

Oliver Twist

The Victorians – attitudes and values

Read the following and
summarise what you read in a
few sentences:

In Victorian England a class structure existed which can, in very simple terms, be divided into three:

- the aristocracy or upper class
- the middle class
- the poor or lower class

The aristocracy did not have to work for a living, often having inherited wealth.

The middle class felt stigmatized for having to work and so promoted work as a moral value. In other words, they often viewed themselves as morally superior to those who were poor and encouraged this idea throughout society.

The Victorian poor were often treated cruelly with some in the middle class viewing poverty as a moral weakness. The most vulnerable: children; the elderly; those with a disability who could not work were often treated appalling badly.

The Poor Law of 1834 meant that the poor were only entitled to receive public assistance if they lived and worked in established workhouses.

Workhouses were intentionally made as unpleasant as possible to deter the poor from relying on the public purse.

Forced to work in soul-destroying conditions, at tedious jobs, families separated and given barely enough food it was intended that the poorest members of society would 'see the error of their ways' and be thankful for all they received in return for the hard labour they did.

Compare your notes with those of a neighbour.

Between you, write a brief summary of the way the Victorian class system operated. Be prepared to read it out to the class.

Now read the following extracts from *Oliver Twist* and decide, with your partner, what this tells us about Charles Dickens' view of the class structure and the Poor Law.

Look in particular at the words that are underlined, to help you.

For the next eight or ten months, Oliver was the victim of a systematic course of treachery and deception. He was brought up by hand. The hungry and destitute situation of the infant orphan was duly reported by the workhouse authorities to the parish authorities. The parish authorities inquired with dignity of the workhouse authorities, whether there was no female then domiciled in "the house" who was in a situation to impart to Oliver Twist, the consolation and nourishment of which he stood in need. The workhouse authorities replied with humility, that there was not.

Upon this, the parish authorities magnanimously and humanely resolved, that Oliver should be "farmed", or, in other words, that he should be despatched to a branch-workhouse some three miles off, where twenty or thirty other juvenile offenders against the poor-laws, rolled about the floor all day, without the inconvenience of too much food or too much clothing, under the parental superintendence of an elderly female, who received the culprits at and for the consideration of sevenpence-halfpenny per small head per week.

Sevenpence-halfpenny's worth per week is a good round diet for a child; a great deal may be got for sevenpence-halfpenny, quite enough to overload its stomach, and make it uncomfortable. The elderly female was a woman of wisdom and experience; she knew what was good for children; and she had a very accurate perception of what was good for herself. So, she appropriated the greater part of the weekly stipend to her own use, and consigned the rising parochial generation to even a shorter allowance than was originally provided for them.

Chapter 2: *Oliver Twist*

Discuss your ideas so far.
Remember to use evidence from
the text to prove you are right.

Now, add to your ideas using
the extracts that follow. These
do not have underlining so you
will need to look carefully for
appropriate words and
phrases.

"When, indeed, ma'am!" rejoined Mr. Bumble. "Why here's one man that, in consideration of his wife and large family, has a quartern loaf and a good pound of cheese, full weight. Is he grateful, ma'am? Is he grateful? Not a copper farthing's worth of it! What does he do, ma'am, but ask for a few coals; if it's only a pocket handkerchief full, he says! Coals! What would he do with coals? Toast his cheese with 'em, and then come back for more. That's the way with these people, ma'am; give 'em a apron full of coals today, and they'll come back for another, the day after to-morrow, as brazen as alabaster."

"I never," said Mr. Bumble, "see anything like the pitch it's got to. The day afore yesterday, a man ... a man, with hardly a rag upon his back (here Mrs. Corney looked at the floor), goes to our overseer's door when he has got company coming to dinner; and says, he must be relieved, Mrs. Corney. As he wouldn't go away, and shocked the company very much, our overseer sent him out a pound of potatoes and half a pint of oatmeal. 'My heart!' says the ungrateful villain, 'what's the use of *this* to me? You might as well give me a pair of iron spectacles!' 'Very good,' says our overseer, taking 'em away again, 'you won't get anything else here.' 'Then I'll die in the streets!' says the vagrant. 'Oh no, you won't,' says our overseer."

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"Well, ma'am," rejoined the beadle, "he went away; and he *did* die in the streets. There's a obstinate pauper for you!"

"It beats anything I could have believed," observed the matron emphatically.

"But don't you think out-of-door relief a very bad thing, any way, Mr. Bumble? You're a gentleman of experience, and ought to know. Come."

"Mrs. Corney," said the beadle, smiling as men smile who are conscious of superior information, "out-of-door relief, properly managed: properly managed, ma'am: is the parochial safeguard. The great principle of out-of-door relief is, to give the paupers exactly what they don't want; and then they get tired of coming."

From: Chapter 23, *Oliver Twist*

Mr. Bumble had re-counted the tea-spoons, re-weighed the sugar-tongs, made a closer inspection of the milk-pot, and ascertained to a nicety the exact condition of the furniture, down to the very horse-hair seats of the chairs; and had repeated each process full half-a-dozen times; before he began to think that it was time for Mrs. Corney to return.

"Oh, Mr. Bumble!" cried the lady, "I have been so dreadfully put out!"

"Put out, ma'am!" exclaimed Mr. Bumble; "who has dared to -- ? I know!" said Mr. Bumble, checking himself, with native majesty, "this is them wicious paupers!"

Mrs. Corney, with great propriety, turned her head away, and released her hand to get at her pocket-handkerchief; but insensibly replaced it in that of Mr. Bumble.

"The board allow you coals, don't they, Mrs. Corney?" inquired the beadle, affectionately pressing her hand.

"And candles," replied Mrs. Corney, slightly returning the pressure.

"Coals, candles, and house-rent free," said Mr. Bumble. "Oh, Mrs. Corney, what a Angel you are!"

The lady was not proof against this burst of feeling. She sank into Mr. Bumble's arms; and that gentleman in his agitation, imprinted a passionate kiss upon her chaste nose.

"Such porochial perfection!" exclaimed Mr. Bumble, rapturously. "You know that Mr. Slout is worse to-night, my fascinator?"

"Yes," replied Mrs. Corney, bashfully.

"He can't live a week, the doctor says," pursued Mr. Bumble. "He is the master of this establishment; his death will cause a wacancy: that wacancy must be filled up. Oh, Mrs. Corney, what a prospect this opens! What a opportunity for a jining of hearts and housekeepings!"

Mrs. Corney sobbed.

"The little word?" said Mr. Bumble, bending over the bashful beauty. "The one little, little, little word, my blessed Corney?"

"Ye -- ye -- yes!" sighed out the matron.

The dove then turned up his coat-collar, and put on his cocked-hat; and, having exchanged a long and affectionate embrace with his future partner, once again braved the cold wind of the night: merely pausing, for a few minutes, in the male pauper's ward, to abuse them a little, with the view of satisfying himself that he could fill the office of workhouse-master with needful acerbity. Assured of his qualifications, Mr. Bumble left the building with a light heart, and bright visions of his future promotion: which served to occupy his mind until he reached the shop of the undertaker.