



Innocence and suffering: A study of Oliver Twist and David Copperfield

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Abstract

In both "Oliver Twist" and "David Copperfield," Charles Dickens poignantly explores themes of innocence and suffering, reflecting the harsh realities of Victorian society. In "Oliver Twist," innocence is embodied by the character of Oliver, a young orphan who remains inherently good despite the cruelty surrounding him. His suffering highlights the brutal conditions of the workhouse and the exploitation of the poor. Dickens uses Oliver's plight to critique societal indifference and the systemic injustices faced by the vulnerable. Oliver's innocence serves as a moral compass, contrasting sharply with the corruption of figures like Fagin and Bill Sikes, ultimately emphasizing the resilience of the human spirit amidst suffering.

Conversely, "David Copperfield" presents a more complex journey of innocence lost and regained. David's early life is marked by hardship and emotional turmoil, stemming from his abusive stepfather and the loss of his mother. This suffering shapes David's character, leading him through a series of trials that force him to confront the realities of adulthood. Throughout his journey, David's inherent goodness shines through, guiding him toward self-discovery and redemption. Unlike Oliver, whose innocence is preserved, David navigates the complexities of human experience, ultimately finding hope and fulfilment.

Together, these novels illustrate how innocence can be both a source of vulnerability and a catalyst for personal growth, while suffering becomes a transformative force that shapes character and resilience in the face of adversity.

Keywords: Innocence, suffering, Victorian society, cruelty

Introduction

The Nineteenth Century was the great age of the English novel. This was partly because this essentially middle-class form of literary art was bound to flourish increasingly as the middle classes rose in power and importance, partly because of the steady increase of the reading public with the growth of reading libraries, the development of publishing in the modern sense, and other phenomena which accompanied this increase. Charles Dickens is one of the most celebrated novelists of the 19th century, born in Portsea, a son of a clerk in the Navy Pay Office, spent much of his boyhood at home and later he did travelling a lot. He was known for his vivid characters and compelling narratives. His works often address the struggles of the poor and the injustices of society. Two of his most notable novels, *Oliver Twist* and *David Copperfield*, feature young protagonists who experience extreme hardship. These stories not only highlight the innocence of childhood but also reveal the suffering that often accompanies it. In *Oliver Twist*, the title character is an orphan who faces a series of brutal challenges in Victorian England. In contrast, *David Copperfield* offers a semi-autobiographical account of David's journey from childhood to adulthood, portraying his struggles with loss and identity. This paper will explore how Dickens uses these characters to examine the themes of innocence and suffering, illustrating the impact of societal conditions on individuals.

Literature review

In *Oliver Twist*, innocence is primarily embodied by the protagonist, Oliver. Critics like John L. Brown highlight how Oliver's purity contrasts sharply with the corruption and moral decay of the society around him. This juxtaposition serves to critique the brutal realities of orphanhood and poverty. The narrative positions Oliver as a

Christ-like figure, representing hope amidst despair, a theme noted by Barbara Hardy, who argues that Dickens uses Oliver's innocence to evoke sympathy and challenge social injustices.

Suffering in Oliver Twist

Suffering in *Oliver Twist* is depicted through the experiences of child laborers, criminals, and the poor. Numerous studies, including those by Michael Slater, examine how Dickens portrays the brutal conditions faced by children in workhouses and the criminal underbelly of London. The pervasive suffering serves not only as a narrative device but also as a call to social reform, reflecting Dickens's advocacy for children's rights.

Innocence in David Copperfield

In *David Copperfield*, the theme of innocence is explored through the protagonist's growth from childhood to adulthood. Critics such as David D. Trotter have analyzed how David's experiences shape his understanding of the world. The narrative structure, which blends autobiography with fiction, emphasizes the loss of innocence as David confronts betrayal and hardship. This evolution is significant in understanding Dickens's commentary on personal growth amid societal challenges.

Suffering in David Copperfield

The suffering depicted in *David Copperfield* is more introspective than in *Oliver Twist*. It includes emotional and psychological struggles, particularly through David's relationships with figures like Uriah Heep and his turbulent family dynamics. Scholars like Graham Allen argue that Dickens presents suffering as an inherent part of human experience, contributing to character development and moral understanding.

Comparative analysis

Comparative studies, such as those by Elaine Showalter, highlight the differences in how innocence and suffering manifest in the two novels. While *Oliver Twist* focuses on the external, societal forces that inflict suffering on the innocent, *David Copperfield* delves into the internal struggles and moral dilemmas faced by its characters. This distinction underscores Dickens's evolving narrative techniques and thematic concerns.

