



EDUCATION AND SOCIAL MOBILITY
“OLIVER TWIST” AND “MIDDLEMARCH”

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ANNOTATSIYA: Ushbu annotatsiya Charlz Dikkensning “Oliver Twist” va Jorj Eliotning “Middlemarch” romanlarida ta’lim va ijtimoiy harakatchanlik masalasining badiiy ifodasini o‘rganishga bag‘ishlanadi. Har ikkala asar XIX asr Angliya jamiyatida shakllangan qat’iy sinfiy tuzilma, ijtimoiy tengsizlik va cheklangan ta’lim imkoniyatlari sharoitida shaxsning jamiyatdagi mavqeini o‘zgartirishga bo‘lgan intilishlarini aks ettiradi. Romanlar ijtimoiy kelib chiqish inson taqdirini belgilovchi asosiy omil bo‘lgan jamiyatda ta’limning ijtimoiy ko‘tarilishdagi o‘rni va imkoniyatlarini yoritadi. Oliver Twist romanida ta’lim masalasi kambag‘allik, yetim bolalar muassasalari va mehnat uylari tizimi bilan uzviy bog‘liq holda tasvirlanadi. Oliverning axloqiy pokligi va bilimga ochiqligi uning past ijtimoiy qatlamdan chiqishiga qaramay, insoniy qadr-qimmatni saqlab qolish mumkinligini ko‘rsatadi. Asarda ta’limdan mahrumlik kambag‘al qatlam vakillarining ijtimoiy harakatchanligini cheklovchi asosiy to‘siqlardan biri sifatida talqin qilinadi. Middlemarch romanida esa ta’lim va intellektual rivojlanish jamiyatda mavqe orttirish va shaxsiy o‘shishning muhim omili sifatida tasvirlanadi. Doroteya Bruk, Tertius Lidgeyt kabi qahramonlar bilim, kasbiy malaka va axloqiy mas’uliyat orqali jamiyatda o‘z o‘rnini topishga intiladilar. Biroq an’anaviy



qarashlar, ijtimoiy bosim va sinfiy cheklovlar ularning ijtimoiy harakatchanligiga to'sqinlik qiladi. Roman ta'limning nafaqat moddiy muvaffaqiyat, balki ma'naviy kamolot uchun ham muhim ekanini ta'kidlaydi. Har ikkala asar orqali mualliflar ta'limni ijtimoiy tengsizlikni yengish vositasi sifatida ko'rsatadilar, biroq bu jarayon jamiyatning ochiqligi va adolatli tizimiga bog'liqligini ham ochib beradilar. Romanlar ijtimoiy harakatchanlik shaxsiy sa'y-harakat bilan bir qatorda ijtimoiy sharoitlar bilan chambarchas bog'liq ekanini ilgari suradi.

Kalit so'zlar: *ta'lim, ijtimoiy harakatchanlik, ijtimoiy tengsizlik, sinfiy tuzilma, viktoriya davri jamiyati, kambag'allik, imkoniyatlar tengligi, axloqiy tarbiya, bilim va jamiyat, shaxsiy rivojlanish, yetim bolalar tizimi, kasbiy malaka, intellektual kamolot, ijtimoiy bosim, jamiyatdagi mavqe*

АННОТАЦИЯ: *В данной аннотации рассматривается проблема образования и социальной мобильности в романах Чарльза Диккенса «Оливер Твист» и Джордж Элиот «Миддлмарч». Оба произведения отражают социальную реальность Англии XIX века, характеризующуюся жёсткой классовой структурой, социальным неравенством и ограниченным доступом к образованию. Через судьбы персонажей авторы показывают, каким образом образование влияет на формирование личности и возможности изменения социального положения. В романе «Оливер Твист» тема образования раскрывается в контексте бедности, системы работных домов и сиротских учреждений. Отсутствие полноценного образования значительно ограничивает социальную мобильность представителей низших слоёв общества. Однако нравственная чистота и стремление Оливера к лучшей жизни подчёркивают, что личные качества и моральные ценности могут противостоять социальным ограничениям. В романе «Миддлмарч» образование и интеллектуальное развитие представлены как важные факторы социального и личностного роста. Такие персонажи, как Доротея Брук и Терций Лидгейт, стремятся реализовать себя через знания, профессиональную деятельность и нравственную ответственность. Тем не*



менее традиционные взгляды, общественное давление и классовые барьеры существенно ограничивают их возможности социальной мобильности. В целом оба произведения подчёркивают значимость образования как средства преодоления социального неравенства, одновременно указывая на зависимость социальной мобильности от общественных условий и структуры общества. Авторы приходят к выводу, что личные усилия должны сочетаться с социальными изменениями для достижения подлинного прогресса.

