

Dickens's Characterisation of Children in *Oliver Twist*: An Empty Rhetoric?

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses Dickens's characterisation of children with the aim of showing whether the rhetoric he uses for that purpose is empty or not. This is carried out through an analysis of *Oliver Twist*, his first eponymous novel with a child hero featuring the unhappy parish children. This unhappy childhood, caught up in the Victorian workhouse system brought about by the Industrial Revolution, could not leave Dickens cold. On the contrary, that provoked strong reactions through his career both as a public orator and prose writer. The question that goes with this topic being not asked rhetorically, it is noteworthy that as a public orator and prose writer, Dickens inescapably relied on rhetorical devices to characterise those children. The experience of such a childhood by Dickens himself drove him to its recreation through a hyperbolic language and style as pinpointed in the development of this study. Indeed, to achieve its objective as regards the shallowness or depth of Dickens's characterisation of children, this analysis is based on the historical and formalistic approaches, thereby resulting in the assessment of Dickens as a writer of solid rhetoric. The analysis is divided into two parts: Dickens's recreation of childhood experiences, and Dickens's hyperbolic portrayal of children. The first part is thus devoted to the link between the recreation of the author's own childhood and of his characters; the second, to the rhetorical devices the author uses to portray his child characters. If in the first part the emphasis is laid on the biographical background of Little Oliver, in the second, it is on the conception of hyperbole, which is the apple of discord between this analysis and the previous ones.

INTRODUCTION

A century after Charles Dickens's death, his novels still raise questions. Such is that of Sylvère Monod during his 1973 lecture, 'Hard Times: an un-Dickensian novel?' In his reviews of *Oliver Twist*¹, a novel that *Hard Times* parallels both in setting and type of characters, Monod (1958; 1967) and other critics are all the same aware of the deliberately exaggerated style Dickens has been indicted for. There is, as such, a great likelihood that these accusations are mostly targeted at Dickens's characterisation of children for he is "uniquely celebrated as the novelist of childhood" (Grant, 1995, p. 92). As a writer who really wanted to persuade his audience on the children's plight in Victorian industrial England, Dickens could not escape what Abrams (1999, p. 58) terms "the inescapable reliance on rhetorical figures." These figures of persuasion are devices that pervade Dickens's career both as a public orator and prose writer. Prose writing is today

the main concern of rhetoric as Maclin (1994, p. 298) asserts:

In ancient Greece rhetoric meant the art of composing speeches to convince an audience. Later rhetoric also came to mean the art of writing effectively. Today the word is usually applied to writing rather than to speech, particularly to prose composition that is consciously organized in special ways. Sometimes rhetoric means language that uses many figures of speech.

When one looks at Dickens's life more closely and in accordance with Maclin's definition of rhetoric, one can assume that Dickens is overall a great rhetorician of modern times. In fact, through his career, the Victorian novelist delivered a number of speeches and composed much prose some of which are part of his plea for women and children, who were made more vulnerable by the Industrial Revolution during

the 19th century. This Industrial Revolution led to mass exodus to the industrial centres like London, Liverpool, Manchester, etc. Some of the people who came from the villages to the cities including children often did not find work, and were soon swallowed up by workhouses. Others could only slip into the vast whirlpool of the unemployed, and lived in a network of dark, dirty streets of ramshackle buildings, a maze that the wealthy never penetrated. Dickens, who knew clearly the plight of those children, came to champion them in his writings, which are full of rhetorical figures.

Written during the industrial era, *Oliver Twist* is Dickens's novel against the workhouse system and the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Actⁱⁱ. Yet, there seems to be a sharp contrast between the effects that the workhouse system had on its inmates as reported by Dickens and the aforementioned accusations against him. In fact, in his introduction to *Oliver Twist*, House (1970, pp. viii-xi), however, claims, "If the purpose were to show that the starvation and cruel ill-treatment of children in baby-farms and workhouses produced ghastly effects on their characters and in society, then *Oliver* should have turned out a monster or a wretched (...)" Between these claims, lies a question raised by this contrast, that is: is Dickens's characterisation of children an empty rhetoric? In other words, this analysis aims to show whether the words Dickens uses to portray children reflect reality whatsoever.

