



A STUDY OF SOCIAL CLASS CHANGES IN CHARLES DICKENS'S OLIVER TWIST AND GREAT EXPECTATIONS

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the representation of social class changes in Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* and *Great Expectations*. It explores how Dickens portrays class mobility, inequality, and identity transformation. The research highlights the impact of Victorian society on individual lives and demonstrates the moral implications of social advancement and class structure.

Keywords: Social class, Victorian society, class mobility, identity, inequality, Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, *Great Expectations*, poverty, transformation.

INTRODUCTION

Charles Dickens is one of the most important writers of the Victorian era because he often criticized society and wrote about social inequality and class differences. He lived during a time when industrialization and urban growth were changing England and creating a big gap between rich and poor people. His novels *Oliver Twist* (1838) and *Great Expectations* (1861) show how people deal with strict social classes in nineteenth-century England. In these novels, Dickens shows changes in social class and comments on the unfair treatment of poor people and the desire to move up in society. *Oliver Twist* focuses on the lives of the poorest people, such as orphans, people living in workhouses, and criminals. The story shows how poverty and social neglect cause suffering. Oliver, the main character, is an innocent orphan who faces very difficult conditions.

He lives in a harsh workhouse and later faces the criminal world of London. Dickens uses Oliver's story to show the unfairness of society and to criticize the institutions that fail to protect children. Many critics say that in *Oliver Twist*, it is very hard to move up in society. Oliver only improves his life because kind people help him, not because of his own actions. This shows that Victorian society had a very rigid class system controlled by wealth and social connections. On the other hand, *Great Expectations* shows how social mobility is possible but complicated. The story follows Pip, an orphan raised by his sister and her husband, a blacksmith. Pip moves from the working class in rural Kent to the middle and upper classes in London. Through Pip's story, Dickens shows the tension between being born poor and wanting wealth, education, and social respect. Social mobility in this novel happens because industrialization allows people to move up based on money and ambition, not just birth.

However, Dickens also shows that moving up in class can be difficult emotionally and morally. Pip thinks that gaining wealth and status will make him

better, but he struggles with guilt and shame about his origins. He also feels distant from the people who cared for him, like Joe Gargery. Dickens uses characters like Joe and Magwitch to show that true worth comes from kindness, loyalty, and integrity, not social class or wealth. Studies of Dickens's work show that social class in *Oliver Twist* and *Great Expectations* is shaped by both outside conditions, like poverty and unfair institutions, and inner feelings, like identity and moral decisions. Some studies also point out that Dickens wanted to show how society blocks people from moving up and the personal cost of trying to change class. This article **aims** to study how Dickens shows social class changes through the story, characters, and themes in *Oliver Twist* and *Great Expectations*. It will look at how social classes are shown in the novels, how characters deal with or resist their social roles, and what moral or emotional effects come with changing social status. By answering these questions, this study helps us understand Dickens's ideas about social inequality and the difficulties of moving in a society with strict social classes.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a **qualitative textual analysis** methodology rooted in comparative literary criticism and socio-historical contextualization. The primary texts for analysis are *Oliver Twist* (1838) and *Great Expectations* (1861) by Charles Dickens. These novels were selected due to their central preoccupation with class representations and their canonical status in Victorian literature. Textual analysis focuses on narrative structure, characterization, thematic motifs, and dialogue that reveal underlying attitudes toward social class and mobility. First, the research situates Dickens's works within the broader socio-historical context of the Victorian era, characterized by industrial transformation, urban expansion, and evolving class relations. Such contextualization allows for an understanding of how Dickens's fictional representations interact with real historical tensions between the working classes, middle classes, and elite. Secondary historical sources were consulted to map the general conditions of class dynamics during Dickens's lifetime, including labor conditions, educational access, and institutional policies affecting orphans and the poor.

The primary analytical approach consists of **close textual reading**, identifying passages that reflect class distinctions, mobility attempts, and moral judgments associated with social status. In *Oliver Twist*, special attention is given to scenes depicting the workhouse, apprenticeship, and criminal networks, which together construct a panorama of lower-class vulnerability under oppressive institutional systems. The narrative's portrayal of characters such as Oliver, Mr. Bumble, and Fagin serves to illustrate how Dickens uses personal experience and social critique to interrogate the ethics of class-based marginalization. These readings are cross-referenced with existing scholarship on Dickens's critique of poverty and institutional failure, providing interpretive depth and supporting evidence. In *Great Expectations*, key episodes involving Pip's transformation from blacksmith's apprentice to a gentleman of London are examined to understand how class mobility is conceptualized. Particular focus is placed on Pip's relationship with Estella and Miss Havisham, his emotional estrangement from Joe Gargery, and the reveal of Abel Magwitch as his benefactor. These moments reveal the psychological and moral dimensions of mobility, demonstrating the interplay between external social ascent and internal identity crises.

