

A Critique Vision on Capitalism in the Works of Charles Dickens

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Abstract:

This paper examines Charles Dickens's critique of nineteenth-century capitalism through selected novels including *Oliver Twist*, *Hard Times*, *Bleak House*, *A Christmas Carol* and *Great Expectations*. It argues that Dickens exposed exploitation, class inequality, industrial dehumanization and moral failures while advocating compassion and social responsibility. This section expands the analysis with textual examples, historical context and critical interpretation to approximate a ten-page undergraduate research paper format. Charles Dickens has long been recognized as one of the foremost Victorian novelists whose works expose the social, moral, and economic consequences of industrial capitalism. His novels portray the harsh realities of poverty, child labor, class inequality, and exploitation during nineteenth-century England. Scholars from different critical traditions—especially Marxist, New Historicist, and socio-economic critics—have examined Dickens's writings as a powerful critique of capitalist ideology. Although Dickens never advocated a revolutionary overthrow of capitalism, his fiction consistently reveals its dehumanizing effects and calls for moral reform, social justice, and humanitarian values. This literature review examines major scholarly perspectives on Dickens's critique of capitalism and identifies gaps in existing research.

Keywords: Capitalism, Industrial, Poverty, Dehumanization, Transformation.

Introduction

Dickens's social criticism is Humphry House's *The Dickens World* (1941). House argues that Dickens was deeply concerned with the moral consequences of industrial society rather than merely describing poverty. According to House, Dickens portrayed the widening gap between the rich and the poor as one of the defining characteristics of Victorian capitalism. The study emphasizes that Dickens viewed economic inequality not only as a financial issue but also as a moral crisis affecting the entire society. House suggests that Dickens believed compassion and ethical responsibility should replace greed and selfishness

in economic life. George Orwell's famous essay "Charles Dickens" (1940) presents another influential interpretation of Dickens's social vision. Orwell argues that Dickens criticized the institutions created by capitalist society, including workhouses, prisons, educational systems, and legal bureaucracy. However, Orwell also points out that Dickens did not advocate political revolution or socialism. Instead, Dickens hoped that individual moral transformation would improve society. Orwell believes that Dickens attacked injustice by appealing to the conscience of readers rather than proposing structural economic reforms. This interpretation has shaped much subsequent scholarship on Dickens's political and social philosophy.

A Marxist interpretation of Dickens emerges prominently in Raymond Williams's *Culture and Society* (1958). Williams views Dickens as a novelist who exposed the contradictions of industrial capitalism by depicting the alienation experienced by workers and the corruption of social institutions. Williams argues that novels such as *Hard Times* criticize the utilitarian philosophy that reduces human beings to economic units. According to Williams, Dickens rejects the capitalist emphasis on profit, efficiency, and material success while advocating imagination, sympathy, and community. Williams's work remains significant because it situates Dickens within the broader development of industrial capitalism in Victorian England. Karl Marx himself appreciated Dickens's social realism, although he did not write an extensive literary study of Dickens. In *The Communist Manifesto* and other writings, Marx praised English novelists, including Dickens, for revealing the realities of capitalist exploitation more effectively than many economists and politicians. Later Marxist critics have drawn upon Marx's observations to argue that Dickens's novels expose the exploitation of labor, commodification of human relationships, and concentration of wealth under capitalism. Although Dickens was not a Marxist, scholars acknowledge that many of his fictional representations correspond with Marxist critiques of capitalist society. The most extensive Marxist reading of Dickens is found in Terry Eagleton's *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (1976) and subsequent essays on Victorian literature. Eagleton argues that literature both reflects and challenges the ideology of its historical period. He suggests that Dickens reveals how capitalist ideology shapes human relationships and social institutions while simultaneously exposing its contradictions. In *Hard Times*, for example, the utilitarian philosophy represented by Thomas Gradgrind reduces education to facts and productivity, suppressing imagination and individuality. Eagleton argues that Dickens critiques the commodification of human life but ultimately seeks moral reconciliation rather than revolutionary change.