Based on limited evidence as a starting point for further investigation of this issue, I suppose that in making children his literary hobbyhorse in a bad and good way, Dickens uses many rhetorical devices to characterise them, and that for serious, ironic or comic effect, his rhetoric seems not to be empty. Given this criticism of which Dickens is the butt for his supposed grandiloquence, it is first worth signalling that hyperbole is a "bold overstatement, or the extravagant exaggeration of fact or of possibility (...) used either for serious or ironic or comic effect" (Abrams, 1999, p. 120). Since this analysis is as well targeted at Dickens's use of devices of addition (anaphora, hyperbole, polysyndeton, repetition...), I should first ask myself how he characterises children, and then try to see if this characterisation does not hold water.

Indeed, to achieve its objective as regards the shallowness or depth of Dickens's characterisation of children, this analysis is based on the historical and formalistic approaches, and is divided into two parts: Dickens's recreation of childhood experiences, and Dickens's hyperbolic portrayal of children. The first

part is thus devoted to the link between the recreation of the author's own childhood and of his characters; the second, to the rhetorical devices the author uses to portray his child characters. If in the first part the emphasis is laid on the biographical background of *Little Oliver*, in the second, it is on the conception of hyperbole, which is the apple of discord between this analysis and the previous ones.

Dickens's Recreation of Childhood Experiences

During his lecture at Charlottesville College on 12 May 1958 in front of representatives from other colleges, reports Nathan (1963, p. 69), William Faulkner, in a humorous tone, distinguished three sources from which a writer writes:

I think a writer writes from three sources. One is his own personal experience, which would include, of course, the books he reads, has read, his observation, and his imagination. I doubt if he himself can say just how much of each source he has drawn from for this particular page or story or book. I believe, though, that he is convinced that he can create much better people than God can.

Faulkner's aphorism finds its rationale in the social novel like Dickens's *Oliver Twist* as this fictitious reproduction of his unhappy childhood obeys the three sources to the letter. Today, *Oliver Twist*, in which Dickens frequently has recourse to rhetorical devices to characterise children, still pulls the emergency cord against child labour around the world, and needs to be revisited to this effect. If Dickens's novel is a sarcastic attack against the workhouse system, it is simply because the system was characterised by Malthusianism, a political economy based on birth decrease. In fact, what the 1834 workhouse reformers did was a way of undoing the family ties. This explains the narrator's exclamation and overt annoyance:

They (...) kindly undertook to divorce poor married people, in consequence of the great expense of a suit in Doctor's Commons; and, instead of compelling a man to support his family, as they had theretofore done, took his family away from him, and made him a bachelor!" (OT, p. 11)

As regards the first source pinpointed by Faulkner, bibliographical studies on Dickens tell it enough. What his child characters experience is partly what he experienced himself as a child. In fact, all his life

Dickens was so haunted by the spectre of suffering childhood that it became his preoccupation. Collins (1965, p. 177) says, "This preoccupation had roots of course (...) in his [Dickens's] memories of his own childhood." In his introduction to *Oliver Twist*, House (1970, p. x) adds, "Dickens's childhood had been such that all these feelings at different times in different degrees had been his." Moreover, a historian thinks there can be no doubt that the young Dickens once lived with his parents near the Cleveland Street Workhouse, that no longer exists, and that he had likely witnessed the cruelty of the workhouse at such close quarters. Thus, he could not have written so convincingly of Oliver

Twist's plight. He adds that Dickens was inspired to write *Oliver Twist* after his own next-door experiences of the dreaded Workhouse.

