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Childhood through Dickens' eyes: an analysis of *Oliver Twist* and *Hard Times*.

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**Abstract:** This research analyzes childhood in the Victorian Era and its representations in two of Charles Dickens' novels: *Oliver Twist* and *Hard Times*. The aim is to determine how Dickens depicts vulnerable children whose childhood is taken away due to desolate infant experiences such as child labour. These novels put on perspective Victorian childhood in terms of suffering and hard living conditions. Dickens creates different characters in these novels that portray children and their desolate infant experiences, which cause them, as a result, an early ageing. The representation of childhood in the previous literary tradition has been taken into account as well as the historical context of the Victorian Era. Finally, this research analyzes how Dickens incorporates children as important characters in his novels and through them, he denounces the exploitation and mistreatment that many children suffered.

**Keywords:** Victorian Era, childhood, Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, *Hard Times*, vulnerability.

**Resumen:** Esta investigación analiza la infancia en la época victoriana y sus representaciones en dos de las novelas de Charles Dickens: *Oliver Twist* y *Hard Times*. El objetivo es determinar cómo Dickens representa niños vulnerables cuya infancia es arrebatada debido a experiencias desoladoras como el trabajo infantil. Estas novelas ponen en perspectiva la infancia victoriana, reflejando el sufrimiento y las duras condiciones de vida. Dickens crea en estas novelas diferentes personajes que retratan los niños y sus experiencias, que les provocan un envejecimiento precoz. También se ha tenido en cuenta la representación de la infancia en la tradición literaria anterior, así como el contexto histórico de la era Victoriana. Finalmente, esta investigación analiza como Dickens incorpora a los niños como personajes importantes en sus novelas y a través de ellos denuncia la explotación y el maltrato que sufrían muchos de ellos.

**Palabras clave:** Época victoriana, infancia, Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, *Hard Times*, vulnerabilidad.



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## INTRODUCTION

In this final dissertation, I will analyse the representation of childhood, child living conditions, and child treatment in *Oliver Twist* and *Hard Times*, both written by Charles Dickens.

As noted by Georgieva, childhood has been one of the main topics of English literature for a long time. However, it arose with the novel and its importance increased during the eighteenth century, when thinkers of the time promoted a brighter view on childhood (2-3). Furthermore, according to Pavan, during this century the number of orphans that were taken care of by institutions increased considerably and many authors, such as Henry Fielding, used children as main characters to ask for a change in the system (5-6). This type of writing has very much in common with Dickens' novels, since not only both of them denounce the situation of children, but also some parallelisms between characters and plots can be established.

As it is explained by Gubar, Victorian children's rights depended on their social status. Children belonging to lower classes often had to work from a very early age instead of going to school. These children usually worked in places where conditions affected their health, such as mines. On the other hand, children from upper-class families lived a very different life. These families could afford tutors or send their children to schools. This means that there were great differences among the social classes in terms of education.

Something worth mentioning is the fact that Charles Dickens himself experienced child labour. When he was twelve years old, his father was put in prison for debts, and he was considered old enough to start working ten hours a day. The fact that the author himself suffered this type of experiences at such an early age plays a key role in the creation of his novels, since they will provide some of the main features of the plot and of the characters.

Charles Dickens was a social activist who promoted several campaigns to improve education and health conditions during the Victorian Era. Moreover, this author is not only an English writer whose novels show the bad situation of children in this historical period, but he also plays the role of social critic. The majority of his novels have been read by many, not only for academic purposes, but also for entertainment. Charles Dickens' novels

are enjoyable because of the stories they tell, but it is also important to notice the social criticism that is included in them, represented by some of the characters with which he tries to denounce the living conditions in Victorian England. Although Dickens uses literature to show and criticise different issues regarding this historical period, such as poverty or the social stratification of the Victorian Era, this final dissertation will only focus on children and childhood.

In his novels, Dickens includes children as the main characters. The life and vulnerability, caused by infant experiences such as child labour, of these characters show what was like to be a child during the Victorian Era. As a result, we can see that many of the characters presented in these novels suffer an early ageing. Many experts and critics have agreed that Dickens' novels represent faithfully the childhood of a Victorian child, for example, in *Childhood in English Literature*, Georgieva affirms that "Dickens offered his readers a view through the child's eyes, creating a palpable experience of childhood" (4).

Moreover, according to Dutta, Charles Dickens' novels share distinct characteristics that make them "Dickensian" (1). Some of them, such as the life of the characters that Dickens creates, will be studied in this final dissertation. Furthermore, as it is noted by Arrando in *Children in the Victorian Era as Depicted in Dickens' Novels*, Dickens intends to develop social awareness concerning both violence and children (72).

In order to be aware of the social criticism that appears in Dickens' novels, it is important to understand both the texts and the period in which they were written. Therefore, the methodology that will be followed corresponds to the analysis of three main points that cover history and literature.

The first point corresponds to the analysis of the historical and social context of the Victorian Era. First, I will define the historical conditions of this period that can affect children, such as social classes or the effects of industrialization. Then, I will gather information regarding children-related issues, such as the role of children in society, their living conditions, and their relationships with adults. Although this project deals with literature, I consider important the analysis of the history and society of this period, because Charles Dickens' novels are also a reflection of his time.



