Ca' Foscari
University
of Venice

Master's Degree Programme

in European, American and Postcolonial
Languages and Literatures

Final Thesis

The Politics of Sentiment in Charles Dickens

Emotions, Empathy, and Sympathy in
Oliver Twist and *Hard Times*

Supervisor
Prof. Emma Sdegno

Assistant supervisor
Prof. Stefano Ercolino

Graduand
Andrea Monteleone
Matriculation Number 879432

Academic Year
2025 / 2026

Abstract

Il ruolo del romanzo nel plasmare l'empatia dei lettori è da tempo oggetto di dibattito critico. Questa tesi indaga cosa accade nella narrativa di Dickens quando le categorie istituzionali diventano corpi sofferenti: il povero diventa un bambino affamato, l'operaio qualcuno consumato oltre la capacità di sentire. Leggendo insieme *Oliver Twist* e *Hard Times*, la tesi sostiene che questo passaggio dall'astrazione all'esperienza particolare costituisca un metodo, e selettivo. Distinguendo empatia, simpatia e compassione, e attingendo al giudizio eudaimonistico di Smith, Hume e Nussbaum, la tesi mostra come ironia, melodramma, descrizione corporea e accesso diseguale alla vita interiore decidano quale dolore meriti serietà morale. L'innocenza di Oliver rende innegabile la crudeltà della New Poor Law, ma lo salva senza riformare il sistema che lo ha creato; Nancy, Fagin e Sikes saggiano i limiti della compassione quando entra in gioco la colpa. *Hard Times* allarga la domanda, seguendo Louisa, Tom, Bitzer e Stephen in una pedagogia che soffoca l'immaginazione, finché Coketown diventa leggibile come vittima collettiva. In entrambi i romanzi, riconoscere un torto e riformarne le cause restano cose distinte: Dickens rende una ferita innegabile, ma ne lascia privato il rimedio. È in questo scarto, tra il potere della finzione di farci vedere e la sua incapacità di garantire ciò che segue, che la tesi colloca la politica di Dickens.

Abstract

The role of the novel in shaping readers' empathic responses has long been a subject of critical debate. This thesis asks what Dickens's fiction does when it turns institutional categories into suffering bodies: the pauper into a hungry child, the factory worker into someone worn past feeling. Reading *Oliver Twist* and *Hard Times* together, it argues that this move from abstraction to particular experience amounts to a method, and a selective one. Keeping empathy, sympathy, and compassion analytically apart, and drawing on Smith, Hume, and Nussbaum's account of eudaimonistic judgment, the thesis tracks how irony, melodrama, bodily description, and uneven access to inner life decide whose pain counts as morally serious. Oliver's innocence makes the New Poor Law's cruelty impossible to miss, but it also lets him be rescued without the system that produced him being reformed; Nancy, Fagin, and Sikes test how far compassion reaches once guilt enters. *Hard Times* pushes the question outward, following Louisa, Tom, Bitzer, and Stephen through a pedagogy built to starve imagination, until Coketown becomes legible as a collective casualty. Across both novels, recognising a wrong and reforming its conditions prove distinct: Dickens can make an injury impossible to ignore while leaving its remedy private. That gap, between fiction's power to make us see and its inability to guarantee what follows, is where this thesis locates Dickens's politics.

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Introduction

Dickens keeps making social problems visible through individual lives, so consistently that the procedure amounts to a method. Institutions, categories and public arguments take on a body: the pauper becomes a hungry child, the worker a tired and vulnerable person, the language of political economy a set of consequences lived out as hunger, exhaustion, fear, isolation, loss. Few features of his writing are more recognisable than this movement from abstraction to particular experience, and few are less straightforward in their moral and political significance. Making suffering visible does not explain its causes. Directing sympathy towards a victim does not imagine a remedy. A novel's capacity to elicit emotions tells us nothing about what a given reader will actually feel, still less about what action might follow from that feeling. Where the politics of Dickensian sentiment lies, then, is in the particular forms through which emotion attaches itself to persons, injuries, judgments and possible solutions, rather than in the bare presence of emotion.

That process will be analysed through *Oliver Twist* and *Hard Times*, novels that stage two complementary sides of the same difficulty. *Oliver Twist* asks how a life already reduced to an administrative and social category might still be made available to compassion. *Hard Times* asks something closer to the reverse: what kinds of persons and relations get produced once education and social organisation set out, systematically, to suppress imagination, fellow-feeling, attention to whatever cannot be counted. The central claim of this thesis, then, is that Dickens contests abstraction at the level of perception and judgment, making certain lives morally readable through narrative form, while running up, again and again, against a limit once recognition has to become something collective, something institutional. Selective moral attention names one part of how this works. Irony, bodily description, melodramatic contrast, access to consciousness, patterns of recognition, the shaping of narrative perspective, all of these restore particularity to some lives far more fully than to others. And the same procedures that expose an injury can end up narrowing the field in which causes, agents, and remedies get imagined at all.

Feeling has held an unsteady place in the critical history of Dickens, which is why the distinction matters. His extraordinary power to move a popular readership was for a long time read as evidence of his strength and of his artistic limitations alike.

Sentimentality could mean moral seriousness, popular accessibility, theatrical excess, emotional manipulation, or a retreat from structural problems into private virtue. Later criticism complicated those judgments by reconstructing the eighteenth-century traditions of sympathy Dickens inherited, by examining the ideological position of the sympathetic spectator, and by reassessing melodrama, caricature and popular form without measuring them against the standards of psychological realism alone. More recent work on affect and narrative empathy has raised a further problem: the emotional structures a text prepares must be kept distinct from the responses of actual readers. A novel can organise attention, invite identification, construct a position from which judgment can be made. Whether the invitation is taken up lies beyond its reach, and so does any translation of emotional response into political action.

These debates are where the present study begins, and it narrows them to a more specific question: how does Dickens build the conditions under which another life becomes morally legible, and what happens to the social injury represented once that recognition has been reached? Asking whether Dickens is compassionate, whether his readers come away more empathetic, whether sentimental fiction is inherently progressive or conservative would turn a problem of narrative form into a verdict already decided in advance. The analysis follows the distribution of attention across the two novels: whose experience becomes accessible, which injuries acquire bodily and emotional weight, how narration directs or complicates judgment, and what forms of remedy the plot finally allows.

Empathy has to be separated from sympathy and compassion for such an approach to work. Dickens did not write within the modern psychological vocabulary of empathy; his own language belongs to sympathy, sensibility, benevolence, compassion, the moral authority of the heart. Empathy serves here as a modern analytical category rather than a term fitted retrospectively onto Dickens, and it describes forms of imaginative or affective access to another's situation that still preserve some distinction between self and other. A more explicit orientation of concern comes with sympathy. Compassion treats suffering as serious, as morally weighty. Holding the three apart makes it possible to ask whether a character becomes intelligible and whether that intelligibility produces concern, judgment, or some claim on the reader.

Narrative empathy is accordingly treated as a formal possibility rather than a measurable psychological outcome. The role a text prepares for a reader is what matters: what gets shown, withheld, repeated, delayed, made comic, made bodily, given interior

duration. Readers may resist that position, and the structure of the invitation can still be analysed on its own terms. In Dickens this matters particularly, since moral orientation rarely depends on psychological access alone. Irony exposes the violence hidden inside respectable language; caricature turns institutional authority into an object of judgment; melodrama sharpens moral distinctions; suspense delays knowledge and revises an earlier reading; bodily description restores hunger, fatigue, fear or pain to classifications that had excluded them. Feeling is treated throughout this study as part of how narrative knowledge itself gets organised.

Oliver Twist offers the first and clearest test of the argument, its central conflict beginning with classification. Before Oliver has any social identity of his own he is a pauper, an illegitimate child, a parish responsibility, an apprentice, and eventually a suspected criminal. The novel keeps setting these descriptions against the vulnerable body they fail to contain. Hunger, fear, physical weakness and childhood itself make institutional violence visible in a form that resists the abstractions of the New Poor Law. His extraordinary innocence simplifies the moral claim he makes on the reader at the same time. Almost nothing in his suffering can be traced to responsibility for the conditions he finds himself in, and the plot confirms in the end that the identities imposed on him were false all along. Recognition restores a hidden genealogy and makes private rescue possible.

The novel's sentimental politics runs into its central difficulty at exactly that point of clarity. If compassion depends on the exceptional innocence of its object, what becomes of those whose suffering cannot be separated from guilt, compromise, aggression, social stigma? Nancy, Fagin, Sikes, the Artful Dodger and Charley Bates make the question harder to avoid with every appearance. Bodily presence, interior access, narrative duration and future possibility are granted to each in different degrees. Nancy's divided loyalties widen the moral field past innocence; Fagin and Sikes become psychologically and physically legible at the moments when condemnation remains secure; the criminal children show what environment, and upbringing can do to a person without receiving anything like the narrative investment given to Oliver. Sympathy in *Oliver Twist* is therefore a problem of distribution. Something more than feeling is being asked of the reader: the novel decides where sustained attention will land, and under what moral description a given life gets to be seen at all.

London gives the distribution a spatial shape. Radically different social worlds are brought into physical proximity by the city, which blocks recognition between them again

and again. Workhouse, street, rookery, respectable interior, country house, courtroom and prison do more than furnish backdrops for the plot. They govern movement, knowledge, safety, visibility, and whether a person can be believed. Oliver walks through a crowded street without his situation becoming intelligible to a single person around him, while the narrative crosses boundaries none of its characters can cross. Moral geography becomes part of the novel's affective structure: making suffering legible also means placing it somewhere it can be seen, told, and folded into a recognisable story.

All this narrative work meets its limit at the ending. Oliver's moral status is settled far more securely than the institutional conditions that made him vulnerable in the first place. Recognition, inheritance, domestic incorporation, punishment and benevolence restore order to particular lives while the workhouse goes on standing. Between recognition and reform there is a distinction central to this thesis. Dickens's sentimentalism can disclose the violence built into an institutional category and offer no institutional alternative to that category. Its political consequence may lie less in legislation than in changing what afterwards counts as an adequate description of a person and of the wrong done to them.

Hard Times provides a second test by altering almost every term of this arrangement. No single, exceptionally innocent child organises the moral field. Suffering spreads across the schoolroom, the factory, the family, marriage, the bank, the circus, the union, the industrial town. What *Oliver Twist* attacked through the category of the pauper becomes explicit here in the language of “Facts,” statistics, utility, and the reduction of workers to “Hands.” Whether one institution has misrecognised one individual is no longer the question. Dickens sets out a whole culture of classification, in which education, political economy, domestic authority, labour discipline and habits of perception all reinforce one another.

Precisely because the affective arrangement of *Oliver Twist* is not reproduced, the comparison earns its place. Louisa's suffering lacks Oliver's immediate readability, coming through silence, repetition, bodily signs, a damaged capacity even to understand her own wants. Stephen Blackpool receives individual moral authority against the abstraction of the industrial "Hands," authority resting heavily on endurance and exemplary suffering. Sissy offers a practical language of compassion while remaining more morally transparent than psychologically divided. The workers become visible as a collective social body and receive sharply unequal degrees of individual narrative access. Selective moral attention persists but its distribution has shifted, making it possible to

separate a recurring Dickensian practice from the sentimental machinery of any one novel.

Four related problems are analysed across both texts. Access comes first: whose perceptions, motives, memories and emotions become available, and where does the narration hold onto its opacity instead? Embodiment follows: how do hunger, illness, exhaustion, fear, violence and physical exposure give perceptible shape to social conditions that institutional language leaves abstract? Narratorial orientation is third: how do irony, direct address, satire, description, melodrama, suspense and tonal contrast organise the reader's position towards the world being represented? Resolution comes last: once suffering has been made visible, what response can the plot actually imagine: recognition, punishment, private rescue, moral conversion, collective action, institutional reform, domestic care? These four questions provide a shared method without assuming that the two novels need answer them in the same way.

Scope stays deliberately limited in what follows. No general theory of Dickens's fiction is proposed, and no attempt is made to show that literary empathy produces some predictable moral improvement in readers. The contribution lies in reading Dickensian feeling as an unequal allocation of narrative resources and moral attention, an approach that keeps sentiment important without assuming it is inherently humane and keeps ideological critique in view without reducing emotional form to political containment. Disclosure and containment can occur within a single narrative movement. A novel can expose an injury with real force while imagining a remedy narrower than the problem it has just taught its readers to see.

Chapter 1 sets out the concepts and critical debates on which the argument rests. It distinguishes empathy, sympathy and compassion; reconstructs the traditions of moral sentiment relevant to Dickens; considers the historical conditions of Victorian public feeling and serial publication; and surveys the main critical positions on Dickensian sentiment, melodrama, sympathetic spectatorship, narrative empathy and political mediation. The chapter closes by defining the method of selective moral attention used in the readings that follow.

Chapter 2 turns to *Oliver Twist*. Beginning from publication, audience and the question of the New Poor Law, it examines the narrator's irony, the construction of Oliver's innocence, the workhouse, London's moral geography, and the unequal access granted to characters whose suffering is complicated by guilt or criminality. Melodrama, recognition, coincidence, punishment and private rescue occupy the closing sections,

which ask how far the visibility the novel produces can be translated into a structural claim.

Chapter 3 turns to *Hard Times* and to the negative side of the comparison: the consequences of training persons to apprehend themselves and others through facts, utility, and self-interest alone. Moving from the schoolroom through Louisa, Tom, Bitzer, Coketown, and the labour conflict, the chapter asks how the suppression of imagination and fellow-feeling becomes a social and narrative problem.

Chapter 4 then brings the novels into direct comparison, treating London and Coketown as different geographies of misrecognition, comparing the construction and failure of fellow-feeling, and asking why irony and recognition produce sharper moral judgment without promoting institutional reform.

The politics of sentiment considered here belongs first of all to perception and to judgment. Dickens needs no programme of reform for his fiction to intervene in the terms through which poverty, labour, childhood, guilt and vulnerability become socially intelligible in the first place. Emotional recognition cannot stand in for justice either. *Oliver Twist* and *Hard Times* occupy the difficult space between those two positions. Their sentimental forms widen the field in which suffering can be seen and judged, and their own selective distributions and resolutions show how hard it is to extend recognition beyond the single life that first made a social wrong visible.

Chapter I – Conceptual and Critical Foundations of Sentimentality in the Novel

> *It is the custom on the stage in all good, murderous melodramas, to present the tragic and comic scenes in as regular alternation as the layers of red and white in a side of streaky, well-cured bacon. […] Such changes appear absurd; but they are by no means unnatural. The transitions in real life […] are not a whit less startling; only there we are busy actors, instead of passive lookers-on, which makes a vast difference.*[1]

This chapter establishes the theoretical and evaluative structure on which the readings of *Oliver Twist* and *Hard Times* in the following chapters will rest. Its task is deliberately circumscribed: to identify the distinctions, historical traditions, and critical debates that make it possible to describe how Dickens organises a reader's attention to suffering. The central problem, accordingly, is how particular formal devices like narration, irony, melodramatic contrast, bodily description, access to interiority (the psyche), and patterns of recognition, render some injuries morally visible while leaving others comparatively obscure.

The discussion unfolds as follows. Section 1.1 opens on terminological ground, establishing working definitions of empathy, sympathy, and compassion, and treating them as analytically distinct concepts. Section 1.2 then focuses on narrative empathy as an effect that texts solicit through determinate formal means but can never mechanically secure in their readers. Together these preliminary analyses establish the conceptual and narratological framework through which the historical materials considered in the remainder of the chapter can be approached.

