

## Symbolism in Charles Dickens's Oliver Twist (1837-9): A critical study

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**Abstract:** When Charles Dickens wrote Oliver Twist in the 1830s, poverty and crime were huge problems in London. To highlight these problems throughout his novel, the author used various literary techniques to create an interaction between the reader and the text in which text can have multiple meanings that can shift over the time. Thus, he uses symbols to evoke a range of additional meaning and significance. His purpose is to get the reader's attention to construct meaning as the plot progress to what he intends to communicate about innocent individuals or villainous ones. Symbolism, irony, and satire were among the tools he used in his work. They work together to convey a deeper embedded meaning to cast suggestions about the development of the novel to emphasize the point the author seeks to stress throughout the novel. Drawing upon the importance of literary devices in unfolding the thematic concerns of the novel, this paper seeks to run an in-depth analysis of how symbolism played a vital role throughout Oliver Twist. The paper argues that through symbolism, the author channels meaning in Oliver Twist to develop the thematic concerns of the novel in creative ways to shape the reader's response and to create a strong bond between the reader and the text.

The paper argues that literary symbolism in Charles Dickens's novel is based on evoking the mental image in the reader's mind to structure meaning through his/her interaction with the text and then shaping his response according to his/her experience. It also creates a strong bond between the reader and the text.

**Keywords:** Symbolism, Reader response, Foreshadowing, Oliver Twist.

## الرمزية الأدبية في رواية تشارلز ديكنز "أوليفر تويست" دراسة نقدية

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**المستخلص:** عندما كتب تشارلز ديكنز أوليفر تويست في ثلاثينيات القرن التاسع عشر، كانت الجريمة مشكلة كبيرة في لندن. ولتسليط الضوء على هذه المشكلة، اهتم تشارلز ديكنز بالقارئ واستخدم أساليب أدبية مختلفة ليكون أكثر تأثيراً وأكثر إنفاذاً في توصيل رسالته الأدبية تجاه مجتمعه. فقد استخدم الرمزية الأدبية لاستحضار مجموعة من المعاني الإضافية ذات الأهمية في توصيل المعنى المنشود. وكان هدفه الأساسي هو جذب انتباه القارئ إلى تصور المعنى لما ينوي إيصاله عن الأفراد الأبرياء أو الأشرار في رواية Oliver Twist. وكان للرمزية القدرة على تحفيز القارئ على استنباط المعاني الأكثر عمقاً، والتي أثرت الرواية من خلال تقديم تلميحات عن تطور أحداث الرواية.

ونظراً لأهمية هذه الأساليب الروائية، ارتأت هذه الورقة أن تجري تحليلاً أدبياً لمعرفة مدى تأثير الدور الذي تلعبه الرمزية الأدبية في إيصال المعنى في رواية أوليفر تويست.

حيث ترى الدراسة بأن الرمزية الأدبية في رواية تشارلز ديكنز تعتمد على الإيحاء والإثارة في بلورة تصور القارئ للمعنى المنشود دون التصريح به. حيث تكتمل الصورة من خلال استجابة القارئ وتفاعله مع النص وبذلك يكتمل المعنى من تلقاء ذاتها ومن تجربته. بالإضافة إلى أنها تعمل على إنشاء علاقة قوية بينه وبين النص.

## 1. Introduction

The interest in the readers response goes back in history to the time of Plato and Aristotle. In The Republic, Plato considers the ways in which the reader receives texts in the famous parable of the cave in Book IX and in his Poetics, Aristotle is concerned with the effects produced on the reader by a tragic drama. Aristotle calls the feelings of pity and fear aroused in the reader or spectator of tragedy, catharsis. (J. Mays, Kelly 2017: P18) The current paper argues that Charles Dickens's literary devices are the building blocks that establish the strong bond between the reader and the text.

