

**A Study of the Use of Satire in the Novels of Charles Dickens with  
Special Reference to Oliver Twist**

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### **Abstract**

This study was designed to examine Dickens' use of satire in his writing style through his Novel "Oliver Twist". It examines the author's techniques and effectiveness of the style. The researcher used the conceptual approach to analyze authors' writing style through diction, narrative voice, images. The results of analysis shows that Dicken's novel Oliver Twist is highly satirical as he uses a lot of really sharp irony-to satirize the various institutions( the parish workhouse system, the justice system, the poor laws, etc) that he thought inhumane and unjust.

Key words: Satire, tone, diction, narrative voice

## Introduction

Narrative style is the way in which an author presents a story to the audience. Narrative style relies on many factors, including sentences, structure, dialogue, who the narrator is ( first, second or third person), the quantity of details, and the description and chronology of the plot. Writers have their own narrative styles, and the effectiveness of the style is highly subjective to the audience. The distinguishing characteristic that the author uses- descriptive paragraphs, telling the story in first person or writing dialogue to reflect regional accents and if those qualities added to the story or if they took away from the reading.

Every author has a basic writing style. Style is not what an author writes, but the manner in which she or he writes it. It's an author's unique way of communicating ideas. One might say that style is the verbal identity of a writer. An author defends his or her style in word choice and syntax ( the order of words in a sentence). While every author has a personal style of writing, that style is not static. The author refines it through reading a variety of writers and through his or her own writing experiences.

Dickens has a unique position in English literature for his special form of self-expression in prose fiction. Dickens's artistic method, his choice of material and his manner of rendering that material in fiction, is Dickens's style. The other parts of Dickens's art, his situations, actions and characters and the meaning that they carry, rest upon style and take their essence from it.

A careful examination of the methods by which Dickens got his narrative effects, reveals overwhelming evidence of careful craftsmanship. Characters and episodes did not spring full-fashioned into his mind. Dickens

remembered how other writers handled similar effects, he used sources constantly and he attempted to improve upon his inspiration he derived from masters like Smollett, Fielding, Le Sage, Cervantes, and Defoe. In his writings Dickens attempted to improve upon almost every technique which had been used by his predecessors.

In general , 'Oliver Twist' is a Victorian novel. It was written by a great Victorian novelist Charles Dickens. The novel Oliver Twist is a classic novel written in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. **Oliver Twist** is the **story** of a young orphan, **Oliver**, and his attempts to stay good in a society that refuses to help. **Oliver** is born in a workhouse, to a mother not known to anyone in the town. ... When he turns nine, he is sent to the workhouse, where again he and the others are treated badly and practically starved.

Satire.... **Satire** is a [genre](#) of [literature](#), and sometimes [graphic](#) and [performing arts](#), in which vices, follies, abuses, and shortcomings are held up to ridicule, ideally with the intent of shaming individuals, corporations, government, or society itself into improvement.<sup>[1]</sup> Although satire is usually meant to be humorous, its greater purpose is often constructive [social criticism](#), using [wit](#) to draw attention to both particular and wider issues in society.

In Oliver Twist Dickens interrupts the story to explain how deliberately adopts the juxtaposition of tragedy and comedy, typical of melodrama. He uses the metaphor of contracting colors in a piece of streaky bacon.

Dickens argues that in everyday life we experience the same alteration between tragic and comic scenes, but that we accept as natural what appear artificial on the stage because in real life we take part in the action. The clashing moods and genres are both real and constructed, and works to make the reader an active participant in reading process by drawing attention to the

constructed nature of fiction. Dickens was particularly keen to show his readers the truth about the squalid details of poverty at the heart of 19<sup>th</sup> century cities, which forced many into a life of crime. He was therefore, appalled to find that contrary to his intentions.

Dickens is a genius of writer. Detail is his specialty and one can instantly see the scene in his mind while reading his intricate descriptions and verbose style. Dickens also sarcastically comments on the abuses of poor children who often suffered at the hands of their apprentices.

Charles Dickens managed to use characterization, thematic aspects and verbose style to poke fun and create humorous situations in order to attract the attention of his readers. He utilized his sharp sense of humor to satirize individual and institutional follies in the Victorian era, which are also applicable to all ages. His skillful mastery of irony, pathos and dramatic manipulation of picturesque incidents addressing timeless themes, made his rather lengthy novels a pleasure to read, to Victorian audience and the modern readers on equal footing.