Ключевые слова: образование, социальная мобильность, социальное неравенство, классовая структура, викторианское общество, бедность, равенство возможностей, нравственное воспитание, знания и общество, личностное развитие, сиротские учреждения, профессиональная деятельность, интеллектуальное развитие, общественное давление..

ABSTRACT: This abstract examines the theme of education and social mobility in Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* and George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. Both novels portray nineteenth-century English society, characterized by rigid class divisions, social inequality, and limited access to education. Through their characters' experiences, the authors explore the role of education in personal development and the possibility of changing one's social position. In *Oliver Twist*, the issue of education is closely connected with poverty, the workhouse system, and orphan institutions. The lack of proper education severely restricts social mobility among the lower classes. Nevertheless, Oliver's moral integrity and desire for a better life suggest that personal values and character can challenge social limitations. In *Middlemarch*, education and intellectual growth are presented as essential factors for social advancement and self-realization. Characters such as Dorothea Brooke and Tertius Lydgate seek fulfillment through knowledge, professional achievement, and moral responsibility. However, traditional attitudes, social pressure, and class barriers hinder their efforts toward upward mobility. Overall, both novels emphasize education as a key means of addressing



social inequality while also highlighting that social mobility depends not only on individual effort but on broader social structures. The authors suggest that genuine progress requires a combination of personal ambition and societal change.

Keywords: *education, social mobility, social inequality, class structure, Victorian society, poverty, equality of opportunity, moral education, knowledge and society, personal development, orphan institutions, professional achievement, intellectual growth, social pressure.*

Introduction

Education and social mobility constitute central concerns in Victorian literature, reflecting the profound social inequalities and rigid class hierarchies of nineteenth-century England. During this period, access to education was unevenly distributed across social classes, functioning not only as a means of intellectual development but also as a mechanism that either enabled or restricted social advancement. Literary works of the era frequently interrogate the extent to which education could challenge inherited social positions within a society largely governed by birth, wealth, and institutional power.

*This study examines the representation of education and social mobility in Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1838) and George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871–1872), two novels that engage critically with Victorian social structures from distinct class perspectives. Dickens focuses on the marginalized underclass shaped by poverty, workhouse institutions, and systemic neglect, exposing how the absence or distortion of education reinforces social immobility. Eliot, by contrast, situates her narrative within a provincial middle-class environment, where education appears more accessible yet remains constrained by gender norms, economic pressures, and social expectations. Together, these novels offer complementary critiques of a society in which education is unevenly deployed as both a promise of progress and a tool of limitation.*

*By placing *Oliver Twist* and *Middlemarch* in dialogue, this article argues that Victorian education operates less as a universal pathway to social mobility than*



as a class-dependent instrument that reflects broader institutional failures and social contradictions. While Dickens highlights the near impossibility of upward mobility for the poor without extraordinary intervention, Eliot presents a more nuanced depiction of limited mobility within the middle class, revealing how personal ambition often collides with structural and cultural barriers. Through this comparative analysis, the article demonstrates how both authors challenge the Victorian ideal of merit-based advancement and expose the enduring tension between education, class, and social power.

Methods

*This research adopts an interpretive qualitative methodology rooted in comparative literary criticism and informed by socio-historical analysis. Rather than treating the selected novels as isolated aesthetic texts, the study approaches *Oliver Twist* and *Middlemarch* as culturally embedded narratives that engage with contemporary discourses on education, class formation, and institutional authority. The methodological framework prioritizes analytical depth over descriptive repetition, enabling an examination of how educational structures are narratively constructed and ideologically positioned within each work.*

The analytical procedure is structured around three interrelated dimensions: institutional representation, narrative mediation, and ideological implication. First, institutional representation is examined through the portrayal of formal and informal educational systems, including workhouse regimes, professional training, domestic instruction, and self-directed learning. Second, narrative mediation focuses on the ways narrators, plot organization, and irony shape readers' perceptions of educational legitimacy and social worth. Third, ideological implication assesses how these narrative strategies reflect, reinforce, or challenge dominant Victorian assumptions regarding merit, respectability, and class stability.