That's to say a transcript basically acquires significant meaning when the audience interconnects with its words to regenerate the intended message according to his/ her response. Accordingly, reading becomes meaningful once the audience interacts with the text he reads. This significant part occurs over a period of time of interaction mainly when the reader truthfully believes a piece of writing has a convincing existence. Every reader, therefore, will have his/her own experiences of a 'text'. (Wolfreys, 2001: P 84-85)

In this context, as Charles Dickens's novels have an important literary function by appealing to the Victorian reader, it is reasonable to say that the reader's perception of what they read was influenced by the social context, which was so closely related with the reality portrayed in fiction.

On this basis, this paper assumes that Charles Dickens's use of symbolism appeals to the reader's emotions and passions. Understanding symbolism depends mainly on the perception of the reader and on how we interact with what we see. The paper assumes that involving the reader to become part of the atmosphere is an important key to Charles Dickens's success as a social reformer.

### Purpose of the study

Through critical thinking, the aim of this research is to identify the role of literary symbolism in promoting the point of view of Charles Dickens's novel Oliver Twist.

### Hypotheses of the Research

The current study assumes that Charles Dickens, as a realist author, uses realistic mainstream objects, or characteristics to give the reader a deeper understanding of what they read.

Literary symbolism provokes the active creation of meaning and gives the text a deeper meaning that is different from the literal definition of the object where things acquire symbolic quality only in certain context.

Literary symbolism in Oliver Twist has deep influence on the reader and they are invested with predetermined intention to determine the theme of ridiculing certain prevailing attitudes of hypocrisy in the Victorian society towards the poor.

### Questions of the Research:

What kind of symbolic representation can the reader achieve from some words in Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist*?

What hidden layers of meaning do certain words and phrases signify in *Oliver Twist*?

### Research Methodology

In order to achieve the objectives of this research, the descriptive analytic method is adopted. This methodology offers a complete analysis of literary symbolism in Charles Dickens's narrative techniques. The analysis goes beyond the linguistic boundaries of literary symbolism to embedded meaning to provoke readers' responses.

### Data Analysis

#### Oliver Twist:

*Oliver Twist*, or the novel's original full title: *The Parish Boy's Progress* was written between 1837 and 1839. It was Charles Dickens's second complete novel that was first issued in succession under the penname 'Boz'. It comprised 53 chapters and it was published in three volumes. The novel appeared periodically in Bentley's *Miscellany* where Dickens was the first editor. Afterwards, mainly in 1838, it was issued by Richard Bentley in three edited volumes. Chapman & Hall worked on other edited publications in the 1840s, such as the *Library Version*, the *People's Copy*, the *Cheap Publication*, and the *Charles Dickens Publication* of his works. (Smith, 1996: P 17)

Charles Dickens criticizes the cruel and disdainful behaviors of the society that push the impoverished children to illegal criminal acts like pickpockets, housebreaking due to official's hypocrisy and duplicity. Charles Dickens's descriptive language, holds the reader's attention with his use of foreshadowing, his use of symbolism, his use of irony and satire. In his novels, Charles Dickens uses foreshadowing and symbolism, but at the same time he kept a humorous attitude so that he could communicate the projected message. His expressive words engage the audience into the scenes he is describing throughout his novel and he makes sure his words leave the influence he seeks. Therefore, this paper intends to analyze his choice of specific words as an influential linguistic medium in his writing. This could explain the way through which Dickens handled topics like: poverty, class division, and standards of judging individuals to fit the Victorian bill. Dickens's use of foreshadowing, symbols, and irony in *Oliver Twist* helps the reader to dig deeper and uncover the hidden message.

### Reader-Response Approach

Reader-response theory stems from hermeneutics which is associated with the Greek god Hermes, who interpreted the cryptic messages of the gods for mortals. Hermeneutics in literary theory can

be defined as the theory of interpretation employed in reading literary and cultural texts. On this basis, reader-response theory studies the manner by which the audience react to fictitious and artistic writings. This theory, also called reception theory, arose as an innovative rejoinder contrary to the New Critical tenacity that gist was wholly restricted in the interior writing itself with no relation to any exterior influences. Intellectuals who advocate the reader-response commencement claim that reading a text and understanding its essence is a dynamic procedure and not a submissive process where the audience absorbs the intended meaning and contributes to the interpretation of the literary text through bonding culturally with its words. On this basis, understanding meaning depends on personal interactions. Approximately, parts of reader-response theory study different reactions based on social standards, ethnical backgrounds, and traditional considerations frequently stem from a psychological or psychoanalytic perception. Furthermore, the social parameters within which interpretation takes place, arguing that "interpretive communities" establish particular modes of reading. Theorists associated with reader-response theory include Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish, E. D. Hirsch, and David Bleich. (Klages, 2012: P 72)

Reader-response theory claims that the gist of a text is almost contingent upon the audience's compliant responsiveness to it. Consequently, it concentrates on the reading as an interactive process which affects readers' visions of a given text.

