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Criminality in Victorian England: Reality and Representation in Dickens's *Oliver Twist*, Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* and James Greenwood's *The Seven Curses of London*

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Abstract:

In Victorian period crime was an unavoidable social problem in England. It is not that criminality did not exist in the preceding decades. But it became the most sordid phenomenon in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century England. This paper will try to explore what was the fact about crime in that period and how its representation was limited, partial and even prejudiced to some extent. In this respect, four aspects are going to be discussed here.

The first section under the subtitle "The Unavoidable Factors behind Crime" explores the socio-economic conditions of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century that gave rise to the poor destitute street dwellers and, simultaneously, delinquent behavior among them. The next section subtitled "Partial Representation of Crime" discusses how the root of crime was traced in poverty in most of the writings of that period. But such representation was a partial truth. The following part subtitled "Superfluous Representation of *Oliver Twist*" focuses on juvenile crime that, like a disease, was very contagious among the orphans and poor children in Victorian England. But the representation of *Oliver* and his confrontation with the criminals in Dickens's *Oliver Twist* is so superficial that it denies the reality. The last section under the subheading "Incomplete Portrayal of Prostitution as Crime" argues that the focus on prostitution as a crime was limited only to heterosexuality. Male homosexuality and male prostitution was ignored in well circulated fiction and nonfiction.

These issues are going to be discussed in relation to *Oliver Twist* (1837) by Charles Dickens (1812-1870), *London Labour and the London Poor: Those That Will Not Work* (1862), a journal by Henry Mayhew (1812-1887) and *The Seven Curses of London* (1869), a journal by James Greenwood (1832-1929).

Keywords: Criminals, Poverty, Vagabonds, Registered thieves, Unregistered thieves, Pickpockets, Juvenile crime, Delinquent behavior, Homosexual prostitution, Pederast.

The Unavoidable Factors behind Crime:

In most of the time the marginalization of criminals was justified on the basis of socio-economic conditions, and crime was specified to the poor section of society. Industrial Revolution, however, brought a considerable change in the population of England during Victorian period. First of all the high birth rate was an important factor behind the growth of population. Furthermore, there was a high amount of migration from country to city for jobs and economic stability. During the first half of nineteenth century the number of towns was

increasing rapidly. The population of England and Wales, according to the census of 1811, was just over ten million and in 1861 just over twenty million—the population thus doubled in fifty years. In comparison to the growth of population, the facilities were limited.

Poverty was an inevitable consequence of this. The New Poor Law of 1834, instead of relieving the poor from their misery, was harsh to them. The condition of the workhouses was so impoverished that no one would choose to enter there unless there was any alternative. In other words, the standard of the lives of these people was deliberately made poorer. This particular class was living in a society where poverty was almost an insoluble problem, and where to abandon the attempt to live an honest life must have been very tempting. The overflowing population of the city, the poor supply of housing and the lack of jobs led to the increase of street dwellers.

All these circumstances worked together and accelerated delinquent behavior among the poor. Theft was a logical alternative than to starve to death. This scenario was so apparent that criminal activities were considered 'normal' behavior of the poor in the eye of Victorian society. Minor theft, picking pockets, stealing of food from street stalls and from middle class houses—all these became common phenomena, mostly associated with the destitute people who were considered criminals. On the other hand, the wealthy people, with an appearance of moral standard and uprightness, were highly valued and respected. The socio-economic conditions and dishonorable life style of the poor helped to make them stigmatized. Consequently, a class-based hierarchy was consolidated.

Partial Representation of Crime:

Among the three texts, Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* clearly focuses on poverty as the root of crime. Mayhew, a Victorian social explorer and social commentator, was much concerned about the miserable poor class of society and noticed how vagrancy was the nursery of crime. According to his survey, the habitual tramps first become beggars and then the thieves. He, in his narrative, categorizes the vagabonds as Those Who Will Not Work discusses this section along with his discussions on beggars and street dwellers and marks them criminals. He therefore, maintains the conviction of Victorian society that crime thrives only from poverty, among the vagabonds. But this evaluation is not always justifiable. In emphasizing poverty in the representation and categorization of criminals, Mayhew altogether avoids another aspect of reality.