Comparative analysis is conducted synchronically rather than chronologically, allowing thematic intersections to emerge without imposing a linear model of historical development. This approach facilitates a nuanced comparison



between Dickens's depiction of structural exclusion and Eliot's exploration of constrained agency, without reducing either text to a single sociological argument. Attention is also given to narrative silences and contradictions, particularly where educational potential fails to translate into sustained social mobility.

To contextualize the literary analysis, the study integrates relevant historical materials, such as contemporary debates on education reform, social legislation, and professionalization, not as empirical data but as interpretive frameworks. This interdisciplinary positioning strengthens the analytical rigor of the study while preserving the autonomy of literary interpretation. Overall, the methodology enables a critical interrogation of education as a culturally coded mechanism within Victorian fiction, emphasizing its role in negotiating power, identity, and social limitation.

Results

*The analysis of Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1838) and George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871–1872) reveals distinct mechanisms by which education interacts with social mobility in Victorian society, demonstrating both structural constraints and ideological biases embedded in literary narratives of the period.*

Educational Deprivation and Institutional Neglect

*In *Oliver Twist*, the workhouse system, formalized under the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, is depicted as an institution that actively limits intellectual and moral development. The results indicate that Dickens portrays education as a nominal construct: basic literacy or moral instruction is systematically withheld, reflecting historical critiques of early Victorian welfare policies (Thane, 1990; 1830s–1840s). This institutional neglect produces a socially immobile underclass, wherein upward mobility is possible only through extraordinary circumstances, such as Oliver's discovery of his birthright, rather than through acquired skills or merit.*

Conditional Mobility in the Middle Class

Middlemarch presents a more nuanced distribution of educational opportunity, particularly for men of the middle class. Characters such as Tertius



Lydgate benefit from professional education but encounter structural and personal limitations, including financial dependency and marital obligations. Similarly, Fred Vincy's partial education provides social recognition but fails to ensure career success until supplemented by practical experience. These results illustrate that, despite broader access to schooling and professional training in post-Reform Act England (1832–1870s), education remains insufficient to guarantee consistent upward mobility (Green, 1980; Lawson, 1988).

Gendered Disparities and Educational Marginalization

The results emphasize significant gender disparities in educational access. While Dickens largely omits female perspectives on formal education, Eliot highlights the constrained intellectual development of women within domestic and superficial schooling systems. Dorothea Brooke's case illustrates how educational attainment is ideologically restricted, aligning with historical patterns prior to the late-nineteenth-century expansion of women's higher education, such as the establishment of Girton College in 1869 (Dyhouse, 2010). Education, therefore, functions as a gendered mechanism, facilitating male advancement while systematically marginalizing female potential.

Education as Ideologically Framed

Across both novels, education is revealed as ideologically framed rather than a neutral mechanism of progress. Dickens portrays education as a tool manipulated by institutions to enforce social conformity, while Eliot presents it as a socially conditioned resource, whose efficacy is contingent on marriage, class expectations, and moral propriety. These results corroborate historical scholarship on Victorian education, which emphasizes its role in reproducing class structures and reinforcing social hierarchies despite reformist rhetoric (Mitch, 1982; 1870 Elementary Education Act).

Comparing the two novels, the results indicate a temporal and class-based distinction: Dickens emphasizes structural exclusion during early industrialization, while Eliot explores the nuanced frustrations of partial reform and expanding



middle-class opportunities. Despite these differences, both works converge in demonstrating that education alone cannot overcome entrenched social stratification; it is mediated by institutional, cultural, and gendered factors that ultimately define the limits of social mobility.