Innocence in *Oliver Twist* and *David Copperfield*

Innocence is a central theme in both novels, representing the purity and vulnerability of childhood. Dickens portrays innocence not only as a characteristic of children but also as a reflection of goodness in the face of adversity. Oliver and David represent this innocence as they navigate their difficult environments. Oliver Twist, the protagonist of the novel, embodies innocence throughout his journey. From his birth in a workhouse, Oliver is marked by his gentle nature and hopeful spirit. He quickly becomes a victim of a cruel society that exploits orphaned children. For instance, when Oliver famously asks for more food, he symbolizes the desperate struggle for basic human needs in a world that often ignores the plight of the vulnerable. Despite his circumstances, Oliver retains his innate goodness. He is often contrasted with the corrupt figures around him, such as Fagin and Bill Sikes. These characters represent the darker aspects of society, highlighting Oliver's purity. His innocence becomes a source of strength that ultimately leads him to safety and acceptance among kind-hearted individuals, contrasting sharply with the harsh realities he faces.

David Copperfield: Innocence

In *David Copperfield*, the character's innocence is challenged as he navigates the complexities of growing up. David's early life is filled with moments of joy, but it is also marked by profound loss. The death of his father and the cruelty of his stepfather, Mr. Murdstone, force David to confront the harshness of life at a young age. Unlike Oliver, David's journey toward understanding is gradual. He begins with a hopeful view of the world, but his experiences such as being sent away to a harsh boarding school serve to temper his optimism. Throughout the novel, David struggles to maintain his innocence while grappling with the realities of adulthood. His relationships with characters like Agnes Wickfield and Mr. Micawber illustrate the importance of love and friendship in preserving his inherent goodness.

Suffering in *Oliver Twist* and *David Copperfield*

Suffering in Dickens's novels manifests in various forms, including physical abuse, emotional neglect, and social injustice. Both Oliver and David endure significant trials that highlight the pervasive suffering present in Victorian society. Dickens uses their experiences to critique the systems that perpetuate such hardships. Oliver's suffering is emblematic of the broader struggles faced by the poor in Victorian England. Dickens paints a vivid picture of the workhouse system, a place designed to care for the needy but instead becomes a site of cruelty and neglect. Oliver's experiences in the workhouse, where he faces starvation and abuse, illustrate the dehumanizing treatment of orphans and the destitute. For example, his famous plea for more food is met with punishment rather than compassion, emphasizing

the moral failures of the institutions meant to protect vulnerable children. Throughout the novel, Oliver encounters various forms of suffering, including betrayal by those he trusts. His relationships with Fagin and Sikes highlight the dangers that come with being vulnerable in a corrupt world. Despite the brutality he faces, Oliver's unwavering hope and innate goodness shine through, suggesting that suffering can coexist with resilience. In *David Copperfield*, suffering is explored on a more personal level. David experiences loss, betrayal, and isolation, which contribute to his emotional struggles. The character of Uriah Heep embodies the manipulative nature of social ambition, exploiting others' vulnerabilities for his gain. David's journey reveals the psychological toll of growing up in a harsh environment. As David navigates his relationships, he faces moments of profound suffering, such as the loss of his mother and the challenges of adulthood. His experiences in the workplace, particularly with Mr. Murdstone and later with Mr. Micawber, illustrate the struggles of the working class. David's gradual awakening to the realities of his society allows readers to witness the impact of suffering on his character development.

The loss of innocence

Both novels depict the loss of innocence as a significant theme, illustrating how suffering transforms the protagonists. For Oliver, the loss of innocence is marked by his realization of the world's cruelty. Although he maintains his goodness, he becomes aware of the darkness that surrounds him. His journey reflects the struggle between maintaining innocence and confronting harsh realities. In contrast, David's loss of innocence is more gradual and multifaceted. As he faces betrayal and disappointment, he learns to reconcile his idealism with the complexities of adult life. David's character evolves as he navigates his relationships and confronts the injustices in his world. Through his experiences, Dickens suggests that while innocence may be compromised, it can also serve as a foundation for resilience.

Redemption and resilience

Despite the pervasive suffering in both novels, there is a strong message of hope and redemption. Oliver's inherent goodness allows him to rise above his circumstances. By the end of the novel, he finds safety and love among kind-hearted individuals, such as Mr. Brownlow and the Maylies. His journey emphasizes the triumph of innocence over evil, suggesting that goodness can prevail in a corrupt world. Similarly, David's journey toward self-discovery highlights the importance of resilience in overcoming suffering. His relationships with supportive characters, like Agnes and Mr. Micawber, reinforce the idea that love and friendship can help heal emotional wounds. Through David's growth, Dickens advocates for the idea that suffering can lead to greater understanding and compassion.