In the following point, I will analyse the tradition in previous novels when representing children and childhood. To do so, I will look into *Tom Jones*, by Henry Fielding, a novel that has features of the picaresque. The picaresque is, after the Heliodoran novel, the first important genre to deal with children as main characters. Not only the satire and irony characteristics of the picaresque can be found in Fielding's and Dickens' novels, but also the children that appear in, as in the Heliodoran novel, are abandoned. As Pavan explains in *The Orphan in Eighteenth-Century Literature: An Insight into Moll Flanders and Tom Jones*, this type of characters is used to denounce the abuse and violent treatment that many children suffered (115). Dickens denounces children's life conditions. For example, in *Oliver Twist*, one of the novels analysed in this dissertation, the main character happens to be the lost nephew of an upper-class family. This also happens in *Tom Jones*. However, the tradition goes back to the Heliodoran novels. James J. Lynch affirms that "Henry Fielding's major novels, *Joseph Andrews*, *Tom Jones* and *Amelia* - are affected by a synthesis of romance and epic remarkably similar to that in the Heliodorian novel" (15). Furthermore, it is possible to establish that some aspects from *Tom Jones*, such as the revelation of Tom's identity, are parallel to the Heliodorian novel (17). This means that the Heliodorian novel somehow influenced Dickens.

The third and last point will explore children and childhood in the two already mentioned novels: *Oliver Twist* and *Hard Times*. The order of the selected novels is that of their composition and publication. First of all, I will introduce both texts briefly since I believe it important to better understand their analysis. I will provide a brief summary of each novel. Having done this, different aspects will be studied regarding each novel. While the analysis of *Oliver Twist* will cover aspects such as violent treatment by institutions and child labour, *Hard Times*' study will deal with education and schools. All of this will be studied through characters and events taken from the two already mentioned novels. The last issue that will be analysed inside this point is the consequence of all these aspects: an early ageing of children. To do so, some characters, as well as their description or the events they are involved in, will be studied.

The analysis of these three issues intends to prove that Charles Dickens followed a tradition when representing childhood in his novels. This tradition is mainly composed of both Heliodorus' novels and the picaresque.

Finally, and considering all the already mentioned aspects, a conclusion on the analysis of Victorian children and their childhood, as well as the representation made by Charles Dickens in *Oliver Twist* and *Hard Times*, will be presented.

## 1. CHILDHOOD IN THE VICTORIAN ERA

The Victorian Era (1837-1901) is known for being a period of progression in several fields, such as economy, science, and technology. According to Pekařová, this historical period also means an expansion of the Industrial Revolution that not only brought wealth to many, but also contributed to the creation of a working-class in which children were very often included (10).

Something important to mention about the Victorian Era is the strict classification of society. This classification was composed of three social classes: upper class, middle class, and working class. This fact will also affect the lives of children since their living conditions and education opportunities would change from one class to another.

The upper class consisted of aristocrats and gentry that belonged to rich families. Children of this class were taken care of by nannies who had a close relationship with the sons or daughters of the family. Parents saw their children only at specific times, such as lunch, or only a few hours a day. Children from the upper class received the best education. Boys were usually sent to boarding schools, while girls, who were expected to get married to a man of a family with the same social status, stayed at home and were educated by a governess. They learnt flower arranging, singing, and music, since those were considered suitable skills to find the right husband. The eldest son had to learn how to take care of the family and the economy of it. It is also important to highlight that the youngest sons of these families used to learn a profession that was considered “gentlemanly”. Examples of this are high positions in the administration, the church, the court, or military professions. Although families of this kind could afford it, daughters did not learn any profession. The reason for this is that in Victorian England it was believed that women should not work since working corresponded only to men. After getting married, a middle and upper-class woman was expected to take care of her family, have children, and be nice (Pekařová 11-12).

The middle class was composed mainly of businessmen, office workers, and doctors. Pekařová states that “most changes in attitudes towards children started and happened within this class” (11). Mothers from the middle class took parenting more seriously than mothers from the upper class. They took care of their children with the help

of domestic servants. Furthermore, during this period childbirth and pregnancy stopped being considered an illness and mothers were asked to breastfeed their children. This fact contributed to the decline of the death of infants. However, it is important to mention that although the deaths were fewer, the infant mortality rate was still very high.

Regarding education, McDowall notes that boys from the middle class attended public schools. These schools tried not only to provide quality education, but also to teach young boys how to be independent. Apart from this, children from the middle class could attend church schools and there were also some schools for girls. It is important to mention that girls received an education, but the main objective of it was not to learn a profession, as in the case of boys. They were expected to marry a man from the middle class, or even the upper class and they needed some education to achieve this (144).

As Robertson explains, affection was also an issue regarding these two social classes. It has already been stated that upper-class parents were cold and only saw children for a few hours a day. Although middle-class parents had a more participative role regarding children, they were also considered cold or reserved. However, it is believed that they were somehow interested in the well-being of children, but they considered their sons and daughters separate individuals with their own special needs and not little adults (416).

According to Pekařová, something that families from both the upper and the middle class had in common is that parents did expect children to be obedient, and they encouraged their sons and daughters to learn self-control and to not complain in certain situations (12).

The working class, the one that had the most members, was the poorest. In contrast to other social classes, the majority of working-class families suffer poor living conditions. As a consequence of this, they could not afford to hire a maid or nannies, or to spend time with children, as parents from other social classes could. Some working mothers were able to afford a nurse who took care of children during the day. However, it is important to mention that these nurses were not allowed to have any other job, since they were often drunk or ill. This means that they were unsuitable to take care of children. These families also struggled with finances, and because of that, women usually worked as much as men, or even more hours if their husbands were unemployed. The lack of money also affected children that had to walk with no shoes and usually did not have coats or warm clothing.