Against this theoretical background, Section 1.3 reconstructs the strand of eighteenth-century moral-sentiment philosophy and sentimental writing to which Dickens is demonstrably indebted, while Section 1.4 resituates this inheritance within the

[1] Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist* (London: Harper Press, 2010), 140. Unless otherwise indicated, all references to *Oliver Twist* are to this edition.

institutional and media conditions of the nineteenth century, the contexts of publication, philanthropy, and public feeling in which his fiction intervened.

Section 1.5 completes the picture by surveying the principal critical positions through which Dickensian feeling has been successively condemned as aesthetic failure, historicised, subjected to ideological critique, and, more recently, reassessed on its own formal terms.

The chapter closes with Section 1.6 that sets out the method and working hypothesis for the thesis as a whole. Dickensian sentimentalism contests abstraction by organising the conditions under which particular lives become morally legible in the first place. Selective moral attention is one mechanism within that larger work, not its whole political meaning. The same formal procedures that disclose social injury also distribute attention unevenly, and they can narrow the range of persons, agents, and remedies through which that injury ever becomes imaginable at all.

1.1 A Working Vocabulary of Emotions

Fellow-feeling has never had a stable vocabulary of its own. Empathy, sympathy, pity, compassion, concern, care: each of these words describes some relation between a subject and another person's experience, yet they overlap without ever quite coinciding. In a study of Dickens, treating them as synonyms would be misleading. Each term descends from a distinct intellectual lineage and carries its own affective, cognitive, evaluative, and moral weight. A preliminary clarification is therefore not a pedantic preamble, but a condition for the argument that follows.

The word *empathy* is relatively recent, but this should not be mistaken for evidence that earlier writers lacked the conceptual resources to describe imaginative or emotional responsiveness to others. Eighteenth and nineteenth-century discourse already had an established vocabulary for this: sympathy, fellow-feeling, pity, compassion, benevolence, sensibility. These terms are related but analytically distinct, each naming a different modality of affective and moral relation to other persons.[2]

Empathy itself has a different origin. Although the OED records earlier roots and related forms,[3] the word only emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century, as a

[2] Neil Roughley and Thomas Schramme, "Empathy, Sympathy, Concern and Moral Agency," in *Forms of Fellow Feeling: Empathy, Sympathy, Concern and Moral Agency*, ed. Neil Roughley and Thomas Schramme (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 3–56, esp. 5, 25–28.
[3] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "empathy, n.," accessed July 18, 2026, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/empathy_n.

translation of the German aesthetic concept *Einfühlung* literally "feeling into." In its original context, *Einfühlung* referred to something narrower than what we now mean by empathy: the perceiving subject's projection of bodily sensations, movements, or emotional qualities into an artwork, a natural form, or another perceived object. It did not yet name, in the sense familiar today, an ethical or psychological grasp of another person's emotional state. Only gradually did the term move from aesthetics into psychology, acquiring its now-dominant interpersonal meaning.[4]

In the light of this, an historically responsible analysis must hold Dickens's own vocabulary apart from the categories through which contemporary criticism reads him. Dickens did not write within a modern theory of empathy; his inheritance is more accurately reconstructed through the languages of sympathy, sentiment, and benevolence, and through that Victorian shorthand for moral responsiveness, "the heart." Yet keeping these vocabularies apart in principle does not prevent them from blurring in practice: because the terms overlap in meaning even as they diverge in origin, the temptation to read Dickens's sympathy as a proto-empathy or to let modern and Victorian senses slide into one another unremarked, remains a real risk throughout what follows.

For the purposes of this thesis, *empathy* designates an affective and imaginative apprehension of another's situation, one in which the distinction between self and other is maintained. The empathising subject does not literally acquire the other's experience; rather, the subject renders that experience intelligible by picturing what the other feels at a particular moment, attending to language, behaviour, and characteristic ways of reacting to the events of that person's world.

Empathy may include an affective component, in which the reader experiences an emotional state akin to the other's, and a cognitive component, where a perspective is reconstructed or simply understood. For literary analysis that breadth turns out useful because a text can place a reader close to a character's bodily or emotional state, reconstruct a perspective, or do both, none of which need imply approval.

Suzanne Keen's formulation helps keep these dimensions together without turning empathy itself into a moral verdict.[5]

Sympathy is used here in two connected senses. Historically, it refers to the communicative and imaginative process described by moral-sense philosophy, especially

[4] Timothy C. Vincent, "From Sympathy to Empathy: Baudelaire, Vischer and Early Modernism," *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 45, no. 1 (2012): 1–15, esp. 6–9.
[5] Suzanne Keen, "A Theory of Narrative Empathy," *Narrative* 14, no. 3 (2006): 207–36, esp. 208–9.

by Hume and Smith.[6] Analytically, it refers to an other-oriented response in which the condition of another is evaluated as significant and worthy of concern. *Sympathy* therefore involves a more explicit element of valuation than empathy does. One may understand the mental state of a manipulative or violent character without supporting that character's aims; one may also feel concern for a sufferer without imaginatively reproducing the sufferer's precise state.

Compassion can be defined as the emotion felt in response to another person's undeserved suffering, arising from the judgment that this suffering is serious and that the sufferer's good has a claim on one's own scheme of concern. Compassion is narrower in object and more explicitly evaluative than either empathy or sympathy. Aristotle's account of pity in the *Rhetoric* remains the historical starting point,[7] but it is also interesting to look at the reformulation made by Martha Nussbaum;[8] in *Upheavals of Thought*, she treats emotions not as impulses that reason subsequently interprets, but as appraisals of objects and events in relation to what a person takes to matter for a flourishing life. *Compassion* accordingly requires more than the perception of distress. It includes a judgment that the suffering is serious, a judgment that it is undeserved or exceeds the sufferer's fault, and an eudaimonistic judgment through which the sufferer's good enters the observer's own field of concern. This last condition does not require the observer to erase social distance or to believe that the same misfortune is likely to happen to them. It requires the damaged possibilities of another life to count as morally significant from a standpoint that is not confined to self-interest.[9]

According to Martha Nussbaum, empathy reconstructs another person's situation while preserving the difference between self and other;[10] it may therefore contribute to compassion, but it can be inaccurate and does not by itself entail concern. Compassion adds an evaluation of what the suffering means: the injury must be recognised as weighty, unjustly borne, and connected to a life whose flourishing matters, i.e. eudaimonia.

Once these three terms are kept apart, Keen's contrast turns out to do real work. Empathy, in her sense, is a matter of feeling with someone, of grasping, what another

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[6] For the philosophical field of fellow feeling—empathy, sympathy, concern—see the essays collected in Neil Roughley and Thomas Schramme, eds., *Forms of Fellow Feeling: Empathy, Sympathy, Concern and Moral Agency* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).
[7] Aristotle, *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, trans. George A. Kennedy, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 2.8, 1385b13–1386b8.
[8] Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), chap. 6, sec. II, "The Cognitive Structure of Compassion," 320.
[9] Ibid., 320–23.
[10] Ibid., 326–28.

person is taken to be feeling. Sympathy on the other hand pictures a different image, or to say it better, a response that points outward, toward the other, a form of concern rather than a merging with. This difference is important to underline when we face Dickens, because he can make a character's state fully intelligible to us without ever asking us to approve of that character. And the reverse holds too; he can call up concern for someone without granting us much access to their inner life at all.[11]

For literary analysis, this shifts attention away from pain as spectacle. What matters instead are the narrative judgments that allow pain to register as a moral claim at all. A scene has to establish what has actually been damaged, how blame gets allocated, and why this particular life, out of all the lives a narrative might have chosen, should enter the reader's horizon of value in the first place. Compassion may generate a desire to help, but neither the adequacy nor the political direction of that response follows automatically.[12]

These distinctions are essential because empathy is not a self-sufficient moral principle. A reader can understand Fagin's fear, Sikes's panic, or a manipulator's calculations without ceasing to condemn them. Ercolino and Fusillo use the expression *negative empathy* for forms of aesthetic involvement with morally objectionable figures in which evaluative distance is nonetheless preserved; Humbert Humbert in Nabokov's *Lolita* is a concise example.[13] Conversely, a reader may judge Oliver's hunger to be unjust without reproducing the bodily sensation itself. The moral work of a novel therefore cannot be measured simply by asking whether it produces identification. What matters is the relation among access, affect, evaluation, motivation and the way narrative form distributes those elements unevenly among characters.

Such contemporary distinctions guide the vocabulary adopted throughout this study. Dickens and his first readers did not understand affective responsiveness through the conceptual framework now associated with empathy, but through the established languages of sympathy, sensibility, compassion, benevolence, fellow-feeling, and the heart. These terms were not interchangeable because they belonged to specific moral, philosophical, religious, and literary traditions that shaped how relations between self and other could be represented and evaluated. Empathy will therefore be used here as a

[11] Keen, "Theory of Narrative Empathy," 208–9.
[12] Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, 334–39.
[13] Stefano Ercolino and Massimo Fusillo, *Empatia negativa: Il punto di vista del male* (Milan: Bompiani, 2022), chap. 1, sec. 1, "Risonanza e distacco."

modern analytical category, particularly when examining the narrative techniques through which readers are granted partial access to another character's perceptions, emotions, and circumstances. Sympathy, sentimentality, and compassion, by contrast, will identify the historically available forms through which Dickens's fiction articulates, solicits, or questions affective and moral response. This double vocabulary makes it possible to employ the precision of contemporary narrative theory without retrospectively imposing twentieth-century terminology upon Victorian culture.[14]

1.2 Narrative Empathy and Its Limits

Among contemporary defences of literary reading, Martha Nussbaum is especially important because her work locates ethical significance not in a detachable moral lesson but in the novel's mode of attention.[15] Her book *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* starts its analysis from a Dickensian novel, *Hard Times* and treats it as a form of public reasoning. Through character, sequence, detail, and address, narrative directs our notice toward features of human lives that administrative or economic description so often leaves out. Its distinctive movement is between shared needs and particular circumstances. The novel presents persons as separate centres of agency, gives weight to qualitative differences, and situates desire within the social conditions that enable, deform, or frustrate it. Literary imagination does not, in this account, replace factual inquiry or abstract argument. It supplies forms of knowledge about human life without which calculation may mistake its own necessary simplifications for a complete description of reality.[16]

Upheavals of Thought, another fundamental publication of Nussbaum, clarifies why such attention can acquire emotional force. Because emotions are evaluative and usually dense with concrete perception, a distant injury is more likely to become significant when it is rendered through particular bodies, memories, objects, and circumstances. Dickens's hungry child, exhausted worker, or dying crossing-sweeper is not simply an example appended to a social proposition. Narrative particularity establishes what the injury means within a life and why its loss has weight. Nussbaum's account, however, remains normative: it identifies capacities that reading can exercise

[14] Keen, "Theory of Narrative Empathy," 209–10.
[15] Martha C. Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 85–112; Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, 64–67.
[16] Martha C. Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), chap. 1, "The Literary Imagination," 1–12.

and cultivate, not a response that every reader must display. The distinction between a textual invitation and an empirical effect therefore remains essential. Keen's theory of narrative empathy begins from precisely this limit.[17]

Narrative form matters here because it opens up a provisional space where possibilities can be entertained without being mistaken for lived experience. Nussbaum's account of the novel stresses that fiction invites readers to imagine what it might be like to inhabit a life structured by circumstances other than their own. The activity is neither a simple identification with a character nor proof of moral improvement in the reader. It is, more modestly, an exercise in regarding another life as a human possibility. That more limited claim is enough for the purposes here. A novel can organise a space of imaginative trial, in which categories get tested against particular persons. Keen's caution keeps that formal invitation from being mistaken for a response the text could somehow guarantee.[18]

Keen's account makes this methodological limit explicit. Fiction can deploy the techniques we associate with empathic response, identification with a character, direct access to thought, the familiar scripts through which suffering gets told, an author's own invitation to care, and still fail to produce the same response in every reader who takes them up. Even when readers report intense feeling, the movement from narrative empathy to durable altruistic action remains unproven and may be exaggerated.[19] A novel can therefore be successful as an affective artefact while failing to alter conduct; it may also reshape the language through which an injury is interpreted without generating a uniform emotion.

This limitation is best understood as a methodological requirement of literary analysis, not a weakness in it. Critics can describe what a text makes available to the reader, what it emphasises, postpones, or withholds; they cannot, however, derive a universal psychological response from formal features alone. The organising intelligence behind a work can instead be reconstructed through its choices of tone, structure, selection, and judgment in a process that corresponds to Wayne Booth's concept of the implied author.[20] Wolfgang Iser similarly defines the implied reader as a role prepared by textual structure rather than as a demographic portrait of actual readers. Gaps, changes of perspective, ironic discrepancies, and incomplete information require acts of

[17] Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, 64–67; Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity*, 85–112.
[18] Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 5–8.
[19] Keen, "Theory of Narrative Empathy," 208, 222–23.
[20] Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 73–76, 137–38.

interpretation: reading is an activity through which the text's perspectives are actualised, not the passive reception of a completed moral message.[21]

These rhetorical models are particularly useful for reading Dickens, since his narration often constructs a position from which readers are invited to see and judge, guiding their attention while also exposing the limits and instability of perception itself. Irony may repeat an institution's respectable language until its cruelty becomes visible. Melodrama may simplify the moral field into recognisable contrasts, yet it may also grant unexpected depth to figures who cross those contrasts. Suspense may delay knowledge so that judgment changes over time. Bodily description may convert policy into hunger, fatigue, tears, illness, or fear. Such devices establish a position from which the represented world can be evaluated, but the position remains an invitation. Readers may accept, resist, sentimentalise, mock, or redirect the emotions solicited by the text.

Audrey Jaffe's work on Victorian "scenes of sympathy" adds another difficulty. Sympathy is never a transparent passage into another person. It is mediated by representation and may replace the sufferer with the spectator's image of what that suffering means. The sympathetic encounter can consolidate the identity of the observer, including class identity, even while appearing to cross social distance.[22] For this reason, the question "with whom does the reader sympathise?" must be supplemented by others: through whose body is poverty represented? Which forms of difference can be incorporated into the observer's moral imagination? Which characters are granted an interior life, and which remain visible only as types, crowds, or threats?

Narrative empathy is selective by its very structure, then. No novel can give equal time, equal focalisation, equal psychological depth to every figure in it. That selection is itself an ethical and political act. A narrative makes some lives central and others peripheral, some intelligible and others opaque. It also governs duration, one injury gets stretched across several chapters, another gets compressed into a single sentence, a third turns into comic background before the reader has time to register it as suffering at all. The reader's moral field is shaped by these distributions long before the narrative states anything explicitly.

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[21] Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 114–17.
[22] Audrey Jaffe, *Scenes of Sympathy: Identity and Representation in Victorian Fiction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 1–17.

This distinction clarifies something worth keeping separate: emotional efficacy from political efficacy. Emotional efficacy has to do with the intensity and quality of the response a scene manages to draw out. Political efficacy has to do with something else, the mediations through which perception turns into public language, into responsibility, association, policy, reform. Keen's caution makes it impossible to treat tears as evidence of transformation.[23] Yet the opposite conclusion that emotion is politically irrelevant unless a novel supplies a programme of reform is equally reductive. Literature can alter the terms in which suffering is perceived, identify injuries that institutional vocabularies conceal, and associate those injuries with responsibility. Its intervention may precede policy without being external to politics.