In Dickens's *Oliver Twist* there is an instance where, even extreme poverty does not always lead to crime. In chapter V of *Oliver Twist* Mr. Sowerberry, the coffin maker and Oliver go to a house to remove a corpse. In that filthy decaying house we find an instance of utmost poverty. According to the husband of that dead woman, she had starved to death. She was ill and died in the dark. Not being able to provide her with food and medicine, her husband had begged in the streets and was convicted for begging. He accuses society by stating: 'They starved her!' and 'they sent me to prison' (Dickens 39). Then how far is the estimation, that poverty is the only cause of crime, true? There really existed those poor who

did not steal even in utter need. Then who are ‘they’ whom the husband in Dickens’s text condemns? Here ‘they’ probably mean the makers and holders of law; or those who, behind the mask of charity, run after profit.

Profit, in Victorian respectable class, became a major factor in turning people towards crime. On the basis of this, James Greenwood, in his *The Seven Curses of London* explores those aspects of crime which is unnoticed by Mayhew. On the one hand Greenwood represents those who are criminals in the eyes of society and who have plunged into this life of dishonesty due to some unfavorable circumstances. On the other hand he describes ‘The Thief Non-professional’, who is outwardly wealthy and honorable but wicked at the core.

According to his estimation, the happy ignorant reader, whose knowledge of the criminal class is confined to an occasional glance at the police courts or government reports, would be shocked and amazed to learn that “there are twenty thousand individuals eating their daily bread of dishonesty within the city of London alone; there are many more than these.”(Greenwood) This enormous number of dishonest mass comprises of those who luckily escape representation in the government report and the police’s eyes and those who will never officially be called ‘criminals’.

Edwin Chadwick, in 1839, wrote in a report of the Royal Commission on the Constabulary Force that crime was not caused by mere want or compulsion but by the attraction for criminal life:

We have investigated the origin of the great mass of crime committed for the sake of property, and we find the whole ascribable to one common cause, namely, the temptations of profits. . . . The notion that any considerable proportions of crime against property are caused by blameless poverty or destitution we find it disproved at every step. (73)

There is an exact reflection of this report in Greenwood’s account in the section titled ‘The Thief Non-professional’. The difference between ‘registered’ and ‘unregistered’ (Greenwood) thieves was a great problem in the city of London during Victorian period. If the poor could not procure employment and were not supported, and if then they committed crime, they got arrested and represented. These people became the ‘registered’ thieves if caught. But there were innumerable ‘unregistered’ thieves who were also the part of the mass of criminals.

According to Greenwood’s account, a shopkeeper is a thief and he is by far a greater villain than the half-starved wretch who snatches a leg of mutton from a butcher’s shop, or some article displayed outside the shop. The so called ‘upright’ shopkeeper cheats the customer every day. He has surveyed that they simply give the customers burnt beans instead of coffee, ground rice instead of arrowroot and a mixture of lard and turmeric instead of butter. The shop man’s poison becomes the poor man’s bread. Greenwood points out that these shopkeepers rob the general people all the time through false measures and abominable mixtures and adulteration of food. In fact the entire commercial enterprise is based on cheating others. Greenwood quotes the statement of Mr. John Bright, the President of the

Board of Trade: "My own impression is that adulteration arises from competition in business" and "competition is the soul of business".(Greenwood) Therefore, in the name of 'trade' and 'competition', robbery is being justified and perpetuated at a large scale. But this picture of crime is not represented in Henry Mayhew's account. The truth that crime and social position are mutually exclusive is not taken into consideration in Mayhew's survey on the origin of crime in *London Labour and the London Poor*.

Dickens in his *Oliver Twist* does not equate crime with poverty. Like the community of the traders in *The Seven Curses of London*, there is a representation of those who are more threatening and more dangerous than Fagin's gang of pickpockets. In Dickens's narrative Mrs. Mann, the superintendent of the parish receives little children for a consideration of seven pence-half penny a child for each week. But she deprives them of sufficient food and nourishment for her own profit. So, to her, as long as Oliver remains alive, he is the source of income. The board of guardians in the workhouse, including the Beadle Mr. Bumble, is wicked. They also deprive the children of sufficient food and severely punish Oliver because "Oliver Twist has asked for more!" (Dickens 12). Mr. Gamfield, The man in chimney-sweeping business lets the young boys be smothered in chimneys and he only wants Oliver as an apprentice for his own profit.