Dickens had also experienced something about the drudgery of child labour himself. In 1823, when his father lost his job and was sent to a debtors' prison, eleven year-old Dickens was sent to work in a blacking factory, pasting labels on bottles of shoe polish. He may well have worked alongside children from the Cleveland Street Workhouse. He made six shillings a week, but as a factory boy, he found life degrading. This is what Oliver experiences in the workhouse while picking oakum, which Dickens ironically calls a "useful trade" (OT, p. 11). After leaving Warren's Blacking Factory, Dickens started walking the slums of London such as Saffron Hill with its outcasts including urchins with their well-known speech habits. This means that he did not only experience unhappy childhood, but observed it until a later period as a novelist. Such observation to a novelist often makes room to his imagination.

In fact, when one refers to the way Dickens depicts the starvation of children in baby-farms and workhouses, one has good reasons for believing that such a starvation could have horrible effects on its victims. One of the wrong sides of the workhouse system is that the children Dickens portrays in *Oliver Twist* are from time to time ravenously hungry, and do not eat their full as evidenced by this hyperbolic passage:

The bowls never wanted washing. The boys polished them with their spoons till they shone again; and when they had performed this operation (which never took very long, the spoons being nearly as large as the bowls), they would sit staring at the copper, with such eager eyes, as if they could have devoured the very bricks of

which it was composed; employing themselves, meanwhile, in sucking their fingers most assiduously, with the view of catching up any stray splashes of gruel that might have been cast thereon. Boys have generally excellent appetites. Oliver Twist and his companions suffered the tortures of slow starvation for three months: at last they got so voracious and wild with hunger, that one boy, who was tall for his age, and hadn't been used to that sort of thing (for his father had kept a small cook-shop), hinted darkly to his companions, that unless he had another basin of gruel per diem, he was afraid he might some night happen to eat the boy who slept next him, who happened to be a weakly youth of tender age. He had a wild, hungry eye; and they implicitly believed him. A council was held; lots were cast who should walk up to the master after supper that evening, and ask for more; and it fell to Oliver Twist (...) Child as he was, he was desperate with hunger, and reckless with misery. He rose from the table; and advancing to the master, basin and spoon in hand, said: somewhat alarmed at his own temerity:

'Please, sir, I want some more.'

The master was a fat, healthy man; but he turned very pale. He gazed in stupefied astonishment on the small rebel for some seconds, and then clung for support to the copper. The assistants were paralysed with wonder; the boys with fear.

'What!' said the master at length, in a faint voice.

'Please, sir,' replied Oliver, 'I want some more.' (OT, pp. 12-13)

Such parts in this passage as "staring at the copper, with such eager eyes, as if they could have devoured the very bricks of which it was composed" and "catching up any stray splashes of gruel that might have been cast thereon" show the high degree of that starvation Little Oliver and his inmates are subjected to. It is better to suffer fast hunger compared to Oliver and his companions, who suffered the tortures of slow starvation for three months. Those tortures of slow starvation coupled up with the temptation to eat the boy who slept next to oneself express all Dickens's implicit hyperbole. As it happened, to be a good novelist, one must have a fertile fancy and be able to see something in it. There is nothing unusual about Dickens's show of imagination in characterisation. Newcomb (1989, p. i), however, argues, "Although the Dickens imagination is so

fertile and its products so overwhelmingly abundant, its limits are after all confined to a quite finite, if extensive, body of material for critics to respond to.”

Indeed, Dickens’s description of child labour and starvation in the workhouse is full of imagination, and therefore, gives critics ground for diverse interpretations. In his critical study on Dickens, Chesterton (1911, p. 244) writes, “All criticism tends too much to become criticism of criticism; and the reason is very evident.” As evident as it appears, I simultaneously support and object to House’s claim. My objection is due to his failure to pinpoint the fact that the effects produced by the starvation and cruel ill-treatment in baby-farms and workhouses on their inmates were even more than ghastly. Are not Little Dick and the like, who undergo more than ghastly effects, the victims of that workhouse system? House omits those effects thereby giving inattentive audience the impression of Dickens’s use of immoderate language.

