

Victorian Shadows and Southern Echoes: A Simultaneous Scrutiny of Social Class Disparity in ‘Oliver Twist’ and ‘To Kill a Mockingbird’

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ABSTRACT

This study examines social class discrimination in Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* and Charles Dickens’s *Oliver Twist*, focusing on their similarities and differences in addressing this issue across distinct historical contexts—Victorian England and 1930s Alabama. Utilizing qualitative methods, the study explores how protagonists Oliver Twist and Scout Finch navigate oppressive social hierarchies and systemic injustices within their societies. Both novels tackle themes of poverty, morality, and the impact of socio-economic status on individuals’ lives, illuminating the inherent inequalities of their respective worlds. Dickens portrays the brutal realities faced by the lower classes through depictions of the criminal underworld, orphanages, and workhouses, while Lee focuses on racial prejudice and the quest for justice during the Great Depression. Employing Marxist theory, this analysis critically reveals how class conflicts and socio-economic disparities inform the narratives, underscoring social injustices and the hypocrisy surrounding them. Though both authors address the plight of marginalized groups, they emphasize different aspects: Lee highlights racial injustice and ethical growth, while Dickens critiques the systemic exploitation of the poor. Ultimately, this comparative study enhances our understanding of societal inequality as presented in literature, deepening our awareness of race, morality, and class dynamics in both novels.

Keywords: *bourgeoisie, injustice, proletariat, racism, social class disparity.*

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Oliver Twist

‘Oliver Twist’, a novel composed by Charles Dickens that was initiated as a serial between 1837 and 1839, is considered a classic of Victorian fiction (Dickens, 2003). This novel consists of the story of Oliver, the protagonist, who flees from a workhouse and gets involved unintentionally with a group of criminals that was under the leadership of Fagin. This novel’s setting reflects the bitter reality of early 19th-century London that the poor and disenfranchised people must tolerate. Dickens sets the target to attack the social

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structures that shelter the workhouse system's corruption, the tremendously horrible treatment of orphans, and the vast class prejudice of Victorian society. The characters made by Dickens, such as Oliver, Fagin, Nancy, and Mr. Bumble, are the signs that Victorian society subconsciously supported social inequality and poverty. The prominent Queen Victoria ruled England from 1837 to 1901. She contributed to the rise of the Victorian era by doing social and cultural renovation and economic establishment. The classification of rich and poor started after the Industrial Revolution's massive expansion of factories and developed urbanization ([Sawant et al., 2024](#)). Dickens wrote the novel 'Oliver Twist', which represents the period when extreme poverty, weak social assistance programs, and child labor were very common issues. Dickens highly despised the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, which wanted to decrease the expense of serving the impoverished by declining the appeal of workhouses. The novel depicts the scene of how the rich people treat the poor in Victorian society and how they live a harsh life ([Dickens, 2003](#)).

1.2 To Kill a Mockingbird

'To Kill a Mockingbird,' composed by Harper Lee in 1960, represents the racism that took place in a divided American South in the period of the Great Depression ([Knopf, 2015](#)). Scout Finch, the main character of the novel, grew up in Maycomb, Alabama, and her father, attorney Atticus Finch, helps Tom Robinson, who was improperly convicted of raping a white lady. Lee tried to find out the deep class and racial stereotypes of the era through Scout Fin's innocent perspective. The novel explores the elements of social justice, morality, and the lack of innocence by challenging the socially built standards that set racial and divisional boundaries. In the 1930s, there was a severe economic disaster and racial conflict in the United States called "The Great Depression." ([Verdugo, 2018](#)). This novel perfectly depicts the life span of impoverished and disenfranchised people over there in that period. A new law was made called "Jim Crow Laws" to rejuvenate the racial aggression against African Americans that affected even everyday life of the South's public and private. This novel revoke the biases towards southern society during the Great Depression, even though it was released in the civil rights movement of the 1960s. It also portrays racial injustice in the Scottsboro Trials by prosecuting Tom Robinson with the other nine African American teens who were falsely alleged of raping two white women ([Johnson, 2019](#)).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Existing Scholarly Research on *Oliver Twist*