These people are not the victims of destitution, but yet they cause misery of others for their own material fulfillment. They are what Greenwood calls, the 'unregistered' criminals of society. What is the difference between these people and Fagin? Like these 'respectable' people of Victorian society, Fagin's gang also works on the basis of apprentice system and runs after profit. But unlike Fagin or Artful Dodger or Bill Sikes, Dickens does not represent those 'honorable' people being punished for their wickedness. Legal punishment only falls on those who are stigmatized as 'criminals' by society. Both Artful Dodger and Fagin are arrested and Sikes hangs himself while trying to escape from police. Such judgments on the criminals indicate that, though Dickens criticizes the moral depravity of the so called respectable people (except Mr. Brownlow), yet separates them from Fagin's group. Thus he covertly maintains the social hierarchy between the respectable class and the criminal class in his representation of criminality.

Like Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor*, there were other non-fictional writings that also hid the truth and tried to trace the origin of crime only in the poor class of people. According to an article published in 1832 in "Fraser's Magazine": "There is a distinct body of thieves, whose life and business it is to follow up a determined warfare against the constructed authorities, by living in idleness and on plunder. . . . They form a distinct class of men by themselves. . ." (521-22). Such hierarchy between the respectable class and the criminal class helped to cover the fact that crime might thrive in the respectable and honorable class if a possibility of high economic profit was involved. Thus the representation of the origin of crime in these texts does not give the entire truth.

Superfluous Representation of Oliver Twist:

Juvenile crime was one of the most sordid aspects of Victorian criminality. There was an utter lack of food, education and shelter among the children of the poor class, most generally the orphans. Such condition assisted their entry into criminal life. This theme occupies a detailed analysis in both the non-fictional texts of Mayhew and Greenwood. In fact Dickens's fictional representation of Fagin's band of pickpockets mirrors real scenario of the gangs of juvenile criminals that truly existed in Victorian England. But his representation of Oliver and Oliver's confrontation with the criminals seem to be superficial.

No child is a born criminal. Along with the behavioral factors, there were some other factors that led to delinquent behavior among children. Mayhew in his Introduction to the section "Thieves and Swindlers" of *London Labour and the London Poor* points out that the neglected orphans of five or six, who loitered in the streets, used to steal apples or oranges or a handful of nuts from the stalls. They were compelled to steal because they knew no other way to get their daily food. Mere begging on streets did not procure the food they required. Greenwood, in chapter VIII of his *The Seven Curses of London* notes: ". . . the children are orphans, or have been forsaken by their parents, and in such cases the children generally fall into the hands of the professional thief-trainer." (Greenwood). These children were fed, clothed and trained by the old and experienced trainer and were made to earn their wages by dishonest practices. There was hardly any possibility to remain thoroughly indifferent to crime. Focusing on the young members of the criminal class of Victorian England W.D Morrison in 1891 wrote: "In some instances these unfortunates have lived all their lives in criminal neighborhoods, and merely follow the footsteps of the people around them."(Morrison 88)

This fact does not match with the representation of Oliver in *Oliver Twist*. From the beginning of his life Oliver is looked down upon as an orphan; he is half starved, ill-treated and frequently punished for nothing. He gets no education of morality but yet he upholds a high moral standard. For such a destitute orphan, Fagin's offer of food, shelter, security, and a sense of belonging to a community which Oliver has never before experienced, must have been welcomed. For the other boys in that group, especially Artful Dodger, it is better to gain status in the criminal class than to be rejected and despised by society. But exactly the opposite happens in case of Oliver. He is represented as an innocent, good and angelic figure. Here the question arises that how can Oliver remain so upright throughout the narrative while all the circumstances are in favour of his entry into the criminal world. In his Preface to the third edition (1841) of *Oliver Twist* Dickens wrote: "I wished to show, in little Oliver, the principle of Good surviving through every adverse circumstances, and triumphing at last" (Dickens vii). From such statement it can be commented that Dickens's personal conviction intrudes in his representation of Oliver and denies the reality and this coating of morality distorts the reality.