I strongly believe that House did not pay attention to Dickens’s implicit intent to involve Little Oliver in fallings-out with the workhouse authorities and tormentor Noah Claypole in order to evict Oliver from the workhouse and let him play his full role as a hero. Dickens’s letting Little Oliver escape from the labyrinthine workhouse borders on hyperbole.

Dickens’s Hyperbolic Portrayal of Children

In characterising children, Dickens resorts to figures of addition, insistence, or repetition. All these devices converge upon what most critics find in Dickens, that is bombast, “a wordy and inflated diction that is patently disproportionate to the matter that it signifies” (Abrams, 1999, p. 25). It is also worth signalling that this resort betrays such linguistic levels as phonology, graphology, lexico-semantics... These figures intertwine as we explore his rhetoric. In a single sentence or passage his child characters may show different changes from being bad to worse, or good to better. It is notable that the more he insists on a fact the more he exaggerates. Discussing these collocations in Dickens, Hori (2004, p. 39) maintains, “(...) Dickens tends to exaggerate the appearance and character of a gentleman such as ‘one very stout gentleman, whose body and legs’ (...)” He does this not only with adult characters, but also with child characters. What is noteworthy is that Dickens’s use of hyperbole makes his readers giggle, and gives free rein to his humour.

No book of criticism whatever its length, can fail to point out the irony that characterises Dickens’s

novels. The fact is that he is first and foremost hailed as a famous humourist, and consequently his humour is inherently associated with irony. That is why one may use these words from Hardy (2008, p. 32) to say that in Dickens “the rhetoric goes beyond a joke as it draws attention to the observation of ordinary life (...)” In fact, right at the outset of *Oliver Twist*, one soon does perceive Dickens’s satire on the workhouse as the children’s birthplace:

Although I am not disposed to maintain that the being born in a workhouse, is in itself the most fortunate and enviable circumstance that can possibly befall a human being, I do mean to say that in this particular instance, it was the best thing for *Oliver Twist* that could by possibility have occurred. The fact is, that there was considerable difficulty in inducing *Oliver* to take upon himself the office of respiration, — a troublesome practice (...) (OT, p. 1)

There is of course a big paradox between Little *Oliver* supposed to enjoy a good birthplace, and the painful circumstances following his birth in the workhouse. As one can plainly see, the superlatives ‘the most fortunate and enviable – the best’ that Dickens uses for this child’s birth in the workhouse, his object of scorn, do not make sense. Irony being a kind of humour based on opposites, the phrases should have been ‘the most unfortunate and detestable – the worst’ to really express what Little *Oliver* experienced on his coming into the

world in the workhouse. In this particular instance, it is not, indeed, the image of a new-born infant that matters more in Dickens, the workhouse system does. The inability of the Victorian charity to meet the needs of the infant paupers of the workhouse is unquestionable. There is, however, a great likelihood and suspicion that he excessively used child characters simply as his tomahawk against the workhouse system. In his introduction to *Oliver Twist*, Chesterton (1963, p. x) states, “In creating many other modern things they created the modern workhouse, and when Dickens came out to fight, it was the first thing that he broke with his battle-axe.”

The aforementioned opening words of the third paragraph of *Oliver Twist* do show that through the use of paralipsis, a rhetorical device by which a speaker emphasizes something by pretending to pass over it, Dickens pretends to omit the fact that the being born in a Victorian workhouse spelt unhappiness for every child born therein. As one can notice it, he does this for rhetorical effect by

intermingling paralipsis and verbal irony in his use of the superlative 'best'. His words ostensibly show that the being born in the workhouse was the best thing for Little Oliver that could by possibility have occurred, but it was not in reality; it was rather the worst thing that could happen to those children. Hence, a reader informed about such devices is quite aware of the image Dickens wants to give to his child hero.