Also, older siblings were forced to take care of their younger brothers and sisters, and sometimes they had to leave their home to look for a job (Pekařová 13).

Regarding affection and the working class, it is believed that mothers were strict, especially when they were exhausted after several hours of working under very hard conditions. Furthermore, Pekařová states that they only were nice or tender to children when they were sick (14).

Children from this social class were lucky if their families could afford education. However, it was considered among the people of the working class that education was not necessary to become a servant or have a job in a factory. Because of this, child labour was very common in the working class. The families belonging to this class could not support themselves if the children were not employed. Therefore, children started to work at a very early age, sometimes even five years old, to support their families. Some children, the lucky ones, learnt a good job or worked as domestic servants. Other children worked in the textile and metal industry in a very hard environment. This type of jobs meant a working day of sixteen hours, under the same conditions in which adults worked (Pekařová 14).



## 2. REPRESENTATIONS OF CHILDHOOD IN PREVIOUS LITERATURE

The nineteenth century was influenced by Rousseau, whose theories created the concept of the “Romantic child”. During the Victorian Era, writers supported the idea of the Romantic Child, and they described child heroes as “idealistically as superior to adults, as angels on earth, sent by heaven to be models of innocence and purity, untouched by the fall into adulthood” (Pekařová 14-15)

Charles Dickens was one of these authors, but before analysing how Dickens represents childhood in the two already mentioned novels, it is important to look into how children have been represented in previous literature. Therefore, the previous tradition, composed mainly by the Heliodoran novel and the picaresque novel, will be studied in the next sections.

### 2.1 The Heliodoran novel

Heliodorus Emesenus or Heliodorus of Emesa was an Ancient Greek author. His masterpiece is *Aethiopica*, also known as *Theagenes and Chariclea* (between 220s and 370s AD).

According to Lynch, what distinguishes the Heliodoran tradition is its synthetic nature and its consciousness of literary rules. The Heliodoran novel (III and IV centuries) has been defined as a literary hybrid that influenced novels written in the first half of the seventeenth century (14-15). However, it is important to point out that it also influenced authors of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, such as Henry Fielding.

The plot of the Heliodoran novel presents the story of two characters whose marriage is not possible for one reason or another. Both characters start a journey in which they are forced to fight against separation, kidnapping, and all kinds of calamities. At the end of the journey, the identities of the lovers are finally established, and their marriage is possible (Lynch 20).

It is possible to see that this same plot is present in *Tom Jones* by Henry Fielding. Although it will be analyzed later, it is important to mention that its plot develops the love story between Tom and Sophia. Tom is adopted by a good family and falls in love with

Sophia in his early youth. At that point, their marriage cannot happen because Tom is an orphan whose origins are unknown. As a result, the paths of both characters separate, since Sophia's father would not allow her to marry someone from a different social class. However, and after many adventurous events concerning the lovers, Tom's identity is revealed, showing that his social status is the same as Sophia's and thus their marriage is possible. We can see how Fielding follows the Heliodoran tradition in his masterpiece.

## 2.2 The picaresque

The picaresque is a prose fiction genre that originated in Spain and depicts the adventures of a character that usually comes from a low social class and lives in a corrupt society. According to Pérez, the picaresque presents the relationship of the main character with the society in which he lives. This character, named *pícaro*, is normally a young boy who has lost his innocence and has to live in a hostile environment. Due to the conditions in which he lives, he has to find out how to cheat and survive. In the case of female characters, named *pícaras*, their survival often depends on the exchange of sexual favours for money or goods that they need (3).

The society of Victorian England did not contribute to the development of the picaresque novel, but there are some novels, such as *Oliver Twist*, that also presents a young boy who has to survive as the main character. In his study, Romero compares *La vida de Lazarillo de Tormes* (1554) that is considered to be the precursor novel of the picaresque genre and *Oliver Twist* that, although it does not belong to the picaresque, is the first English novel that presents a child as the main character to denounce situations such as child labour or abuse.

While Lázaro is a child that finds himself forced to mature and deal with the society of the time, Oliver has to fight against a society that wants to mistreat him. Something that connects both novels and that suggests that Dickens' writings are influenced by the picaresque is not only that *Lazarillo de Tormes* has a critical attitude towards the society represented in the novel, but also that the main theme of this text is the child who suffers from marginality. Although *Oliver Twist* is placed in Victorian England, it has been argued



that the same theme can be found in this novel, since it is the first novel that has a child that suffers the abuse of society as a protagonist (Romero 5).

It is important to mention that the same fact is studied by Eoff, who explains that one may remember Lázaro when Oliver runs away from his employer to start a new life. When Oliver is on his way to London, he finds himself forced to beg for food. This means, he is in a position in which he suffers from marginality and can easily become a *pícaro* (443-444).

### **2.3 *Tom Jones* by Henry Fielding**

During the eighteenth century, several authors included the figure of the orphan in their texts. As Watt affirms, “the novel has ever had the ability to portray all the varieties of human experience, and not merely those suited to one particular literary perspective: the novel's realism does not reside in the kind of life it presents, but in the way it presents it” (11).