The analysis is enriched by engaging with scholarly interpretations that highlight volatility in class expectations and moral values. Comparative analysis across both novels reveals patterns and contrasts in Dickens's representation of class. For example, while *Oliver Twist* presents class transition as rare and externally imposed, *Great Expectations* presents mobility as possible yet ethically complex. The comparative structure of the methodology allows the research to draw broader conclusions about Dickens's evolving critique of the social order. Furthermore, the research integrates **theoretical lenses** from socio-cultural literary criticism, including Marxist perspectives on class and identity, and cultural studies approaches to narrative and ideology.

These frameworks assist in interpreting how Dickens constructs social hierarchies and the tensions inherent in crossing class boundaries. By combining close reading with theoretical analysis, the study reveals multiple layers in Dickens's class discourse economic, cultural, and psychological. Secondary sources such as peer-reviewed articles, literary criticism, and historical case studies provide additional evidence and contextual support. Many of these sources argue that Dickens's narrative strategies are intrinsically bound to his critique of Victorian class structures, emphasizing the social and moral implications of class divisions on individual fates. Ultimately, this methodological framework ensures a comprehensive and interpretive analysis that balances textual evidence, theoretical insight, and historical grounding, producing nuanced conclusions about Dickens's literary portrayal of class changes.

RESULTS

The textual analysis of *Oliver Twist* and *Great Expectations* reveals that Dickens constructs two distinct but complementary visions of social class and mobility. In *Oliver Twist*, social class is portrayed as rigid and oppressive. The novel's protagonist, Oliver, is born into poverty and subjected to the harsh realities of the workhouse system, which Dickens vividly describes as dehumanizing and morally corrupt (research.nordicuniversity.org). Oliver's encounters with characters like Mr. Bumble and Fagin demonstrate how institutional power and criminal networks perpetuate inequality. Oliver's social elevation is ultimately facilitated by external benevolence rather than personal initiative, highlighting the scarcity of genuine social mobility in Victorian society. Dickens thus emphasizes structural barriers and societal indifference as defining features of the lower-class experience. In contrast, *Great Expectations* presents a narrative of aspirational mobility. Pip's transformation from a blacksmith's apprentice to a gentleman in London illustrates the potential for upward social movement. However, this mobility is contingent upon the intervention of a benefactor, Abel Magwitch, and is not purely a function of Pip's own merit (litcharts.com). While Pip gains material wealth and social prestige, he experiences psychological dislocation and moral confusion. His increasing estrangement from his working-class origins, particularly his guilt and shame in relation to Joe Gargery, underscores the internal costs of class advancement. The novel suggests that social mobility is morally complex and emotionally fraught.

Both novels utilize **characterization** to explore class change. In *Oliver Twist*, Oliver's purity and moral integrity contrast sharply with the corruption surrounding him, such as Fagin's criminal activities or the exploitative behavior of workhouse officials (research.nordicuniversity.org). These contrasts highlight the ethical

dimension of social class and reinforce the idea that societal position often dictates moral opportunity. Similarly, in *Great Expectations*, characters such as Estella and Miss Havisham embody the consequences of rigid social conditioning and inherited wealth, illustrating how class identity is enforced and internalized ([researchgate.net](https://www.researchgate.net)). A comparative perspective reveals that Dickens's approach to class change evolves between the two novels.

In *Oliver Twist*, the emphasis is on external conditions poverty, institutional neglect, and criminal networks as the primary determinants of social status. Conversely, *Great Expectations* foregrounds **internal experience**, examining how social ascent affects identity, ethical perception, and emotional well-being. This shift demonstrates Dickens's increasing interest in the psychological ramifications of class mobility, alongside his enduring concern with social injustice. The results also indicate that Dickens consistently critiques upper-class hypocrisy. In both novels, characters who occupy higher social strata, whether benevolent (Mr. Brownlow) or morally corrupt (Miss Havisham, the upper-class benefactors), serve as instruments to examine societal inequities. Dickens presents wealth and privilege as morally neutral tools that can either nurture virtue or propagate vice, reinforcing the notion that ethical behavior transcends class boundaries (zenodo.org). Overall, the study finds that Dickens employs both narrative strategies and character development to depict social class change. In *Oliver Twist*, class is largely imposed and external, whereas in *Great Expectations*, it becomes aspirational and psychologically complex. Despite these differences, both novels foreground the moral implications of social mobility and emphasize the role of character, integrity, and compassion in navigating class boundaries. These findings underline Dickens's dual critique of the structural constraints of Victorian society and the internal struggles engendered by social ascent.