The analytical task that follows is consequently precise. Rather than asking whether Dickens makes readers better, the thesis examines how his novels construct moral legibility: how they convert a social condition into a scene, give or refuse access to a subject, assign innocence, and blame, and position a reader in relation to that distribution. This method treats feeling as part of narrative form and judgment, not as an emotional substance added after the fact.

1.3 From Moral Sentiments to Victorian Sentimentalism

Dickens's affective rhetoric emerges from a longer tradition in which feeling was understood as a foundation of social judgment. The relevant genealogy does not require a complete account of Western theories of human nature. Its decisive point lies in the eighteenth-century revaluation of sympathy. Hume rejects the idea that reason alone can motivate moral conduct and treats moral distinctions as inseparable from sentiment. Sympathy enables the passions and interests of others to become affectively present, although its force varies with proximity, resemblance, and social relation.[24] Smith develops this relational model through imagination: because the senses cannot carry us directly beyond our own person, we imagine what we might feel if we were in another's situation. The impartial spectator then names the internalised perspective through which conduct is assessed beyond immediate self-interest.[25]

[23] Keen, "Theory of Narrative Empathy," 222–23.
[24] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), 2:455–76, 574–91.
[25] Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982), 9, 109–17, 129–32.

If sympathy depends upon imagining situations not directly experienced, narrative can supply voices and sequences through which the fortunes of strangers become thinkable. Eighteenth-century sentimental writing made that process visible in the trembling body, the tears, the virtuous sufferer, and the spectator whose response confirmed moral sensibility. Authors like Richardson, Sterne, Goldsmith, and Mackenzie organised their plots around feeling itself rather than treating emotion as an ornamental addition. Sentimental texts could therefore operate as forms of affective pedagogy, teaching readers what counted as a proper response to virtue, suffering, and benevolence.[26]

The later pejorative meaning of *sentimental* should not be projected backwards without qualification. In its earlier moral sense, *sentimental*ity expressed confidence that benevolence, compassion, and the desire for approval belonged to civil life. Fred Kaplan distinguishes this tradition from an excessive display of feeling, while Valerie Purton traces the literary line through which Dickens inherited the good heart, tears, bodily responsiveness, and faith in moral regeneration.[27] The tradition was never uniform. Sterne's irony could expose feeling as theatrical performance even while valuing sensibility; later writers inherited both the ethical claim and the risk of affectation.

Dickens enters this tradition, however, at a moment when sentimentality had become vulnerable to accusations of falsity, femininity, childishness, and aesthetic inferiority. Bethan Carney shows that hostility to Dickensian feeling was inseparable from hostility to his popularity and to the heterogeneous audience addressed by his fiction.[28] The sentimental mode drew suspicion for more than one reason. It seemed unrealistic to some readers, certainly, but what troubled others just as much was its capacity to move people across the very boundaries of education and class that were supposed to hold firm. Its public accessibility challenged critical ideals that identified seriousness with restraint, psychological inwardness, or elite cultivation.

Kindness, rather than doctrine, offers the clearest way into Dickens's Christianity. What matters in his writing is not adherence to a theological system, but the moral value of mercy, forgiveness, and active concern for those who suffer. Valentine Cunningham

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[26] Janet Todd, *Sensibility: An Introduction* (London: Methuen, 1986), 3–9, 23–31.
[27] Fred Kaplan, *Sacred Tears: Sentimentality in Victorian Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 37–41; Valerie Purton, *Dickens and the Sentimental Tradition: Fielding, Richardson, Sterne, Goldsmith, Sheridan, Lamb* (London: Anthem Press, 2012), xiii–xxviii.
[28] Bethan Carney, "Introduction: 'Mr Popular Sentiment': Dickens and Feeling," *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, no. 14 (2012): 1–21, esp. 1–3, https://doi.org/10.16995/ntn.644.

places this practical ethics at the centre of Dickens's religious imagination. The same emphasis shapes *The Life of Our Lord*, where Christ is presented chiefly through his actions and his response to human vulnerability. Throughout the novels, religious belief is evaluated in similarly concrete terms: by the way people treat children, the poor, and those whom respectable society ignores, condemns, or degrades.[29]

Purton's account is particularly useful in showing how Dickens adapts eighteenth-century traditions of fellow-feeling to a world increasingly shaped by industrialisation, bureaucracy, urban anonymity, and mass print. The old sentimental encounter between sufferer and benevolent observer becomes unstable when injury is produced by institutions rather than by isolated misfortune. Brownlow can rescue Oliver, but private goodness does not abolish the workhouse. A converted individual can recognise a wrong, but recognition does not necessarily establish a collective right. The sentimental inheritance thus provides Dickens with a language powerful enough to expose dehumanisation and limited enough to risk privatising its remedy.[30]

This tension is already visible in the figure of the child. Romantic and sentimental traditions make childhood a privileged sign of uncorrupted value, imaginative freedom, and vulnerability. Dickens intensifies the convention by placing children before institutions that classify, discipline, exploit, or neglect them. The child becomes an ethical test because the disproportion between weakness and punishment makes cruelty immediately legible. Yet the strategy also narrows compassion towards the exceptionally innocent victim. The later analysis of Oliver will therefore ask how innocence creates a claim upon the reader and, more importantly, what happens to figures whose suffering is mixed with guilt, compromise, aggression, or social opacity.

[29] Valentine Cunningham, "Dickens and Christianity," in *A Companion to Charles Dickens*, ed. David Paroissien (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 255–76, esp. 255–59.
[30] Purton, *Dickens and the Sentimental Tradition*, 91–120, 121–50.

1.4 Dickensian Feeling in Context

Two historical developments are particularly important to this study because they shaped the formal articulation of feeling in Dickens's fiction.

1. The growing use of administrative categories to classify and regulate poverty, labour, childhood, criminality, and public health.
2. The expansion of print culture, especially serial publication, which made the novel part of an ongoing exchange with a broad and socially diverse readership.

These changes unfolded within a rapidly industrialising and increasingly metropolitan society, whose lived contradictions often exceeded the institutional language used to describe and govern them.

Raymond Williams's concept of a "structure of feeling" offers a useful way of connecting literary form to this historical problem. Rather than separating emotion from thought, Williams defines it as "thought as felt and feeling as thought": a form of practical consciousness expressed through lived relations, tones, pressures, and experiences that have not yet settled into a fully articulated ideology or political programme. From this perspective, Dickens's narrative innovations, his use of crowds, contrasts, grotesque figures, coincidences, and shifting points of view, can be understood as a response to forms of urban experience that were still new and difficult to conceptualise. The novel does not simply reproduce an already established interpretation of social reality; through its formal procedures, it gives shape to an emergent experience and makes it available for critical evaluation.[31]

The New Poor Law provides one of the clearest institutional contexts for this discussion. Introduced by the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, the reformed system organised relief around deterrence, the workhouse test, and the principle of less eligibility. In doing so, it reduced poverty to a series of administrative distinctions: between the able-bodied and those deemed incapable of work, the deserving and the undeserving, and dependence and independence. *Oliver Twist* responds to this classificatory logic not by offering an alternative social treatise, but by translating its abstractions into embodied experience. Hunger, infancy, reasons, intimacy, naming, punishment, and separation become narrative events through which the assumptions of administrative reason are

[31] Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 131–32; Raymond Williams, *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1970), 29–37.

exposed to judgement. For this reason, critics have read the novel both as a direct challenge to Benthamite abstraction and as a more complex engagement with capitalist discipline, social classification, and the uncertain limits of compassion.[32]

Nowhere is this conflict more explicit than in *Hard Times*, the novel Nussbaum takes as the organising example of *Poetic Justice*. Her reading identifies Gradgrind's social reason with four linked operations: commensurability, aggregation, maximisation, and the treatment of preferences as exogenous. The objection is not that measurement is inherently inhuman, but that a model devised for calculation becomes morally distorting when it is allowed to determine what counts as relevant knowledge. Qualitative differences are flattened into a common scale; individual lives disappear into totals; agency becomes secondary to outcomes; and desires are treated as given rather than as products of education, deprivation, and social power. Dickens gives these operations a language and a body. Children become numbered vessels, workers become "Hands," and personal suffering is answered by averages, percentages, and rules that cannot register what a particular loss means to the person who bears it.[33]

Nussbaum's strongest contribution to the present argument is the claim that the novel does not oppose such abstraction at the level of theme. Its form enacts a rival practice of attention. It separates one life from another, lingers over faces, voices, fatigue, memory, and thwarted choice, and repeatedly asks what remains invisible when a person is known only as a type or statistic. Yet her reading also acknowledges a limit that is central to this thesis. Dickens's suspicion of collective action and his preference for individual sympathy or private charity can leave the institutional shape of remedy underdeveloped. *Hard Times* may therefore expose the inadequacy of Gradgrindian knowledge without producing an adequate account of structural redress. Her later account of compassion in public life likewise insists that institutions must embody and stabilise compassionate insight rather than rely on the uneven benevolence of individuals. Gallagher's analysis of industrial fiction complements this point by showing that political economy and reform debates do not just supply the novel with topics since they reshape its formal problems from within.[34] The conflict between "Facts" and "Fancy" is thus not

[32] Robert L. Patten, "Capitalism and Compassion in '*Oliver Twist*,'" *Studies in the Novel* 1, no. 2 (1969): 207–21, https://www.jstor.org/stable/29531329; K. J. Fielding, "Benthamite Utilitarianism and '*Oliver Twist*': A Novel of Ideas," *Dickens Quarterly* 4, no. 2 (1987): 49–65, https://www.jstor.org/stable/45291188.
[33] Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, chap. 2, "Fancy," 13–27.
[34] Catherine Gallagher, *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction: Social Discourse and Narrative Form, 1832–1867* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 147–69.

a contest between reason and emotion, but between rival accounts of what responsible knowledge of a human life requires.[35]

The demands of a mass readership also shaped Dickens's rhetorical practice. Serial publication structured the reading experience through anticipation, interruption, repetition, and the gradual renewal of contact with characters over time. Dickens was therefore writing for a broad and socially diverse audience that could not be treated as a single interpretive community, nor assumed to share the same political commitments. Theatricality, caricature, melodramatic contrast, and direct narratorial address provided widely recognisable forms through which the novels could engage this heterogeneous readership. As Juliet John argues, Dickensian characterisation and melodrama remain intricately connected to popular cultural forms rather than to an aesthetic centred on private psychological depth. Sally Ledger similarly places Dickens within a tradition of popular radicalism in which satire, affect, grotesque exposure, and an inclusive understanding of the audience work together.[36]

Dickens's own description of fiction's public purpose illuminates this strategy. In an 1854 letter, he presents one of fiction's highest uses as the capacity to "interest and affect the general mind" on behalf of an evident wrong while avoiding commitment to a single theory of cause or cure.[37] The formulation is politically significant. It rejects the view that emotional effects are accidental or commercial, but it also identifies their limit. Dickens seeks a broad moral concentration upon injury rather than adherence to a comprehensive political doctrine. His fiction can mobilise compassion and indignation while leaving the institutional form of redress open.

The historical context relevant to this study should not, therefore, be understood as a simple catalogue of Victorian social conditions. What matters is the relationship between administrative abstraction, popular literary form, and moral perception. Dickensian feeling takes shape at the point where institutional systems reduce individuals to categories and narrative seeks to reverse that process by restoring embodiment, singularity, duration, and social relation. Such a reversal can expose the violence concealed within administrative forms of knowledge. At the same time, however, it may

[35] Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 27–45; Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, chap. 8, secs. I and IV, 402, 424–31.
[36] Juliet John, *Dickens's Villains: Melodrama, Character, Popular Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1–20; Sally Ledger, *Dickens and the Popular Radical Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1–10.
[37] Charles Dickens to Henry Carey, August 24, 1854, quoted in Ledger, *Dickens and the Popular Radical Imagination*, 7.

place too much faith in personal recognition, sympathy, and benevolence as responses to structural problems. Much of the critical debate surrounding Dickensian sentiment has developed from this unresolved tension.

1.5 Dickensian Sentiment

> *"...the item of mortality whose name is prefixed to the head of this chapter"*[38]
>
> *"Please, sir, I want some more."*[39]
>
> *"I wish some well-fed philosopher [...] could have seen Oliver Twist"*[40]
>
> *"What have paupers to do with soul or spirit?"*[41]

Taken together, these moments condense the central difficulty that has shaped the critical reception of Dickensian sentiment. *Oliver Twist* repeatedly transforms institutional abstraction into scenes of hunger, bodily vulnerability, and moral address. Yet the force of these scenes has never been interpreted in a single way: their theatricality may expose social violence, but it may also simplify its causes, organise suffering as spectacle, or place reform in the hands of sympathetic individuals.

The following sections trace the development of this debate, from early charges of emotional excess and their later historical reassessment to ideological critiques of sympathy, accounts of melodrama and popular radicalism, and recent approaches to narrative empathy and reception. The aim is not to determine whether Dickensian sentiment is simply progressive or conservative, but to examine how it directs attention, distributes sympathy, and imagines the relationship between feeling and social change.

1.5.1 From "Mr Popular Sentiment" to Historical Rehabilitation

Criticism of Dickensian sentiment did not wait for posterity; it began while Dickens was still writing, and it soon settled into a durable formal accusation. Trollope's caricature of "Mr Popular Sentiment," Fitzjames Stephen's attacks, and the barb about the death of Little Nell later attributed to Wilde together furnished a vocabulary in which sentimentality signified excess and the manipulation of an undiscriminating public. What

[38] Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, 1.
[39] Ibid., 15.
[40] Ibid., 33.
[41] Ibid., 56.

Carney makes clear is that these charges seldom stayed on the page: again and again, an objection to the writing shades into contempt for those who read it, so that emotionalism comes to carry the marks of femininity, childishness, lower-class taste, and half-educated intelligence.[42] So, the quarrel was never simply a matter of taste. A novelist who could draw tears and laughter alike from readers on either side of a class line unsettled the very boundary that separated cultivated judgment from popular feeling.

Twentieth-century criticism tended to inherit this hierarchy even where it conceded Dickens his imaginative force. Measured against the standard of psychological realism, his sentimental scenes looked schematic, and his idealised children were read as botched portraits rather than as pieces of a different aesthetic altogether. The shift came when historical scholarship stopped asking whether such figures were lifelike and began asking what they were built to do. For Kaplan, the sentimental character is less an imitation of ordinary personality than an instrument of moral reform, one whose suffering is meant to rouse the reader's own moral sentiments.[43] Purton, in turn, recovers the eighteenth-century inheritance that binds tears, bodily responsiveness, benevolence, and moral exemplarity into a coherent system rather than a set of lapses.[44]

This recovery is indispensable, for it returns historical sense to forms that a later taste had written off as kitsch. Yet it carries a danger of its own, since contextual explanation slides easily into exoneration. To establish that Dickens's readers felt by other conventions tells us nothing, in itself, about whether a given scene apportions sympathy fairly, veils the social causes of suffering, or quietly translates a public wrong into a private consolation. Historical understanding, then, is a beginning and not a verdict: it has to be held together with formal and ideological analysis rather than made to stand in their place.