*Tom Jones* was written in the 1740s and published in 1749. The story deals with the life of an orphan who eventually becomes the heir of the Allworthy family. We can see how this novel has influenced Dickens’ writings, since not only the idea of an orphan is present in *Oliver Twist*, but also there is a common theme: the illegitimacy.

According to Shutt, during the eighteenth century (time in which *Tom Jones* was written and published), the responsibility of an illegitimate child affected both parents. The unmarried mother was asked to name the baby, as it can be seen in the case of Tom Jones, who is named by Molly Seagrim, his pretended mother. Also, the word of the mother was enough to make the father pay some money, marry her or go to prison (17).

The idea of illegitimacy can also be found in *Oliver Twist*. Oliver is named by Mr. Bumble, the man who is in charge of the orphanage. It has been argued that rather living up to the last name that was given to Oliver, he decides to escape from the life he is living and somehow, he is also able to escape from the poverty and illegitimacy (Shutt 26). Furthermore, it is important to highlight that his illegitimacy reinforces Dickens’ Rousseauesque belief in the innocence of a child of nature (Shutt 55).



### 3. CHILDHOOD IN CHARLES DICKENS' NOVELS

Charles Dickens is considered by many not only a great English novelist, but also one of the most important social commentators who used fiction in his novels to criticize both social and moral abuses in Victorian England. Dickens also showed empathy and compassion towards those belonging to the English society and considered vulnerable. According to Dutta, Dickens' novels are a reliable portrait of the childhood of a considerable number of Victorian children, most of them orphans (1). It is also important to mention that the characters in the novels represent the real life of children of the Victorian Era. As Dutta states, these characters could be a reflection of Dickens' childhood, since many of the experiences that the author underwent when being a child, such as child labour, can be seen in the novels. Furthermore, it has been argued that Dickens' writings focused on the sad faces of children and the cold hearts of adults. In his writings, the author also shows us how a warm heart could be the cure for the pain caused by the indifference of society. These novels consist of a social criticism that calls for reform at several levels of society (Dutta 2).

#### 3.1 *Oliver Twist*

*Oliver Twist*, or *The Parish Boy's Progress* is Charles Dickens' second novel, and it was originally published as a serial novel from 1837 to 1839 in *Bentley's Miscellany*, a magazine run by Dickens. Charles Dickens also published this novel in three volumes in 1838, before the serial publication finished. After that, the author revised the text and published it again in 1846, 1850, 1858, and 1867.

Within this point, a brief summary of the plot of the novel, as well as an analysis regarding the representation of childhood, specifically institutional cruelty, and child labour, will be provided.

##### 3.1.1 *A brief presentation*

First of all, it is important to highlight that *Oliver Twist* is the first English novel that includes a child as the main character. Furthermore, it is also considered one of the first social novels in the history of literature. As a matter of fact, it draws the readers' attention

to several social issues of the time, such as child labour or how children ended up committing a crime, among others. This writing is used by Dickens to show the living conditions of children in Victorian England (Mallotti 12-13).

The plot deals with the story of Oliver, who is an orphan. Oliver's life is not easy because of the conditions of the orphanage where he lives. He suffers from hunger and abuse. As a victim of child labour, Oliver is sold to an undertaker. However, he manages to escape and decides to run away and start a new life in London, but when he arrives there, he is forced to be part of a criminal gang led by a man named Fagin. Eventually, it is discovered that Oliver belongs to a respectable and wealthy family.

Dickens uses the plot and children characters in *Oliver Twist* to denounce the social conditions of the time. According to Pekařová, several social issues are explored in this novel, such as the abuses of the law system and the image of children as victims (16).

### 3.1.2 Institutional cruelty

“Oliver Twist and his companions suffered the tortures of slow starvation for three months” (*Oliver Twist* 14).

Workhouses may be known by many who have heard about Oliver Twist's story. According to Richardson, *Oliver Twist* was published by Dickens to denounce how the system treated children born and raised in the workhouse system. Workhouses were established in 1834 by the Poor Law Act, also known as the “New” Poor Law. Far from protecting the elderly, the sick, and the poor, workhouses would become, somehow, a prison. The government intended to cut spending by instituting this regime. The old parish poorhouses were fully transformed, no cash assistance would be provided, and the gifts (food, shoes, or blankets) that could help a family were forbidden. As Richardson states, the character of the “man in the white waistcoat”, one of the gentlemen in the board of the workhouse in which Oliver lives, personifies how arrogant the guardians were. By using this character, Dickens demonstrates that the workhouses were administered by self-satisfied and heartless individuals. This is the first place in which the reader encounters Oliver. As previously mentioned, Charles Dickens uses this setting, very realistically

described, to show not only the injustices that take place there, but also how officials behave, and treat children.

The novel depicts different kinds of abuses suffered by children. Starvation is one of them. For example, when Oliver arrives at the workhouse. He is introduced to “ten fat gentlemen” (*Oliver Twist* 11) and one, who was “particularly fat” had “a very round, red face” (*Oliver Twist* 11). Hunger is also denounced when Oliver is challenged by some of his partners to ask for more food: “Please, sir, I want some more” (*Oliver Twist* 15). In this part of the novel, it is not only stated by Dickens that the amount of food that children receive in the workhouse was not enough, but also the author shows us that the man in charge of feeding children was fat and healthy. It is possible to see here the juxtaposition between the man who eats more than enough, and the children who are starving. Food was also believed to make children rebellious and according to Mr. Bumble, the beadle of the workhouse, poor people should not eat too much, since it gives them energy and, as a result, they became rebellious. This is said by Mr. Bumble when Oliver is taken by Mr. Sowerberry, the undertaker. Mr. Bumble is asked to go to Sowerberry’s house, since Oliver assaults other children that live there. The ironic explanation that Mr. Bumble gives is that Mrs. Sowerberry, who was in charge of Oliver’s meals at this point, has given Oliver too much food and as a result, he has become violent: “Meat, ma'am, meat [...] You've over-fed him, ma'am. [...] If you had kept the boy on gruel, ma'am, this would never have happened” (*Oliver Twist* 59).

