



Universitetet
i Stavanger

FAKULTET FOR UTDANNINGSVITENSKAP OG HUMANIORA

BACHELOROPPGAVE

Studieprogram: ENG290 Bacheloroppgave i engelsk

Vårsemesteret, 2023

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Tittel på bacheloroppgaven: *A state of poverty: Critical realism of socio-economic problems in the works of Charles Dickens*

Engelsk tittel: *A state of poverty: Critical realism of socio-economic problems in the works of Charles Dickens*

Emneord: Litteratur

Antall ord: 5593

Antall vedlegg/annet: 0

	Stavanger, 15.05/2023 dato/år
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A state of poverty:

Critical realism of socio-economic problems in the works of Charles Dickens

"...I had nothing to frighten him with; which we always must have in the beginning, or we labour in vain." (Dickens, 1838, p.245).

The industrial revolution was during the Victorian era in London, machines replaced manual labour resulting in the inhabitants losing their jobs. The population grew too fast for the market to keep up with, therefore food prices rose, these factors contributed in poverty and many poor people engaged in a life of crime. Duckworth explains that people moved to cities to earn their living but ended up entering *"...the ranks of criminals by necessity."* (Duckworth, 2002, pp. 2), poor people had to partake in a life of crime in order to survive. Crime and poverty are two main themes in *Oliver Twist* and they are still relevant in today's society. There is a connection between these two socio-economic problems and Morrison comments upon this connection and states as follows *"In the cases of persons who are in a state of poverty, (...) the offence they are most likely to commit is theft..."* (Morrison, 1891, pp.129), poor people were most likely to commit to stealing as their offence. In *Oliver Twist* one gets a good overview of poverty and crime, especially in the sense of theft. Fagin and his gang of pick pockets are a good example of theft. Fagin uses child labour as a means to make children thieves for him. On page 245 Fagin says: *"...I had nothing to frighten him with; which we always must have in the beginning, or we labour in vain."* (Dickens, 1838, p.245). This passage shows that it was a common thing for children to be beaten into submission. The fact that Fagin says *"or we labour in vain."* (1838, pp. 245), indicates that the belief in the Victorian era was that child labour did not have an effect unless the children were

frightened. Workhouses were also a common thing in the Victorian society, which can also be seen in modern day society. Another socio-economic problem that can be found in *Oliver Twist* is oppression of women, especially in the sense of the characters Nancy, Oliver's mother and Rose Maylie. This paper will focus on the critical realism in Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* that demonstrates several socio-economic problems of the Victorian society such as workhouses, child labour and oppression of women, which are still relevant for today's society.

The New Poor Law which was passed in 1834 (Richardson, 2012, pp.6) was an improved version of the 1601 law, where its purpose was "*raising rates, relieving the impotent, setting the able-bodied to work and apprenticing poor children...*" (Slack, 1995, pp.10). Charles Dickens criticizes the new poor law in *Oliver Twist*, an example of this can be found on page 13 where Dickens writes "*What a noble illustration of the tender laws of this favoured country!...*" (Dickens, 1838, p. 13). This is an example of irony as a literary device that Dickens used to ridicule the New Poor Law of Victorian England. According to Richardson "*Oliver Twist is well known as Dickens's major attack on the New Poor Law of 1834...*" (Richardson, 2012, pp.6). Throughout the novel Charles Dickens criticises society in London, not only the new poor law but also crime and poverty and the oppression of women. *Oliver Twist* is a book written by Charles Dickens in 1838 (Richardson, 2012, p.3). The novel follows an orphan named Oliver Twist as he ventures through life as an orphan in the Victorian society in London. Oliver is faced with several moral questions and obstacles he has to endure in order to survive. Oliver's mother dies right after giving birth to Oliver and he is therefore forced to live and work in a workhouse. He is later taken in as an apprentice by an undertaker but escapes and meets The artful Dodger. Dodger introduces him to Fagin and Oliver is plunged into a life of crime. Oliver then meets Mr. Brownlow who later adopts him. Even though Oliver experiences numerous bad things throughout the novel, the story ends well for him.