1.5.2 Sympathy as Ideology, Spectacle, and Liberal Guilt

The ideological critique of sympathy turns the question away from the sincerity of Dickens's feeling and toward the social work that representation performs. For Jaffe, Victorian sympathy is bound up with spectacle and identity: the observer imagines the sufferer through the cultural forms ready to hand, and in the very act of concern may shore up a comfortable middle-class self-image.[45] Sympathy can close a distance, but it

[42] Carney, "'Mr Popular Sentiment,'" 1–6.
[43] Kaplan, *Sacred Tears*, 37–41.
[44] Purton, *Dickens and the Sentimental Tradition*, xiii–xxviii.
[45] Jaffe, *Scenes of Sympathy*, 3–17.

can just as easily administer that distance, rendering poverty consumable as a scene. On this account the figure who suffers is not just recognised. The framing itself works to confirm the moral standing of the one doing the looking.

Daniel Born locates a kindred structure in liberal guilt, where the novel converts a systemic contradiction into the moral burden borne by a single subject. Guilt registers the suspicion that privilege is tied to suffering; at the same time, it may shrink to private conscience a problem far larger than any conscience can hold.[46] Gallagher's work on industrial fiction points the same way, showing that narrative form does not survey the discourses of reform from some vantage outside them but moves within them. A novel may lay bare the injuries of political economy and yet keep faith with the very assumptions through which those injuries were made intelligible.[47]

Together these arguments explain why benevolence in Dickens is so politically equivocal. When Brownlow rescues Oliver, feeling is given the practical completion it needs recognition hardens into shelter, education, protection. But the remedy is personal and exceptional. The benevolent household mends one life while the institution that broke it stands ready to break others, and the same pattern returns across the later fiction in its benefactors, its domestic havens, its sudden changes of heart. Sentiment sets itself against indifference, yet the agent of change it reaches for is, more often than not, the single awakened individual.

1.5.3 Melodrama, Popular Form, and Radical Imagination

Melodrama unsettles any tidy opposition between emotional excess and political seriousness. Brooks describes it as a mode that hunts for moral legibility in a world stripped of the sacred: through heightened gesture, polarised forces, persecuted innocence, and the recognitions that follow, it makes ethical conflict visible where the ordinary surfaces of social life have gone opaque.[48] It can thus be ideologically simplifying and cognitively revealing in the same breath. The question is not whether Dickens forsakes realism for melodrama, but which realities are brought to light by melodramatic organisation, and which complexities are dimmed beneath it.

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[46] Daniel Born, *The Birth of Liberal Guilt in the English Novel: Charles Dickens to H. G. Wells* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 1–17, 30–50.
[47] Gallagher, *Industrial Reformation of English Fiction*, 147–69.
[48] Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess,* with a new preface (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 4–5, 13, 20.

Recent Dickens criticism has unsettled the assumption that inward psychological complexity is the sole measure of serious characterisation. Reading Dickens's villains, his theatricality, and his externalised figures through the cultural politics of melodrama, John shows how publicly legible gesture and type can speak to a collective audience, laying bare the moral energies of a scene without recourse to the conventions of realist interiority.[49] This approach is especially useful for *Oliver Twist*, where the grotesque administrator, the innocent child, the theatrical villain, and the compromised rescuer operate within an affective system larger than any single consciousness could contain.

Ledger sets this popular aesthetic within a radical tradition of satire, caricature, performance, and opposition to respectable power. Dickens's affective mode weds sentimental suffering to grotesque comedy: the child lays a claim upon our feeling, and the official who refuses that claim is rendered absurd.[50] Pairings of this kind keep sentimentality from collapsing into passive tears, for indignation, laughter, disgust, suspense, and pity can work in concert to expose authority.

The popular-radical account also helps explain why Dickens eludes any fixed political label. His fiction can assail the workhouse, bureaucratic cruelty, industrial calculation, and elite indifference while remaining wary of collective political organisation or retreating into domestic solutions. The emotional language is mobile, ready to serve reformist, paternalist, radical, evangelical, or conservative ends, and its direction depends upon the narrative combination in which it surfaces. Popularity, then, is not something laid over the form from outside; it shapes a method built to forge shared recognitions across a divided public.

Ablow's survey of Victorian feeling, together with the essays gathered in *Dickens and Feeling* under Carney and Waters, marks a wider critical turn away from casting emotion as the antithesis of thought. Feeling is now read as embodied, historically organised, and constitutive of cognition, social relation, and literary form alike.[51] That turn opens the way to a reassessment of Dickens that neither celebrates emotion as humane by default nor dismisses it as the residue of an immature art.

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[49] John, *Dickens's Villains*, 1–20.
[50] Ledger, *Dickens and the Popular Radical Imagination*, 1–10.
[51] Rachel Ablow, "Victorian Feeling and the Victorian Novel," *Literature Compass* 4, no. 1 (2007): 298–316, esp. 300, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-4113.2006.00405.x; Carney, "'Mr Popular Sentiment,'" 1–3.

1.5.4 Narrative Empathy, Reception, and Political Mediation

Narrative-empathy theory supplies a last distinction to this critical history. A text may solicit empathy, sympathy, indignation, or grief, yet the presence of such a strategy is no proof of its effect in any actual reader. Keen's scepticism toward the empathy-altruism hypothesis is, for that reason, indispensable to an account of Dickensian influence.[52] It guards the argument against treating the mass audience as one undivided emotional community, or mistaking the popularity of a scene for evidence of reform enacted.

Rhetorical and reader-response criticism nonetheless let us examine the role the text projects. Booth traces the values inferred from a work's narrative choices; Iser describes the acts by which its gaps and shifting perspectives are brought to life.[53] Taken together, the two models sustain a distinction among the historical author, the organising values of the work, the role held out to the reader, and the uneven responses of real readers. Dickens's narrators may invite a judgment they cannot compel, and the scene of suffering may turn, according to interpretive context, into an occasion for compassion, resistance, amusement, embarrassment, or ideological critique.

Williams's concept of a structure of feeling joins this textual solicitation to historical consequence. Literary form can register pressures that are lived before thought has stabilised them into concepts; it can reorder perception and make a contradiction felt even where neither author nor reader commands a full theory of its causes.[54] The passage from felt contradiction to political action, however, runs through journalism, association, parliamentary debate, administrative inquiry, labour organisation, religious practice, and the other institutions that mediate it. No novel governs that sequence.

The debate can accordingly be recast. The question is not whether Dickens is progressive or conservative in the abstract, nor whether his sympathy is genuine or feigned. The questions that matter concern operations. What does the narrative make visible, and through whom? By what allocation of innocence, agency, interiority, and duration? What kind of responsibility does it imagine, and how does it resolve the injury it shows? Posed this way, the inquiry keeps what ideological critique has taught us while refusing the premise that an emotional form carries a single, settled political meaning.

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[52] Keen, "Theory of Narrative Empathy," 208, 222–23.
[53] Booth, *Rhetoric of Fiction*, 73–76, 137–38; Iser, *Implied Reader*, 114–17.
[54] Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 131–32; Williams, *English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence*, 29–37.

1.6 Method, Research Gap, and Working Hypothesis

Existing scholarship has established the historical significance of moral sentiment, the importance of melodrama, the ideological risks inherent in sympathetic spectatorship, and the uncertain relationship between narrative empathy and social action. The contribution of this thesis does not therefore lie in introducing feeling as a neglected aspect of Dickens's fiction. Rather, it seeks to bring these critical debates together by examining the precise ways in which narrative form distributes attention, vulnerability, blame, and the possibility of remedy. Sentimentality is understood here neither as a coherent political doctrine nor simply as an intensity of emotion, but as a set of formal procedures through which moral perception is organised.

Nussbaum provides the clearest normative account of the intuition underlying this method: narrative can resist abstraction by restoring qualitative difference, agency, and the concrete conditions of flourishing. The present thesis adopts that insight but narrows its claims. It does not assume that the novel as a genre reliably humanises its readers, nor that particularity is distributed evenly within any single work.[55]

The question is instead how Dickens constructs the conditions under which a life becomes available for compassion. Some characters are named, remembered, and placed within a sequence of losses and desires; others remain types, bodies in a crowd, comic interruptions, or sources of danger.[56]

Nussbaum's account explains why particularisation can matter ethically; the concept of selective moral attention makes its distribution an object of criticism. The same formal resources that oppose administrative abstraction may also reserve full moral legibility for exemplary victims, leaving compromised or collective subjects less fully seen. Literary imagination is therefore treated here not as a guaranteed moral achievement, but as a contested allocation of visibility, value, and concern.[57]

It is organised around four related questions:

1. **Access**: whose thoughts, sensations, memories, and motives are made available to the reader, and to what extent?
2. **Embodiment**: how do hunger, exhaustion, illness, tears, violence, and exposure translate abstract social conditions into felt experience?

[55] Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 2–12, 27–35.
[56] Ibid., 27–35.
[57] Ibid., 35–45.

3. **Narratorial orientation**: how do irony, direct address, description, suspense, and tonal contrast position the reader in relation to the judgments represented in the text?
4. **Resolution**: how is suffering resolved, through institutional reform, collective action, private rescue, punishment, moral conversion, or a return to the domestic sphere?

This approach avoids two opposing assumptions: that Dickensian pathos is politically emancipatory simply because it elicits compassion, and that emotion is inherently conservative whenever a plot fails to imagine structural reform. A sentimental scene may reveal the human cost of an institution, extend the boundaries of moral concern, and alter the terms in which a social problem can be judged. At the same time, it may contain the force of that critique by concentrating sympathy on an exceptionally innocent victim or by locating the possibility of remedy in an individual act of benevolence. Disclosure and containment should not, therefore, be treated as mutually exclusive interpretations. They may operate simultaneously within the same narrative sequence.

The working hypothesis of this thesis is that Dickensian sentimentalism functions as a selective technology of moral attention. In *Oliver Twist*, bodily vulnerability, narratorial irony, melodramatic polarisation, and the exceptional innocence of the child render administrative violence morally legible. Yet the novel's unequal distribution of interiority, together with its movement towards recognition, rescue, and private benevolence, limits the structural implications of this exposure. *Hard Times* assesses the same model in a later industrial context, where the figure of the innocent child gives way to a broader conflict involving imagination, labour, abstraction, and moral exceptionalism. The comparison does not aim to produce a comprehensive theory of Dickens's fiction. Instead, it asks whether the tension between affective disclosure and political containment persists when the object of sympathy, the narrative tone, and the social problem are altered.

Chapter II – Making Suffering Visible in Oliver Twist

> *Among other public buildings in the town of Mudfog, it boasts of one which is common to most towns great or small, to wit, a workhouse; and in this workhouse was born on a day and date which I need not trouble myself to repeat […] the item of mortality whose name is prefixed to the head of this chapter.*[58]

The opening of *Oliver Twist* gives grammatical priority to an institution over the child born within it. Before the protagonist has a name, a history, or even recognition as a feeling human subject, he is defined by the administrative place to which he belongs. Only once this setting has been established does the child enter the sentence at all, and even then, not as Oliver but as "*the item of mortality whose name is prefixed to the head of this chapter*."

The sentence translates a human birth into the language of record-keeping, treating the newborn less as an individual than as another fact to be entered into the parish accounts. Dickens's criticism is thus already embedded in the narrator's diction: by momentarily adopting the institution's cold vocabulary, while simultaneously exposing its absurdity through irony, the narration reveals how readily the workhouse system reduces the people under its authority to administrative objects.

This chapter traces how Dickens's narrative form resists that reduction, gradually establishing Oliver's individuality against it. Throughout the novel, suffering becomes visible precisely when the narration moves beyond an official or conventional label to attend to the particular experience it conceals. The pauper emerges as a hungry child; the apprentice as a frightened victim of violence; the supposed criminal associate as a little boy coerced into acts he barely understands. Nancy, too, is never allowed to remain a "fallen woman": the novel increasingly dwells on her divided loyalties, her fear, and her awareness of the danger closing in around her.

Yet this work of individualisation is not evenly distributed. It depends on narratorial irony, melodramatic contrast, bodily description, varying degrees of access to

[58] Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, 1.

consciousness, and a plot built around concealment and recognition, devices that determine whose suffering the reader is invited to see closely and whose remains at the margins. The novel's emotional force arises from this management of attention, but so do its political limitations.

The chapter moves from the novel's publication and the public problem it addresses to the narrator, whose irony supplies the moral judgment institutional language refuses to voice. Oliver's innocence is a narrative construction, not a psychological given: it secures him the reader's sympathy but raises the question of who cannot claim that same purity. The workhouse exposes administrative cruelty in its systematic form, London transposes it onto urban space, unevenly distributing visibility and protection. Nancy, Fagin, Sikes, and the criminal children test the limits of this moral field, while the ending, resolved through coincidence and private rescue, closes the plot without resolving the institutional contradictions it exposes.

This chapter is not concerned with emotional response as something the text simply delivers. The real question is what kind of judgement the novel trains in its reader: where it points our attention, what we are allowed to know, and which suffering becomes hard to look away from. *Oliver Twist* exposes the cruelty of the New Poor Law, but it never proposes what should replace it. We want Oliver to be saved, without ever suggesting that every child in his position deserves the same protection as a matter of right. This is not meant as a criticism of Dickens, yet he offers society no reform. The distinction drawn in Chapter 1 can now be put to work. Aristotle's account of pity, as Nussbaum reconstructs and revises it, rests on three judgments: the seriousness of a misfortune, its relation to desert, and the spectator's sense of the sufferer's possibilities. Nussbaum keeps the first two but recasts the third. Similar possibilities no longer ground compassion directly; they aid a further, eudaimonistic judgment, the one by which another person's good becomes part of one's own. *Oliver Twist* tests this structure with unusual precision. Its affective labour lies not in the display of pain but in the supply of information that lets pain be judged serious, responsibility be assigned, and a life acquire worth beyond the category that first names it. The chapter therefore asks not whether Dickens "creates empathy," but how access to experience is converted, or fails to be converted, into compassion, judgement, and action.[59]

[59] Aristotle, *On Rhetoric* 2.8, 1385b13–1386b8; Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, 306–13, 316–23.

2.1 Publication, Audience, and the Novel's Critical Problem

Oliver Twist ran in *Bentley's Miscellany* between February 1837 and April 1839, while the three-volume edition was issued before serialisation was complete. This overlap is significant because it shows that the novel was never first encountered as a self-contained object. Readers de facto read it in instalments, alongside other prose, verse, commentary, advertisements, and George Cruikshank's illustrations, and they returned to its characters after intervals in which public debate over poverty, crime, and the Poor Law continued unabated. Lance Schachterle's comparison with earlier magazine serials demonstrates how far Dickens tightened the relation between instalment and plot: rather than letting each number stand as an almost self-sufficient adventure, he built a longer mystery around Oliver's origins, scattering clues whose full significance could only be pieced together over time.[60] Readers had to wait to understand. Seriality thus amounted to more than a simple commercial scheduling; it trained readers to remember and to await the next instalment.

The formal consequences of this schedule are nowhere more visible than in the novel's handling of disappearance. Oliver repeatedly vanishes from the secure spaces in which the reader last saw him taken from Brownlow, carried through unfamiliar streets, delivered to Sikes, wounded during the burglary, then withheld from view while the narrative turns to the Bumbles, Monks, or Fagin. These deferrals generate suspense, but they also enact the precariousness of a child who can be lifted out of one social description and inserted into another. In Oliver's absence, his identity lies open to competing accounts: Bumble can present him as naturally vicious, Fagin can attempt to manufacture criminal habits in him, Monks can work to erase the evidence of his birth. The serial mystery is thus also a contest over who holds the authority to narrate the child.

