

Crimes in the 19th Century London in Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*

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Abstract

The world of literature is the result of human's culture, where it can be the expression of one's life experience which is influenced by a certain society of certain period. Practically, literature can sometimes help readers in understanding the condition of the society. Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* as one of literary works that contains culture and life of Victorian era has described clearly about all the things that is going on in the 19th century of London. The novel satirizes the poor living condition, unemployment, poverty, and social class at that time. It also attacks the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 and the workhouse system that causes suffer to the poor and increases crime. Using sociological approach as one of the study that learns about the social condition of certain culture, Crimes in the 19th Century London in Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* is chosen as the title of the study is to find out the kinds of crimes exist in London and the causing factors that increase the number of crimes. The result of the study shows that the kind of crime exists in the 19th century of London as shown in *Oliver Twist* is pick-pocketing, thievery, robbery, burglary, house-breaking, and murder. While the causing factors that increase crime are unemployment and poverty, Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 and the workhouse, and social class and social gap.

Keywords: crimes, Victorian era, *Oliver Twist's* analysis, Charles Dickens, poor law amendment act, 19th century of London

INTRODUCTION

Literature is a kind of imaginative work performed in beautiful language. Literature is the result of human's culture, which refers to the beauty, gentleness, and also the reflection of life. Lucas (1993) states that each great work of literature creates 'it's own world', which is unique and seemingly distincts from 'everyday life'. However on the other hand, a literature may simply reflect one's life experience, which is influenced by certain society in a certain time and also contain social value, religion, phylosophy, etc. Literature has a function as social documentation, which is seen as a process of society and written in a certain time. Because of that, literature can sometimes help

readers in understanding the condition of the society.

Charles Dicken's *Oliver Twist* is one of the works of literature that gives a reflection of life and of the society. The story gives a simple reflection about social condition of Victorian England. The story of *Oliver Twist* is quite interesting. It occurs in 19th of London. The story tells and describes many things in London. It also comes up with many crimes experiences as the reflections of Victorian era in 19th century such as house-breaker, petty robbery, pick pocketing, and murderer. Those crimes in the story were done by the poor and unemployed people, for example, Mr. Bumble

who sells Oliver's identity to Monk for mere twenty pounds, Mr. Fagin who takes the poor children to crime, Dodger who steals Mr. Brownlow's pocket, and Sikes who murders Nancy. They, in this story, who live in poverty, get money from crimes to fulfill their needs.

On the other hand, Dickens also portrays the rich people in Victorian era through the characters of Mr. Brownlow, Mr. Grimwig, Dr. Losborne, and the Maylies. Dickens also tries to describe through *Oliver Twist* about social gap in Victorian era. He tries to say through the story that the poor become an entirely different race in the eyes of the rich.

Dickens who live at the same time where *Oliver Twist* was written, exposes the criminal world which is experienced by an innocent boy who lives in the lower class society and is uneducated but not influenced by people surrounds him to do crime. In *Oliver Twist*, Dickens describes clearly about crimes in London including the people who lived in London streets. Through *Oliver Twist*, Charles Dickens seems want to satirize the social condition in London especially in Victorian era. He gives his criticism about Victorian England. He encounters the characters of *Oliver Twist* as one of victims of industrial revolution in Victorian England. *Oliver Twist* is also characterized as an unfortunate orphan who is born in the Victorian world and brought to criminal world.

Oliver Twist is an interesting novel of nineteenth century which tells and reflects the social condition in Victorian era. The combination of its literary genre keeps the story entertaining and enjoyable. Moreover, the story is written based on Charles Dickens' life experience in Victorian era. Based on the background above, the writer is interested in analyzing deeply about crimes in London especially in Victorian era.

The main purposes of the study are (1) to know what kind of crimes happened in the 19th

century London as represented in *Oliver Twist*, and (2) to find out the causing factors of the crimes in 19th century London. London in 19th century is also called as the Victorian era. It was the time of Queen Victoria's throne. She became queen for almost $\frac{3}{4}$ of the century from 1837 until 1901. During that time, there was an industrial revolution in Britain that had brought some changes in economic, political, social, transportation, communication, and so on (Samekto 1982:263).