Another example that can be found is the violence that children suffered when they were beaten up and forced to work. Child labour and its presence in the novel will be analyzed in the next section. According to Yekini, physical abuse can include hitting, shaking, throwing, or burning, among other ways of harming children. In extreme cases, it can also mean death. Moreover, physical violence against children was very common in Victorian England and this is shown by Dickens (129). It is possible to see several instances of this type of violence in the novel. For example, the physical abuses that children often received are portrayed when Oliver does not want to go to talk to the men in the board. At this point, Mrs. Mann threatens him with physical violence and the reaction of Oliver shows how frightened he is:

He caught sight of Mrs. Mann, who had got behind the beadle's chair, and was shaking her fist at him with a furious countenance. He took the hint at once, for the fist had been too often impressed upon his body not to be deeply impressed upon his recollection (*Oliver Twist* 10).

Oliver is not the only child who is physically abused in the workhouse. When he leaves Mr. Sowerberry's house to run to London, he has to go by the workhouse. Oliver is nervous because some of the adults in there could see him, but instead he sees his friend Dick, who is still in the workhouse. At this point, the author states that both children have been abused: "[...] Oliver felt glad to see him before he went [...]. They had been beaten, and starved, and shut up together, many and many a time" (*Oliver Twist* 62).

Another kind of abuse that can be found in the story is mental abuse. Adult characters in the novel, especially those who have a job in the workhouse, consider children inferior and treat them as that. Physical abuse has already been discussed, but different instances of mental abuse can be found in the novel as well. A very good example is the gentleman in the white waistcoat. As previously mentioned, this character personifies how arrogant adults in *Oliver Twist's* workhouse were. The gentleman in the white waistcoat appears when Oliver turns nine years old, and he is considered old enough to be moved to the house with the older children. Oliver is forced to talk to the gentlemen of the board, but he feels so frightened that he starts to cry. He is also told that he is an orphan, but Oliver answers that he does not know the meaning of that word. As a result, the gentleman in the white waistcoat calls him a fool: "'The boy is a fool - I thought he was' said the gentleman in the white waistcoat" (*Oliver Twist* 12). The rest of the gentlemen of the board also believe that children of the workhouse would not have a good future. This can be seen when Oliver asks for more food. At this point Mr. Bumble reports it to the board. Not only the gentlemen are surprised, but also the man in the white waistcoat predicts how bad Oliver will end up: "I never was more convinced of anything in my life, than I am that that boy will come to be hung" (*Oliver Twist* 17).

### 3.1.3 Child labour

“Child labour is often defined as work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential, and their dignity, and that is harmful to physical and mental development” (ILO).

Firstly, it is important to mention that Charles Dickens suffered himself child labour and that this experience plays an important role in the creation of his novels. In 1824 his father was put in prison, so he had to start working in a factory at the age of twelve to support his family. His childhood seems to be a recurrent issue in many of his novels. The negative experiences that the author underwent as a child made him empathize with the vulnerability of Victorian children (Dutta 2).

As it has been stated in previous sections, child labour was very common in the lower classes in order to support the family. According to Hansan, in 1870 (near the half of the Victorian Period) about 750,000 children worked. This figure only includes children less than fifteen years old and excludes those who worked in a family business. Furthermore, it is important to mention that child labour developed an important role in the economy of the time. Not only children were considered an important source of labour in the Victorian period but also, they had to put up with very hard conditions.

Focusing now on the novel, we can see that child labour is especially present in *Oliver Twist*. As Cheadle states, “The first seven chapters of *Oliver Twist* are remarkably innovative [...], using the victimization of the workhouse orphan as the occasion for a fictional attack in contemporary attitudes and abuses” (308). We can find three main examples of child labour in this novel.

The first instance of child labour explains that small and thin children such as Oliver were often sold to work as chimney-sweeps. It is stated in the novel that this task was very dangerous since children were put at the top of the chimney and fire was made under them to “help” them scape. This is told when Mr. Gramfield wants Oliver to be a chimney-sweeps trainee, and he describes the job to the board: “Boys is wery obstinit, and wery lazy, Gen'l'men, and there's nothink like a good hot blaze to make 'em come down with a run” (*Oliver Twist* 22). Although Oliver lacked education and knowledge, he was aware of the

conditions of a job such as this. He is so frightened about this job that he even prefers a physical punishment at the workhouse to working as a chimney-sweep: “Oliver felt to his knees, and clashing his hands together, prayed that they would order him back to the dark room - that they would starve him - beat him - kill him if they pleased - rather than send him away with that dreadful man” (*Oliver Twist* 27).