Robert Patten has shown that Dickens's dealings with publishers and with periodical form were inseparable from the practical business of composing his fiction.[61] This practical constraint shaped the novel's texture; the monthly rhythm favoured sharp tonal contrast, recurrent scenes of danger, each needing its own visual anchor. For instance, Cruikshank's illustrations such as the raised bowl, the inattentive magistrate, the den, the burglary, Nancy's meeting with Rose, helped readers recall certain aspects of the novel between instalments. The novel's moral argument was carried, in part, by this

[60] Lance Schachterle, "*Oliver Twist* and Its Serial Predecessors," *Dickens Studies Annual* 3 (1974): 1–13.
[61] Robert L. Patten, *Charles Dickens and His Publishers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978).

repetition across media: bodily disproportion, posture, costume, and setting all helped to stabilise the distinction between official description and visible suffering.

Serial publication also complicates any simple notion of "the audience." Dickens addressed a public broad enough to sustain a successful periodical yet too heterogeneous to share a single political position. The novel could not presume agreement about the causes of poverty, the proper administration of relief, or the relation between crime and social deprivation. Its rhetoric therefore tends to operate at a more elementary level, concentrating attention on cases where the disproportion between need and punishment becomes difficult to defend. The starving child, the terrified apprentice, and the woman murdered after an act of protection provide scenes around which readers with different theories of society might nevertheless form a temporary moral judgement. Sally Ledger's account of Dickens's popular radical imagination is useful here: satire, grotesque comedy, pathos, and theatrical contrast create an accessible language of opposition without requiring adherence to a complete political doctrine.[62]

That mixed readership also complicates the social direction sympathy could take. Jaffe, for her part, shows that scenes of Victorian sympathy could let spectators define their own social standing through the very act of looking at someone else's suffering.[63] Pauperism, then, could be met at once as something to feel concern over and as a threatening social position against which respectability defined itself. Part of Oliver's usefulness to the novel lies in this double movement. He brings the workhouse close enough to demand attention, while his innocence lets readers set aside the moral stigma that clung to the category of the pauper. The emotional identification the novel offers is bound up, as a result, with a social boundary one the plot challenges throughout, only to restore it in the end through Oliver's recovered genealogy.[64]

The subtitle, *The Parish Boy's Progress*, identifies the central contradiction outright. "Progress" implies development, education, and movement towards social incorporation; "parish boy" names a child already classified by the institution responsible for him. The plot carries Oliver through a series of apparently distinct worlds, the baby farm, the workhouse, the undertaker's shop, roads, rookery, the magistrate's court, the bourgeois home, the country house, and the prison yet each transition raises the same

[62] Ledger, *Dickens and the Popular Radical Imagination*, 6–8.
[63] Ledger, *Dickens and the Popular Radical Imagination*, 4–5, 102–4; Jaffe, *Scenes of Sympathy*, 18–19.
[64] Ledger, *Dickens and the Popular Radical Imagination*, 4–5, 100, 104–5; Jaffe, *Scenes of Sympathy*, 18–19.

question: will this new environment recognise him any differently? At first, his progress is not the acquisition of a self so much as a succession of readings imposed upon him by others: burden, ingrate, commodity, criminal, patient, likeness, heir, adopted son.

Dickens's 1841 preface to the third edition shows him keenly aware that the representation of criminal life had itself become a matter of controversy. Answering the charge that the novel had made thieves and prostitutes fit subjects for fiction, he defended his decision to depict them without the glamour associated with the Newgate tradition. His claim is not that representation ought to remain morally neutral; on the contrary, Dickens insists on ugliness, degradation, and punishment as part of the truth of the criminal world.[65] This defence illuminates both the force and the difficulty of the novel. It seeks to extend attention to people conventionally excluded from respectable fiction, but it does so through moral classifications that can themselves turn harsh, theatrical, and unevenly applied.

The immediate public pressure behind the early chapters comes from the New Poor Law. The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 reorganised relief around deterrence and the workhouse test, requiring anyone who sought assistance to accept conditions deliberately made less desirable than those of the lowest-paid independent labourer. Dickens never pauses to explain the legislation in any systematic way; instead, he converts its assumptions into scenes whose comedy rests on a recognisable inversion, starvation is called economy, coercion is called training, and the refusal of ordinary human needs is called philosophy. Robert L. Patten and K. J. Fielding both read the novel's compassion in direct relation to political economy and Benthamite abstraction, though they differ somewhat in emphasis.[66] The book does not rebut calculation with another system of calculation. It asks what disappears when calculation becomes the only legitimate description of need.

Gertrude Himmelfarb's account helps specify the ideological work performed by this classification. The reformers sought to separate the labouring poor from the pauper, turning the receipt of relief into a legally and morally distinct status rather than a single point on a continuum of need. Yet the stigma attached to the workhouse spread well beyond the group it was meant to isolate: the threat of pauperism hung over the

[65] Charles Dickens, preface to the third edition (1841), in *Oliver Twist*, ed. Philip Horne (London: Penguin Books, 2002), Appendix A.

[66] Patten, "Capitalism and Compassion in '*Oliver Twist,*"' 207–21; Fielding, "Benthamite Utilitarianism and '*Oliver Twist*': A Novel of Ideas," 49–65.

independent poor rendering dependence shameful before anyone had actually entered the institution. Dickens's parish boy is produced within this semantic regime. Before Oliver has acted, the word pauper has already converted need into a damaged identity.

This strategy gives the novel a critical reach wider than that of a topical pamphlet, but it also produces its principal limitation. The institutional problem is embodied above all in Oliver, whose innocence is so complete that the official suspicion directed against him appears simply absurd. The reader is invited to conclude that the system has misjudged this particular child, rather than that it operates on a mistaken principle.

A more radical conclusion, that no child should have to prove exceptional purity in order to deserve protection, is present in the narrative as a kind of pressure, but it is never as securely built into the plot. Susan Zlotnick's analysis of bastardy and the New Poor Law shows how firmly the novel's legal questions remain tied to genealogy and legitimacy.[67] By the end, Oliver is more than rescued from a false classification; he is discovered to possess the relations that make his removal from the pauper class appear retrospectively proper.

The critical problem of *Oliver Twist* can thus be stated from the outset. Its sentimental and melodramatic forms render social injury visible by giving it an exemplary victim. That victim exposes the violence of the category imposed on him, yet the very clarity of his case may leave the category itself only partly dismantled. The novel oscillates between two distinct claims: the parish has failed to recognise Oliver for who he truly is, and that any society treating a child in this way has failed in its obligations. Much of what follows concerns the unstable relation between these propositions.

2.2 Narrator, Irony, and the Position of the Reader

The above-mentioned instability is already present in the narrative method. Dickens's narrator speaks with a historian's apparent command over the sequence of events, but repeatedly turns that authority against itself, mocking the very forms through which it claims neutrality. Chapter titles promise sober information only to inflate the smallest transitions into mock-ceremonial announcements; officials are introduced with an honorific seriousness that their own actions immediately undercut. Nor does the narrator make much effort to disappear behind the story. He addresses the reader directly,

[67] Susan Zlotnick, "'The Law's a Bachelor': *Oliver Twist*, Bastardy, and the New Poor Law," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 34, no. 1 (2006): 131–46, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150306051084.

interrupts the narrative, anticipates objections, and shifts tone without apology, until narration itself becomes part of the novel's moral theatre.

The first chapter already makes it difficult to decide where the narrator's irony is directed, because Oliver enters the novel in a language that seems almost incapable of registering him as a child, then as an "*item of mortality*", being described in the idiom of a register: an item that has increased the parish burden, yet the very same sentence sets this administrative phrase beside the physical struggle of birth itself. After considerable difficulty, the infant "*breathed, sneezed, and proceeded to advertise to the inmates of the workhouse the fact of a new burden having been imposed upon the parish…*".[68] What is striking here is not just the contrast between life and bureaucracy, but the way the sentence itself moves between them without marking a clean boundary. Oliver breathes and sneezes; those actions are bodily, involuntary, almost absurdly minimal signs of survival. But they are immediately redescribed as an announcement of economic liability. The comic effect therefore depends on more than a clash between two vocabularies. It exposes how readily one vocabulary can absorb the other: the child's first signs of life are intelligible to the institution only once they have been converted into the language of burden. The narrator's irony lies in allowing that conversion to proceed almost smoothly. He does not step outside the sentence to tell us that the parish view is morally grotesque; he lets its grotesqueness emerge from the fact that, grammatically, breathing and costing money can be made to sound like parts of the same event. What becomes uncomfortable, then, is not simply the cruelty of an official phrase, but the ease with which such a phrase can organise perception in the first place.

The notion of the implied author of Wayne Booth offers a useful way of describing the judgement produced by passages like this one. The literal speaker may go on praising prudence, wisdom, and benevolence, even as the arrangement of detail renders those very terms impossible to accept at face value; the reader is left to reconstruct a governing set of values from the gap between language and event.[69] In the workhouse chapters, irony is stable not because every possible reader must understand it, but because the text provides sustained evidence that official virtue means injury to the child. The joke is an invitation to reverse the institution's evaluations.

The reversal is nowhere clearer than in the board scene where Mr Bumble commands Oliver to "bow to the board"; seeing no board other than the table before him,

[68] Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, 2.
[69] Booth, *Rhetoric of Fiction*, 73–76, 137–38.

the child bows to that.[70] The joke depends, of course on the double meaning of the word, but its force lies in the fact that Oliver himself does not perceive the ambiguity at all. He obeys as literally as he can but, in this case, however he, accidentally, reduces the guardians' collective dignity to a piece of furniture. The board becomes a table. The peculiar aspect here is that the humour generated by Oliver, effectively satire, depends entirely on his innocence, since he is not yet capable of satirising the officials. The narrator by recounting the facts exploits the gap between what Oliver hears and does and what the adults expect him to understand.

The same rhetorical arrangement structures the request for food. The sentence "*Please, sir, I want some more*" contains neither accusation nor explanation.[71] Its force lies in how the novel's depiction of hunger turns Oliver's request from an act of insolence into the inevitable expression of a deprivation the institution has made ordinary. The disproportionate reaction to Oliver's modest request shifts the scene's moral abnormality from the hungry child to the adults who can interpret hunger only as insubordination.

At other moments the narrator abandons indirection and openly challenges the reader's bodily ease. When Oliver consumes the dog's rejected scraps at Sowerberry's, the narrator wishes that a "well-fed philosopher," with an icy blood and iron heart, could witness "the horrible avidity" of famine and then be required to eat under the same conditions.[72] The narrator through his sentences is not inviting the philosopher to entertain some abstract proposition about relief but imagines instead a forced exchange of bodily position. Sympathy here depends on collapsing the distance that makes detached judgement possible: feeling is produced not by contemplating suffering from safety, but by being imaginatively compelled to inhabit its physical conditions.

The 'well-fed philosopher' apostrophe makes this mechanism unusually explicit. Aristotle connects pity with the recognition that the sufferer's misfortune belongs to a field of possibilities that could also touch the spectator; Nussbaum treats this thought of similar possibilities as psychologically powerful but not strictly constitutive of compassion. Dickens stages precisely such a transfer when he wishes the philosopher could be made to eat 'the same sort of meal himself.'[73] The counterfactual does not ask the privileged observer to become Oliver or abolish the social distance between them. It

[70] Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, 11.
[71] Ibid., 15.
[72] Ibid., 33.
[73] Ibid., 34.

makes bodily vulnerability available as a common measure, unsettling the fantasy that material security places the spectator outside the conditions under which hunger becomes morally urgent. Empathy here functions as a route toward the eudaimonistic judgment: Oliver's suffering is invited to matter within the observer's own evaluative world.[74]

This directness coexists with a marked reluctance to provide sustained access to Oliver's consciousness. The narrator reports fear, grief, gratitude, and attachment, but Oliver seldom receives the extended interior monologue that some later realist fiction might use to establish psychological depth. Wolfgang Iser's account of textual gaps proves useful here: limited access to a character's mind does not necessarily produce limited reader involvement and can in fact oblige the reader to piece together bodily signs, circumstances, and ironic discrepancies that the character himself cannot interpret.[75] Oliver's inner life becomes legible, then, less as a sequence of private reflections than as a relation between vulnerable embodiment and hostile social readings imposed on it by others.

The narrator moreover frequently names the audience implicated in this work. Chapter headings refer to the "intelligent reader," invite "the reader" back to an earlier chapter or explain that a seemingly minor episode "may be found of importance in this history." These gestures are without any doubt comical, but they also construct reading as a memory and comparison activity; the reader is expected to remember what happened before, a practice that is strictly linked to serial publication.

The novel's theatricality becomes fully explicit in the famous opening of book 1, chapter 17, where the narrator compares the alternation of tragic and comic scenes in "good, murderous melodramas" to the red and white layers of "streaky, well-cured bacon," before arguing that life itself produces transitions no less abrupt.[76] The passage is often read simply as a defence of tonal inconsistency, but it also reveals how Dickens positions the reader. In life, people are "busy actors"; in the theatre or novel, they become "passive lookers-on." The comparison acknowledges this distance only in order to exploit it. Spectatorship permits patterns to become visible that action may conceal.

Peter Brooks describes melodrama as a mode concerned with making moral forces readable when they are no longer secured by a shared sacred order.[77] Dickens's narrator

[74] Aristotle, *On Rhetoric* 2.8, 1386a20–1386b8; Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, 316–20.
[75] Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 34–38, 163–70.
[76] Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, 140.
[77] Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination,* 4–5, 13, 20.

performs precisely this work through contrast: comic pomposity set beside bodily pain, domestic warmth beside the den, and respectable speech beside violence create a field in which moral judgement appears immediate. Yet the narrator also knows perfectly well that this immediacy is manufactured. The bacon passage draws attention to arrangement, to the deliberate cutting and alternation of scenes. Feeling is neither spontaneous nor fraudulent simply because it has been constructed; it is a consequence of form.

Audrey Jaffe's critique of Victorian sympathy prevents this position from appearing innocent. A scene of suffering also constructs the spectator who recognises it as such. The reader may condemn Bumble and identify with benevolent observers partly because the scene confirms a desired image of moral refinement.[78] The "well-fed philosopher" apostrophe, for all its attack on indifference, still imagines a reader equipped with food, leisure, and interpretive authority, looking down upon the poor. Dickens crosses social distance through representation; in other words, without ever quite abolishing the unequal relation between observer and observed.

At times, the narrator turns this very inequality back against the audience itself. When Oliver is recaptured in the street, the bystanders readily accept Nancy's performance of domestic distress and Sikes's account of the child as a hardened runaway. Oliver is "overpowered by the conviction of the bystanders that he was really the hardened little wretch he was described to be." The narrator then asks, "what could one poor child do?" before he is dragged through a "labyrinth of dark, narrow courts".[79] The public does not simply fail to help. It completes the criminals' fiction by supplying belief. Readers often assume they would have seen through Nancy's performance, but the scene itself does not share this certainty.

This is precisely why the narrator's guidance resists being reduced to emotional coercion. His interventions keep exposing the very processes by which people become credible or incredible objects of concern. Oliver's tears may be read as natural grief, theatrical deceit, or proof of ingratitude depending on the observer. Nancy can use the conventions of family feeling to abduct him, then later risk her life because she has recognised the violence concealed by those conventions. The narrative educates judgement not by eliminating performance, but by making its uses visible.