Discussion

*The present analysis demonstrates that Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* and George Eliot's *Middlemarch* do not merely depict education as a thematic concern, but embed it within distinctive ideological frameworks that reflect and critique Victorian social structures. Scholarly responses to these portrayals reveal both convergence and divergence in interpretive traditions, illuminating the unique narrative strategies of each work.*

Oliver Twist: Institutional Critique and Moral Economy

*Dickens's *Oliver Twist* has been widely interpreted as a systemic critique of early Victorian social policy, particularly the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. Critics such as Philip Collins argue that Dickens uses the novel to expose the dehumanizing effects of institutional poverty, asserting that "workhouse schooling" functions not as education at all, but as a means of social containment. Collins's work emphasizes how Dickens's ironic narrative technique — exemplified in the famously misnamed chapter "Treats of Oliver Twist's Growth, Education, and Board" — exposes the hypocrisy of a system that claims to educate while systematically depriving its subjects of substantive learning.*

*Similarly, John Bowen highlights the socio-legal framework underpinning Dickens's critique, noting that the novel dramatizes the moral economy of charity and punishment. For Bowen, workhouses and orphan narratives illustrate not individual misfortune alone but the ideological failure of a society that claims to prioritize reform but instead reproduces inequality. This reading aligns with the present findings: in *Oliver Twist*, education is less a vehicle for empowerment than a symbol of institutional neglect.*



However, Juliet John offers a contrasting perspective: she contends that Dickens's focus is as much moral as structural. In her view, Dickens frames education within a moral economy where kindness, individual conscience, and social responsibility matter as much as institutional reform. While this critique acknowledges Dickens's social concerns, the present analysis suggests that the narrative's structural emphasis on institutional barriers — particularly in the lives of characters like Oliver and the Artful Dodger — indicates a broader critique of systemic constraints rather than purely moral commentary.

*Critics note that Charles Dickens's works are not just stories but realistic novels that criticize society. In *Oliver Twist*, Dickens presents issues such as the class system, the gap between rich and poor, and lack of education in Victorian England.*

Dickens portrays the life of poor and orphaned children, their struggles, and social injustice. He also emphasizes moral values, kindness, and social support as crucial for improvement

Middlemarch: Agency, Structure, and Social Texture

*In *Middlemarch*, Eliot's representation of education and mobility has drawn admiration for its psychological depth and socio-cultural sensitivity. George Levine argues that Eliot portrays education not as an abstract good but as a socially mediated resource, shaped by gender, marriage, and provincial norms. Lydgate's scientific ambition and Fred Vincy's pragmatic struggles illustrate how professional education intersects with economic pressures and personal relationships, supporting Levine's view that education in *Middlemarch* is conditional and relational, not merely formal.*

*Rosemary Ashton expands this reading, emphasizing *Middlemarch*'s "social texture" — the intricate web of economic, intellectual, and interpersonal forces that frame educational attainment. Ashton suggests that Eliot's narrative strategy avoids simplistic moral judgment; instead, it situates characters within complex ethical economies wherein education intersects with duty, desire, and constraint. This perspective aligns with the findings that *Middlemarch* presents a nuanced view of*



mobility: education opens possibilities but cannot alone surmount entrenched social and cultural limits.

In contrast, Dinah Birch cautions against treating Eliot's educational themes as overly diffuse. She argues that Middlemarch disperses its critique across multiple narrative arcs, which can obscure a cohesive ideological position on education. Nevertheless, the strength of Eliot's representation lies precisely in this diffusion: rather than offering a singular critique, the novel maps diverse educational experiences — from Dorothea's intellectual idealism to Mary Garth's practical learning — and thereby expands the interpretive space beyond the more overt social indictment found in Oliver Twist.

Gender and Education: Feminist Perspectives

Feminist scholars have extended the discussion by examining how gender shapes educational possibilities within both novels. Sheila Roberts and Susan Stanford Friedman emphasize that Middlemarch reveals the systematic marginalization of women's education. Dorothea Brooke's limited access to formal intellectual training constrained by societal expectations of femininity and domesticity — exemplifies what Friedman terms "patriarchal containment", where women's intellectual potential is recognized but socially devalued. This interpretation is consistent with historical developments: significant expansions in women's higher education did not occur until later in the century (Girton College, established 1869), long after the period depicted in Eliot's novel.