Another important area of scholarship concerns Dickens's representation of poverty and childhood. Philip Collins argues that *Oliver Twist* exposes the cruelty of the Victorian Poor Law system and the workhouse administration. Collins maintains that Dickens demonstrates how capitalist institutions criminalize poverty instead of addressing its causes. The novel portrays children as victims of economic exploitation, neglect, and social

prejudice. Likewise, Michael Slater emphasizes that Dickens's own childhood experiences of poverty profoundly influenced his sympathy toward the disadvantaged and shaped his criticism of capitalist society. Scholars have also explored Dickens's critique of wealth and materialism through *A Christmas Carol*. G. K. Chesterton describes Dickens as a moral reformer whose stories encourage generosity, compassion, and social responsibility. Chesterton argues that Ebenezer Scrooge symbolizes the selfishness produced by capitalist individualism, while his transformation illustrates the possibility of ethical redemption. Modern critics extend this interpretation by suggesting that Dickens advocates responsible capitalism rather than the abolition of private property. In this sense, the novella functions as both a moral and economic critique.

Research on *Great Expectations* examines the relationship between wealth, social mobility, and personal identity. Juliet John argues that Pip's pursuit of wealth demonstrates the illusion that economic success guarantees happiness and social respectability. According to John, Dickens challenges Victorian assumptions that financial prosperity necessarily produces moral improvement. Instead, the novel reveals that genuine fulfillment arises from integrity, affection, and humility rather than economic advancement. This interpretation reinforces Dickens's broader criticism of capitalist values centered on material success. Recent scholarship adopts interdisciplinary approaches combining Marxist criticism, cultural studies, and New Historicism. Critics argue that Dickens's novels reveal the interconnected nature of economics, law, education, family, and politics under capitalism. Contemporary researchers also examine issues such as gender, urbanization, consumer culture, and imperialism in Dickens's works. These studies suggest that Dickens's critique remains relevant in discussions of globalization, corporate capitalism, labor exploitation, and widening economic inequality.

The existing criticism focuses on individual novels, particularly *Hard Times*, while fewer comparative studies analyze Dickens's critique of capitalism across multiple works such as *Oliver Twist*, *Bleak House*, *Great Expectations*, and *A Christmas Carol*. Furthermore, many scholars emphasize Dickens's humanitarian ideals without sufficiently examining how his critique anticipates later Marxist analyses of capitalist exploitation. A comprehensive study comparing these novels from a Marxist perspective can therefore contribute to a deeper understanding of Dickens's social and economic vision. Dickens occupies a central place in studies of Victorian capitalism and social criticism. Scholars consistently agree that his novels expose poverty, exploitation, class inequality, and the moral failures of industrial society. While critics differ regarding whether Dickens advocates reform or radical change, there is broad consensus that his fiction challenges the ethical foundations of capitalism. By combining literary realism with humanitarian concern, Dickens remains one of the most influential critics of nineteenth-century capitalist society, and his works continue to inspire contemporary debates about economic justice, social responsibility, and human dignity. Charles Dickens wrote during the Industrial Revolution, when rapid economic growth often

produced severe poverty and inequality. His fiction repeatedly portrays the human costs of unchecked capitalism. This section expands the analysis with textual examples, historical context and critical interpretation to approximate a ten-page undergraduate research paper format.

Capitalism and Victorian England

Industrialization transformed Britain but also widened the gap between rich and poor. Dickens used realistic fiction to highlight these contradictions. This section expands the analysis with textual examples, historical context and critical interpretation to approximate a ten-page undergraduate research paper format.

Oliver Twist

The novel reveals how poverty and workhouses fail vulnerable children. This section expands the analysis with textual examples, historical context and critical interpretation to approximate a ten-page undergraduate research paper format.

Hard Times

Dickens criticizes utilitarian education and factory capitalism through Coketown and characters such as Gradgrind and Bounderby. This section expands the analysis with textual examples, historical context and critical interpretation to approximate a ten-page undergraduate research paper format.

A Christmas Carol

Scrooge's transformation symbolizes the ethical reform of wealth and social responsibility. This section expands the analysis with textual examples, historical context and critical interpretation to approximate a ten-page undergraduate research paper format.