### **The Origin of Symbolism**

According to Johann Wolfgang (1832-1749), 'symbolism alters the experience into a notion and a notion into a representative image that contribute to a deeper understanding of a specific idea. Once the idea is voiced through the image, it keeps dynamic and inaccessible. Even though it is articulated in different tongues, it stays deep and indescribable.' Here Goethe says that a poem is a piece of writing that utilizes words that readers make effort to understand. Until quite recently, understanding a text was generally taken to mean discovering its meaning, and in the same tradition that meaning was taken to refer to the 'message' the author of the poem intended to send. Nevertheless, contemporary criticism nowadays strengthens the inaccessibility of assuring exactly what a novelist's precise purpose was. For one thing, most of the authors read by students of literature are likely to be dead authors, and communication beyond the grave is not accepted as an academic method. But even if a living author were to say: "This poem of mine means such-and-such, and this symbol I use stands for so-and-so," we recognize the right of every reader to add: "But I, because of my own personal experience and because of the aleatory conditions affecting my own life, always and automatically associate the same symbol with something different."

## Symbolism

Symbolism can be objects that represents qualities, people that represent attitudes, places that represent beliefs, or actions that represent values. Charles Dickens in all of his works uses and functions the symbols to depict several things. Using weather symbols is one of his techniques. Rain, fog, mist, mud, sunshine, and storms used in his novel, *Oliver Twist*, they represent the darkness and people's mood and served both as literary devices and as tools of social criticism. Charles Dickens's work has symbolic quality in certain context. For instance, his social criticism is developed even through the names of individual character as a narrative technique this tells something about the individual's position in the narrative through which the reader can either sympathies or hate the character.

### Oliver Twist's Name

Chapter two that handles *Oliver Twists* growing, and his education, Charles Dickens ridicules Bumble's great pride of inventing an alphabetical system for naming children like Oliver. The conversation between him and Mrs. Mann reveals his grim pretension when she raised up her hands in amazement after a while of wondering stupidly how comes he has named all children. In return, the vain beadle stood up with ostentatious pride announcing pretentiously that he is the same one that has invented the system. He stressed this act saying 'I, Mrs. Mann.' In response, she expressed her astonishment with a futile surprise for the method of naming fatherless new born children according to an alphabetic order he himself established. As an example of this arrogant capacity, he added that Swubble was the last name he had recently generated from the letter S. He, in the selfish manner, reminds her that the list involves T for Twist that 'I named him.' Bumble's exaggerated affectation mentions other future strategies for naming other children in same way like Unwin and Vilkins. Both names match the same unswerving alphabetical order. He also told her that he had got names readymade right down to alphabet Z. (*OT*, chapter 2, P12)

Oliver's surname foreshadows that his life is intertwined with over treacherous twists. These knotted twists were ultimately untied, as soon as he returned back to his biological family. Consequently, the net of Fagin's criminal gangsters that he got entangled in was released or untwisted. When Mr. Brownlow discovered the truth, the audience cherished Oliver's character because throughout the novel, he remained honest and his straightforward personality didn't change much, as he was constantly truthful, innocent, and loving notwithstanding the circumstances he had encountered. (Ingham, 1982: Pp 188-189)

### The Symbolism of Sike's Dog

Irony is an important tool of satire introduced in a form of rhetoric language that is meant to deeply influence the audience's awareness of the intended message in any literary text. In *Oliver Twist*, Charles Dickens uses irony as an insightful medium for ridiculing and criticizing the new poor law of 1834.