While Oliver Twist does not foreground women's educational experiences to the same extent, modern critics argue that Dickens's omission itself is revealing. The near absence of female perspectives on formal learning reflects a broader Victorian narrative tendency to marginalize women's intellectual struggles, particularly among the urban poor. This silence invites further inquiry into the ways Oliver Twist implicitly reinforces gendered patterns of educational exclusion.

Ideological and Comparative Implications



*Across critical traditions, many scholars — including Terry Eagleton and Laurence Lerner — frame Victorian education in fiction as an ideological construct rather than a neutral instrument of individual betterment. Eagleton’s Marxist critique, for example, argues that literature of the period often reproduces dominant class ideologies even as it purports to critique them. From this perspective, both *Oliver Twist* and *Middlemarch* problematize the promise of education: Dickens reveals how institutional constraints nullify educational potential for the poor, while Eliot illustrates how social expectations and economic pressures limit its efficacy for the middle class.*

*What distinguishes these novels from other Victorian works — such as Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* or William Makepeace Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* — is their structural integration of education into social critique. *Jane Eyre* foregrounds individual moral development through education and self-respect, and *Vanity Fair* satirizes social ambition, but neither foregrounds the institutional mechanisms of education and mobility with the same systematic intensity found in Dickens and Eliot. Where Brontë’s *Bildungsroman* centers on personal moral agency, and Thackeray’s satire disperses social critique across a broad cast, Dickens and Eliot embed educational inequality within the very architecture of their fictional societies.*

*Critic Virginia Woolf highly praised *Middlemarch*.*

*According to Woolf, *Middlemarch* is “one of the few English novels written for fully grown readers.”*

This means the novel stands out for its complex social analysis, deep psychological portrayal of characters, and depiction of personal development.

*Woolf appreciates Eliot’s realistic depiction of Victorian society and the intricate connection between personal ambitions, moral values, and social restrictions. In conclusion, the analysis shows that scholarly interpretations converge on the idea that Victorian fiction treats education as a complex cultural construct. However, *Oliver Twist* is distinguished by its institutional indictment of education as a means of containment, and *Middlemarch* by its textural exploration of education’s*



conditional promise. Together, these critical voices demonstrate that Victorian novels do not merely reflect social realities, but actively interrogate the ideological tensions surrounding education, class, and agency.

Conclusion

*The comparative study of Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* and George Eliot's *Middlemarch* demonstrates that education, while often idealized as a pathway to social mobility, operates within a tightly structured framework of class, gender, and institutional constraints in Victorian England. In *Oliver Twist*, Dickens foregrounds the systemic deprivation of the underclass, using workhouse education as a symbol of institutional neglect that perpetuates poverty and limits upward mobility. By contrast, Eliot's *Middlemarch* presents a more complex and nuanced portrayal, where education enables conditional opportunities for the middle class but remains constrained by economic pressures, marriage expectations, and social norms, particularly for women.*

The analysis further reveals that both novels offer a critique of the Victorian meritocratic ideal: Dickens highlights the near impossibility of social advancement for the poor absent extraordinary circumstances, while Eliot underscores the fragility of middle-class mobility even when formal education is attained. Feminist perspectives illustrate that gendered limitations further complicate access to meaningful education, as women's intellectual potential is recognized but institutionally devalued, particularly in the context of domestic and societal expectations.

By situating these novels within historical and legislative contexts — including the Poor Law Amendment Act (1834), the 1832 Reform Act, and the gradual expansion of middle-class professional training — the study confirms that Victorian fiction engages deeply with the ideological and structural mechanisms of social stratification. The works' distinctive approaches also highlight their originality: Dickens's emphasis on institutional critique contrasts with Eliot's



detailed mapping of conditional social mobility and the interplay of personal agency with structural limitations.

In sum, Oliver Twist and Middlemarch collectively demonstrate that education in Victorian literature is not a neutral instrument of progress but a socially mediated, ideologically charged force. These novels reveal how class, gender, and institutional power shape the effectiveness of education, and how literature can illuminate the complexities of social mobility. They remain vital for understanding both the historical realities of Victorian society and the enduring questions about education, equity, and opportunity.

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