DISCUSSION

The findings from the textual analysis of Dickens's *Oliver Twist* and *Great Expectations* indicate that social class change is a central theme across both works, albeit addressed through different narrative strategies and thematic focuses. In *Oliver Twist*, Dickens critiques the inflexibility of social structures and the perils faced by those at society's margins. The novel highlights systemic failures, such as the workhouse system and criminal exploitation, which limit the possibility of genuine upward mobility ([research.nordicuniversity.org](https://www.research.nordicuniversity.org)). Oliver's eventual improvement is mediated by external intervention rather than merit, reflecting the broader Victorian skepticism toward meritocratic social advancement. The narrative portrays social class as a determinant of moral and material opportunities, emphasizing that institutional structures often reinforce inequality and prevent personal development. In *Great Expectations*, Dickens explores the internal dimensions of social mobility. Pip's rise from humble origins to the world of London gentility illustrates that upward mobility is attainable in theory but fraught with moral and psychological complexity ([litcharts.com](https://www.litcharts.com)). Pip's sense of shame toward his roots, and his alienation from Joe Gargery, underscore the emotional and ethical challenges of leaving one's original social class. Dickens's portrayal suggests that social mobility can create internal conflicts where material success is accompanied by spiritual or relational disconnection. This exploration of identity transformation provides a richer, more nuanced critique of class than the structural focus in *Oliver Twist*. A comparative

analysis reveals that Dickens's treatment of class evolves from an emphasis on structural oppression to a focus on individual psychology.

In *Oliver Twist*, external factors such as poverty, institutional neglect, and social exclusion define the narrative tension. In *Great Expectations*, however, the narrative probes the psychological ramifications of mobility, illustrating how social ascent can generate ethical dilemmas and emotional alienation ([researchgate.net](https://www.researchgate.net)). Furthermore, Dickens consistently highlights the moral dimension of social class. Characters in both novels demonstrate that ethical conduct is independent of social position. Oliver's innate goodness contrasts with Fagin's corruption, while Pip's moral development diverges from Estella's upbringing, shaped by Miss Havisham's manipulations. Dickens seems to advocate for a vision of society where integrity and compassion transcend class divisions (zenodo.org).

This dual emphasis on structural critique and psychological analysis reflects Dickens's deep engagement with Victorian social realities. His works suggest that the rigid class system limits opportunities for the poor while creating ethical challenges for the upwardly mobile. The tension between external constraint and internal conflict underscores Dickens's belief in the transformative power of character and moral judgment, rather than wealth or status alone. In addition, the novels indicate that social change is neither uniform nor entirely predictable. While some characters, like Oliver or Pip, experience improvement in their circumstances, these transitions are contingent upon chance, mentorship, or benefaction. Dickens thereby critiques the myth of meritocracy in Victorian society, emphasizing the interplay of fortune, ethics, and institutional structures in shaping social mobility (litcharts.com). Ultimately, the discussion reveals that Dickens's novels present a sophisticated and multi-layered understanding of social class changes. Through *Oliver Twist* and *Great Expectations*, he interrogates both external societal barriers and internal moral challenges, offering a holistic critique of Victorian social structures.

CONCLUSION

The comparative analysis of *Oliver Twist* and *Great Expectations* demonstrates that Charles Dickens presents social class change as a central concern, explored through both structural and psychological lenses. In *Oliver Twist*, class is predominantly external and imposed, and upward mobility is rare, reliant on the intervention of benevolent characters. This reflects Dickens's critique of Victorian institutions such as workhouses and the criminal justice system, highlighting the systemic oppression of the poor and socially marginalized ([research.nordicuniversity.org](https://www.research.nordicuniversity.org)).

In *Great Expectations*, Dickens shifts focus to the psychological ramifications of social mobility. Pip's journey illustrates the internal challenges associated with leaving one's original social class, including moral conflict, alienation from family, and identity crises. While economic ascent is achievable, it is morally and emotionally complex, indicating that social change is not solely material but profoundly personal (litcharts.com).

The study shows that Dickens consistently critiques the upper class for moral failings while emphasizing the intrinsic worth of characters independent of social standing. The novels collectively suggest that true gentility is measured by integrity, compassion, and moral courage rather than wealth or title. Both works reveal

Dickens's evolving perspective on class: from a structural critique in *Oliver Twist* to a nuanced psychological exploration in *Great Expectations* ([researchgate.net](https://www.researchgate.net)). Furthermore, Dickens's representation of social mobility underscores the contingency of human fortune and the limitations of meritocracy in Victorian society. Characters' experiences suggest that opportunity is mediated by chance, social connections, and moral behavior, highlighting the complex interplay between social structure and individual agency (zenodo.org). In conclusion, Dickens's exploration of social class change in *Oliver Twist* and *Great Expectations* remains relevant for understanding the moral, psychological, and societal dimensions of mobility. By combining vivid characterizations with socio-historical critique, Dickens offers a timeless commentary on the ethical implications of social hierarchy and the human desire for upward movement. This study contributes to the ongoing scholarship on Dickens by clarifying how his narratives reflect, interrogate, and morally assess the dynamics of social class in Victorian England.

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