When Oliver was recaptured, Sikes forced him back into Fagin's criminal gang of burglars. At that moment, he was caught and was warned against yelling out or screaming for help from any passerby. Sikes threatened that in this case, the dog would easily find his way to Oliver's throat because it was as good as human. Oliver made sure not to disobey Sikes as he was observing the grumbling dog ready to attack him brutally at any moment. The dog's viciousness reflects Sikes brutality and represents his criminal and felonious character. This mood is reflected in the symbolism of Bull's-Eye as it stared right at Oliver while growling. Whereas, Sikes placed his other hand around the little boy's neck and warned him that even if he whispers one single word, then the dog will grab a hold of him and pounce on him ruthlessly. The dog's resemblance lies in his willingness as the Christian community to practice some kind of cruel and violent authorizations over the poor and consequently their capability to turn a blind eye to their suffering. Bill Sikes warns Oliver that the worst is yet to come. Therefore, for his own safety, he is not supposed to call for help. Once, he attempts the dog will have the deciding word. The dog will have the game settled by getting on the young boy in an instance. Oliver notices how Bull's-eye shakes his tail in an approval of this strangely appealing way of speech which at the same time has given outlet to another admonishing growl for the benefit of Oliver, led the way onward. (OT Chapter, 16: P 175).

The irony in this symbolism is critical and basically criticizes what the dog represents, the unchristian behavior of the Christian Institutional System towards the poor. Charles Dickens introduces his readers to this stark irony through Sikes's ferocious dog which is likewise capable as some bad Christian characters to impose control over the feeble and destitute, to slide into this life of delinquency.

Accordingly, Charles Dickens summonses the audience to consider what they as Christians got to do. In this sense, the novel is profoundly disturbed by the shoddier status of the poor in England. The author appeals against the poor laws and against the high-ranking officials in Christianity that establish the essence of morals. He used this symbol to make his point clear and effective.

Chapter four handles Oliver's first association with the community, he was transported in a small trading container linked to a corrupt harbor. This is projected as the best possible act that could possibly happen to Oliver. Now he spares himself the trouble he has already endured in the workhouse. Such as the possibility of being flogged playfully and carelessly to death someday after dinner by the master in charge of the workhouse or his brain being knocked out with an iron bar. Things he was accustomed to tolerate and accept against his will. These violations were normally acknowledged as the high-ranking officials' genuine method of punishing or reforming the poor. They were 'common recreations among gentleman of that class.' (OT, chapter 4, P 35) As a helpless poor child, Oliver is very vulnerable to any social abuse, Charles Dickens stresses this fact in the presence of weak laws.

## The Symbolism of the Workhouse

Dickens observed the problems of poverty even after passing the poor regulations in 1834. By that law assistance could only be confined to people within the workhouses. However, the circumstances of poor were too horrible that anyone manage to enter the public life would never agree to return back to any of them. Dickens criticized the fact that according to that law, none of the trespassers could obtain currency or any benefit personally from it. Therefore, the financial assistance that the system provided was only restricted to the workhouse inmates via the officials who were basically as corrupt as the law itself. It was justified that such surroundings were severe to overcome poverty.

When the law is so often mis-stated or absent. It is worse as the consequences have coloured a conventional view of settlement law only as oppressive. Removal was harsh but the concept of freedom of movement is still contested in modern British society, particularly when applied to migrants and refugees. (Charlesworth, Lorie 2010: P 84)

Dickens criticized the administration of workhouse because the food supplies were very poor that inmates starve every day. They couldn't grow properly and their inconvenient diet was provided in an unhealthy environment. It was only a medium to keep them alive. Besides, it was accompanied with the absolute negligence of their basic emotional needs. This aggravated the situation and hinders their growth and their development so badly. Therefore, most of the inmates suffered from severe malnutrition and emotional disorders. This inhumanity of such officials is represented in the characters of Mr. Bumble and Mrs. Corney.

