuller picture, Victorian readers could understand and interpret events in the novel in a way that modern readers can not. Therefore, it seems reasonable to suggest that Charles Dickens and his readers were influenced by their context in the sense that there was a mutual relationship between the fictional orphan and the real life children. As this essay has shown, literature and history illuminated each other; the social context widened the perception of the fictional orphans, and the fictional orphans in their turn increased the awareness of the social situation.

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