



## THE DEPICTION OF CLASS AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN CHARLES DICKENS' NOVELS OLIVER TWIST AND GREAT EXPECTATIONS

**Author:** Xayitova Shaxnozaxon Mavlon qizi <sup>1</sup>

**Affiliation:** Master Student of Nordic International University <sup>1</sup>

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15202375>

### ANNOTATION

This research explores the representation of class divisions and social transformation in Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1838) and *Great Expectations* (1861). Dickens, a key figure in Victorian literature, was deeply concerned with the struggles of the poor and the rigid class structures that limited social mobility. By analyzing these two novels, the study highlights Dickens' critique of institutional oppression, wealth disparity, and the false promises of social advancement. While *Oliver Twist* presents a bleak portrayal of the lower class's suffering due to systemic injustice, *Great Expectations* examines social mobility's psychological and moral consequences. This research employs a comparative literary analysis to demonstrate Dickens' evolving perspective on class struggles and his advocacy for moral and social reform.

**Keywords:** Charles Dickens, class struggle, social mobility, Victorian England, poverty, social reform, industrialization

### INTRODUCTION

Class structure and social mobility were dominant concerns in Victorian England, shaping people's opportunities and quality of life. Charles Dickens, one of the most influential writers of the 19th century, used literature as a tool to expose the injustices of the social hierarchy. His novels frequently depict the harsh realities faced by the working class, while also exploring the consequences of ambition and upward mobility.

In *Oliver Twist*, Dickens presents a direct critique of the workhouse system, criminal underworld, and the neglect of orphaned children, showing how the poor were often trapped in cycles of misery. Conversely, *Great expectations* explore the emotional and ethical dilemmas associated with changing social status, illustrating that wealth does not necessarily lead to happiness or self-worth. Through these narratives, Dickens critiques Victorian society and raises essential questions about class inequality and social change.

This study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How does Dickens portray the struggles of the lower class in *Oliver Twist* and *Great expectations* ?
2. What role does social mobility play in shaping the characters' lives and choices? How do these novels reflect Dickens' vision of social reform and moral progress?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Class and Social Critique in Dickens' Works

Several scholars have analyzed Dickens' portrayal of class struggles and social transformation.

- Humphrey House (1941) argues that Dickens' novels reflect his personal observations of social injustice and his sympathy for the poor. *Oliver Twist*, in particular, is a direct attack on the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, which Dickens saw as cruel and dehumanizing.
- Catherine Waters (1997) examines how *Oliver Twist* exposes the failures of institutional support for the poor, showing that both workhouses and criminal organizations exploit vulnerable individuals rather than helping them.
- Philip Horne (2000) explores how Dickens presents an internalized struggle with class identity. Pip's transition from a poor blacksmith's apprentice to a wealthy gentleman illustrates the illusions of social mobility and the emotional cost of rejecting one's origins.
- Gareth Stedman Jones (1984) contextualizes Dickens' work within Victorian social debates, arguing that Dickens was less of a political activist and more of a moral commentator, advocating for kindness and ethical responsibility rather than radical structural change.

### The Victorian Class System and Industrialization

Victorian society was characterized by rigid social divisions, largely influenced by wealth, birth, and education. Industrialization created new economic opportunities, but social mobility remained difficult for most individuals.

- Asa Briggs (1963) discusses how industrialization widened the gap between the rich and poor, creating a growing underclass that Dickens frequently depicted in his works.
- John Carey (1992) examines how literature of the time reflected anxieties about the newly emerging middle class, whose social aspirations often clashed with traditional aristocratic values.

This study builds upon these scholarly discussions to compare *Oliver Twist* and *Great Expectations*, analyzing how Dickens addresses class mobility, social injustice, and moral redemption.

## METHODOLOGY

This research follows a qualitative literary analysis approach, focusing on Dickens' narrative techniques, character development, and social commentary. The study involves:

1. Close Reading: Examining passages from *Oliver Twist* and *Great Expectations* that illustrate themes of class struggle and social change.
2. Comparative Analysis: Identifying similarities and differences in how each novel portrays class mobility and its consequences.
3. Historical Contextualization: Understanding how Dickens' personal experiences and the socio-economic conditions of Victorian England influenced his writing.
4. Thematic Analysis: Exploring key themes such as poverty, wealth, morality, and institutional oppression.

Primary sources include *Oliver Twist* and *Great expectations*, while secondary sources comprise academic books, journal articles, and historical analyses of Victorian society.

## DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

**The Representation of Poverty and Class Struggles:** In *Oliver Twist*, Dickens portrays the lower class as victims of institutional neglect and exploitation. The novel exposes the cruelty of the workhouse system through Oliver's early suffering and the hypocrisy of officials such as Mr. Bumble. The criminal underworld, represented by Fagin and Bill Sikes, further demonstrates how poverty forces individuals into desperation. In contrast, *Great expectations* focuses on a more personal journey, illustrating how class mobility affects an individual's identity. Pip's expectations of becoming a gentleman lead him to reject Joe and Biddy, only to realize later that true worth lies in character rather than social status.

### The Illusions of Social Mobility

Both novels challenge the idea that wealth and status equate to happiness.

- Oliver, despite his hardships, remains morally pure, suggesting that virtue is not determined by class.
- Pip, on the other hand, learns that wealth does not guarantee fulfillment; his pursuit of social status leads to disappointment and self-alienation.

**Dickens' Message on Social Change:** Dickens advocates for a society based on morality and compassion rather than wealth and privilege. He critiques institutional failures but also emphasizes individual responsibility. Through characters like Nancy (*Oliver Twist*) and Joe Gargery (*Great expectations*), Dickens highlights the dignity of the working class and the importance of kindness over ambition.

## RECOMMENDATION

Future research could:

1. Compare Dickens' portrayal of class with other Victorian novelists such as Elizabeth Gaskell (*North and South*) and Thomas Hardy (*Tess of the d'Urbervilles*).
2. Analyze how Dickens' depiction of social mobility relates to modern economic and class struggles.

Investigate the role of women in Dickens' class critique, focusing on characters like Nancy (*Oliver Twist*) and Estella (*Great expectations*).

## CONCLUSION

Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* and *Great expectations* offer profound critiques of the rigid class structures and social inequalities in Victorian England. Through his vivid storytelling and complex characters, Dickens highlights the struggles of the poor, the corruption within institutional systems, and the moral dilemmas associated with social mobility. In *Oliver Twist*, Dickens presents a grim portrayal of poverty, institutional neglect, and the criminal underworld, demonstrating how the lower class was systematically oppressed. The novel emphasizes that social structures often prevent the poor from escaping their circumstances, reinforcing class-based injustices. Conversely,

Great expectations explore a more personal dimension of class mobility, showing that financial success does not necessarily lead to happiness or moral superiority. Pip's journey from a poor orphan to a wealthy gentleman illustrates the emotional and psychological consequences of aspiring to a higher social status, ultimately revealing that character and integrity are more valuable than wealth. Both novels collectively argue that true social reform must be driven by morality, empathy, and justice rather than by mere economic progress. Dickens does not call for a complete overthrow of the class system but rather advocates for a more compassionate and fair society where individuals are judged by their values rather than their financial or social standing. The themes explored in Oliver Twist and Great expectations remain relevant today, as class disparity and economic inequality continue to shape societies worldwide. Dickens' work serves as a reminder of the human cost of social injustice and the enduring need for reforms that promote fairness and dignity for all.

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