We can find the second example of child labour when Oliver is sold to Mr. Sowerberry, the parochial undertaker. The task assigned to Oliver is to be present at funerals and cry. Mr. Sowerberry believes this task to be perfect for Oliver since he has a sad face: “There's an expression of melancholy in his face [...] He would make a delightful mute” (*Oliver Twist* 41). This new place where Oliver spends some time is worse than the workhouse; for example, he continues suffering abuses. It is also important to mention that the conditions that Oliver faces in this new place are distressing. In fact, he is given the food that the dog rejected, and he has to sleep next to two coffins: “I wish some well-fed philosopher [...] could have seen Oliver Twist clutching at the dainty viands that the dog had neglected” (*Oliver Twist* 36).

Another instance of child labour is found when in London Oliver realizes that he is being abused by an adult. This adult is named Fagin and he hosts orphan or vulnerable children and teaches them how to steal. At the beginning Oliver does not know how to steal and Fagin is determined to teach him. He hides different things in his pockets, and he asks the children to try to steal them without him noticing. Oliver thinks that this is a very funny game. This means, he is not aware of the fact that those children are forced to steal by an adult:

The merry old gentleman and the two boys played at a very curious and uncommon game, which was performed in this way. The merry old gentleman, placing a snuff-box in one pocket of his trousers, a note-case in the other, and a watch in his waistcoat pocket [...], He would look constantly round him, for fear of thieves, and would keep slapping all his pockets in turn [...] Oliver laughed till the tears ran down his face (*Oliver Twist* 79-80).

As a matter of fact, Oliver is forced to steal, and he even ends up in prison. A good gentleman, Mr. Brownlow, takes good care of him but Fagin manages to have Oliver back to his business. At this point, Oliver states that he does not want to be there because he



knows what Fagin's business is about: "I don't like it' rejoined Oliver, timidly; 'I wish they would let me go. I - I - would rather go'" (*Oliver Twist* 169).

### **3.2 *Hard Times***

*Hard times: For These Times* is Charles Dickens' tenth novel. It is by far Dickens' shortest book, just a quarter of the length of those published before and after it. It was published as a serialized novel in twenty weekly parts from April 1854 to August 1854 in *Household Words*, a magazine owned by Dickens. Since the different parts of the novel were sold very well and there was quite a demand, a complete volume was published in August of that same year.

As in the case of the previous novel, a brief summary of the plot as well as an analysis regarding the representation of children in the educational field will be provided.

#### *3.2.1 A brief presentation*

The novel is divided into three main books (Sowing, Reaping and Garnering). The setting is Coketown, a fictional city in the industrial North. Along the novel, Dickens uses several characters and events to show the life of the different social classes: the lower class that considered work as something necessary; the upper class that controls workers who work under very hard conditions; and the life of the people from the circus.

Victorian childhood is present in the story for the reason that it shows us the ideas of Thomas Gradgrind, who raises his own children following a philosophy based only on rationalism and facts. Mr. Gradgrind believes that human beings can be only governed by rational rules. Thanks to his philosophy, Gradgrind is financially and socially successful, and he even becomes a member of the Parliament. According to Ahmad, Mr. Gradgrind sees children as if their heads were empty and waiting to be filled with evidence and facts. He believes that this type of educational approach can be successful. This means, there is no room for fantasy or imagination in his system; facts are more than enough. As a result, he only supports positive sciences that he considers to be the result of human intelligence and therefore deserving of being taught. It is possible to say then, that by showing this type

of utilitarian philosophy, Dickens wanted to make a critical depiction of the educational system of the Victorian Era (Ahmad 2391-2396).

This philosophy will be very present in the plot of the novel. Dickens tells us how Gradgrind educates his own children, Louisa, and Tom, following the already mentioned philosophy. He even creates a school and charitably takes in Sissy Jupe, a girl who comes from the circus and who is abandoned by her father. The fact that poor children, such as Sissy, attend this school may seem philanthropic, but because of the type of education it is based on, it ends up being a disaster. Sissy grows up at Gradgrind's house and develops a friendship with Louisa. However, this friendship ends when she accepts to marry Bounderby, her father's friend who is twice her age. The marriage is disrupted when James Harthouse, brother of one of Gradgrind's friends, arrives. Louisa feels impressed by him and tries to explain to her father all her feelings and emotions. Bounderby, who becomes aware of this, decides to dismiss Louisa. In the meantime, Blackpool, one of the workers in Bounderby's factory, is fired and decides to leave the city. Tom, the elder son, who is aware of this fact, decides to help him and asks him to wait for him around the bank. A few days later the bank is robbed, and everyone blames Blackpool. The woman he loves, Rachel, knows that he is innocent and, together with Louisa and Sissy, tries to solve this situation. Rachel and Sissy find out that Blackpool fell in a giant pit. He dies and it is discovered that Tom robbed the bank. After this, Tom runs away to America helped by Sissy's friends.

### 3.2.2 Education and schools

“Now, what I want is Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life [...] This is the principle on which I bring up my own children, and this is the principle on which I bring up these children” (*Hard Times* 9).

The initial quote reflects the utilitarian philosophy that Mr. Gradgrind believes in and applies in the education of children. In Mr. Gradgrind's school children are taught nothing but facts, and because of this type of teaching there is no room for creativity.

Therefore, nobody can change his idea about education. As it has been previously pointed out, *Hard Times* is composed by three main books and this quote appears in the first book: 'Sowing'. The name of the first book is important, since it is possible to understand this title as if Mr. Gradgrind starts to sow, but he is doing it in a wrong way, and as a result, children who were taught following these principles will have troubles.