The industrial revolution caused many factories used more machinery than human resources. It happened because machine was more efficient than human resources. Moreover, machine can produce a great number of product quantities quickly and cheaply. This industrial revolution has made a great change in Britain. There were lots of small farms taken by the large manufacturer. That fact made people who were thrown away from agricultural field must try to get jobs in cities including London as the capital of Britain.

A great shift in movement from villages to cities increased population in London. In 1880, London had become the largest single city in the world, in which had doubled again by the mid-century. That high population rate, as the negative effect of industrial revolution, had made lots of problem, for example, the occurrence of unemployment in Britain. It happened because the number of job vacancy was not equal with the number of applicant so that many people were jobless at that time. It led to poverty such as poor living condition and lower education. Because of that, the growing number of young children on the streets of London was rising at this period according to Emsley (2018). The worst effect of the industrial revolution is that there were lots of child labor, slums area, and bad working condition in factories. Poverty was one of the major social problems in Britain between 1815 and 1914. The population growth and industrialization created problems by the end

of the eighteenth century, especially in times of high food prices. According to Charles Booth (1984), one person in three of the population lived below his/her basic poverty line.

The population growth and industrialization increased unemployment in which it raised the poor rate. Industrial revolution also made many people jobless and broke. Many people lost their home because they cannot afford it anymore. Thus many people lived on the streets in a very bad living condition. This condition drove the government to form the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. Fielding (1982) says that the Poor Law is aimed to help the poor getting a shelter, money, and education especially for children. However, he added, the Poor Law Amendment Act caused another problem at that time such as crime and child labor. It happened because a child was not old enough, at the age of five or six, to begin work. Thus, this act makes the poor afraid of entering the workhouse because its harsh treatment. Thus statement is the same as Charles Dickens' criticism that neglected and ill treated children and also the poor lived in suffering because they were treated injustice at that time (Dickens 1952:331). Based on Horton (1990), in western, urbanization in 19th century is connected with industrialization. The development of industrial and trade in capital city makes inhabitant moved to the city. Rural people seemed neglected whether they got a job or not. This urbanization automatically raised urban population which was followed by some social-economy problem including people who think about their own without considering other. The social class among the society is often caused by job differences as mentioned above. Social class consists of people who have the same social status and assume others as the same society member. Certain social class depends on their socioeconomic status within its society including wealth, job type, education, self-identity, prestige, group participation and recognition from other

people. As an effect, social class can create life patterns of each individual. The certain definition of social class classification itself actually cannot be defined clearly, because it can change from time to time. The differences of social class cause a gap within society that separates people into the different communities. According to Najjar (2000), geographic area, population density, degree of urbanization, stability of population, modes of transportation and the highway system, climate, quality of law enforcement, and availability of guns and drugs are causing crime. London in 19th century had those factors as the effect of industrial revolution, such as population rate for about 2,362,000 people at that time. The high population made London became one of the largest cities in the world with a high criminal level.

Based on Sanford (1983), industrialization also changes the technology of modern life by providing luxury goods and services that become parts of social identity of individuals. Urban living, especially materialistic, and wealth, is usually highly visible; affect participation in crime. Many luxury items become important as status symbol, and people are increasingly judged by their style of consumption. Not all urban inhabitant have equal access to these goods.

METHODOLOGY

This study deals with a novel of *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens, which was written in 1837. The method used in this study is library research where some reference books, articles, essays, and internet sites which are relevant with the social condition of Victorian era and the background of Charles Dickens were used to interpret this novel. Attar (1993) says Library research is research that is been done in the library, where the researcher gain data and information about the research object through books and other visual stuffs.

The primary literary source used for this research was the novel written by Charles Dickens, entitled *Oliver Twist*, the writer found an interesting idea to describe crime and social gap in London in the 19th century or London in Victorian era. Thus, in the case of this study, sociological approach was used. Sociological approach starts with a conviction that art's relations to society are vitally important, and that the investigation of these relationships may organize and deepen one's aesthetic response to a work of art (Scott, 1977). Sociological criticism will reveal social conditions of certain time in certain country. In other words, it can be defined that sociological approach in a work of literature will concern with the relation between literature and society. It can also be said that sociological approach will show that literature is a mirror of the society.