The workhouses represent the corruption of the charity institution. Throughout satire, evil characters are depicted ironically for saying what they do not mean. The reader observes the hypocrisy of Mrs. Mann's at the sight of Mr. Bumble and in the way she talks with him. On the sight of Mr. Bumble and to show her fake excitement, Mrs. Mann wonders if he is the one coming while she is poking her head out of the window in a deeply impressed manner. Then, she asks Susan to take Oliver along with two 'brats upstairs, and wash 'em directly. Claiming that her heart is already full of life in the presence of Mr. Bumble. 'how glad I am to see you, sure-ly!' (OT, chapter 2, P 10)

Yet, at the same time, she scolds children who ask for more food. As a hypocrite, she pretends to be a caring, 'good lady of the house' and benevolent proctress. Under her management, the paupers are given 'three meals of thin gruel a day'. Under her supervision children like Oliver witnessed terrible abuse of premeditated starvation which prompted a boy to threaten that he would devour the boy sleeping next to him if an extra bowl of gruel wasn't given to him. Where the choice finally falls on Oliver Twist.

Accordingly, the reaction for Oliver's request was extremely shocking to readers and the scene that depicts this confrontation reflects the official's repulsive reaction, mainly, when the obese master's complexion turned pale. Dickens ridicules Bumble's astonishment and stupid gaze in response to this

small rebellion that is totally unexpected from a little boy like Oliver who should be grateful and indebted instead. To the master, the request came like a bolt from the blue, that it took him a while of contemplation to understand what's going on, then, he headed to the copper asking for support. There the master and his assistants were stunned with shock, whereas, the other boys were in a panic. In a faint voice that appears to be wondering, the master asked with astonishment... 'what!' and Oliver confirmed his appeal for some more. At this point, the master aimed a strike at Oliver's head with the scoop and restrained his arm. Then, he screamed with shrieks for the official in charge. (OT chapter 2 P10)

Chapter three describes how Oliver is about to get into an uncomfortable sinecure for being rebellious. To the reader's astonishment, Oliver is taken to the committee of the sinful and blasphemous felony of requesting more gruel. There, he is reproached and confined in a tiny room as a result of appealing for more gruel. In his lockdown, he heard how the other boys being warned against disobedience to protect them from the evils and sins of Oliver who was prompted by the devil. (OT, chapter 3, P 22)

### **The Symbolism of Bumble's Obesity**

Charles Dickens ridicules Bumble's obesity which symbolizes the greedy and corrupted manners of conceited officials who are supposed to be proactive of the poor and the needy. But on the contrary, they are abusive and careless. Finally, Charles Dickens ridicules the beadle's egocentricity as he did his best to be the center of Mrs. Corney's attention. Yet when they got married, he discovered that she was the greater bully. Though, he turned blind eye to her futile management of the girl's reformatory, as she has rarely performed her duties honestly, the proficient woman grabbed him forcefully and suddenly gripped his throat with one hand. Then, she attacked him aggressively with a mass of awful strikes. (OT, chapter 37, P 421)

### **City as the Symbol of Industrialization**

Charles Dickens uses irony to show the dark side of the city where people visit with expectation of prosperity and future prospects of financial benefits. Industrialization and the development of machinery could make considerable amounts of profits. Yet this development came at a price. This is obvious in the description of the city in contrast to the countryside. The novel, *Oliver Twist*, discusses societal structure, and criticizes the inequality in living standards of the Victorian time. From their beginnings, cities such as London were divided by class. There were spacious, comfortable blocks where the rich lived, and much less desirable slum regions where the poor made their homes. However, by the Victorian era several exceptionally large slums had sprung up.

Charles Dickens accurately described the atmosphere of one of these areas, which he called Folly Ditch, in *Oliver Twist*. He wrote that windows were broken and supported with poles thrust out for drying the domestic textiles that don't exist. The rooms were so tiny and so grimy. They were so narrow and



suffocating, that the air appeared badly contaminating even for the filth and foulness that they accommodate. He also described the wooden loose niches that were positioned above the sludge, and weren't firm enough to avoid collapsing into it. Walls and crumbling foundations were covered in dirt. The banks of the Folly Ditch were surrounded by the disgusting features of poverty represented in filth, decay, and trash and all indicated the detestable conditions of the city. Currie, 2014: P 32))

In Oliver twist, the slums have a suffocating smell which signifies the murky activities of evil characters and their bad desires to oppress the poor. This horrible condition is reflected in the description of the city's decaying establishments.