The issue of discrimination has become an important topic in literature, and novelists are also contributing to it with their powerful literary lenses and testing the social norms and practices ([Afshan et al., 2023](#); [Karmakar, 2024](#); [Lewis, 2008](#); [Nathiya & Balachandran, 2023](#); [van Dijk, 1998](#); [Venkatesan & James, 2018](#)). The two novels 'Oliver Twist' and 'To Kill a Mockingbird' depict the social view of two different nations, societies, and countries in one frame where 'Oliver Twist' displays the societal degradation of a small town where the workhouse system was built to allocate the works to the poor but with less pay and more hard work. Oliver's Twist reveals the socio-

economic discrimination and injustice that were created by the powerful social authority ([Aminah, 2018](#)). Dickens also focused on the heinous outcomes of the Poor Law Amendment Act 1834. In addition, 'To Kill a Mockingbird' scans the elements of racial and socioeconomic inequality in 1930s American South society, a tiny southern community to be more exact. Harper Lee criticizes the social structures that portray American South society's oppressions of race and class disparities in the novel 'To Kill a Mockingbird.'

Charles Dickens composed the novel 'Oliver Twist', based on the extreme class division and socioeconomic discrimination. Although the Industrial Revolution made the economy of England strong and formidable around the world. But along with that huge development of industry and economy, human life, especially in rural areas, was in danger because of that rapid industrialization. A number of lower-class workers rushed into the city for the purpose of working there and having a happy, wealthy life. The effect of this moving to cities makes their lives underclass and crowded with slums and poor lives. Later, the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 changed the regular life of the poor from the pre-existing conditions to the severely worst conditions, as this law compelled the poor to stay in workhouses. Dickens represents the workhouse system and its bitter reality. The way authority used to treat the poor in the workhouse was very cruel and inhumane. The novel depicts the harsh realities of the poor of Victorian England and the class conflictions of London. This part will go through the relevant writings of 'Oliver Twist' by other writers to find out how Charles Dickens used the story of the novel to criticize the social and racial disparities of Victorian England. After that, the directions will go towards the novel 'To Kill a Mockingbird.' During the Great Depression, the American South confronted a huge injustice and class racism, and Harper Lee depicted the scenario of that time of the 1930s perfectly. Furthermore, the theory of Marxism will be applied to both novel stories to find out the elements. This study plans to explain the ongoing significance of both novels in the field of social inequality and racism by assembling all the ideas. Many literary historical scholars have experimented with the novel 'Oliver Twist', with a pretty decent demonstration of the socioeconomic class and the structural inequalities that the poor had to tolerate in that time. The protagonist of the novel, Oliver, was born poor and was a victim of poverty. Gradually, he felt the harsh reality by falling into the trap of 7 class injustice and the workhouse system. Dickens depicted how a young boy from the early Victorian period's society experienced life in London.

According to [Aminah \(2018\)](#), social inequality refers to unequal treatment of marginalized groups, such as the poor, adoptees, and disabled individuals. In such situations, dominant groups have power and are believed to be right, while marginalized individuals are expected to remain silent. They have no right to express their feelings or question their situation, and their only option is to remain silent. Injustice varies among societies, ranging from low to high intensity, reflecting differences in values and inequality. Examples include poverty, lack of freedom, hate crimes, bullying, unemployment, and ageism.

Social injustice is the violation of human rights, involving the unfair distribution of resources, oppression, and preventing self-determination ([Brewer & Stonecash, 2015](#); [McKeown, 2022](#)). Examples include unequal wealth distribution, casteism, racial discrimination, sexism, ableism, child labor, and homophobia. Contemporary manifestations of injustice and oppression are often perceived as separate phenomena,

such as racism, sexism, ageism, and discrimination based on sexual orientation, disabilities, and religions.

[Reddy \(2024\)](#) stated that 'Oliver Twist' is a story that follows Oliver from his birth in a workhouse in England to his adoption by Mr. Brownlow and Mrs. Maylie. The author explores the systems and influences that shape Oliver's life, from his mother's death to his experiences in orphanages and workhouses. Oliver's experiences reveal the cruelty and abuse of the poor, and Nancy's sacrifice to save him is a turning point. Despite his suffering, Oliver's desire for good leads him to salvation with Mr. Brownlow, and the author martyrs Nancy, punishing those who continue to practice crime and violence. The story ends with the good characters enjoying and the bad characters suffering.

