

**THE REPRESENTATION OF THE SOCIAL TATUS OF CHILDREN  
AND ADOLESCENTS IN CHARLES DICKENS'S OLIVER TWIST AND  
GREAT EXPECTATIONS**

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**Abstract:** This thesis-based article investigates the representation of the social status of children and adolescents in Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1838) and *Great Expectations* (1861) within the socio-historical and literary framework of Victorian England. The study focuses on how Dickens portrays childhood and adolescence as socially constructed categories shaped by poverty, class hierarchy, institutional control, education and moral development. Drawing on historical studies of Victorian childhood and major critical interpretations of Dickens's fiction, the research argues that child and adolescent characters function as central instruments of social criticism and moral evaluation. Through a comparative textual analysis, the study demonstrates that *Oliver Twist* presents childhood primarily as a condition of vulnerability and victimization within oppressive welfare institutions, while *Great Expectations* explores adolescence as a stage of social aspiration, identity formation and ethical conflict. Despite these differences, both novels expose the moral contradictions of Victorian society and challenge dominant ideologies of class mobility, respectability and success. The findings reveal that Dickens's representation of children goes beyond sentimentalism and instead constitutes a systematic critique of social injustice, institutional failure and moral hypocrisy. The thesis concludes that Dickens's child characters serve as enduring symbols of social responsibility and ethical consciousness, reinforcing the relevance of his work to contemporary discussions of childhood and inequality.

**Keywords:** childhood; adolescence; social status; Victorian England; Charles Dickens; social inequality; moral development; class consciousness

**Introduction:** The Victorian period in nineteenth-century England was characterized by rapid industrialization, urban expansion and profound social transformation. These changes intensified class divisions and deeply affected the lives of children who became one of the most vulnerable groups in society. Poverty, child labor, inadequate education and harsh institutional environments shaped childhood experiences, particularly among the lower classes. As Cunningham (1995) notes, the Victorian era marked a crucial moment in the historical construction of childhood as a social, moral and political concern. Literature played a significant role in revealing and critiquing these realities. Among Victorian novelists, Charles Dickens stands out for his persistent engagement with social injustice and his deep concern for the suffering of marginalized individuals. Dickens's fiction repeatedly foregrounds children and adolescents, using their experiences to expose the failures of social institutions and the moral contradictions of Victorian society. Scholars have long recognized that Dickens's child characters are not merely sentimental figures but powerful tools of social critique (House, 1941; Slater, 2009).

This thesis-based study examines the representation of the social status of children and adolescents in *Oliver Twist* and *Great Expectations*. These novels were selected because they offer contrasting yet complementary portrayals of childhood and adolescence: one emphasizing institutional oppression and survival, the other focusing on social ambition and moral development. The central aim of this research is to analyze how Dickens uses child and adolescent characters to interrogate issues of class, education, morality and social mobility, thereby revealing broader ideological tensions within Victorian England.

**Methods:** The research employs a qualitative literary methodology grounded in close textual analysis and historical-contextual interpretation. The primary texts analyzed are Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1838) and *Great Expectations* (1861). These works are examined in relation to historical studies of Victorian childhood, social class and institutional structures such as workhouses, schools and charitable organizations. The analytical approach combines comparative

reading with thematic analysis, focusing on the depiction of child and adolescent characters in relation to poverty, class hierarchy, moral values and social institutions. Secondary sources by Cunningham (1995), House (1941), Slater (2009), Williams (1958), Miller (1965) and Jordan (2001) provide the theoretical and critical framework. This interdisciplinary method allows for an integrated understanding of literary representation and social reality.

**Results:** The analysis reveals that Dickens consistently represents children and adolescents as socially marginalized figures whose lives are shaped by structural inequality and institutional neglect. In *Oliver Twist*, childhood is defined by orphanhood, poverty and exposure to punitive welfare systems. The workhouse and related institutions are portrayed as mechanisms of control rather than care, reflecting the dehumanizing effects of utilitarian social policies. Oliver's suffering highlights the moral failure of a society that prioritizes discipline and economic efficiency over compassion and justice. In contrast, *Great Expectations* presents childhood and adolescence as dynamic stages of social aspiration and identity formation. Pip's early experiences of poverty and class shame motivate his desire for upward mobility, which initially appears to promise personal fulfillment and social acceptance. However, as the narrative progresses, Dickens reveals the moral costs of social ambition, particularly the internalization of class prejudice and the erosion of authentic human relationships. Across both novels, child and adolescent characters function as indicators of broader social injustice. Their experiences expose systemic inequalities and challenge the moral legitimacy of Victorian social structures. Dickens portrays childhood not as a protected or innocent state but as a site where social forces exert powerful and often destructive influence.

**Discussion:** The findings support House's (1941) argument that Dickens's novels constitute a sustained moral protest against Victorian society. Child characters serve as ethical benchmarks, allowing Dickens to measure social values against principles of justice, empathy and human dignity. Slater (2009) emphasizes that Dickens's focus on childhood reflects a broader humanistic vision, in which social reform is inseparable from moral responsibility. Williams's (1958) concept

of class consciousness is particularly relevant to the analysis of Pip's development in *Great Expectations*. Pip's internal conflict illustrates how social ideology shapes individual identity and moral judgment. Miller (1965) further argues that Dickens resolves social tension through moral reevaluation rather than material success, a pattern evident in Pip's eventual rejection of false social values. By juxtaposing Oliver's passive victimhood with Pip's active moral struggle, Dickens presents a complex view of childhood and adolescence. Both figures reveal different dimensions of social inequality and ethical responsibility, reinforcing the idea that childhood is central to Dickens's critique of Victorian society.

**Conclusion:** This thesis-based study demonstrates that Charles Dickens's representation of children and adolescents in *Oliver Twist* and *Great Expectations* functions as a powerful instrument of social criticism and moral inquiry. While *Oliver Twist* depicts childhood as a condition of institutional oppression and social exclusion, *Great Expectations* explores adolescence as a period of moral uncertainty shaped by class aspiration and social ideology. Despite their narrative differences, both novels expose the injustices and moral contradictions of Victorian England. Dickens's child characters challenge readers to confront the ethical consequences of social inequality and institutional neglect. The enduring relevance of these representations lies in their ability to illuminate the relationship between childhood, social responsibility and moral consciousness making Dickens's work a vital contribution to both literary studies and social critique.

#### **The List of Used Literature:**

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2. Dickens, C. (1838). *Oliver Twist*. London: Penguin Classics.
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6. Miller, J. H. (1965). Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

7. Slater, M. (2009). Charles Dickens. New Haven: Yale University Press.

8. Williams, R. (1958). Culture and Society 1780–1950. London: Chatto & Windus.