Dickens was in such a mood as he used to enlarge the image of children or dramatize their situation. In accordance with Ben Jonson's recreation of the medical theory of humours, we come to deduce that Dickens was sometimes in his humour, sometimes out of his humour. Dickens did master the complexities of Jonsonian humour because in the performance of *Every Man in His Humour*, Davis (1998, p. 129) says, "Dickens directed and played the role of Bobadil." As it could be seen, the fact that Little Oliver is born in an old workhouse and continues in a reformed one does not bore Dickens. What is boring to him is that from the former to the latter, the child remains under the same trials and tribulation.

Thumbing through Dickens's novels it is not surprising to find him mixing rhetorical devices. In fact, speaking of Little Oliver's first instances of orphanhood, Dickens mixes irony and hyperbole:

What an excellent example of the power of dress, young Oliver Twist was! Wrapped in the blanket which had hitherto formed his only covering, he might have been the child of a nobleman or a beggar; it would have been hard for the haughtiest stranger to have assigned him his proper station in society. But now that he was enveloped in the old calico robes which had grown yellow in the same service, he was badged and ticketed, and fell into his place at once – a parish child – the orphan of a workhouse – the humble, half – starved drudge – to be cuffed and buffeted through the world – despised by all, and – pitied by none. Oliver cried lustily. If he could have known – that he was an orphan, left to the tender mercies of church – warders and overseers, perhaps he would have cried louder. (OT, p. 3)

One realises that with such a parallelism or the use of similar structures "despised by all, and pitied by none" Dickens has one major failing, which is perissology or the fault of wordiness. One has to be out of his or her naturally normal humour or else in his conscious humour to write for emphasis such a

hyperbolic sentence as Dickens did for Little Oliver, who was "to be cuffed and buffeted through the world—despised by all, and pitied by none." There was understandably no need for Dickens to reinforce the phrase 'despised by all' with 'pitied by none' as they appear superfluous and hyperbolic. Yet he took pleasure in writing them as we do in reading them. There is, in fact, no one who is despised by all; there is always a Good Samaritan somewhere. Such a use of hyperbole bites both Victorian officials and Dickens's readers.

Dickens's humour crystallises tension, and enhances the intensity of depression that takes over the narrator. With less wariness, the author seems not to establish the subtle differences between those who are hated by everybody, and those who are hated by some people. In the complaint, "Everybody hates me. Oh! Sir, don't, don't pray be cross to me!" (OT, p. 28), Little Oliver concurs with his narrator on what the latter says about the child's social status. This hyperbolic style is all the same obvious when Mr. Brownlow extends a warm welcome to the suffering Little Oliver, "Here, a bed was prepared, without loss of time, in which Mr. Brownlow saw his young charge carefully and comfortably deposited; and here, he was tended with a kindness and solicitude that knew no bounds." (OT, p. 79).

What is worth noting as a hyperbole is the way the boy is tended. The boundless character of such kindness and solicitude would matter if the care were not administered to the child under the roof of Mr. Brownlow and his housekeeper Mrs. Bedwin or at the Maylies'. We understand quite well that kind of care, that of old people towards a little

affectionate creature. Little Oliver's sorry plight from the workhouse to London would urge any novelist to add grandiloquence and colours to his description. The motive in doing that is nothing but the awareness of the child's situation that needs no other alternative than some hyperbole for the sake of persuading even the careless audience.

Hyperboles are leitmotifs that are repeated like refrains when one tackles Dickens's characterisation of whether children or grown-up people. His extreme exaggerations of Little Oliver's trait as exceptional as they appear can hardly reduce a reader to believing in their realism. The old gentleman, Mr Brownlow, who runs to the boy's rescue soon realises his wretchedness. However, the old gentleman had never known the boy as such, and is not utterly convinced of the words he hears from him as he seeks to hear more:

You say you are an orphan, without a friend in the world; all the inquiries I have been able to make, confirm the statement. Let me hear your story; where you come from; who brought you up; and how you got into the company in which I found you. Speak the truth, and you shall not be friendless while I live. (OT, p. 100)

As one can notice, nowhere in the novel is this hyperbole expressed as such by Little Oliver himself, who rather refers to the fact that he had no father, no mother, and no sister without mentioning Monks, his 'wicked' half-brother. Mr Brownlow should have made his inquiries throughout the child's close relations before extending them to the latter's friends. Being an orphan without a friend or an acquaintance in the world is a state that is beyond all beliefs. Therefore, such a hyperbole characterising Dickens's portrayal of the child, not grounded on facts, is derived from the information the old gentleman had been asking from the child's detractors like Mr Bumble.