As a young child Charles Dickens was forced to work at a warehouse and therefore was a victim to child labour. (Forster, 1892 ,pp. 10). Charles Dickens knew in that sense what it was like to work as a child. A boy Dickens met at the warehouse while working there named Bob Fagin, was his inspiration for the character Fagin in *Oliver Twist*, "*His name was Bob Fagin,*

and I took the liberty of using his name, long afterwards, in Oliver Twist." (Forster, 1892, pp. 11). Child labour was a common thing in the Victorian era, as well as workhouses.

Richardson states that *"Workhouses were publicly run institutions funded by local taxation ('poor rates'), which provided minimal accommodation and sustenance for the desperate poor."* (Richardson, 2012, pp. 6). Richardson further explains that Dickens *"exposes the small-minded meanness and cruelty of the workhouse regime..."* (2012, pp. 14).

In the beginning of the novel *Oliver Twist*, Dickens describes the harsh environment of the workhouses. Dickens also uses humour to criticise society and the authorities at the time. An example of the irony Dickens uses is when he writes *"The members of this board were very sage, deep, philosophical men; (...) they found out at once, what ordinary folks would never have discovered, - the poor people liked it!"* (Dickens, 1838, pp.13), Dickens also writes that the workhouses was *"a tavern where there was nothing to pay, - a public breakfast, dinner, tea, and supper, all the year round..."* (1838, pp. 13), this further confirms that Dickens used irony to criticise the workhouses.

Oliver is an orphan who works in a workhouse, he is an illegitimate child and he is subject to a lot of beatings in his youth. The surgeon that was present at Oliver's birth says while looking at the hand of Oliver's mother *"no wedding-ring..."* (Dickens, 1838, pp.3) this shows that Oliver's mother was not wearing a wedding ring, indicating that Oliver was an illegitimate child. An example of Oliver being a subject to beatings is the passage on page 10 that reads *"Mrs. Mann (...) 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..."* (Dickens, 1838, p.10). By using the words *"too often impressed"* (1838, pp. 10), the reader gets the sense that Oliver is often beaten at the workhouse he lives in. The only food the authorities served in the workhouses was gruel, on page 3 the surgeon talks about Oliver as *"...troublesome."* (Dickens, 1838, pp. 3) and says that the nurse shall offer Oliver *"...gruel if it is."* (1838, pp. 3). This passage can indicate that the authorities cared little for the poor and that the conditions in workhouses were inhumane. The food served in a workhouse mainly consisted of gruel. Dickens describes the food in the workhouse as *"small quantities of oatmeal; and issued three meals of thin gruel a-day, with an onion twice a week, and half a roll on Sundays."* (Dickens, 1838, pp.13). Dickens writes further *"They made a great many other wise and humane regulations..."* (1838, pp.13), Charles Dickens uses irony again to ridicule

the new poor law. By using the words “*wise*” and “*humane*” Dickens is exaggerating, making it clear that he is being ironic and therefore in a way mocking the new poor law. After living at the workhouse for some time, Oliver takes on the job as an apprentice of an undertaker. Oliver is angered by the words of Noah Claypole when he talks badly of Oliver’s mother. Mr. Bumble, who is the beadle in the workhouse where Oliver lived, explains Oliver’s behaviour by saying “*If you had kept the boy on gruel, ma’am, this would never have happened.*” (Dickens, 1838, pp.59), this indicates that workhouses often underfed the children to prevent rebellion.

In modern day society there are still examples of bad working environments. Sweatshops can be seen as a form of workhouse in the sense that the working conditions are terrible. Powell describes sweatshops as “*Factories may be crowded, dirty, and hot.*” (Powell, 2014, pp. 64). Powell further explains that the employees have to work long hours with minimal to no breaks and some do not get paid vacations (2014, pp. 64). Workhouses in today’s society are not as horrific as they were in the Victorian era. In the Victorian era the government did not really care too much about the conditions but rather about making money. The authorities submitted to abusing the employees in the Victorian era. It is no secret that workhouses still exist to some extent in today’s society. Even though the working conditions are inadequate the workers still get paid for their work. Powell argues that the quality of the work will depend on the employees’ health and safety. If the job is at a higher risk, the pay is better (2014, pp.65). It is further stated by Powell that:

“Activists again have to be careful not to advocate for changes that may eliminate the lousy sweatshop working conditions and throw workers into even worse conditions elsewhere.” (Powell, 2014, pp. 64).