Juliet John and Sally Ledger both insist that Dickens's externalised characters, theatrical scenes, and popular forms should not be judged solely by the standards of

[78] Jaffe, *Scenes of Sympathy*, 3–17.
[79] Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, 128.

inward psychological realism.[80] The narrator's voice belongs to that public aesthetic. It creates sharply readable relations, invites laughter and indignation, and moves quickly between scenes that would appear incompatible in a more restrained mode. There is no moral to extract here. There is only a repeated demand: look at what respectable language has trained you not to see.

2.3 Oliver as a Readable Innocent

Oliver's innocence is developed throughout the novel. Moral purity has no direct visual form. It is something readers grasp through a pattern, bodily exposure, linguistic simplicity, disproportionate punishment, failed attempts by others to impose a contrary identity on him. Oliver's character supplies the medium through which the novel's social argument acquires clarity, more than it supplies its starting point.

As just seen before, the whole process begins at birth. The workhouse registers a new burden, while the narrative records the fragile sequence by which a body, the child, enters life: breath, a sneeze, a cry, and the immediate loss of the mother who might have named and protected him.[81] Oliver enters the world without anyone able to speak for him except the institutions that receive him. In the absence of family memory or testimony, his identity is assembled from outside. Bumble gives him a surname through the parish's alphabetical system; the parish determines his social position; Mrs Mann disguises neglect beneath the language of maternal care. Even naming loses its usual connection with family and becomes an administrative act. Oliver is therefore defined socially before he has any real capacity to define himself.

The same vulnerability is registered through his body. Hunger leaves little room for concealment: the polished bowls, the boys watching them, fingers searching for the last remaining drops, and the grim suggestion that one child may eat another all make deprivation physically visible. By the time Oliver asks for more, the request has already been prepared by the hunger of the whole group. Yet once he speaks, that collective condition narrows around him. His single body comes to bear the risk created by an experience shared by all the boys.

Elaine Scarry offers a useful way of reading this emphasis on the body, though Oliver's hunger belongs to a very different scale of suffering from the extreme forms of pain at the centre of her study. For Scarry, pain is absolute to the person who feels it but

[80] John, *Dickens's Villains*, 1–20; Ledger, *Dickens and the Popular Radical Imagination*, 4–8.
[81] Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, 2.

remains uncertain to those who witness it, especially because it resists direct expression. Dickens confronts a similar problem by making deprivation legible through its effects: empty bowls, thin bodies, trembling, faintness, hurried eating, and the responses these sights provoke. Hunger reaches the reader through such external traces. The body cannot communicate experience transparently, but it can make suffering harder to dismiss by giving it visible form. In this sense, bodily evidence carries what speech alone cannot secure: the demand that hunger be recognised as real.[82]

The same structure governs Oliver's removal from the baby farm. The narrator remarks that a kind word or look has never illuminated his childhood, yet he grieves when he leaves the only companions he has known. His tears and the agony he expresses are not a sign that Mrs Mann's establishment was humane; they register the child's capacity to form attachments even within deprivation. The passage refuses the assumption that people require adequate conditions before their emotional lives become meaningful. Oliver has almost nothing, but the loss of that little is still, a loss.[83]

Tears serve a recurring purpose in Dickens, but they are never treated as self-evident signs of sincerity. Noah Claypole, after deliberately provoking Oliver, produces an "imposing show of tears and terror," while Nancy is able to assume the role of the distressed sister in public. Feeling, or its appearance, can therefore be staged. What gives Oliver's tears their credibility is not the display itself but the narrative sequence surrounding it. Hunger, humiliation, separation, fear, and gratitude are followed by reactions that seem proportionate to what has happened. Noah's tears, by contrast, emerge from calculation and an awareness of their effect on others. The distinction rests less on an opposition between true and false emotion than on the reader's access to the circumstances in which emotion is expressed.

Aristotle's first two judgments, seriousness and nondesert, clarify why these bodily signs do more than accumulate pathos. After the punishment that follows the attack on Noah, Oliver waits until he is alone and '*wept such tears as, God send for the credit of our nature, few so young may ever have cause to pour out before him*.'[84] The absence of an internal spectator matters. Unlike Noah's calculated display or Nancy's performance in the street, this grief is not addressed to anyone within the scene; the reader

[82] Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 3–13.
[83] Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, 10–11.
[84] Ibid., 58.

alone is made witness to it. Dickens therefore couples the bodily sign with a causal history, bereavement, humiliation, beating, confinement that supplies an appraisal of its seriousness and directs blame away from the child. Read through Nussbaum's reconstruction of Aristotle, the early chapters are striking for the accumulation of recognisably grave predicaments: bodily ill-treatment, lack of food, isolation, separation, physical weakness, reversals of expectation, and the absence of good prospects. The narrative teaches the reader how to evaluate the injuries that produce Oliver's feelings, not simply that he feels them.[85]

Oliver's speech is marked by the same restraint. He pleads, asks, gives thanks, and at times protests, but he rarely tries to explain the circumstances in which he finds himself. Even his most famous request, "Please, sir, I want some more," is striking for its simplicity. There is no attempt to justify himself at length or to persuade his listeners through argument. This simplicity helps to preserve the impression of Oliver as sincere, but it also means that he has little control over the way his story is understood. He speaks for himself less often than others speak about him.

As a result, much of Oliver's identity is produced through other people's attempts to interpret him. Bumble sees insolence where Brownlow sees honesty; Sowerberry considers what use can be made of him, while Fagin imagines what he might be taught to become. Rose responds to him through sympathy, and Monks sees in him something quite different: a threat because of what his existence might prove. Oliver's real journey is less geographical than interpretive. Parish officials classify him, criminals try to fold him into their own schemes, sympathetic characters read his appearance and manner as signs of something better, and questions of identity and inheritance eventually come down to whatever evidence can be established and believed. The uncertainty surrounding Oliver is thus not simply a question of mistaken identity. It also concerns who has the authority to define him, and what kind of evidence the novel allows that definition to rest upon.

The episode with Noah briefly unsettles this pattern. After Noah insults Oliver's dead mother, Oliver responds with a violence that shocks those around him. The scene does not recast him as naturally aggressive. On the contrary, Dickens makes clear that his anger comes from a loyalty that has survived despite everything done to isolate and degrade him. Oliver reacts not to an insult against himself, but to an attack on a mother

[85] Aristotle, *On Rhetoric* 2.8, 1385b13–1386a13; Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, 306, 313.

he scarcely remembers. For once, he acts before others can define what his feelings ought to be.

That moment of self-assertion, however, is immediately taken away from him. Noah labels him "wicious," while Bumble explains the outburst through the logic of the workhouse, absurdly suggesting that meat has given the boy an excess of "soul and spirit." What Oliver experiences as an instinctive defence of his mother is thus translated by the adults into further proof that something is wrong with him. The episode is revealing precisely because the violence itself matters less than the speed with which it is made to fit an existing view of the pauper child. Even when Oliver acts from a recognisable moral impulse, the institutions around him remain ready to redescribe that impulse as misconduct.[86] The grotesque claim reveals what Oliver's anger has exposed: the institution demands more than obedience; it depends on a child stripped of independent feeling. Yet the attack on Noah also unsettles the idea that Oliver's innocence rests on passivity. Dickens allows him violence, but only within narrow moral limits. He fights in defence of his mother, not for advantage, revenge, or power, so that his anger can still be contained within the novel's sentimental logic. What Oliver is not allowed to develop is an anger that becomes social understanding or sustained resistance. He runs away from Sowerberry's household but never turns that experience into a criticism of the parish system that sent him there.

The journey towards London gives him a little more room to think and act for himself. Beside the milestone, Oliver considers the distance ahead, his lack of food, his clothes, and the anonymity London might offer. His reasoning remains practical and recognisably childish: a clean shirt, two pairs of stockings, and a penny are only "small helps" for a sixty-five-mile journey. The scene gives him a limited capacity for planning without making him less vulnerable. Oliver can decide to flee, but he cannot yet imagine the dangers that such freedom exposes him to.[87] London appears to him as escape because the information available to him has been produced by other paupers, for whom the city represents the possibility of surviving beyond parish control.

The title's "progress" thus repeatedly places bodily movement beside interpretive ignorance. Oliver walks, runs, is transported, abducted, hidden, and carried. His body moves across a wide social geography while his knowledge remains fragmentary. A materialist reading such as Eagleton's emphasises that Oliver's limited perspective is

[86] Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, 53–54.
[87] Ibid., 62.

formally productive: the child cannot totalise the social world, while the reader is asked to connect its fragments.[88] Oliver experiences hunger, violence, kindness, and fear without fully grasping how they belong to the same social world. Their connection is left for the reader to recognise, producing an understanding that remains largely beyond the protagonist himself.

Oliver's limited understanding gives him a peculiar critical force. He does not speak in the idioms of the workhouse, criminal opportunism, or class prejudice, and for that reason their assumptions stand out more sharply when imposed on him. His plain responses strip euphemism of its cover; his gratitude makes neglect more visible; his fear reveals the pressure hidden beneath authority. Oliver rarely contests the adult world in its own terms. Instead, the contrast between what he feels and what others claim about him becomes the means by which their distortions are exposed.

The portrait in Brownlow's house gives this logic a visual form. Oliver is disturbed by the painted woman whose sorrowful eyes seem fixed upon him; the image makes his heart beat "as if it was alive, and wanted to speak to me, but couldn't".[89] At first the resemblance remains unreadable. Before the adults can recover the facts of Oliver's genealogy, he has already responded through feeling. Recognition begins here not with proof, but with an uneasy overlap between bodily response and partial knowledge. Resemblance precedes certainty, while the portrait seems to speak for a woman whose own history can no longer be heard.

Yet the portrait also introduces the class and hereditary logic that will secure Oliver's final rescue. His appearance is evidence that he belongs elsewhere. Brownlow's sympathy is not reducible to physiognomy, but the plot gradually confirms his intuition by revealing Oliver as the son of Agnes Fleming and Edwin Leeford. Susan Zlotnick argues that the novel's engagement with bastardy and the New Poor Law is inseparable from this recovery of legitimate family history.[90] The child whom the parish treats as an undifferentiated pauper is eventually distinguished from the pauper population through blood, likeness, inheritance, and name.

The difficulty becomes sharper because Oliver remains morally untouched by the criminal world around him. Fagin introduces theft gradually, wrapping it in games,

[88] Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory* (London: New Left Books, 1976), 64–69, 77–78; Terry Eagleton, *The English Novel: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 149–51.
[89] Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, 95.
[90] Zlotnick, "'The Law's a Bachelor,'" 131–46.

rewards, humour, observation, and dependence, yet none of these methods alters the child's basic judgement. Once Oliver understands what the Dodger and Charley actually do, his response is immediate revulsion rather than curiosity or temptation. This clears him of the criminal identity others try to assign to him, but it also complicates a purely social account of corruption. Nancy and the boys bear the marks of their environment; Oliver, placed among the same influences, seems to carry a goodness that experience can test but not fundamentally reshape.

Malcolm Andrews reads Oliver's incorruptibility through Dickens's broader contrast between children who retain childhood and those whom neglect pushes too early into adult roles. The Dodger makes this distinction particularly clear. Subjected to similar pressures, he survives by adopting the clothes, language, and habits of the adult criminal world, while Oliver remains untouched by them. The contrast sharpens Dickens's sense of the damage an environment can produce, but it also leaves that explanation incomplete. If the same conditions deform one child and fail to alter another, Oliver's virtue begins to look less socially formed than rooted in some prior, largely unexplained disposition.

Oliver's purity needs the Dodger to be visible at all. The children who adapted to survive become the ones the novel struggles to feel for.[91]

The contrast is ethically productive and politically limiting. It demonstrates that poverty is not proof of vice, since the poorest child may possess extraordinary moral integrity. At the same time, it risks making integrity the condition under which poverty becomes worthy of compassion. Oliver is protected from ambiguity so completely that other children can appear to deserve the suspicion he escapes. The moral field becomes clearest where victimhood and innocence coincide.

This is why "readable innocent" should be understood as an ambivalent category. Oliver's body and conduct expose the violence of systems that deny his humanity. His blamelessness activates the judgments of seriousness and undeserved suffering upon which compassion depends. But the same blamelessness narrows the test. The novel can prove that the institution is monstrous because it harms a child who is visibly unlike the figure it imagines; the harder proposition is that the institution would remain unjust even if the child were disobedient, damaged, aggressive, or already implicated in crime. Nancy, Fagin, Sikes, and the criminal children will force that question back into the novel.

[91] Malcolm Andrews, *Dickens and the Grown-up Child* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994), 80–82.

Seen from this perspective, the "readable innocent" becomes the novel's most carefully managed basis for compassion. Hunger, physical weakness, separation, fear, and violence establish the seriousness of Oliver's suffering, while the plot repeatedly clears him of the intentions others project onto him. At the same time, his capacity for affection, gratitude, learning, and future happiness shows what deprivation may prevent him from becoming. Nussbaum's account helps to expose the limitation built into this design. Compassion depends, in her formulation, on suffering for which someone is "not, or not fully, to blame"; it does not require that the sufferer be morally spotless.[92]

Dickens, however, makes Oliver's non-desert unusually easy to read by pushing it toward blamelessness. The novel becomes ethically more difficult when suffering belongs to figures who have also acted wrongly, because compassion must then survive without the protection supplied by the exemplary innocent.

2.4 The Workhouse and the New Poor Law

The opening chapters of *Oliver Twist* are often described as an attack on the New Poor Law, but their distinctive force lies in the way policy is translated into a recurring conflict between administrative description and bodily fact. Dickens presents a system that can sustain cruelty only by changing its name. Deprivation is recast as economy, coercion as discipline, and death as an unfortunate defect in what is still described as a rational experiment. The problem, then, is not simply that cruel officials administer a flawed system, but that the system itself depends on language that makes cruelty appear legitimate.

Mrs Mann's baby farm provides the first example. The parish pays a weekly allowance for each child, and the narrator explains that the sum might be enough to "overload" a small stomach if it were actually spent upon food. Mrs Mann, celebrated as a woman of "wisdom and experience," appropriates most of it and thereby proves herself an "experimental philosopher".[93] The allusion to the horse supposedly trained to live without eating places Malthusian economy within the register of absurd science. The comedy is exact: children die because the official arrangement rewards the reduction of their needs, while the language of experiment removes intention and responsibility from the result.

[92] Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity*, 90–92.
[93] Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, 6.

The parish already possesses abundant information about the children in its care. They are measured, counted, examined, moved, and eventually buried. What remains absent is any language capable of turning those facts into moral responsibility. Institutionally, the child appears as an expense, a number, or a possible source of disorder. Dickens alters that perspective by restoring time and bodily experience to the record: Oliver's hunger is not confined to a single inspection but belongs to years of deprivation in which affection itself has been scarce. The failure of administrative knowledge is therefore not simply that it overlooks certain facts. Its distortion lies in deciding, from the outset, which facts are worth seeing.

Nussbaum's account of the narrative imagination gives this conflict between administrative knowledge and bodily fact a broader epistemic significance. In her discussion of social invisibility in *Cultivating Humanity*, she argues that narrative art can 'make us see the lives of the different' and, crucially, show how circumstances shape both possibilities for action and 'aspiration, desires, hopes and fears.'[94] The workhouse chapters perform an analogous correction. The parish possesses data about Oliver: age, status, cost, destination, but those data are organised by a vocabulary that excludes the question of what deprivation means within his life. Dickens's counter-description adds precisely what the register omits: duration, attachment, fear, appetite, memory, and the possibility of a future. The political force of particularisation lies in this change of object: a case in the parish books becomes a person whose flourishing can be damaged.