Mr Bumble is even badly surprised at the cost of the boy exclaiming in his Cockney English, "Oliver! — seventy shillings—one hundred and forty sixpences! — and all for a naughty orphan which nobody can't love" (OT, p. 19). Contrary to Bumble's declarations, an orphan is rather a child who draws public attention especially when he or she is not a scoundrel or a rascal. Little Oliver is not a suchlike orphan; this child instead meets a lot of benefactors. Therefore, an 'orphan whom nobody can love' does not live on this earth, and such is a hyperbole that is beyond all beliefs as well. Examples of exaggerated language are everywhere in the novel as in the sentence, "They [children] had been beaten, and starved, and shut up together, many and many a time" (OT, p. 51). This sentence uses another figure

of addition, that is polysyndeton, that excessive use of the conjunction 'and' where one is enough. On the care Little Oliver is given under Mr. Brownlow's roof, Dickens writes with the same extra conjunction, "Weak, and thin, and pallid, he awoke at last from what seemed to have been a long and troubled dream. Feebly raising himself in the bed, with his head resting on his trembling arm, he looked anxiously around" (OT, p. 79).

Like Dolabella in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, who describes Emperor Antony to Cleopatra with such words as "his voice was property/As all the tuned spheres" (Act 5, Scene 2), Dickens shows Little Oliver, "setting up as loud a cry

as could reasonably have been expected from a male infant (...) a voice, for a much longer space of time than three minutes and a quarter" (OT, p. 2). How does it happen that a new-born child's voice could be so stentorian? This style is nothing but part of Dickens's high-sounding language with little meaning. His rationale for such grandiloquence, we will not be able to justify it enough, is purposely more literary than founded on fact. Such a characterisation of a new-born with a loud voice is arguably Dickens's way of making himself heard at all the spheres of Victorian society. A child hero like Little Oliver who was not meant to remain longer in the workhouse would cry louder so as to shake it to its foundations.

Readers should not, however, get novelist Dickens wrong because in a literary work it sometimes needs clinching the nail in one's readers' stomachs and driving the point home so as to whet their reading appetites. Should someone be given a digestive shock, they will eat with relish. The patent fact is that Dickens's prose writings are still well devoured. Eagleton (2005, p. 145) describes Dickens's prose style as being "full of hyperbole, extravagant gestures, unpredictable connections, rapid thumbnail sketches, melodramatic explanations, abrupt shifts of tone and theatrical display."

To these exaggerations, pathos is added. Pathos being an appeal to the emotions and the sympathetic imagination, as well as to beliefs and values, Brook (1970, p. 46) states, "Dickens sometimes made too strong an appeal to the emotions." Dickens's sense of humour and pathos are among others, elements that define his style. They are interconnected as each plays the role of referee for the other when he portrays children. If through humour he goes beyond the mere emotion that his readers may feel, pathos comes as a balance or a stop to his jocularity. He cannot ease children's plight without first characterising them as pathetic. One

of the things for which Dickens has been indicted is pathos. Chesterton disclaims this; for him (1911, p. 53), however, "It is not true, as is commonly said, that the Dickens pathos as pathos is bad." Chesterton (1911, p. 48) has his opinion on pathos as expressed in Dickens's novel:

A modern realist describing the dreary workhouse (...) would have made all the boys in the workhouse pathetic by making them all pessimists. (...) *Oliver Twist* is not pathetic because he is a pessimist. *Oliver Twist* is pathetic because he is an optimist.