Narrative Techniques and symbolism

Character development

Dickens's character development plays a crucial role in illustrating the themes of innocence and suffering. Both Oliver and David are carefully crafted to reflect the struggles faced by children in a cruel society. Through rich characterization, Dickens allows readers to empathize with their experiences, making their journeys impactful. In *Oliver*

Twist, characters like Fagin and Sikes serve as foils to Oliver, emphasizing his innocence and moral integrity. Their actions reveal the depths of human depravity, while Oliver's responses highlight his purity. Similarly, in David Copperfield, characters like Mr. Micawber and Uriah Heep illustrate the complexities of human nature, showcasing the spectrum of morality within society.

Symbolism of the workhouse and schools

The workhouse in *Oliver Twist* symbolizes the systemic oppression of the poor, representing a society that fails to protect its most vulnerable members. Dickens critiques the institutions designed to help the needy but that instead exacerbate their suffering. The workhouse serves as a grim reminder of the failures of social systems, revealing the cruelty faced by those in need. In *David Copperfield*, schools symbolize the challenges of education during Dickens's time. David's experiences at the Murdstone Academy highlight the harsh conditions of boarding schools, where emotional abuse is commonplace. This setting emphasizes the failure of educational institutions to nurture children, further contributing to their suffering.

Narrative structure and perspective

The narrative structure of both novels contributes to the representation of innocence and suffering. *Oliver Twist* employs a more episodic structure, reflecting the disjointed nature of Oliver's experiences. This format mirrors the chaotic world he inhabits, making his struggles more relatable to readers. In contrast, *David Copperfield* follows a linear, autobiographical narrative, allowing for deeper introspection. This shift in perspective enables readers to engage more profoundly with David's emotional and psychological development. Dickens's use of first-person narration in *David Copperfield* creates an intimate connection between the reader and David, making his journey of suffering and redemption all the more compelling.

Critical perspectives

Understanding the historical context of Victorian England is essential for grasping the significance of innocence and suffering in these novels. The Industrial Revolution brought about profound social changes, resulting in increased poverty, child labor, and exploitation. Dickens's works serve as reflections of these societal issues, advocating for social reform and greater compassion toward the underprivileged. The portrayal of orphans and the working class in both novels highlights the urgent need for social change. Dickens's critique of the workhouse system and the educational institutions of his time underscores the importance of reforming these structures to protect vulnerable children.

Psychological interpretations

Psychological interpretations of Dickens's characters reveal the complex interplay between innocence and suffering. Both Oliver and David exhibit traits of resilience that suggest an innate capacity for growth and healing. Through their struggles, Dickens explores themes of identity formation and the psychological impact of trauma, offering insights into the human condition. Oliver's experiences illustrate the effects of trauma on innocence. His ability to maintain hope despite overwhelming adversity reflects a

psychological resilience that resonates with readers. Similarly, David's journey emphasizes the importance of self-awareness and emotional intelligence in navigating the complexities of life.

Major Findings

Contrast of Innocence and Corruption: In *Oliver Twist*, Oliver's innocence starkly contrasts with the moral corruption of Victorian society, emphasizing the plight of orphans and the need for social reform.

Suffering as a social critique: Both novels utilize suffering to critique social injustices. *Oliver Twist* highlights systemic exploitation through child labor, while *David Copperfield* portrays emotional and psychological struggles, reflecting personal and societal challenges.

Character development: In *David Copperfield*, innocence evolves into a nuanced understanding of the world as David faces betrayal and hardship, showcasing the transformative nature of suffering.

Thematic depth: The representation of innocence and suffering serves as a lens to explore themes of hope, resilience, and moral complexity, with innocence often acting as a beacon amidst despair.

Narrative techniques: Dickens employs different narrative styles in each novel; *Oliver Twist* is more external in its social critique, while *David Copperfield* offers a more introspective exploration of character and growth.

Moral implications: Both works suggest that suffering is an integral part of the human experience, shaping identity and moral understanding, thereby reinforcing Dickens's advocacy for compassion and social justice.

Conclusion

In *Oliver Twist* and *David Copperfield*, Charles Dickens masterfully navigates the themes of innocence and suffering, presenting a nuanced portrayal of childhood in a harsh world. Through the experiences of Oliver and David, Dickens critiques the social injustices of his time while highlighting the resilience of the human spirit. The interplay of innocence and suffering deepens our understanding of these characters and calls for empathy and social reform. As we reflect on Dickens's portrayal of childhood, we are reminded of the enduring relevance of these themes in contemporary society, where the struggles of the innocent continue to resonate.

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