Incomplete Portrayal of Prostitution as Crime:

Prostitution in Victorian England was considered a crime since it was regarded an 'illicit' sexual relationship (especially heterosexual) based on commerce. The term 'prostitute' generally indicated those women who offered sexual favour to men for money. Henry Mayhew in the section entitled "Prostitution in London" of *London Labor and the London Poor* defines a prostitute by saying, "Literally every woman who yields to her passions and loses her virtue is a prostitute" (Mayhew 215). This depiction of prostitution which was based on 'illegal' heterosexual relationship was well-circulated in public through journals and fictional narratives. Homosexual activities, on the other hand, was also declared illegal and hence crime. Nevertheless, male brothels and homosexual pornography were prevalent in homosexual subcultures. In Cleveland Street (London) there was a male brothel which was discovered in 1889 by police. In fact the clients of male brothel faced possible prosecution if discovered.

If homosexual prostitution was a crime, it must have occupied an equal representation along with the heterosexual prostitution in these fictional and non-fictional narratives which were in circulation among public. But this was never the case. In his classification of prostitutes Mayhew says:

We divide prostitutes into three classes. First, those women who are kept by men for independent means; secondly, those women who live in apartments, and maintain themselves by the procure of their vagrant amours; and thirdly, those dwell in brothels. (Mayhew 213)

Even a survey on this field, as depicted by Mayhew, includes the confessions of those women who had embarked on this profession. There is no depiction of male brothels or male prostitutes.

The description of prostitution begins in chapter XVI of Greenwood's *The Seven Curses of London* with the title 'Fallen Women'. He depicts two types of prostitutes, the women who are "well-dressed, and living in houses of ill-fame" (Greenwood) and those women who are "well-dressed and walking the streets" (Greenwood). Thus the discussion on prostitution only revolves around one side of the reality (that is, the heterosexual prostitution), the other side being totally avoided. In this way, the Victorian taste for homosexual pornography and male brothels was either hidden or avoided in the public discourse.

Dickens also subscribes to this mode of representation in *Oliver Twist*. He never mentions that Nancy is a prostitute, but intends for her to be read as a prostitute and associates prostitution with criminality. She is never shown taking part either in the training procedure of the boys by Fagin, or in stealing on the street, or in the robbery that Sikes and his fellow robbers undertake. This is the implication through which the readers understand her profession as a prostitute.

Any discussion on homosexual activities, however, took place in the legal and medical reports that were at least less circulated among public than these fictional and non-fictional writings. In the 1885 Criminal Law Amendment Act, put by the Liberal politician

Henry Labouchere, male homosexuality and male prostitution were discussed and called illegal. Medical reports portrayed homosexuals as effeminate and degenerated.

Nevertheless, there is a vague suggestion of Fagin being a pederast in *Oliver Twist*. His pederasty can be inferred from his mode of observation of Oliver in chapter XVIII: “As he [Oliver] glanced timidly up, and met the Jew’s searching look, he felt that his pale face and trembling limbs were neither unnoticed, nor unrelished by that wary old gentleman.” (138). Garry Wills writes in his essay “The Loves of *Oliver Twist*”, “When I first read *Oliver Twist*, in my own childhood, I did not . . . realize that Fagin is a pederast. Did Dickens expect his knowledgeable adult readers to understand this fact . . .?” (593). But such inference is not enough to ascertain that Dickens had intended to acknowledge male prostitution in the novel. The revelation of the ‘crime’ of prostitution, therefore, was partial in these writings.

Conclusion:

Such analysis of these texts reveals that there was a disparity between the facts about crime and its representations. The three texts, *Oliver Twist*, *London Labour and the London Poor* and *The Seven Curses of London* were considered great social survey on the criminal world of Victorian England. Despite such conviction, the one-sided representation of the origin of crime served the social respectability; the superficial representation of honesty and uprightness amidst crime was to uphold the moral righteousness that was highly valued in Victorian period; and the partial representation of the ‘crime’ called prostitution was due to the Victorian prejudice regarding the silencing on homosexual activities. Such partial representation of crime questions how much complete and unbiased these texts are. Nevertheless, the importance of the three writers, Dickens, Mayhew and Greenwood, as social explorers, cannot be denied.

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Criminality in Victorian England: Reality and Representation in Dickens's *Oliver Twist*, Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* and James Greenwood's *The Seven Curses of London*

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