One can argue that a sweatshop is a better place to work in than to live on the street with no money and with even worse conditions. An example Powell uses is the “*...scavenging in the Phnom Penh garbage dump is much worse.*” (Powell, 2014, pp. 64). According to Powell it is better to work in a sweatshop than to scavenge around a garbage dump looking for something to sell. This argument is what Powell uses when he talks about activists that has to be careful with eliminating sweatshops. Laura Hapke on the other hand describes sweatshops as “*...an exploitative urban workplace associated with the garment trades...*”

(Hapke, 2004, pp. 1). Hapke explains further that this type of work are “*synonymous*” (2004, pp. 1) to a form of degrading employment. As stated by Hapke sweatshops are workplaces that exploit and degrade the workers due to inadequate working conditions. There is no secret that workhouses somewhat still exist to some extent in modern day society. The difference is that there are workhouses today who pay their workers low wages instead of nothing at all. A sweatshop inspector investigated a sweatshop in China where he found out that “*...dormitories were filthy: the hallways were strewn with garbage...*” (Frank, 2008, pp.1). Much like Powell, Frank also states that it is better for a 14 year old to work in a sweatshop with low wages than to go hungry or work in even worse conditions elsewhere (2008, pp.3). Powell, Hapke and Frank all criticise sweatshops with their bad working standards. At the same time both Powell and Frank claims the sweatshops are better working alternatives for developing countries than to starve or to risk finding even worse jobs. We see here that workhouses and bad working conditions are still relevant to some extent in society today.

Throughout the novel Oliver is a victim to the bad side of society, despite this he never fails to lose his innocence. Oliver is introduced to the Artful Dodger on page 67, Oliver describes the Artful Dodger as “*...one of the queerest-looking boys that Oliver had ever seen.*” (Dickens, 1838, pp.67), this can show Oliver’s innocence. Oliver thinks that Dodger looks odd, which can indicate Oliver’s alienation from criminals, making him seem very innocent. Oliver does not know what criminals look like, therefore he thinks that Dodger, who is a criminal, looks different. After talking to the Artful Dodger Oliver decides that Dodger’s “*...moral precepts (...) had hitherto been thrown away upon him.*” (Dickens, 1838, pp.70), this passage can show that Oliver gets the feeling that Dodger does not have a sense of morality. Oliver further concludes that “*...if he found the Dodger incorrigible, as he more than half suspected he should, to decline the honour of his farther acquaintance.*” (1838, pp.70), this can indicate that Oliver does not want to associate with Dodger if Dodger does not improve his sense of morality. By writing the phrase “*...as he more than half suspected he should...*” (1838, pp.70) the reader gets an insight in Oliver’s thoughts which show that he does not believe that Dodger will change. This can be an example that Oliver has a sense of morality and he does not want to associate with people that does not have one.

The fact that Oliver is willing to accompany Dodger even though he believes Dodger lives an immoral life, can also be seen as a somewhat criticism of the poor in the Victorian society. In the novel Oliver observes that in some of the villages they have signs that read “...all persons who begged within the district (...) would be sent to jail...” (Dickens, 1838, pp.66), which meant that begging was illegal. Charles Dickens may have written about these signs in order to show that the poor did not have any other choice but to steal. When Oliver meets Dodger he is offered food and a place to stay, which he accepts despite his doubts about Dodger. When Oliver joins Fagin’s band of criminals it is in order to survive and not because he wants to live a life of crime, this is shown on page 69 which reads “*This unexpected offer of shelter was too tempting to be resisted, (...) the old gentleman already referred to, would doubtless provide Oliver with a comfortable place without loss of time.*” (Dickens, 1838, pp. 69). This can be seen as a criticism to society at the time because rather than help poor people, the government at the time, put up signs stating that it was illegal to beg. It seems as though Dickens felt that the only hope for poor Oliver was to join a life of crime, which I mentioned earlier poor people were more inclined to steal than to commit other offenses. By writing this Dickens is criticising how society dealt with poor people. Since Oliver decides to escape the undertaker and walk to London this act can be seen as a representation that poor people migrated to big cities to try and find their fortune.