Based on Abdulsyani (1994), sociology is a study of human's life within society. While Auguste Comte says that sociology is human philosophy and social life philosophy. Thus, sociological approach will study and concern with human life including their social life, relationship, and interaction, within their society. Sociological approach will also learn about the unity of human that live together as a life system within the society. Moreover, the study also used historical background of London in 19th century including theories and articles that show the social condition of London in 19th century.

Since it is difficult to find the original version of *Oliver Twist* which was actually written and published in 1837, the writer used reprinted version which is described as follows: (1) the author is Charles Dickens, (2) the publisher year is in 2002, (3) the publisher is Penguin Classics Popular, (4) the place is in London, and (5) the total pages are 553.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Crimes in 19th Century London

This study will analyze first about the characters of Oliver Twist, Fagin, Bill Sikes, Artful Dodger, and Nancy to find out the crimes that existed in 19th century London. Each of the characters represents crime in 19th century London.

Oliver Twist

Oliver Twist is the main character. Oliver Twist is the son of Edwin Leeford and Agnes Fleming. His mother, Agnes Fleming, dies after the birth of Oliver Twist in a workhouse, while his infant father is unknown. Oliver Twist is first placed in a private juvenile home which then after nine years of mistreatment is returned to the workhouse for even more abuse. The situation and the condition in the workhouse are very harsh. The Master of the workhouse, Mr. Sowerberry, and Noah Claypole treat the poor in the workhouse including Oliver very badly. The harshness, lack of food and child labor in the workhouse makes Oliver run away from the workhouse. Especially after Oliver and Little Dick, Oliver's friend, has punished and beaten hard when they both starve and try to get more food.

'Please, sir, I want some more.' 'What!' said the master at length, in a faint voice.

'Please, sir,' replied Oliver, 'I want some more.'

'For more!' said Mr. Limbkins.

'That boy will be hung,' said the gentleman in the white waistcoat; 'I know that boy will be hung.'

... For a week after the commission of the impious and profane offence of asking for more, Oliver remained a close prisoner in the dark and solitary room to which he had been consigned by the wisdom and mercy on the board (Dickens 2002:17).

The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 forces the poor people to live in the workhouse, where they become working labor. It means that the poor people should be hidden or thrown away out of sight and should have something to do to earn some money instead of lying on the street and become a beggar. Yet, the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 does not solve the problems. He prefers to join Fagin's gang because of the harshness, strict authorities, terrible places, and the lack of food in the workhouse. Poor people should work hard for only few shilings a week. They even do not have enough food to eat in the workhouse. The worse, they are also beaten and abused. All the poor people in the workhouse are treated badly. The workhouse looks like the ill-contrived apartments which have not enough capacity to contain all the poor people with convenience. Many people get starve, sick, dies, and the child labor come to shore (Morgan 1984:61).

The workhouse in Victorian London is the same as in *Oliver Twist*. The situation, the condition, and workhouse make the poor people, include Oliver and Fagin's gang, afraid of entering the workhouse. It like the house of horror for them and bring another problem to them. The workhouse makes poor people run away from it, go back lying on the street, and become a beggar. It is the same as what Oliver does in the story.

Actually Oliver is not a true criminal. He is the victim of the situation which brings him to the street. In his innocence, he joins the Fagin's gang although he does not know anything about the Fagin and the gang he has entered. All he knows is that he has nobody in London and very pleases to have someone who wants to talk to him, gives food and place to stay and asks him to join the gang (Dickens 2002:62).

Fagin

Fagin is the mastermind among the criminals. He is a very old shriveled Jew, whose

villainous-looking and repulsive face is obscured by a quantity of matted red hair. He is both bad temper, and rage with anger but also humorous person. Fagin looks more like a harm greedy person that always forces all the member of the gang to do some crimes for his own wealth. He saves all the valuable things he has from crime in the snuff-box and hides it out somewhere in his dirty place. He uses the homeless boy who does not have any money and place to stay at night to join his gang and to be trained as theft, pick pocket, robber, and burglar.