Dickens's tendency to exaggerate things is understandably more virtual than real. In other words, his exaggeration is first meant for art for art's sake to support House's assumptions further up. His insistence in portraying children shows his power of imagination. That is, his inner thoughts or emotions towards his social surroundings are symbolically reflected in this insistence, for he aims to attack or despise the adults who badly influence children's life and fortune. For this reason, this technical device is fundamental for Dickens to develop his vision of the world that surrounds him. That is why he contrastingly writes about the children in Victorian society.

Repetition in Dickens's novels is also defined as anaphora when it comes to portray children. It is first and foremost worth being aware like Brook (1970, p. 30) that "From time to time Dickens made use of the figure of speech known to medieval rhetoricians as epanaphora, a series of parallel phrases each beginning with the same word or group of words. Epanaphora is another term for anaphora. Anaphora is the repetition of a word or a phrase at the beginning of consecutive clauses, lines, or sentences. It is used by Dickens in such a moment of tension that expresses the increasingly-high voltage between Little Oliver and the tormenting Noah. About Little Oliver's anger, Dickens writes, "His breast heaved; his attitude was erect; his eye bright and vivid; his whole person changed, as he stood glaring over the cowardly tormentor who now lay crouching at his feet" (OT, p. 44).

A child is not the only creature to lose temper in such a confrontation. That may happen to all of us readers. In fact, in accordance with the reader's response theory, Dickens's use of anaphora leaves the readers heartbroken in front of children's plight. In this scene describing Little Oliver's fight against Noah Dickens uses semicolons and appositions. Such pauses lengthier than in the case of commas, are more efficient to prolong Oliver's agony.

If prolixity is a general defect in Victorians, perissology is peculiar to Dickens insofar as he often adds to his sufficiently expressed portrayal of child characters, other terms that are superabundant. Such a way of writing which could come from no pen but his, generally results in gradation be it an ascending or descending enumeration. For instance, when making a show of reifying Little Oliver, Dickens writes, "he was badged and ticketed, and fell into his place at once—a parish child—the orphan of a workhouse—the humble, half-starved drudge—to be cuffed and buffeted through the world (...)" (OT, p. 3).

Dickens's gradational portray of his children displays a scale of successive changes, stages, or degrees. In doing so, he sometimes uses zeugma with a static verb like 'to be' which applies to more than two other independent clauses, as in the following example in Chapter XVIII where Oliver passed his time in the improving society of his reputable friends, "Oliver was but too glad to make himself useful; too happy to have some faces, however bad, to look upon; too desirous to conciliate those about him when he could honestly do so" (OT, p. 134). In this instance one realises that this gradation is as ascending as Little Oliver's image, which worsens from firstly an apparently safe parish child to an orphan of a workhouse and so on. In other words, this gradation shows how being born in the workhouse drops the child out of the frying-pan into the fire. Being an orphan especially in Victorian England as seen in Dickens's novels, was quite a predicament because all the sorrowful situations enumerated above would affect one's life.

Whether it lacks colour or size, Dickens's use of gradation is even so rich in tone and feelings. With gradations of feeling he shows the inability of Little Oliver at the end of the falling-out with his abductors to do anything to get rid of them, but rather to surrender. The image of the child that the author offers thereupon is too much alarming:

Weak with recent illness; stupefied by the blows and the suddenness of the attack; terrified by the fierce growling of the dog, and the brutality of the man; overpowered by the conviction of the bystanders that he really was the hardened little wretch he was described to be; what could one poor child do! (OT, p. 112)

The tone of the description is the more so alarming as it is likely to bring tears to an emotional reader owing to the vulnerable nature of the child. Physical weakness, low spirits, and helplessness grabbed hold of him as evidenced by Dickens's use of these adjectives

"weak; stupefied; terrified" which come before the nouns "illness; suddenness of the attack; the fierce growling of the dog" all bearing a wicked sense.