The workhouse board extends this logic through collective authority. Its members are "very sage, deep, philosophical men" who discover that the poor enjoy relief too much and resolve to give them the choice of gradual starvation inside or rapid starvation outside.[95] The sentence reduces the principle of less eligibility to a grotesque either-or logic.

The policy masquerades as a conclusion drawn from pauper preference, even though the terms have already been fixed in advance. What the poor are said to choose becomes the very justification for the treatment they are forced to endure.

Elaine Hadley situates this procedure within the melodramatic rhetoric of anti-Poor Law protest rather than treating it as Dickens's private emotional excess. Contemporary speeches, newspapers, pamphlets, and sermons rendered the union workhouse through scenes of separated families, starved bodies, coercion, and threatened

[94] Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity*, 88.
[95] Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, 13.

death; *Oliver Twist* entered the same public field, and the Times rapidly detached the board scene from the serial and reprinted it as topical protest. Hadley's point sharpens the chapter's argument: melodrama did not simply exaggerate a pre-existing policy dispute. It supplied a public language in which classificatory reason could be answered by injured bodies and visible relations. At the same time, because this rhetoric organised dissent around persecution and recognition, it could oppose the new system while leaving the older parish hierarchy available as an imagined remedy.[96]

The gruel scene brings this logic into direct contact with the body. All the boys are starving, yet once Oliver speaks, a shared condition is recast as his personal defect. The institution turns the deprivation it has created into evidence against the child who gives it words. The white-waistcoated gentleman carries the distortion further by predicting that Oliver will be hanged, as though hunger itself already contained the beginnings of criminality. K. J. Fielding's account of the novel's response to Benthamite utilitarianism helps bring the target of this satire into sharper focus: calculation has ceased to be a method for evaluating consequences and has become a language for excluding the sufferer's own account of those consequences.[97]

Oliver's treatment after the incident links poor relief directly to labour, criminal suspicion, and punishment. Once marked as troublesome, he is no longer simply to be maintained but removed through apprenticeship. The parish offers five pounds to whoever will take him, turning his departure into a subsidised transaction while presenting it as employment. Gamfield's appearance strips away that respectable language. To him, Oliver is valuable because his small body can be sent into dangerous chimneys; to the board, he is valuable because taking him away reduces the parish burden. What is called an opportunity for the child is, in practice, an economical way of disposing of him.

The magistrate scene briefly arrests this administrative momentum through an act of attention. Moments earlier, the elderly magistrate cannot see the inkstand placed before him; then, before signing the indenture, he notices Oliver's pale, frightened face. The joke about defective sight is suddenly reversed, as seeing becomes the basis for moral hesitation. What the board has classified as advantageous employment becomes legible

[96] Elaine Hadley, *Melodramatic Tactics: Theatricalized Dissent in the English Marketplace, 1800–1885* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 77–83, 115–30.
[97] Fielding, "Benthamite Utilitarianism and '*Oliver Twist*,'" 49–65.

as danger when the official attends to the child's body.[98] The intervention saves Oliver, but its contingency is troubling. Protection depends upon one person looking up at the right moment. The legal structure remains capable of authorising the same transaction for another child.

What matters in this episode is that Oliver's fate can turn on whether someone chooses to notice him. Dickens grants real force to individual compassion and does not dismiss it simply because it cannot reform the whole system. At the same time, the scene makes that dependence troubling. Oliver is protected because this magistrate pauses; another might have signed without hesitation. Mercy can interrupt the machinery, but it cannot replace a right that the machinery itself fails to provide.

Moving into Sowerberry's shop changes Oliver's surroundings, but not the way his body is treated as something of economic use. His thinness makes him suitable as a mute at children's funerals: deprivation becomes professional appearance. Even death is organised as a market in which the pauper child can be made to signify grief for paying clients. Mr Sowerberry's relative mildness does not remove the economic structure. Oliver is fed the scraps rejected by the dog, sleeps among coffins, and learns that the sorrow of the poor can be performed for others while their own dead are treated with indifference.[99]

The funeral scenes widen the novel's treatment of suffering by showing how differently death is acknowledged across social positions. The pauper woman's husband is left with grief he can barely articulate, while parish officials and undertakers translate the same death into procedures, costs, and practical arrangements. Oliver can only witness the gap. In Sowerberry's business, mourning becomes something organised and displayed, yet Dickens repeatedly draws attention back to forms of loss that cannot be contained by the rituals surrounding them.

Noah's provocation and the adults' response reveal the institutional demand beneath these arrangements. Bumble's question: "What have paupers to do with soul or spirit either?" is comic because it states too openly the assumption the system ordinarily disguises.[100] The poor may be kept alive as bodies required for labour, but inwardness appears as an excess inappropriate to their condition. Oliver's anger, attachment, and

[98] Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, 24.
[99] Ibid., 27–46.
[100] Ibid., 56.

dignity become administrative problems because they resist the reduction of the pauper to manageable life.

Paul Schlicke's account of Bumble and the Poor Law satire emphasises that the beadle is more than an isolated comic hypocrite.[101] He is the visible performer of an institutional ideology. His cocked hat, cane, rhetoric, and appetite give administrative authority a theatrical body. Dickens makes the system easier to grasp by concentrating it in Bumble, a figure who invites both ridicule and blame. Yet Bumble's power is not simply personal since it rests on an office that gives his vanity practical force. The satire works most sharply where private self-importance and institutional authority become indistinguishable.

The novel repeatedly exposes the material interests behind moral language. Mrs Corney's courtship with Bumble occurs in the presence of parish food and drink, while paupers remain objects of management. Their eventual marriage joins two forms of petty authority and appetite. Old Sally's confession about the locket and ring then reveals another administrative crime: an object capable of preserving Agnes's identity has been stolen from a dying woman whose speech carries little institutional weight. The loss of the tokens permits Oliver's history to be erased: poverty exposes one's testimony, possessions, and relations to appropriation without consequence.

Susan Zlotnick's analysis of bastardy helps place this theft within the Poor Law's broader regulation of illegitimacy.[102] Oliver's unknown parentage makes him vulnerable to classification as a parish burden, while the destruction of evidence prevents him from claiming family, property, or name. The plot of recognition will reverse that dispossession, but the workhouse chapters show how easily institutional power can convert a temporary absence of knowledge into a permanent social identity.

The magistrate Fang extends administrative cruelty from relief into criminal justice. Oliver, ill and barely conscious, is processed through a court more interested in speed and authority than evidence. Brownlow's testimony is interrupted; the child's bodily condition is treated as insolence; conviction appears likely until the bookseller arrives. Once again, rescue depends upon a late witness who restores facts excluded by procedure.[103] Dickens links workhouse and court through their shared interpretive violence: both decide what Oliver is before attending to what happened.

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[101] Paul Schlicke, "Bumble and the Poor Law Satire of *Oliver Twist*," *The Dickensian* 71 (1975): 149–56.
[102] Zlotnick, "'The Law's a Bachelor,'" 131–46.
[103] Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, 87–89.

This repetition matters because it prevents the New Poor Law satire from remaining confined to one institution. Parish, apprenticeship, trade, police, and court form a continuum in which vulnerable subjects are moved from one category to another. Poverty makes Oliver available for labour; his presence among thieves makes him available for prosecution; illness makes him less capable of giving the account that could save him. The institutions differ in function but share a preference for legible types over unstable persons.

Robert L. Patten's argument about capitalism and compassion identifies the novel's attempt to oppose this circulation with relationships that recognise non-economic value.[104] With Brownlow, Rose, Mrs Maylie, and Losberne, Oliver enters spaces where care is no longer tied to usefulness or exchange. Food, shelter, patience, and trust are given freely. These households break the earlier pattern of sale and punishment, making compassion tangible through the ordinary practice of looking after another person.

The contrast between institutional cruelty and private benevolence, however, also marks a limit in Dickens's critique. The parish appears through Bumble and the board, while relief comes from unusually generous households rather than from any dependable public provision. Oliver receives food, protection, and trust because certain individuals recognise his worth. The novel makes the need for care unmistakable but leaves its availability dependent on personal virtue rather than collective guarantee.

This tension remains in the Bumbles' final fate. Once their part in concealing Oliver's history is revealed, they are stripped of office and eventually reduced to paupers themselves, entering the very workhouse whose authority they had once exercised over others.[105] The reversal provides a satisfying form of comic justice: Bumble and his wife are made to inhabit the condition they once treated with contempt. But the punishment falls on them, not on the institution. The workhouse remains untouched; what changes is only who is forced to enter it.

This is characteristic of the novel's treatment of administrative cruelty. Dickens gives abstract principles a physical and social form: the board's reasoning is measured against a starving child, less eligibility against scraps of food, official indifference against a magistrate who fails to notice what is before him. Such scenes give the critique much of its force, but they also narrow its reach. Systemic harm repeatedly becomes a question of individual conduct, whether an official is cruel, a witness attentive, or a stranger

[104] Patten, "Capitalism and Compassion," 207–21.
[105] Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, 478.

compassionate. Oliver survives when someone sees him differently. The structure that endangered him survives as well.

2.5 London as Affective and Moral Geography

The spatial reading offered in the chapters ahead is not a fifth method appended to the four questions raised in Chapter 1. It is, rather, the ground on which those questions meet. Whether a character has access to a place depends on who is permitted to enter it, to leave it, to trace its routes, or simply to recognise where they are; embodiment registers what that movement costs, in fatigue, danger, or exposure; the orientation of the narrating voice decides whether a given quarter of the city reads as sanctuary, marketplace, maze, or show; and resolution, finally, takes on a spatial form in the specific places to which characters are sent back, shut up, punished, or shut out. London figures here not chiefly as backdrop but as an arrangement of who can be seen and who can move.

Long before Oliver actually sees London, he has already imagined it. Sitting beside the milestone, he pictures a "great large place" where Bumble could never track him down and where a boy of spirit might discover unknown means of living.[106] In this fantasy, being unknown and being free are the same thing. The parish has made his life miserable by keeping him fixed in its records, always identifiable, always accounted for; London, by contrast, promises the relief of not being known at all. But the anonymity the city eventually grants him turns out to be a darker version of what he imagined. He becomes hard to find not because he has escaped notice, but because he has been swallowed into streets, crowds, and interiors that other people control.

The novel narrates Oliver's approach to London mostly through what walking does to his body. We are told how many miles he covers, how little bread he has, how he begs for water, how the cold sets in, how many nights he passes with no roof over him. Space, in other words, is felt long before it is ever mapped. What might otherwise remain an abstract relation between country and city becomes, in the telling, the physical labour of a child's small frame. So, by the time the Dodger comes across him, Oliver is already too worn down to weigh carefully what he is being offered food, a bed, somewhere to stay. It is through this need that the city does its recruiting.

Following the Dodger into the rookery changes how Oliver perceives things. He has to keep his attention fixed on the boy ahead of him, so what reaches him of the streets

[106] Ibid., 61.

comes in fragments, narrow lanes, mud underfoot, smells, public houses, and "heaps of children" who seem to make up the only stock the shops have to sell.[107] That commercial figure of speech is worth pausing on. These children linger at thresholds, between the house and the street, the family and the market, play and labour. They are at once a population and a kind of merchandise, everywhere in view yet never counted, as individuals, by anyone.

For David M. Craig, Dickens's London cannot be separated from the way the self is made and unmade within it.[108] In *Oliver Twist*, movement through the city gives Oliver little knowledge of where he is or how one place relates to another. He cannot retrace the way to Fagin's den, name the district into which he has been brought, or grasp the proximity between criminal and legal spaces. The street does more than provide a setting for events. It shapes who is visible, who can vanish from view, and whose version of events carries authority.

Fagin's den gives this uncertainty a domestic form. After the loneliness of the road, it offers Oliver food, warmth, conversation, and the company of other children. These signs of shelter are convincing enough that he does not at first recognise the danger they conceal. The room resembles a home without providing the security associated with one, since its relationships are governed by theft, surveillance, and obligation. Fagin's instruction works by allowing exploitation to pass, at least initially, as a form of belonging.

So, the city's moral geography cannot be reduced to a plain contrast between the wicked slum and the virtuous suburb. Respectable places can breed harm of their own, Fang's courtroom and the workhouse are proof enough of that, while criminal spaces sometimes hold real attachment, humour, even protection. What actually shifts from one setting to another is who holds power there and who gets to decide what events mean. At Brownlow's, Oliver is given time to recover before anyone presses him for an explanation. At Fagin's, the food and the care generate debts whose true nature stays hidden. In the street, whoever tells the most familiar-sounding story wins the crowd.

The abduction scene spells this out. Nancy plays the suffering sister, Sikes lends the whole business a man's authority, and the onlookers read Oliver according to the domestic story they are handed. Once he has been labelled a runaway, nothing he cries

[107] Ibid., 67.
[108] David M. Craig, "The Interplay of City and Self in *Oliver Twist*, *David Copperfield*, and *Great Expectations*," *Dickens Studies Annual* 16 (1987): 17–38.

out can mean anything to them. He is pulled into a "labyrinth of dark narrow courts," and the narrator remarks that it would have made no difference even if his cries had been perfectly distinct.[109] The labyrinth works on two levels at once: the streets themselves block any rescue, but the crowd's reading of events has already made rescue seem beside the point.

Often Dickens's descriptions start with something like directions and end in a rush of sensation. Smithfield, Saffron Hill, the streets leading to Fagin's den, these come to us as noise, smell, crowding, animals, mud, buildings that will not sit square. Passages like this refuse the confident overview a map would give. The reader is placed close to things without being given any command over them, taking in the same pile-up of impressions that the child himself, poorly oriented, has to work with. London becomes, in this way, a geography of feeling: what a given space means is decided by fear, hunger, curiosity, relief.

The Maylies' country house seems, for a while, to lift this pressure entirely. There is greenery, quiet, rooms kept in order, meals that come regularly, and people who are fond of him and under these conditions Oliver's body heals and his sense of time changes. He can read now, for instance, and has grown attached to the people around him. The contrast tells us something: moral goodness needs the right conditions to develop in. Oliver may be good by nature, in the novel's own terms, but that goodness still needs surroundings that do not use up every ounce of attention just on staying alive.

Still, the country refuge takes the child out of the social world the novel has spent so much effort exposing. His recovery happens by way of withdrawal, spatially speaking. The workhouse, the city, the criminal underworld all of it stays elsewhere while Oliver is folded into a protected, private circle. Care, in this novel, turns out to be a garden with a wall around it. Nothing in the book tells us how such a garden might be planted anywhere else.

Jacob's Island, appearing near the novel's close, brings London back to the centre of things, and this time the narrator claims a wider, more commanding view. He leads an imagined visitor through muddy streets, past foul smells, decaying houses, filthy water, buildings that lean out over Folly Ditch.[110] Unlike that first disorienting passage through the city with the Dodger, this description names the place outright and explains why it

[109] Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, 128.
[110] Ibid., 441.

stays hidden. A corner of London unknown to the "great mass" of the city's own inhabitants is, here, made visible to the reader.