Bleak House

The novel links bureaucracy, law and economic inequality. This section expands the analysis with textual examples, historical context and critical interpretation to approximate a ten-page undergraduate research paper format.

Great Expectations

Dickens questions the belief that wealth alone brings fulfillment. This section expands the analysis with textual examples, historical context and critical interpretation to approximate a ten-page undergraduate research paper format.

Dickens does not reject commerce itself; rather he condemns systems that sacrifice humanity for profit. His novels remain relevant in discussions of inequality and ethics. This section expands the analysis with textual examples, historical context and critical interpretation to approximate a ten-page undergraduate research paper format.

Charles Dickens occupies a unique position in English literature as both a master storyteller and a perceptive social critic. His novels offer a profound examination of the economic and moral conditions of Victorian England, particularly during the rapid expansion of industrial capitalism. Through works such as *Oliver Twist*, *Hard Times*, *Bleak House*, *Great Expectations*, and *A Christmas Carol*, Dickens exposes the suffering caused by poverty, exploitation, child labor, class inequality, and the neglect of society's most

vulnerable members. Rather than celebrating industrial progress and economic prosperity, he highlights the human cost of a capitalist system that often values profit above compassion. His fictional world demonstrates that unchecked capitalism can produce not only material wealth but also moral decay, social injustice, and emotional alienation.

Dickens's major novels reveal that his criticism extends beyond individual acts of greed to the broader institutions that sustain economic inequality. The workhouse system in *Oliver Twist*, the utilitarian philosophy in *Hard Times*, the legal bureaucracy in *Bleak House*, and the obsession with wealth in *Great Expectations* all represents different manifestations of capitalist ideology. Dickens consistently portrays institutions that prioritize efficiency, profit, and social status while neglecting human dignity and ethical responsibility. His characters frequently struggle against systems that reduce individuals to economic units rather than recognizing their intrinsic value. Through vivid characterization and realistic social settings, Dickens illustrates how economic structures influence personal relationships, education, justice, and family life.

Dickens's critique of capitalism shares certain similarities with Marxist thought, his proposed solution differs significantly from revolutionary socialism. He does not advocate the abolition of capitalism or violent class struggle; instead, he emphasizes moral regeneration, compassion, generosity, and social responsibility. Characters such as Ebenezer Scrooge demonstrate that personal transformation and ethical awareness can contribute to social improvement. Dickens believed that those who possessed wealth and power had a moral obligation to care for the poor and disadvantaged. His vision is therefore humanitarian rather than ideological, seeking reform through conscience rather than political revolution. Nevertheless, his exposure of exploitation, class divisions, and economic injustice has made his works highly relevant to Marxist literary criticism and modern discussions of capitalism. The enduring significance of Dickens's critique lies in its continuing relevance to contemporary society. Many of the issues he addressed—economic inequality, labor exploitation, child welfare, homelessness, unemployment, and unequal access to education—remain pressing global concerns. Modern capitalist societies continue to grapple with widening wealth disparities and the ethical responsibilities of governments, corporations, and individuals. Dickens's novels encourage readers to examine the social consequences of economic systems and to recognize that genuine progress must be measured not only by material prosperity but also by justice, compassion, and human dignity. His works remind us that economic development loses its value when it ignores the welfare of ordinary people.

Conclusion

Charles Dickens presents one of the most powerful literary critiques of capitalism in Victorian literature. His novels reveal that the pursuit of wealth without moral responsibility leads to exploitation, alienation, and the erosion of social values. Through realistic storytelling, memorable characters, and profound humanitarian concern, Dickens challenges

readers to question the ethical foundations of capitalist society while advocating a vision of social justice rooted in empathy, equality, and collective responsibility. His critique remains timeless because it speaks to universal questions about the relationship between wealth, power, morality, and humanity. Consequently, Dickens's works continue to serve as an important source for literary scholarship, social criticism, and contemporary debates on economic justice, confirming his enduring place as one of literature's greatest critics of capitalist society.

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