When Oliver is introduced to Fagin and his band of thieves, Oliver does not know that they steal for a living. Dodger and a boy named Charley Bates gives Fagin some pocket-books and handkerchiefs. Oliver, however, does not realize that Dodger and Charley has stolen them, and thinks that they make handkerchiefs. Fagin then asks Oliver “*You’d like to be able to to make pocket-handkerchiefs as easy as Charley Bates, wouldn’t you, my dear?*” (Dickens, 1838, pp.79), to which Oliver replies “*Very much indeed, if you’ll teach me, sir,*” (1838, pp.79). Charley Bates then starts to laugh because he “*...saw something so exquisitely ludicrous in this reply...*” (1838, pp.79), this encounter with Charley Bates demonstrates Oliver’s innocence. Charley Bates starts to laugh because Oliver believes Fagin’s lies about what Dodger and Charley have been doing. Oliver is too innocent to understand that Fagin and his gang of pick pockets are thieves, and so he is too innocent to know that the handkerchiefs and the pocket-books have been stolen. After this encounter Fagin somewhat trains Dodger and Charley to pick pockets, Oliver who is too innocent to understand what is

going on, thinks it is a game. Oliver describes the game as “...*very curious and uncommon...*” (Dickens, 1838, pp.79), this is another example of the innocence that Oliver possesses. Oliver has never seen anyone play a game like that, which is why he thinks the game is odd. The game revolves around Fagin who walks around pretending to be an old gentleman and he pretends to look inside shop windows so that Dodger and Charley Bates can try and steal the items Fagin possesses. While Fagin walks around like an old gentleman Oliver starts to laugh “...*till the tears ran down his face.*” (1838, pp.80). Oliver’s laughter and his lack of understanding what the gang is doing, shows that he is too innocent to live a life of crime.

Oliver’s innocence shines through with his naivety. When Oliver discovers Fagin’s box of jewels Fagin explains that he is “...*a miser...*” (1838, pp. 77). Oliver thinks it’s odd that Fagin lives in such a filthy place when he has a lot of jewellery, but he brushes his suspicion off by thinking that Fagin uses a lot of money on his gang of boys (1838, pp. 78). This is another example of Oliver’s naivety, Oliver is naïve because he believes the good in people, even though he has his doubts. Another example of Oliver showing his innocence is when Fagin makes Oliver take a handkerchief from his pocket. Oliver does as he is told and gets praised for this action, he does not understand that Fagin is training him in pick pocketing. Oliver questions Fain’s actions but thinks nothing more of it because he thinks to himself that Fagin is “...his senior” (1838, pp. 81) and therefore Fagin “...must know best...” (1838, pp. 81). This passage further confirms that Oliver does question Fagin’s morality but since he is naïve he brushes it off and therefore his innocence shines through.

Jack Dawkins goes by the nickname The artful Dodger, the fact that he has a nickname can be a representation that he is hiding his identity. His name is a part of who he is and by referring to himself as The artful Dodger he is concealing his true self, much like criminals do. Dodger is indulged in a life of criminality, and he takes pride in that he is a good thief. Dodger is the most skilled in Fagin’s group when it comes to the boys who commit theft for Fagin. This is represented when Fagin tells Oliver “...*Make ‘em your models (...) especially the Dodger’s, my dear. He’ll be a great man himself...*” (Dickens, 1838, pp. 81), Fagin idealizes Dodger and wants Oliver to do the same. When Dodger first meets Oliver he looks at him with attentive eyes. This may indicate that Dodger is intrigued as to who Oliver is and what he’s purpose in London may be. The fact that Dodger asks Oliver several questions as to if he

has money or if he has lodgings further confirms that Dodger is intrigued by Oliver. Dodger is interested in ruining Oliver's innocence when he introduces him to a life of crime. Dodger takes in a way advantage of Oliver's naivety and lures him to meet Fagin and therefore making him join Fagin's gang. Dodger gets the feeling that Oliver is naïve and therefore he knows that Oliver is an easy prey.