Regarding the school, it is important to mention that, although the author describes it, the descriptions are quite precarious since it is very basic and simple. This can be seen when Mr. Gradgrind gives a lecture in the school, and the room in which he does it is defined as "plain, bare, monotonous vault of a school-room" (*Hard Times* 9). Levarda notes that the conditions in the school are very precarious since the author is showing the reader the real conditions of Victorian schools. During this historical period, very small places were used for the education of the masses (111). It is also important to mention that children are not people at the school but somehow, they are dehumanized. For example, they are not called by their names but by numbers. An instance of this appears when Mr. Gradgrind refers to Sissy Jupe. Gradgrind needs a child to answer some questions when giving a lecture and, instead of calling the girl by her name he says: "Girl number twenty, said Mr. Gradgrind [...] 'Sissy Jupe, sir, explained number twenty, blushing, standing up, and curtsying'" (*Hard Times* 10). Personality and freedom of the students are corrupted by this type of education. Because of how they are taught, children become knowledge machines that only produce facts. It could be possible to establish that the same as workers are trapped in factories, children are trapped in the school.

This philosophy of education is also present in Mr. Gradgrind's house and in how he educates his own children, Louisa, and Tom. When he finds them trying to sneak off in the circus, he says "Thomas and you, to whom the circle of the sciences is open; [...] who may be said to be replete with facts; [...] who have been trained to mathematical exactness [...] cried Mr. Gradgrind" (*Hard Times* 19). Both Louisa and Tom have troubles as adults due to the education they received. Starting with Louisa, we can say that she often feels disconnected from her own feelings. She realizes that her father's educational system has deprived her of her childhood, but she is still willing to please him, for example when she marries Bounderby, even though she does not love him. When she considers the marriage

proposal, she realizes that she feels emotionally detached, and she also considers how short her life is and the fact that she does not have numerous options. As she is not emotionally tied to anyone, she does not find any problem in marrying Mr. Bounderby: “While it lasts, I would wish to do the little I can, and the little I am fit for. What does it matter!” (*Hard Times* 99). As it has previously been mentioned, she develops a friendship with Sissy. Although Sissy is also educated under these values, she somehow represents the imagination. As Sissy spent some time in the circus, she had the opportunity there to use her imagination. This is opposed to Louisa, who represents the utilitarianism and deep down desires Sissy’s life. Tom, the eldest son, also experiments some consequences. He reacts to this strict education by becoming a dissipated young man. He is loved by his sister, but he is not able to appreciate it. Instead of that, he loves money and becomes an addict to gambling. This attitude appears when he decides to rebel against the education he had: “However, when I go to live with old Bounderby, I'll have my revenge [...] 'I mean, I'll enjoy myself a little, and go about and see something, and hear something. I'll recompense myself for the way in which I have been brought up” (*Hard Times* 55).

Finally, it is important to mention that the end of the novel is somehow a conclusion that portrays the fates of the main characters, and the reader can see that the majority of the characters have received what they deserve. Regarding Louisa and Tom, we could say that, because of the damage caused by the education they received they live a life full of sadness. According to Terci, at the end of the novel Mr. Gradgrind realizes of this and regrets having corrupted the nature of his own children (105).

### **3.3 Children ageing as a common topic in *Oliver Twist* and *Hard Times***

Having analyzed childhood and its representation in two of the main novels written by Charles Dickens, it is possible to establish that the characters of children that appear in them are children with no childhood. This means that childhood has been taken away from them. As a consequence of this, these children suffer an early ageing. Furthermore, this ageing is probably the result of the situations they have to deal with, and how they found themselves forced to be adults before living their childhood.

Starting with *Oliver Twist*, we can see that sometimes Oliver, as well as other children in the workhouse, behave or seem adults instead of children. For example, when Oliver decides to run away and in his way, he meets his friend Dick. The conversation that they have sounds like a conversation that adults could have. Dick tells his friend that the doctor believes that he will be dead soon: “I heard the doctor tell them I was dying [...] I know the doctor must be right, Oliver, because I dream so much of Heaven, and Angels, and kind faces that I never see when I am awake” (*Oliver Twist* 62). Death and Dick will be present again in the novel when he wants to write his last will, but he does not know how to write. He asks adults of the workhouse for help because he believes that his time has arrived, but adults laugh of him instead: “I should like, if somebody that can write, would put a few words down for me on a piece of paper, and fold it up and seal it, and keep it for me, after I am laid in the ground' [...].” (*Oliver Twist* 158).

The novel also shows us that children behave like adults regarding drinking and smoking. In the text we can see that Oliver meets other children that are not old enough to drink or smoke, but nevertheless they do it. On his way to London, Oliver meets Jack Dawkins, and as he does not have any place to sleep, he spends the night at Fagin’s house with Jack Dawkins and other children. At this point, the narrator tells the reader that these children seem to be middle-aged men: “Seated round the table were four or five boys, none older than the Dodger, smoking long clay pipes, and drinking spirits with the air of middle-aged men” (*Oliver Twist* 72). Oliver ends up drinking alcohol at a very early age since he finds himself pressed by men present in the criminal activities lead by Fagin: “Frightened by the menacing gestures of the two men, Oliver hastily swallowed the contents of the glass, and immediately fell into a violent fit of coughing” (*Oliver Twist* 203).