### **London Bridge**

In chapter 46, The Appointment Kept, the central point of the London bridge signifies the location where the appointment is kept between two figures of the unequal walks of society and its unfair standards. Dickens shows how Nancy a member of the poor class protected Oliver from evil characters in a world full of criminal schemes. This happened when Rose Maylie met her there. The scene was risky as she put her life into danger. The scene remained precarious when she appeared on the bridge at the time when the clocks of the church struck a quarter to twelve. The two figures crossed the bridge from Middlesex to Surrey shore. There Nancy emerged seemingly frustrated, as she turned back with fearful inspection of any cunning trespasser that could watch her. Yet, the intruder managed to hide into one of the recesses which surmount the piers of the bridge. He concealed himself and watched her from a distance as she passed on the opposite pavement. He sneaked quietly and followed her nearly to the middle of the bridge and stopped there. (OT, chapter 46, Pp 538-539)

The center of the bridge serves as a link between two worlds. It foreshadows the possibility for transformation. When Rose Maylie and Mr. Brownlow meet Nancy on London Bridge. The time and location of the appointment retain a hidden reference to two different worlds with an interval point between virtue and evil as Nancy was having a hard time getting Oliver out of danger. (Patten, 1969: Pp 207-221)

The audience realizes that saving Oliver is a major breakthrough that is fraught with danger as Bolter is tracing Nancy and her associates to their midnight meeting down by London Bridge. Here, the narrative becomes highly concentrated as Dickens uncovers every single twist and turn in this path, along with the voice and motions to reconstruct the situation so evidently that the situation has reached an alarming level that evokes urgent action for saving the whole society from corruption. (Andrews, 2006: P122)

The dusky night foreshadows that Nancy's tragic moment is approaching. She is soon to be murdered after being tracked by the devious spectator. This also suggests that Oliver is still stuck in criminality. Thus, it plays a crucial role in sounding the alarm about Nancy's wellbeing. Mainly, when the

heavy church bell tolled declaring the death of another day. Furthermore, the portrayal of the fog talks more about the scene. It has shrouded over the river and the red signals faded after alerting the small boat that docked at the port and the foggy buildings on the banks are no longer visible.

This tragic scene portrays the old warehouses situated on both sides with their miserable shapes reflected in the river. Besides, the tower of old Saint Saviour's Church and Saint Magnus spire were visible in the gloom. Whereas, the of shipping underneath the bridge, and the densely dispersed spires of churches above, were almost concealed from eyesight. Now, the girl starts pacing to and fro. Moving in different directions unaware that she has already been watched by her unnoticed observer. Now, the heavy bell tolled for the death of another day. Midnight had come upon the crowded city.' (OT, chapter 46, P 539)

## Conclusion.

In conclusion, Charles Dickens makes great use of symbolism in all his novels and Oliver Twist is no Exception. His protest against the miserable conditions of the paupers is very clear in his language. Through the process of reading, the reader construct meaning in relation to its cultural context. According to the reader-response theory, symbolism acquire meanings that matches the readers' experiences. As Lorie Charlesworth, made it clear, Charles Dickens brilliantly holds the 'double role of the novelist as an entertainer and a social critic, has given the novel a unique status within the area of literary forms. Charles Dickens, the social critic, criticised poverty in Oliver Twist. He deals more graphically with this theme and the novel contains records of biographical details of age, occupations, residence patterns and life circumstances. Like Oliver, it is extremely difficult to obtain further family histories of poor individuals. The novels of Charles Dickens are still widely read and celebrated for expressing concern for the poor; they contain full biographies of contemporary fictional individuals who either potentially or within the novels experience poverty. This permits a reconstruction of the law of settlement and removal in action at a time of significant legal transition and illuminates how little that law changed. (Charlesworth, 2010: P 122)

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**Online Resources:**

- Dickens, Charles Oliver Twist Free eBooks at Planet eBook.com