In present-day society it is estimated by the International Labour Office that there were about "...210 million children between the ages of five and fourteen (...) working in 2000..." (Banerjee et al., 2006, pp. 244). During the year 2000 the number of children working between five and fourteen years old was a lot. This is a good example that child labour is an actual thing in society today, it is not just something that took place during the time Charles Dickens was alive. It is no secret that child labour is more common in developing countries than in industrialized countries. This is also stated in the book *Understanding Poverty* where it is explained that the biggest number of working children is in Asia, while child labour more often occurs in Africa (2006, pp. 244). This is an interesting point because even though there are more children working in Asia, it happens more often in Africa. At the time when the book *Oliver Twist* was written, child labour was found mostly throughout countries going through the industrial revolution. Child labour was not commonly viewed as a bad thing during the industrial revolution. Nowadays it is frowned upon by industrialized countries, but sadly, it is common in developing countries. Blunch and Verner concludes that "*Poverty affects the likelihood of engaging in harmful child labour positively...*" (Blunch & Verner, 2001, pp. 13), Blunch and Verner further writes that children living in poor households "...are almost four times more likely to engage in harmful (...) child labour..." (2001, pp. 8) than children in wealthier households. This shows that there is also a link between poverty and child labour, much like with poverty and sweatshops. Even in the book *Oliver Twist* one can see several examples of the correlation between poverty and child labour. These examples include workhouses, which housed for the most part orphans in the book. Fagin's gang of pickpockets is another example of poverty and child labour. Fagin is poor so he forces children to work for him so he can provide food and lodgings for them, he also states that "...I had nothing to frighten him with; which we always must have in the beginning, or we labour in vain." (Dickens, 1838, p.245). This is an example of the abuse that Fagin conducted to force the children to steal for him, which is an example of harmful child labour.

Oppression of women is another socio-economic problem one can find in *Oliver Twist*.

Oppression of women in *Oliver Twist* can be seen through the characters Nancy, Rose Maylie and Oliver's mother who the reader learns bears the name of Agnes. Women in the Victorian era had to be married in order to have sexual intercourse, as well as give birth to a child.

Zlotnick writes that *"...if women sell themselves short and "discount" their chastity, the consequence for them will be poverty."* (Zlotnick, 2006, pp. 138). This confirms the belief that women's moral status was greatly affected by their sexuality. Oliver's mother, Agnes, is a lady who gives birth to an illegitimate child, that child being Oliver. Agnes falls victim to the cruel Victorian society and their beliefs, she is therefore forced to run away from her home and ends up dying after giving birth to Oliver. Agnes is first introduced to the reader in the very first chapter when she gives birth to Oliver. The first thing Agnes says is *"Let me see the child, and die."* (Dickens, 1838, pp. 2), she feels like she is going to die and therefore wants to see her baby before this happens. Agnes knows she is a fallen woman and therefore accepts her fate. This can be viewed as the Victorian society believing it is better for a woman to die than to live like a fallen woman. Nancy, on the other hand, does not have any illegitimate children, she is, however, a prostitute and falls victim to the cruel beatings of her husband Bill Sikes. She feels like she cannot leave Bill Sikes because she knows she is a fallen woman in the Victorian society. Bill is her only safety and therefore she clings on to him to not end up on the streets. She feels as if she belongs to Bill, even though she has to endure beatings from him. An example of this can be found on page 115 when Nancy refuses to get Oliver after Oliver has been wrongfully captured by the police. Sikes proceeds to force her to go by promising, bribing and threatening her and she eventually accepts, and goes to find Oliver (1838, pp. 115). This passage is a representation that she undertakes Sikes's commissions because he forces her, even though she does not want to do it. On page 189 Nancy tells Oliver *"...I have borne all this for you already..."* and proceeds to show Oliver *"...some livid bruises upon her neck and arms..."* (1838, pp. 189), this is an example that despite Sikes beating her she does what she can to save Oliver. Both Agnes, which is also a fallen woman, and Nancy ends up dying in order to save Oliver. Agnes dies right after giving Oliver life while Nancy, on the other hand, dies because she is trying to save Oliver's life. Bill Sikes beats her to death when he learns that she has helped Oliver escape to Mr. Brownlow for safety. Nancy redeems herself when she gives her life to save little Oliver.