Another example that can be found is that the legal system considers children to be adults and they are judged and treated as such. This can be seen when Oliver is arrested for being a thief. Although the police has not any evidence against him, Oliver is forced to be in a cell whose hygienic conditions are inexistent. It is also important to highlight that this cell in which Oliver stays has been previously used by adults: “This was an invitation for Oliver to enter [...] into a stone cell. Here he was searched; and nothing being found upon him, locked up. This cell was [...] intolerably dirty; for it was Monday morning; and it had

been tenanted by six drunken people, who had been locked up, elsewhere, since Saturday night” (*Oliver Twist* 89-90). Continuing with the legal system, something worth mentioning is that one of the punishments for those who broke the law was to be hanged. In *Oliver Twist* we can see that children also suffer this punishment, as if they were adults. This can be seen when Fagin tells Oliver about a boy who spent time at his house. Although this boy had received Fagin’s help, he was willing to communicate with the police. The boy was finally hanged:

“[...] he had succoured under parallel circumstances, but who, proving unworthy of his confidence and evincing a desire to communicate with the police, had unfortunately come to be hanged at the Old Bailey one morning” (*Oliver Twist* 164).

Focusing now on *Hard Times*, we can see that this novel presents children from other social classes. As in the previous novel, it is also possible to find examples of an early ageing of children. For example, characters in this novel also write their last will very soon as in the case of the previous novel. We can see this with the character of Josephine, daughter of Mr. Sleary’, a circus performer. It is true that she does not write her last will at such early age as Dick in *Oliver Twist*, but it is still a very early moment:

“Here his daughter Josephine - a pretty fair-haired girl of eighteen, who had been tied on a horse at two years old, and had made a will at twelve, which she always carried about with her, expressive of her dying desire to be drawn to the grave” (*Hard Times* 41).

Child labour can also be found in this novel. This is clearly, as in the previous novel, a reason for the early ageing of children. In *Hard Times* working focuses more on the industrialization and adults. However, it is possible to find instances of child labour. For example, Stephen Blackpool tells Mr. Bounderby about his experience working as a child: “I’m a weaver, I were in a fact’ry when a chilt” (*Hard Times* 77). Stephen Blackpool is important because not only does he represents the contrast between how poor he is and how wealthy Mr. Bounderby is, but also because he finds himself in the middle of a labor fight that deals with the differences between poor and rich. Stephen Blackpool is the only worker

who refuses to join a workers Union, because he thinks that a strike will not be the solution to the problematic relationship between poor and rich. According to Ozutku, the character of Stephen Blackpool represents what takes place in a factory as he is a victim of industrialization (840). It is at this point and thanks to Stephen Blackpool that the living and working conditions of those belonging to the lower class are exposed. It is important to mention that these conditions also affected children, since when dealing with working there is no distinction between adults and children: “Look round town - so rich as 'tis - and see the numbers o' people as has been broughten into bein heer, fur to weave, an' to card, an' to piece out a livin', aw the same one way, somehow, 'twixt their cradles and their graves” (*Hard Times* 147).

### 3.4 Conclusions

Charles Dickens is with no doubt one of the most remarkable British authors of the nineteenth century. In his novels he plays the role of social commentator and uses children as main characters to denounce the social conditions of the period in which he lived in, the Victorian Era. He is a critic who deals with different issues regarding this historical period. Focusing on children we can find a faithful representation of Victorian childhood. The main topics of his novels when dealing with childhood are child labour, institutional cruelty, poverty, and the consequences of a wrong educational system.

It is important to mention that Dickens is influenced by a previous tradition composed by the Heliodoran novel, Henry Fielding and the picaresque. Henry Fielding was influenced by Heliodorus in terms of plot. As in the case of Tom, Oliver is an orphan whose living conditions are very difficult, but at the end of the novel it is discovered that he belongs to a good family. Moreover, Dickens is also connected with the idea of the *pícaro*. One of the most representative characters of the picaresque is Lázaro from *Lazarillo de Tormes*. Lázaro suffers the abuses of the society as many characters of children created by Dickens.

In the two already analyzed novels we can find different characters of children. While in *Oliver Twist* the main character is an orphan belonging to the lower class who decides to run away from the life he is living, in *Hard Times* we can find characters

belonging to different social classes and how they received an education based on facts, both at school and at home. Children were not treated differently from adults in many aspects, but Dickens was able to transmit how Victorian children had no childhood no matter what their social status was. While children from lower classes present an early ageing since they are forced to work and live like adults, children from the middle and upper class did not receive affection and the education they were given caused them troubles as adults.

Regarding both novels, we can conclude that in *Oliver Twist* and *Hard Times* one of the main themes is childhood, and how events experienced by children in that stage of their lives made them vulnerable. Both novels are representative of how children dealt with very hard living conditions and their childhood was taken away from them. Although one of the main topics in *Hard Times* is education, we can also read about the conditions of workers in the factories. It is important not to forget that many of those workers were children and that those conditions affected them as well. This means, that we can conclude that Dickens shows us the contrast between children from different social classes, but they were connected by their loss of childhood. Furthermore, this contrast can also be seen in *Oliver Twist* when comparing the Oliver from the beginning of the novel (forced to work and from the lower class), with the Oliver at the idyllic end of the novel since he ends up being part of a respectable and wealthy family that will give him an education. Charles Dickens wrote these novels to denounce the conditions of the time and this paper concludes that Dickens incorporates children as important characters in his novels and through them, he denounces the exploitation and mistreatment that many children suffered.



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