Dickens uses stilted and artificial language. He uses some street slang as the characters in Oliver Twist don't develop. That means they don't change. Sikes is bad and continues to be bad. Oliver is pure and good and continues to be good. . In ' Oliver Twist' conclude with the protagonists affirmation of his own immense and good fortune.

Dickens presented a satirical view of reality : he was essentially a comic writer who used irony to create caricatures against cruelty and injustice in society. His narrative style moves from comedy to tragedy.

## Literature Review:

At the start of book II, chapter 5, the narrator Satirizes Mr. Bumble by sarcastically calling himself a humble author in comparison to "so mighty a personage as a beadle". In actuality of course, a beadle wasn't all that important of a person, so Dickens clearly being ironic and super-sm arky. The effect of the Satire is to show how pompous and self-Satisfied officials like Mr. Bumble are full of it.

The narrator's tone throughout Oliver Twist is thick with sarcasm, cynicism, hardly a sentence exists where his witty humor can not be found. Sarcasm appears all most everywhere.

In chapter IV, Dickens' satire upon the evil lurking in the Poor Law Act, points, in a darkly humorous manner to the injustices a against the poor as well as to the fostering on two aspects. The characterization of the characters and social commentary, Dickens is very apt in using humor and satire. Oliver twist is full of humorus elements, which greatly delights his audience. He produces humor through characterization, to make the novel more appealing to the readers. His witty sense of humor casts light on the social injustices of the times durig1837 and 1839. He doesn't comment on the miserable conditions of workhouse and the laws that made the cruelty within law in 19<sup>th</sup> century. Dickens loves verbosity as a tool for description.

Dickens moves from comedy to pathos and from pathos to satire. Dickens uses sarcasm and Exaggeration. Dickens creative imagination is also seen in inventing dramatic and picturesque incident. Many such dramatic incidents readily come to the mind of all readers of Dickens. His creative imagination makes them excel in humor. On reading Oliver Twist it

is obvious to most sagacious readers that Dickens uses irony to vibrant satire in the novel. Dickens wanted to show poverty and its consequences in their true light to move his readers to compassion and if possible action. To make this message more effective, he refracts his portrayal of true life through the media of melodrama, Gothic fiction, satire, sentiment and allegory. Throughout, aspects of different genres are skillfully woven together to enhance the power of the writing maintain reader interest, and move the reader to tear and laughter, perhaps more importantly, the use of different genre conventions challenge the readers expectations and prompts them to reconsider their initial judgments.

Dickens also presents similar problems using different genres in order to intensify, the readers emotional response. Satire characterizes Dickens portrayal of the workhouse and the effects of the poor Law Amendment Act ( 1834) which sought discourage applicants by making workhouse life as unpleasant as possible.

In depicting another victim of institution abuse, Dickens adopts the sentimental mode, which focuses on the distress of the virtuous Oliver childhood companion. Dickens is implausibly angelic and surprising well-spoken considering his brutal upbringing at a parish baby farm for poor orphan children. On parting, this young boy tells Oliver that "they will only meet again in heaven, he know that his death is imminent because I dream so much of heaven and angels, and kind faces that I never see when I am awake "( ch.7). This satire provokes appalled laughter at the treatment of poor, whereas where sentimentality can move the reader to pity.

Modern readers find it difficult to reconcile the melodramatic devices with Dickens Satire social realism and sentimentality. Dickens didn't see

melodrama as antithetical to realism instead he felt that he could harm the power of melodrama extreme contracts to reinforce his social critique.

At one point in *Oliver Twist* Dickens interrupts the story to explain how deliberately adopts the juxtaposition of tragedy and comedy, typical of melodrama, he uses the metaphor of contrasting colors in a piece of streak bacon.

Dickens argues that in everyday life we experience the same rapid alternation between tragic and comic sense, but that we accept as natural what appears artificial on the stage because in real life we take part in the action. The clashing moods and genres are both real and constructed, and works to make the reader an active participant in the reading process by drawing attention to the constructed nature of fiction.

Dickens was particularly keen to show his readers the truth about the squalid details of poverty at the heart of 19<sup>th</sup> century cities, which forced many into a life of crime. He was therefore, appalled to find that contrary to his intentions. "There was the little church, in the morning, with the green leaves fluttering at the windows: the birds singing without: filling the homely building with its fragrance. The poor people were so neat and clean, and knelt so reverently in assembling there together; and though the singing might be rude, it was real, and sounded more musical (to Oliver's ears at least) than any he had ever heard in church before. Chapter 32, page 293

Although the major part of the novel is serious, the author is able to "extract as much humor from the protagonist innocent in the underworld (as possible) the story is narrated in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person by an omniscient narrator who is also omnipresent in contrast to Oliver who is often absent from the action itself. Owing to the fact that "the conversations are unnatural because of a pretentious style of speech borrowed from the cheap theatre and that the portrayals of the characters are "incredibly black or improbably white".