'Well,' said the Jew, inspecting them closely; 'they're very good ones, very. You haven't marked them well. though, Charley; so the marks shall be picked out with a needle, and we'll teach Oliver how to do it. Shall us, Oliver, eh?- Ha! Ha! Ha!

'If you please, sir,' said Oliver.

'You'd like to be able to make pocket-handkerchiefs as easy as Charley Bates, wouldn't you, my dear?' said the Jew.

'Very much indeed, if you'll teach me, sir,' replied Oliver (Dickens 2002:70).

Fagin is used to represent the criminal world that occurs in Victorian era. He rejects moral and legal laws by exploiting children like Oliver, the Artful Dodger, and Charles Bates in a life of thievery.

John Dawkins

John Dawkins or Jack Dawkins is The Artful Dodger. He is Fagin's most esteemed pupil. Dawkins is the one who talks with Oliver and takes Oliver to join Fagin. He is one of the best pick pocket and thief in Fagin's gang. So that he got the name of the Artful Dodger after him. Dickens tries to portray another criminal figure in the 19th century of London through the character of the Artful Dodger.

'What you have got, Dodger?'

'A couple of pocket-books,' replied the young gentleman...

'Pretty well,' replied the Dodger, producing two pocket-books, one green and the other red.

'And what have you got, my dear?' said Fagin to Charley Bates.

'Wipes,' replied Master Bates: at the same time producing four pocket-handkerchief' (Dickens 2002:70).

Bill Sikes

Bill Sikes represents the ultimate outcome of a brutalizing existence. He has almost lost any sign of human sensitivity or tenderness. He is a robber that comes from bad society. As Fagin's best friend, he has higher position than other Fagin's pupil. Bad society where Sikes lives has shaped him to become a man who has bad personality. He becomes such a bad-temper man who always get angry easily even for a little problem as in the story when Sikes has a quarrel with Nancy because she tries to protect Oliver.

'Well, then, keep quiet,' rejoined Sikes, with a growl like that he was accustomed to use when addressing his dog, 'or I'll quiet you for a good long time to come' (Dickens 2002:122).

Nancy

Nancy is one of the members of the Fagin's gang. She is trusted and resourceful member. Nancy is described as untidy and free in manner, but on the other side she has the goodness inside her soul. Though she has lived with the evil in Fagin, she actually has a good side. She shows her kindness and her sympathy to Oliver. She tells Oliver's secret to Mr. Brownlow and Rose Maylie. Because of that, she finally gets killed by Bill Sikes. Nancy is actually a nice girl. The poverty makes her to live like that. However, she has never felt happiness in Fagin's community. If she finds a nice person who wanted to help her in handling her problems some years ago, she will not live among the thieves.

'Lady,' cried the girl, sinking on her knees,' dear, sweet, angel lady, you are the first that ever blessed me with such words as these, and if I had heard them years ago, they might have turned me from a life of sin and sorrow; but it is too late-it is too late!' (Dickens 2002:336).

The Causing Factors of Crime in the 19th Century London as Represented in *Oliver Twist*

Unemployment and Poverty toward Crime

Unemployment is the first social problem that occurs in the 19th century London as represented in Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*. It is said so because urbanization and population growth in London has created many unemployment. Many people in London needed job, while human resources were replaced already by machine, so that they did not have any opportunity to get a job.

In his novel, Dickens shows how a lack of community coupled with poverty, and the desire of the poor to survive. As unemployment increases comes poverty. London in Victorian era was also famous with the poor problem. Dickens has clearly described about degrading living conditions and the terror of unanticipated violence. It brings the issues of poverty and homelessness that leads many evils in the 19th century London. Unemployment and poverty have a close relation in increasing crime in Victorian era. The industrial revolution in Victorian era that blemished traditional factories has causes many people loose their job and become unemployed. Hard condition at that time in finding job leads to poverty. Thus, many people getting poorer. On the other hand, poor people and unemployed people must survive to run their life. It can be said that with poverty comes hunger. In their poor conditions, they should figure out how to live their life and they find that the easiest way to get money is doing crime. Moreover the unemployed are assumed to have more time and opportunity to commit

crime. Unemployed and poor people in the 19th century London are often portrayed as 'idle hands devil' (Lea and Young 1993:103).

Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 and The Workhouse toward Crime

Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 is a way to overcome poverty and the poor in London in the 19th century. The original purpose of the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act is to accommodate the poor in the workhouse so that they do not lie on the street and become beggar. The poor people in workhouse will be given something to do. However, the Poor Law Amendment of 1834 does not bring good impact to the poor.

The famous words from Oliver 'please, sir, I want some more' (Dickens 2002:6) is also showing the bad condition in the workhouse. It shows that poor people in the workhouse do not have enough food to be eaten because they have to work hard in it. It shows that with poverty comes hunger. Then, added the punishment 'that boy will be hung' (Dickens 2002:15) for asking more food to eat is already strengthening the harsh treatment in the workhouse.

Social Class and Social Gap toward Crime

Another problem that occurs as the result of industrialization in the 19th century London is social class where social class is followed by social gap. It is the fact that the great changes in certain city, as the industrialization in London, will make the social changes. Its social changes will cause social problems. It has already discussed above that the industrial revolution and urban growth have causes unemployment, poverty, and frightful living condition. The industrial revolution also causes moral decadence among the society. The social changes have created social class. The difference of social class is related to a host of more subjective differences such as status, lifestyle, and culture.

The society in London in the 19th century also comes out with this problem. People in London divide themselves into upper-class, middle-class, and lower-class or poor-class in which often called as working class. Even the ruling classes in the early nineteenth consider the working class or the poor class because the whole world of the poor is dealing with criminal world. Dicken's *Oliver Twist* shows three different social classes. First, the parochial world. The Bumbles and Sowerberrys belong to this middle-class society. Second, the criminal world. Pickpocketing, house-breakers, and murders belong to this world. Poverty drives them to crime. Fagin, Bill Sikes, Artful Dodger, and Noah Claypole are part of this lower-class society. Finally, the world of the upper class society. Mr. Brownlow, Dr. Losborne, and the Maylies are its members.

The novel also shows that each of classes runs their own business on their own and they look down upon one to another class especially to the underclass. This phenomenon leads to what is called social gap. There is a border between the rich and the poor and it breaks the relation between them. The rich people think that the poor people are a dangerous class that should be avoided and neglected. Thus the rich is getting richer and the poor is getting poorer. Social class drives people to live for themselves without thinking about other's life. Social class and social gap make the rich people does not want to help the poor. Thus, it leads to more crime because the poor has to survive on their own. It probably will be different if they are living together in harmony and help each other.

CONCLUSION

Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* is a novel that portrays the Victorian era. In *Oliver Twist*, Dickens highlights the problem of unemployment, poverty, the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, and social class as the result of industrialization in which those effects

increase crime rate in the 19th century of London. Through all the explanations, it is shown that Fagin and the gang do some crimes such as pick-pocketing, house-breaking, and burglary. Moreover, Bill Sikes also does other crime, which is murder because he kills Nancy. Thus, it can be learnt and concluded that the kind of crime exists in *Oliver Twist* is pick-pocketing, thievery, robbery, burglary, house-breaking, and murder. These crimes are done by Fagin, Artful Dodger, Bill Sikes, and Nancy. Fagin uses and forces all of his community member to do these crimes for his own good.

Furthermore, it can be concluded that the factors which cause crimes in the 19th century London are unemployment and poverty; Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 and the workhouse; social class and social gap. Unemployment leads to poverty so that people prefers doing crime to fulfill their need. Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 and the

workhouse which is made to overcome the poor problem cause another problem to poor people. It happened because the harshness and poor living condition in the workhouse make poor people prefer lying down on the street and doing crimes. While social class and social gap makes the rich people does not want to help the poor, so that it leads to more crime because the poor has to survive on their own.

According to the writer's point of view, Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* is talking about crime, poverty, and the workhouse. It also gives bright description about the social condition of London in the 19th century. It gives the readers some valuable knowledge about Victorian England culture where. It tells too that there is an industrial revolution at that time which brings difficulty to people such as unemployment and poverty, and also social stratification that separate the poor from the rich.

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