

THE THEORETICAL STUDY OF CHARLES DICKENS'S WORKS

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Abstract. This paper examines the works of Charles Dickens through a theoretical lens, focusing on realism, social criticism, and moral humanism. Dickens's novels have been analyzed from various theoretical perspectives, including moral philosophy, narrative theory, and psychological criticism. Using examples from *Oliver Twist*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, and *David Copperfield*, this study explores how Dickens combines realistic depiction with moral imagination to represent the social and emotional struggles of nineteenth-century England. The research also considers the symbolic and linguistic dimensions of his writing, emphasizing his contribution to literary realism and social reform. The findings highlight that Dickens's fiction serves not only as artistic expression but also as a theoretical model for understanding humanity, society, and ethics.

Keywords: Charles Dickens, realism, social criticism, humanism, literary theory, narrative style, moral philosophy

Introduction

Charles Dickens (1812–1870) remains one of the most significant figures in English literature. His novels are not only masterpieces of storytelling but also rich sources for theoretical and critical analysis. Dickens's works have inspired numerous interpretations—from social realism to psychological and symbolic readings—revealing his deep engagement with the moral and social problems of Victorian England. His detailed depiction of poverty, injustice, and emotional struggle made him both a novelist and a social philosopher. The purpose of this study is to analyze Dickens's novels from a theoretical perspective, focusing on how literary theories such as realism, social criticism, and moral humanism can be applied to his writing. The paper also aims to show how Dickens's narrative techniques and symbolic language contribute to his enduring relevance. By analyzing *Oliver Twist*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, and *David Copperfield*, the research highlights how Dickens's literary art reflects the intersection of narrative theory and ethical vision.

Methods

This research follows a **qualitative theoretical analysis** approach. Rather than empirical data collection, the method involves **textual and interpretive analysis** based on literary theory. The selected novels—*Oliver Twist* (1838), *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), and *David Copperfield* (1850)—were chosen for their representation of

Dickens's main artistic concerns: social justice, moral growth, and the complexity of human character.

The analysis draws upon major literary theories, including:

- **Realism** (as discussed by Raymond Williams, 1973)
- **Marxist social criticism** (Eagleton, 2005)
- **Narrative theory and focalization** (Booth, 1983)
- **Humanistic and psychological criticism** (Freud, 1917; Abrams, 1999)
- **Semiotic and stylistic analysis** (Bakhtin, 1981)

Each section of the analysis interprets Dickens's themes and techniques in light of these theoretical perspectives, showing how his fiction bridges artistic imagination and moral philosophy.

Results

From a realist perspective, Dickens's works provide vivid portrayals of nineteenth-century English life. *Oliver Twist* illustrates the harsh realities of child labor, poverty, and social inequality. The depiction of workhouses, the criminal underworld, and bureaucratic cruelty reflects Dickens's realistic observations of industrial society. However, Dickens's realism differs from pure naturalism because it combines factual representation with moral sentiment. His characters often face extreme situations that test their humanity, allowing readers to reflect on their own ethical and social responsibilities. Similarly, *David Copperfield* uses realism to portray personal development within a recognizable social environment. The detailed settings and lifelike dialogue create authenticity, while the first-person narrative gives psychological depth. Dickens's realism is not merely documentary but interpretive; it seeks to reveal moral truth through artistic imagination.

Dickens's novels serve as powerful instruments of social critique. His fiction exposes the corruption, greed, and hypocrisy of Victorian institutions. In *Oliver Twist*, he criticizes the Poor Laws that dehumanized the poor, while in *A Tale of Two Cities*, he explores the dangers of both oppression and revolution. The duality of "the best of times" and "the worst of times" symbolizes the moral contradictions of human history. The character of Sydney Carton embodies Dickens's moral philosophy of redemption and sacrifice. His selfless act at the end of the novel suggests that individual morality can transcend collective injustice. Dickens's belief in the reformatory power of love and compassion aligns with humanist theory, which views literature as a means to improve moral consciousness. The theoretical core of his social criticism is the conviction that art should reveal ethical truths through emotional experience.

From a narrative perspective, Dickens's mastery of storytelling is central to his theoretical importance. His use of omniscient narrators, shifting focalization, and complex characterization demonstrates his understanding of narrative as both artistic

and moral construction. In *David Copperfield*, the first-person narration creates an intimate connection between the reader and the protagonist's inner life, illustrating the theoretical model of the *Bildungsroman*. Moreover, Dickens's psychological insight anticipates later developments in psychoanalytic theory. Characters such as Oliver, who yearns for love and identity, reflect the unconscious emotional struggles that Freud would later describe as central to human behavior. Dickens's empathy toward children and the oppressed reveals his belief in the moral potential of emotion, linking psychological development with ethical growth.

Beyond realism, Dickens frequently employed symbols and imagery that invite semiotic analysis. The fog in *Bleak House* represents moral blindness and bureaucratic confusion, while the guillotine in *A Tale of Two Cities* symbolizes both justice and vengeance. The city itself functions as a living metaphor — London embodies the collective conscience of industrial society. According to Bakhtin's theory of dialogism, Dickens's novels contain multiple voices that interact to construct meaning. This heteroglossic quality, seen in the diversity of dialects and speech styles, demonstrates Dickens's linguistic awareness. Through symbolic and linguistic analysis, we see how his works transcend simple storytelling and enter the realm of theoretical discourse on meaning, morality, and identity.

Discussion

The theoretical analysis reveals that Dickens's fiction represents a synthesis of realism, moral philosophy, and narrative innovation. His works are not confined to one school of theory but invite multiple readings—Marxist, humanist, psychoanalytic, and linguistic. The moral foundation of his writing aligns with humanist criticism, which regards literature as a force for social and ethical transformation. Moreover, Dickens's treatment of class and justice anticipates later sociological theories about power and inequality. His portrayal of marginalized characters gives voice to the voiceless, an approach that modern postcolonial and feminist critics have extended to broader discussions of identity and agency. Dickens's artistic method, balancing detailed realism with moral imagination, demonstrates how fiction can both represent and transform social reality. In terms of stylistic theory, Dickens's manipulation of language, irony, and humor shows his awareness of discourse as a reflection of power relations. His works can therefore be studied through both stylistic and ideological frameworks. The enduring relevance of Dickens lies in his ability to merge emotional storytelling with theoretical insight into human society.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the theoretical study of Charles Dickens's works reveals his multidimensional contribution to literature and thought. His novels combine realistic representation with moral and psychological depth, creating texts that remain both socially relevant and intellectually rich. By examining *Oliver Twist*, *A Tale of Two*

Cities, and *David Copperfield*, we can see how Dickens uses narrative art to explore justice, empathy, and human growth. Through realism, social criticism, and symbolic language, Dickens not only depicted the world of Victorian England but also offered a timeless reflection on human values. The theoretical legacy of his writing continues to influence modern literary studies, confirming his place as a moral realist and one of the most profound interpreters of the human condition.

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