Dickens plays on different linguistic levels to characterise children. At the phonological level, one realises that Dickens endows his children's detractors with such a defective utterance as the latter mispronounce words describing children. In fact, the taunting Noah Claypole uses the neologism "Work'us" (OT, p. 31) twelve times in the novel to

jeer at Little Oliver. It is not, in fact ‘work’us’, but ‘work for us’ in view of the hard labour and ill-treatment he is subjected to. It reads about Little Oliver that “Charlotte treated him ill, because Noah did; and Mrs. Sowerberry was his decided enemy, because Mr. Sowerberry was disposed to be his friend” (OT, p. 42).

At the graphological level, for example, we may see capital letters where they are not supposed to be as evidenced in the sentence, “The next morning, the public were once informed that Oliver Twist was again To Let” (OT, p. 22). For Brook (1970, p. 42), these “initial capitals are used to indicate over-emphatic speech” (p. 42). One can now understand that the child’s reduction to an item of goods had then become the talk of the suburbs of London. At the lexico-semantic level, words that should not go together may be deliberately brought together. Hence, it is written that Little Oliver was “sociably flogged” (OT, p. 15), which is an oxymoronic use.

Dickens’s characterisation of Little Oliver as a speaker of good English does not let him avoid scrutiny and go unnoticed by meticulous critics. Monod (1967, p. 133) has this to say about Little Oliver’s language

Several critics have rightly protested against the purity of both language and feeling which Oliver simply could not have acquired in the workhouse, where religion and morals were not taught, and where the only kind of language spoken was that of Bumble, superbly picturesque and entertaining, but fundamentally ungrammatical and corrupted. (p. 133)

Such a purity of language is somewhat surprising to every inquisitive reader. In fact, owing to the fact that from his birth to his adoption by Mr. Brownlow, he has not been to any school, and could not therefore be well up grammatically, Little Oliver was expected to speak broken English. However, his purity of language and whatever is Dickens’s pure imagination.

CONCLUSION

This article was premised upon the investigation of Dickens’s characterisation of children in *Oliver Twist* so as to find out whether such portrayal of his is an empty rhetoric or not. After close scrutiny, his characterisation proves not an empty one. The analysis of *Oliver Twist* has revealed that Dickens’s portrayal of children is but a deliberate exaggeration,

but with a rhetorical intent as I have found out that he does not exaggerate unintentionally. Yet, to successfully convey his message on the sorry plight of the children, he often intermingles art for art’s sake with commitment. The effect thereof is that he is off and on misunderstood by those who approach him on a literal basis.

Notice has also been given that exaggeration is one of the rhetorical devices that Dickens overuses for the purpose of efficiently conveying his message. I have found out that for the issues addressed by Dickens, exaggeration was, in fact, very significant. In fact, it invigorates his novel by erasing out all dullness and attracts the reader during the contact with the text. This brings me to consider a good discussion of this carried out by Taine (1911, p. 5), who considers Dickens’s perception (neatness, pace and force) both as the cause of his merits and flaws, or his power and excess.

What we readers of Dickens must bear in our minds is that creative literature is not mere history. Even though Dickens based his story of *Oliver Twist* on the Victorian State Welfare, he, as a creative writer, had to blend fact and fiction, and to mix business with pleasure. No rhetoric is not worthy of note if it does not do so, and if it does not serve the hero’s interests in a work of literature. I have also found no wonder in Dickens’s characterisation of his child hero as a good English speaker compared with other child characters. In fact, owing to the fact that from his birth to his adoption by Mr. Brownlow, Little Oliver has not been to any school, and could not therefore be well up grammatically, Dickens’s novel has been judged unrealistic. I have, moreover, realised that those critics who protest against the purity of Little Oliver’s language fail to pinpoint the pure language of the hero’s inmates of the workhouse like Little Dick. In a nutshell I deduce from this evidence that Dickens’s portrayal of children in various aspects, holds water.

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ⁱ *Oliver Twist* is abbreviated in *OT* for in-text referencing.

ⁱⁱ *The Poor Laws* refer to the allowance of a financial help for the poorest in England and in the rest of the United Kingdom in the 18th century and 19th centuries.