[Patten \(1969\)](#) elucidated that 'Oliver Twist' explores the concept of human life, contrasting it with the capitalist world of thieves. The novel highlights the contrast between the respectable world and the dehumanizing world of Fagin, who seeks to subvert Oliver's need for compassion for his own profit.

2.2 Existing Scholarly Research on *To Kill a Mockingbird*

'To Kill a Mockingbird' was published in 1960, though based on racial and class conflicts in the 1930s post-Great Depression period in American South society in Maycomb, Alabama, United States. The effects of the Jim Crow Laws were devastating and were the reason for the extreme discrimination. These laws created and validated social inequality, denying African Americans as citizens and depriving them of human rights such as opportunities and justice, political power, and so on. The Marxist literary theory ([Birchall, 1977](#); [Eagleton, 1976](#)) will be conducted here in the novel 'Oliver Twist'. The novel will be analyzed through the lens of social class struggle and socioeconomic resources. The capitalist system neglects human rights, especially the poor working-class people and they are the victim of social inequality. The Marxist theory is relevant and applied here based on social class inequality. Charles Dickens picked up the capitalist system as the point of criticism of Victorian England, which shaped the social class and exploited the poor people. The capitalist system created the social structure which deprived the rights of the poor and dehumanized them as a product. The characters in the novel; Oliver and Fagin, Nancy and others are the symbol of social class injustice victims. The economic system kept them as powerless and under the control of the rich upper-class peoples. There are many scholars who reviewed the novel 'To Kill a Mockingbird' from different perspectives. As this novel is a classic and based on the display of social discrimination and racism of the post-Great Depression period in American South in 1930s Maycomb, Alabama, United states. Few scholarly observations have been discussed below.

[Potyk and White \(2020\)](#) claims that, "Harper Lee's 'To Kill a Mockingbird' is a successful American novel set in the 1930s, focusing on the story of a white lawyer, Atticus Finch, who represents a falsely accused black man, Tom Robinson. The book introduces readers to race relations and justice in the south and serves as a call for racial and social justice. However, the novel's portrayal of Atticus as racist and the portrayal of racism, segregation, and a caste system are often overlooked. The book also highlights the long-standing systemic racism in society, such as the disproportionate infliction and death of black Americans from COVID-19 and other health disparities. Despite the success of the novel, 60 years later, racial profiling, lack of opportunity, and prejudice persist, with police actions and judicial practices unfairly targeting blacks and resulting

in the mass incarceration of young black men. Addressing these disparities requires grace, humility, and a growing sense of responsibility”

According to [Johnson \(1994\)](#), “The dynamics of social hierarchy that structure social discrimination and racism. Racism is the superior form of discrimination in *Maycomb*. Class differences also play a big role in individual behavior and social status. Though the character Ewells is poor and peripheral, he still reigns over the black community, such in a social class system where the lower white race is superior to the African Americans. In addition, the entire incident happened to Tom Robinson; such an innocent and moral character was convicted only because of his lower status as a black man.”

[Shields \(2006\)](#) argues that, “how the Finch family, especially Mr. Atticus Finch, depicted the moral responsibility of the middle class while the social class advantage promoted societal injustices. On the other hand, characters like Bob Ewell utilized the social class influence to normalize their immoral actions. [Shields \(2006\)](#) also shows how social class is used to compensate for unethical behaviors. The upper-rich characters like Aunt Alexandra spread racism in the guise of “family pride.”

3. RESEARCH METHODS

The article is qualitative and interpretive and will be conducted on the basis of the comparative literary analysis of two novels, ‘*Oliver Twist*’ by Charles Dickens and ‘*To Kill a Mockingbird*’ by Harper Lee. The article tries to focus on the social class discrimination of Victorian England and the American South based on the study of the texts and socio-historical contexts of two novels. The characters, themes, and setting will be analyzed to see how they interact with the social class inequality of the two societies.