Rose Maylie is another female character in the book, and she is the complete opposite of both Agnes and Nancy. Rose Maylie represents the good moral woman of the Victorian society. Zlotnick describes Rose as “...*Dickens’s pure flower of Victorian femininity.*” (Zlotnick, 2006, pp. 139). She comes from a wealthy family and has no children nor is she wed, she is seen as a pure creature. Rose is a contrast to Nancy and Agnes who are unwed women but still engages in sexual activities, and as a result Agnes gives birth to an illegitimate child. Rose, on the other hand, does not engage in sexual activities because she is not married. Rose adopts Oliver as somewhat of a brother/nephew, and Oliver’s story therefore comes to a good end. Rose Maylie is seen as an innocent and pure woman with good virtue, while Agnes and Nancy are seen as woman with bad virtue, even though they are good people. Agnes and Nancy are viewed as being in the same situation, like Zlotnick also explains “...*the bastardy clause’s supporters insisted that unwed mothers and prostitutes were one and the same because both profited from their sexuality.*” (2006, pp. 139). This shows that women who bore illegitimate children were as bad as prostitutes. It seems as if the Victorian society looked at sexual activities like something bad and filthy, while women in the Victorian society were supposed to represent good and pure creatures, for a woman to be bad and filthy could be seen as almost a sin in society at that time. Zlotnick continues by saying “...*Dickens collapses Nancy and Agnes because the two share the same self-defeating character flaw.*” (2006, pp. 139). This passage further confirms that both Nancy and Agnes are fallen women of society and they both die. No matter how kind and respectable Nancy behaves and how well she treats Oliver, she still falls victim to the Victorian society’s belief that women who are prostitutes are fallen women. In the end of Nancy’s life, like I mentioned earlier she has a chance to redeem herself, and she takes it by dying for Oliver’s sake. Agnes never gets a chance to redeem herself because she dies before that happens. The fact that Oliver’s mother does not receive a name before the end of the book, can be seen as a form of lack of identity. Since she is a fallen woman, the Victorian society does not really care for her and therefore she loses her identity. Neither Nancy nor Agnes acquires a surname, this can be a sign that since they are both fallen women both them and they’re rights are invisible in the Victorian society. Rose Maylie, however, attains a surname because she represents a good and pure creature, which is what a woman in the Victorian society

was supposed to be. Rose Maylie is therefore not invisible and belongs to the Victorian society because she is the embodiment of how the Victorian society believed women to be.

When it comes to oppression of women in modern day society, this is still a socio-economic issue. This socio-economic problem can be found in society today, one might find this issue more prominently in the eastern part of the world than the western part. According to Root and Brown "*Degradation of women can be seen daily on television, and in movies, books, and magazines.*" (Root & Brown, 2014, pp. 131). This can indicate that the media is somewhat a reason for oppression of women today. Root & Brown further explains that "*The domestic violence problem is also rooted in the oppression of women in Asian cultures.*" (2014, pp. 135), Root & Brown look at Asian American communities to find out if the domestic violence occurs more often with Asian Americans or Americans. This passage, however, can show that oppression of women still happens in Asian cultures and therefore is more prone to happen in Asian American communities. It is further stated that "*Males are highly valued in Asian cultures.*" (2014, pp. 135), this can explain why oppression of women more often occurs in Asian cultures. Root & Brown also states that "*Women (...) in Asian cultures, are expected to be subservient, obedient, and quiet.*" (2014, pp. 135). Having these beliefs about women can help explain why oppression of women is more prominent in Asian culture. According to Root & Brown Asian culture also believes that "*Women are given support and recognition for enduring hardship and are discouraged from speaking up.*" (2014, pp. 136), this further confirms that Asian culture is more prone to oppressing women. Domestic violence can be linked to Nancy and Bill Sikes in the book *Oliver Twist*. When Nancy saves Oliver she tells him that he will "*...perhaps by my death.*" (Dickens, 1838, pp. 189), this shows that even though she was afraid that Sikes might murder her for saving Oliver, she does it anyway and thus, achieves redemption.