Throughout the novel, Dickens employs a shifting narrative voice as James R. Kncaid noted in *Dickens and the Rhetoric of laughter*. "It is



impossible to define the characteristics or moral position of the narrators in this novel, for they are continually shifting." At time the narrator is detached and wordy, as in the opening paragraph in which he says abstractly that he will not name the town or workhouse where a certain " item of morality was born. At the same time, he is mocking the conversations of many novel of his time, which opens with a lengthy and of smug description of the main character's birthplace and family. The narrator doesn't consistently stay in this remote sarcastic voice but sometimes shifts to remarking ironically on the supposedly wonderful way in which the poor are treated and on how kind it is, or sometimes the narrator appeals to friendly feeling of the readers" we al know how child and desolate the best of us will sometimes feel" As kncaid noted, we can never count on being in any single relationship with the narrative voice for long. Just we are relaxed. We are pushed away"

The novel is filled with dark humor, Mr. Bumble and Mr. Soweberry laughing about the abundance of small children's coffins to Dickens mocking the seriousness and puffery of the members of the parish board, this exposure of the cowardice and avarice of Noah and Charles to the capering of artful Dodger when he is put on trial. **“The shop-boys in the neighbourhood had long been in the habit of branding Noah, in the public streets, with the ignominious epithets of ‘leathers,’ ‘charity,’ and the like; and Noah had borne them without reply. But, now that fortune had cast in his way a nameless orphan, at whom even the meanest could point the finger of scorn, he retorted on him with interest. This affords charming food for contemplation. It shows us what a beautiful thing human nature may be made to be; and how impartially the same amiable qualities are developed in the finest lord and the dirtiest charity-boy.”** (Chapter 52, pages 38-39

This humor only serves to sharpen the desperate sufferings of Oliver and the other characters, however, so that although readers laugh while they are reading the book when they are done, they tend to remember the sadness in it .

The narrator of *Oliver Twist* tends to be pretty hands-off . In general we only get to see what's going on in the heads of a very few characters (including Oliver, obviously). Particularly with the members of Fagin's gang and the descriptions of London, Dickens backs off and is more objective. The narrator is third person ( limited omniscient)

The effect is that these scenes seem almost journalistic-it's like we are reading a newspaper expose on criminals in London, instead of a novel . But every now and then, the narrator launches into a lengthy discussion of how the plot is working or what he is planning on doing in this particular chapter ( the beginning of book I chapter fifteen). These digressions, or breaks in the story, remind the reader that this is in fact a novel, and not real life. They serve to add to the distance between us, the readers and the characters and action of the story. The distance between the reader and the characters in the novels was important to Dickens from an ethical, as much as from an artistic, point of view.

Many of his contemporary critics and reading public feared that novels could be too realistic, and that naïve readers ( often female readers) wouldn't be able to tell the difference between fiction and reality, especially for a novel like *Oliver Twist*, which is about " dangerous" subjects like poverty, crime and the relationship between the two. Dickens probably felt that it was prudent to put the occasional check on the readers' sympathetic identification with the characters.

The narrator in the novel is a sort of moralist who remarks specific situations ( this is a new element in novel as in previous novels there was

only general interference- a typical Victorian element George Eliot represented was the writers responsibility-specially moral responsibility. "Among other public buildings in a certain town, which for many reasons it will be prudent to refrain from mentioning, and to which I will assign no fictitious name, there is one anciently common to most towns, great or small: to wit, a workhouse; and in this workhouse was born; on a day and date which I need not trouble myself to repeat, inasmuch as it can be of no possible consequence to the reader, in this stage of the business at all events; the item of mortality whose name is prefixed to the head of this chapter." ( Chapter 47, Page 44)

## Conclusion

The tone of Dickens in general and Oliver Twist in particular, is satirical by using heavy irony through the characters. Dickens was trying to describe the world realistically but he combines realist with fiction as the narrator in Oliver Twist is the third person omniscient with more effective tone. The study shows that Dickens' writing style in his Novel "Oliver Twist" through the use of the figures of speech, symbols, images and allegory makes it predominantly satirical. The author's tone, diction and narrative voice add to satire. It examines the author's techniques and effectiveness of the style points out the culture of England i.e treatment with children and women, the condition of workhouses, the treatment of government with the people of England.

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