3.1 Research Design

This article will be designed following the dynamics of a few essential components. Literary comparison: the two novels ‘*Oliver Twist*’ and ‘*To Kill a Mockingbird*’ will be compared based on the depiction of social class injustice and its effect on societies. And Themes demonstration: The novels will explore the themes of social class discrimination, poverty, and ethical values in the socio-economic conditions of Victorian England and the 1930s American South. Character analysis: the prominent characters of the novels, for instance, Oliver, Tom Robinson, Scout, Atticus Finch, and the Ewells and others, will be elaborated, and their influence in the novels will be focused.

3.2 Theoretical Framework

This article uses Marxist theory and the mechanism of Marxist theory will be applied to figure out the class construction and social inequalities in the texts and also explore the observation of Dickens and Lee in the way they examine the capitalist societies in their times and the variation of power in upper and lower classes.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis Procedure

The novels will be read carefully, concentrating on the figures of social injustices and discrimination and checking how the injustices shape the characters' lives and the plot. After finishing the close study of the two novels, there will be a comparison and analysis. How Dickens and Lee exposed the class issues in the novels will be noted, and the similarities and differences between the novel and how the societies treat the characters regarding the class issue will be demonstrated. The influence of sociocultural conditions in Victorian England and the American South will be followed by how each author depicts their observation towards class. This segment will grant a backdrop for the readers to realize the significance of social class discrimination in each novel. The scholarly articles and book analysis will be included in the interpretation of the article so that the social class disparity will be understandable more accurately.

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4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Results

4.1.1 Social class and systemic oppression

According to the Marxist perspective, 'Oliver Twist' and 'To Kill a Mockingbird' both novels uncover the perpetual class-based systematic exploitation by the economic systems. The superior bourgeoisie is always dominant over the proletariat. In 'Oliver Twist', Charles Dickens criticizes the capitalist system of Victorian England, focusing on how the industrialization dehumanizes the poor people and sets their lives as working-class inhabitants. For instance, a common key symbol of capitalist injustice is the workhouse where the bourgeoisie dehumanized the proletariat showing poverty is an outcome of moral failing instead of a systemic issue. On the other hand, In the novel To Kill a Mockingbird, economic inequality is linked to racial hierarchies during the Great Depression in the American South. A self-evident example of exploitation is the dominance of poor white families like the Ewells over the black community in terms of

judicial and economic conditions along discriminatory social class and racial lines. This represents the Marxist theory of “False Consciousness,” where marginalized people are put into a conspiracy to fight each other, which prevents them from making solidarity and resistance to capitalist systematic structures.

4.1.2 The legal system and the Bourgeoisie

The legal system also works for the aid of the ruling class in the novels. In ‘Oliver Twist’ the judicial court and the police want to prove poverty as the culprit. The characters like Oliver and Nancy are the victims of the justice system that is made by the social authority to punish the poor instead of searching for the root cause of their sufferings. Even the legal authorities are depicted as dictators as involved with the rise of capitalist exploitation. In ‘To Kill a Mockingbird’ the supremacy of power and class is clearly shown. The trial of Tom Robinson who is from the Black community. The verdict of the court was influenced by racial and economic bias and served the White class as the elite making the Black community scapegoated. This part is relevant to the Marxist theory of the Superstructure where the law and politics superintend the economy and keep the interest of society’s ruling class.

4.1.3 Commodification and dehumanization of the proletariat

According to the Marxist lens, the characters in both novels are visualized as marginalized people who are used as the utility to the ruling class. The upper class of society treats the lower class as commodities to be exploited according to their will. In ‘Oliver Twist’, the workhouse system converts human beings into labor units. The struggle of Oliver demonstrates how industrial capitalism exploits impoverished people. Oliver represents the process of being dehumanized by the Industrial Revolution. Development is necessary for each country but the working-class people must get the proper payment and a well working environment. The workhouse normalizes the systematic and institutional exploitation done by the upper-class people and the horrible treatment from the criminalized social authority. The character Nancy also shows how society treats poor women as sexual slaves or laborers. Similarly, in ‘To Kill a Mockingbird’ the black community is shown as the exploited underclass. Though the white landowners were dependent on the black community’s labor still the capitalist society’s white-class did not value their presence and rights. The element of commodification is here when Tom Robinson’s trial and verdict were based on the social and economic dominance of the upper white class over the black community. This finding explains how the capitalist systems sneak humanity from the working-class people keeping them abstain from economic functions.