In the book *Oliver Twist* Nancy tries to speak up but she is shut down, and has to do as Sikes commands her to do. Like I mentioned earlier when Fagin and Sikes discusses who shall bring Oliver back, they suggest that Nancy should be the one to do it. She first refuses to but Sikes forces her to undertake his command and she then ends up doing what she is told (1838, pp.115). Much like Nancy, women are still discouraged from speaking up in today's society. Women are also oppressed in marriages in the sense that they belong to their

husbands, Root & Brown comments upon this by saying "*A wife is therefore considered to be a property paid for by the husband.*" (Root & Brown, 2014, pp. 136). This fact can also be linked to Nancy and Bill Sikes in the book *Oliver Twist*, Nancy says that "*It's not very easy for me to leave him...*" (Dickens, 1838, pp. 440). When Nancy is supposed to meet Rose Maylie, she tries to get out in order to meet Rose but Bill refuses. She tries to say that she only wants some air but Sikes again does not let her go out. The discussion ends with Bill getting physically violent towards her, so Nancy fails meeting up with Rose. Bill then comments upon Nancy's behaviour saying "*I thought I had tamed her, but she is as bad as ever.*" (1838, pp. 428), this makes Nancy seem more like Bill's dog than his lover. When Nancy tries to speak up Bill calls Nancy mad, an example of this can be found on page 427 when Bill says "*...she's out of her senses, you know, or she daren't talk to me in that way.*" (1838, pp. 427). The fact that Nancy is called a mad woman for speaking up for herself is a good example of oppression of women in the book *Oliver Twist*.

In conclusion, *Oliver Twist* is a book written by Charles Dickens in 1838, during the Victorian era in London. The book talks about several socio-economic problems of the day, such as workhouses, child labour and oppression of women, which are the socio-economic problems this paper focuses on. These socio-economic issues can still be seen to some extent in the society we live in today. Sweatshops and child labour can mostly still be seen in developing countries. Oppression of women can be found everywhere, but might be seen for the most part in Asian culture. In the book *Oliver Twist*, oppression of women are shown through the characters of Nancy, Agnes and Rose. By comparing Nancy and Agnes to Rose, Dickens highlights this socio-economic issue. Nancy and Agnes are, according to the Victorian society, fallen women, while Rose is the ideal woman and represents a good and pure creature, much like women were supposed to represent in the Victorian era. Child labour, like I mentioned is also dealt with in the book, both through Oliver's time in the workhouse and also when Oliver is introduced to the artful Dodger and Fagin. Oliver is forced to work for the magistrate when he lives in a workhouse, his time in the workhouse is not good and he is treated very badly. When he escapes and travels to London he also has to work for Fagin. Fagin represents child labour through his gang of thieves. Fagin forces children to steal for him, he frightens them to make them do what he desires. Like I mentioned earlier Fagin says "*...I had nothing to frighten him with; which we always must have in the*

beginning, or we labour in vain." (Dickens, 1838, p.245), which is an example that Fagin uses fear to make children do his bidding. Workhouses is also a socio-economic issue that can be found both in the book and somewhat in society. Nowadays one can find sweatshops, which is to some extent a workhouse. The conditions in a sweatshops, much like in a workhouse, are bad and somewhat inhumane. The employers have low wages, considering they have to work in filthy and sometimes dangerous conditions. In the book, Oliver is treated badly and receives minimal food in the workhouse he lives in. These socio-economic issues that the book deals with can also be seen in the society we live in today, and we have yet to solve them.

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