4.1.4 Social oppression and resistance

Both novels expose the elements of class struggle and later the novelists also gave a little resistance showing some opposite upper-class characters who went against the inhumanity of the capitalist system towards the poor characters. In ‘Oliver Twist’, the journey of the protagonist Oliver could be interpreted as an extreme critique of 13 capitalist exploitation but the novelist gives a twist by using an upper-class benevolent character like Mr. Brownlow to counteract institutional exploitation who accepts Oliver

and gives him a new life. This stance proves Charles Dickens's reformist thinking rather than a revolutionary stance. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the liberal character Atticus Finch opposes the racial and discriminatory justice system of the American South. This is a sign of resistance against social injustice. The trial of Tom Robinson in court was biased in favor of the upper white class, but being a white man, Mr. Atticus Finch did his best to give the black man a fair trial. This novel combines signs of class conflict and resistance. From a Marxist perspective, novels show the essence of collective action rather than individual heroism in confronting social power structures.

4.2 Discussion

Marxist theory suggests that literature serves to foster class consciousness and incite revolution among the working class ([Birchall, 1977](#); [Eagleton, 1976](#)). Both novels use their narratives to challenge the status quo and highlight the contradictions within capitalist societies. The Marxist interpretation of *Oliver Twist* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* reveals critical insights into how literary texts reflect and resist systemic class oppression. While the Results section highlighted the portrayal of legal injustice, commodification, and class-based exploitation, the discussion emphasizes the broader ideological implications of these depictions. Both novels confirm the enduring relevance of Marxist theory, particularly the idea that capitalist structures manipulate social systems—such as law, labor, and race—to serve bourgeois interests.

The findings reinforce that literature not only documents social realities but also acts as a form of ideological resistance ([Karmakar, 2024](#); [Lewis, 2008](#); [van Dijk, 1998](#)). Dickens and Lee, although writing in different contexts, portray how class and race intersect to maintain the hegemony of the ruling class. The inclusion of benevolent upper-class characters like Mr. Brownlow and Atticus Finch may appear to offer hope for reform, but from a Marxist standpoint, they also expose the limitations of individual resistance within an inherently exploitative system. These characters operate within the superstructure, attempting to humanize it, but do not challenge the base economic inequalities at its core.

What emerges from this comparative analysis is a deeper understanding of how capitalist ideologies mask inequality through legal and social systems. The novels illustrate “false consciousness,” where the oppressed internalize the values of their oppressors, thus hindering collective resistance. However, both texts subtly invite readers to recognize the need for systemic change rather than relying on isolated acts of kindness.

This article contributes to the broader discourse on class struggle by demonstrating how literature serves as both a mirror and critique of capitalist exploitation. It shows that classic literary texts remain potent tools for examining contemporary issues of inequality, reinforcing the importance of Marxist criticism in literary studies. Future research may further explore how such narratives influence readers' perceptions of justice and class consciousness.

5. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

These two classic novels show how the racial and biased systems of the societies keep impoverished and lower-class people stuck in harsh and hard lives. The novels also expose how the structural discriminative rules and justice systems of societies about class

and race serve the upper-class and authoritative institutions, keeping the life of poor, women and racial minorities harder and miserable. Charles Dickens and Harper Lee portray the sufferings of poor peoples and criticize the social systems. Charles Dickens focuses on the scene of benevolent acts done by the characters like Mr. Brownlow brings hope where Harper Lee shows the attempt of Atticus Finch as personal efforts, can not fight enough to the social injustices but both novels give suggestions that the sheer change must be initiated from the side of society. The novels expose the inequality and exploitation that are still taking place in our modern societies as a big social problem, and also show us the essence of working together to prevent the social injustices and racism. 'Oliver Twist' and 'To Kill a Mockingbird' make us think twice regarding justice, class and the importance of unity to make better world for every nation and race so far.

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