The passage is morally forceful, but not a simple one. Poverty is rendered here through an aesthetic pitched at the extreme; filth, rot, refuse, danger, disgust. The people who live in this place enter the scene as part of it: labourers, women, ragged children, the "refuse" carried by the river. So, the narrative does two things at once. It uncovers an environment that has stayed hidden, and it risks flattening the people in that environment into the very signs of degradation that make the place seem worth describing at all. The setting draws the reader's eye. The people in it, for the most part, do not.

The crowd chasing after Sikes turns this same hidden corner of London into a stage for public judgement. Rooftops, bridges, windows, shouting, the house under siege all of it organises a collective stare fixed on the murderer. The city that could not recognise Oliver being dragged away now becomes ferociously capable of recognition. But what it recognises this time is not an obscure victim; it is a spectacular villain. Public feeling runs strongest, it seems, once guilt is beyond doubt and punishment can be pictured happening right away.

London in *Oliver Twist*, then, hands out visibility according to where a person or a story sits, socially and narratively. The city can hide a child in plain sight, keep a whole criminal network tucked within ordinary streets, and put a murderer on display before thousands of eyes. It allows for chance encounters across class lines even as it holds onto deep inequalities over who gets to move freely and who gets to say what is happening. What Dickens's geography maps, in the end, is who is allowed to see whom. Moral recognition turns out to depend on routes, doorways, rooms, crowds, and whatever story happens to attach itself to them. To make someone's suffering legible is also to put it somewhere visible, and that raises its own question: visible to whom, and what kind of looking does the place itself allow?

Nussbaum's talk of the "demarcations" of compassion gives us a sharper way of naming this geography of attention. Compassion, on her account, always poses a question of boundary: whose lives fall within the circle of a given observer's concern, and whose fall outside it? Literary imagination, she argues, has the capacity to test that boundary, and sometimes to cross it, precisely because it can bring lives that are distant or unlike our own into view.[111] Dickens gives this problem a spatial form. The workhouse, the

[111] Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity*, 91–92. See also Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, 318–20.

hidden courts, Fagin's rooms, Brownlow's house, the country house, Jacob's Island; these are not just containers holding different social groups apart. They set the terms under which those groups might, or might not, become visible to each other at all. Again, and again the city allows for proximity without recognition: Oliver can cry out in a crowded street and still remain, morally speaking, invisible to everyone around him, even as the narrative itself crosses paths its characters never manage to cross. In that sense London becomes more than a geography of feeling functioning as a map of the boundaries compassion has to get past.

2.6 Selective Empathy

Oliver gives the novel an object of sympathy that is, in an unusual way, secure; nothing about him complicates the reader's willingness to feel for him. The criminal world, by contrast, tests whether that same sympathy holds up once suffering comes bound together with guilt. Nancy, Fagin, Sikes, the Dodger, Charley Bates, and the rest of the boys are not given equal space in the telling, nor the same balance between being explained and being judged. It is in these differences, more than in Oliver's case alone, that the novel's moral attention shows itself to be selective.

Nancy's first appearance has her working as part of the machine that drags Oliver back to Fagin. What makes her effective is performance: she plays the distressed sister, reads correctly what the crowd already assumes, and uses respectable domestic feeling to override a child telling the truth. The scene shows she can understand what is going on in other people's minds but here that understanding is put to work for coercion, not for kindness. In the terms laid out in Chapter 1, being able to take another's perspective is not yet the same thing as compassion. Nancy knows perfectly well what the bystanders will believe, and she knows what Oliver is afraid of; neither piece of knowledge stops her from helping Sikes pull him away.

The moral change begins when she witnesses the violence that follows. As Fagin and Sikes dispute possession of Oliver, Nancy intervenes with a history of her own: “I thieved for you when I was a child not half as old as this,” she tells Fagin, recalling twelve years in the same trade and service.[112] The sentence turns the scene from likeness into recognition. Oliver is not, for Nancy, some abstract figure of innocence. He is a measure. Looking at him, she reads back the childhood that made her what she is, and the protection

[112] Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, 137.

she offers him rests on this retrospective seeing of herself, she sees what was done to her by watching it happen again, this time to someone else.

This is one of the novel's most important expansions of sympathy. Nancy's moral claim does not rest on innocence left untouched by experience. She has stolen, deceived, helped abduct a child, and stayed bound to a violent man. What the narrative makes legible is the coexistence of guilt and injury. Her criminal acts are neither wiped away nor taken as proof that she lacks an ethical life at all. The novel shows, instead, a conscience that can survive inside degradation and come alive again through attachment to someone else.

Michael Slater's work on Dickens's women has helped establish Nancy as a central exception to the apparent split between idealised virtue and fallen femininity.[113] She has neither Rose's social protection nor Oliver's purity. Her moral authority comes from a knowledge of the world that the respectable characters have no access to. When she speaks with Rose, the contrast between the two women is at first organised around shame and the distance of class. Nancy calls herself infamous and hesitates even to step into the attention of a respectable woman. Rose, for her part, refuses to grant her the identity Nancy expects to be given.

The meeting does more than set fallen woman against pure one. It builds an uneasy exchange between two different kinds of knowledge. Rose can offer belief, money, protection, a way out; Nancy can explain how the criminal network actually works, and why women like her stay bound to it. When she speaks of "hundreds of others as bad and wretched as myself," the narrative briefly widens beyond the exceptional individual.[114] Nancy understands her condition as shared. The phrase interrupts the tendency of sentimental plot to concentrate suffering in one unique figure.

At the same time, the conversation narrows what is really a social problem down to the language of personal rescue. Rose asks Nancy simply to leave Sikes and take the help on offer. It is a generous offer, and a serious one in practical terms, but it assumes that leaving becomes possible the moment someone benevolent shows up. Nancy's refusal has often been read as irrational attachment or taken as evidence of a fallen woman bent on her own destruction. The novel itself gives a more complicated account than that. She is emotionally tied to Sikes, afraid of the gang, worn into the shape of her own world,

[113] Michael Slater, *Dickens and Women* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1983), 340.
[114] Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, 354.

convinced she is not worth saving, and unsure whether any other self could hold together once removed from the relations that made her who she is.

Her later statement to Brownlow is explicit: “I am chained to my old life. I loathe and hate it now, but I cannot leave it”.[115] The image of the chain places moral revulsion beside constrained agency. Nancy does not mistake Sikes for a good man; nor does she lack the ability to imagine another life. Her inability to leave is presented as the result of long formation, dependency, fear, and attachment. The chain is social and psychological at once.

Dickens kills Nancy at precisely the moment her self-understanding becomes complete and that timing is not incidental. Her death works, in the end, as a way of containing a consciousness too large for the rescue on offer: not punishment alone, not martyrdom alone, but the plot's own means of foreclosing what an aware subject like her might otherwise have gone on to become. Amanda Anderson's reading of Victorian fallenness helps explain why. For her, the trouble with Nancy's self-knowledge is that it never opens onto a path toward reform through her own effort; it teaches her, instead, to see herself through a category that has already decided what a fallen woman is and cannot stop being. So, when Nancy speaks of being chained, something more than emotional dependence on Sikes is at stake. She can diagnose exactly what shaped her and the diagnosis itself is what convinces her that no other self remains open to her. The novel exposes this kind of self-awareness that leads nowhere, and then, through murder, does away with the problem it has raised.[116]

This is what makes Nancy the novel's hardest test of compassion. Oliver's suffering is easy to read because the guilt for it can be placed entirely outside him. Nancy asks something harder of the reader: to see the suffering without denying she has agency, and to see the agency without mistaking it for full freedom. Her position comes close to, without quite matching, what Ercolino and Fusillo call negative empathy, the reader entering a morally compromised point of view while still holding onto some evaluative distance.[117] In Nancy’s case, however, the effect is not fascination with evil but the disruption of a simple moral taxonomy.

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[115] Ibid., 409.
[116] Amanda Anderson, *Tainted Souls and Painted Faces: The Rhetoric of Fallenness in Victorian Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 90–92.
[117] Ercolino and Fusillo, *Empatia negativa*, 60.

Nancy therefore exposes an important distinction within the judgment of nondesert. To say that suffering is not, or not fully, deserved is not to deny agency or erase culpable acts. Nussbaum explicitly leaves room for compassion where responsibility is partial, and her account of narrative imagination stresses that social circumstances can form the very capacities through which choice is exercised; as she puts it, 'circumstances of oppression form desire and emotion and aspiration'.[118] Nancy's history makes this point dramatically. She helps abduct Oliver and stays attached to Sikes, but the novel also traces a childhood spent in Fagin's service, years of economic dependence, fear, habit, and a damaged sense of what other paths might even be open to her. Her line about being "chained" to her old life is not, then, an acquittal. It asks the reader to judge fault as something formed, not simply chosen. Oliver makes compassion easy by keeping victimhood and guilt apart; Nancy asks whether moral concern can hold up when injury and responsibility live inside the same person.[119]

That the violence still happens, even after Rose's compassion has reached her symbolically through the handkerchief, is the point: sympathy of this kind cannot undo what the network Nancy remains bound to has already set in motion. The handkerchief itself carries both meanings at once, a token of recognition, and a protection that fails linking the respectable domestic world to the very room in which she dies. Nancy kneels there, lifts the white cloth Rose had given her, and prays for mercy.[120] This is the shape the novel's disruption of easy moral judgment finally takes: not just powerful, but genuinely disturbing. Sikes kills her only after Fagin has arranged the surveillance that turns her meeting with Rose into betrayal.

The murder scene grants Nancy the posture of martyrdom. Her death confirms the moral rightness of what she tried to do for Oliver and it exposes Sikes's violence without any possible qualification. But martyrdom is also a form of containment. It is only through sacrifice that Nancy can be fully absorbed into the novel's moral order. She is not permitted to go on living, as a woman marked by prostitution and theft, inside Brownlow's "little society." The plot recognises her humanity even as it withholds the social future that such recognition might otherwise demand.

Fagin receives a different distribution of attention. For much of the novel he is constructed through grotesque appearance, theatrical gesture, animal imagery, and

[118] Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity*, 88, 92.
[119] Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, 310–13.
[120] Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, 419.

repeated identification as “the Jew.” Any account of selective empathy must confront the antisemitic tradition activated by this representation. Susan Meyer argues that the novel’s social critique is compromised by the way anxieties about capitalism and criminal exploitation are concentrated in a racialised figure.[121] Fagin’s Jewishness becomes a visible sign through which diffuse social fears are localised.

Harry Stone's foundational study makes it hard to treat this racialisation as a blemish that can simply be lifted off the text, or as a prejudice contributed only by later readers. He reconstructs the laws, the journalism, the stage types, the songs, the trades, the street images that had made the Jewish receiver of stolen goods a culturally available villain in the 1830s, while still insisting that historical typicality does not cancel authorial responsibility. Fagin has almost no religious practice, no communal history to speak of; as Stone observes, apart from a few conventionalised features and his association with old clothes, what most persistently marks him as Jewish is simply the narrator's repeated label, "the Jew." The designation does not deepen character. It converts an inherited prejudice into narrative shorthand, making criminality legible through a racial sign before any psychological access to the man has even begun.[122]

This localisation does several things at once. Fagin is a teacher, organiser, receiver of stolen goods, and manipulator of children. He personifies the conversion of need into criminal labour. The den offers the belonging that legal society has withheld, but the belonging is exploitative. By making Fagin the central intelligence behind the gang, the novel gives criminal socialisation a face and a will. The cost is that structural processes; poverty, child abandonment, informal economies, and legal exclusion can appear to originate in an exceptionally corrupt individual.

The later chapters partially disturb this fixity. During the trial and the last night in prison, the narrator grants Fagin sustained access to fear, attention, memory, and distorted temporality. The court is “paved from floor to roof with human faces,” all eyes fixed upon him; he searches the crowd for the faintest sympathy and finds none.[123] The spectacle reverses the earlier sympathetic scene. Fagin, who has watched and manipulated others, becomes the object of an all-consuming public gaze.

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[121] Susan Meyer, “Antisemitism and Social Critique in Dickens’s *Oliver Twist*,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 33, no. 1 (2005): 239–52, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150305000823.
[122] Harry Stone, “Dickens and the Jews,” *Victorian Studies* 2, no. 3 (1959): 223–53, esp. 223–35.
[123] Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, 468.

The prison chapter draws the reader closer still. Time comes apart in fragments; sounds grow unbearable; the condemned man moves back and forth between calculation, memory, denial, terror. This closeness does not acquit him. What it does is make the execution felt, present, lived through, rather than letting punishment remain a satisfying way of watching a villain simply vanish. Juliet John's account of Dickens's villains is useful here: psychological intensity, on her reading, tends to concentrate in figures whose individualism and theatricality make them morally dangerous, while the good characters stay comparatively flat, externalised.[124] Fagin's final state of mind is one of the deepest interiors the novel offers.

The ethical result is unsteady. The reader may feel fear alongside Fagin even while condemning what he has done, a case of empathy without sympathy, strictly speaking. And yet the narrative keeps calling him by the racial label that has structured his otherness all along, and the prison scene offers no retrospective account of the social world that made his position, his trade, possible in the first place. Interior access humanises the condemned person at the point when no future remains. It does not fully dismantle the stereotype through which the plot has used him.

The publication history also complicates the apparent movement from type to person. In the 1867 revision Dickens removed large numbers of references to "the Jew" from the final third of the novel, including changing "The Jew's Last Night Alive" to "Fagin's Last Night Alive." Stone records twenty-three deletions in chapter 39; thirty-one of thirty-seven references removed across chapters 44 and 45, which had formed a single chapter in the original version; and eleven deleted in chapter 52, leaving one occurrence in the condemned-cell chapter. These alterations cannot undo the racial economy of the version first received by the serial audience, nor do they transform Fagin into a socially situated Jewish character. They do, however, show that the equation between name and racial label was neither artistically indispensable nor finally invisible to Dickens. The late revisions expose an instability already latent in the prison scenes: the narrative reaches towards the condemned man while attempting, belatedly and incompletely, to loosen the stereotype that made him available as a villain.[125]

Sikes is drawn through a related but different movement. Before he kills Nancy, he appears mainly as a physical threat, brutal speech, the dog, the pistol, sudden blows, a body built around force. His interior life stays thin, and that thinness makes him instantly

[124] John, *Dickens's Villains*, 1–20.
[125] Stone, "Dickens and the Jews," 252.

readable as dangerous. This belongs to the economy of external signs that melodrama runs on. Sikes does not need some complicated motive to terrorise Oliver or Nancy; his violence is the motive, made visible on the surface.

After the murder, though, the narrative enters the psychological aftermath with extraordinary intensity. Blood appears on objects and on the dog; ordinary sights are reorganised by guilt; Nancy's eyes return as an involuntary image that no change of place can remove. He cannot walk away from what he saw. The flight chapter does not ask the reader to forgive Sikes. It makes condemnation coexist with an experience of persecuted consciousness. The murderer becomes unable to escape the scene he has created.

This is negative empathy in a stricter sense than before. The narrative asks the reader to feel panic, sensory distortion, the pressure of memory returning again and again, all while keeping moral revulsion firmly in place. Sikes's horror is not something imposed on him only by the crowd or by the law, it is generated from within his own perception. When the eyes appear again during his attempted escape, he loses his balance and is accidentally hanged by his own rope.[126] The death has the structure of poetic justice, but it is prepared through psychological rather than mechanical causation.

Taken together, Fagin and Sikes demonstrate why empathy must remain analytically separate from compassion. Nussbaum defines empathy as an 'imaginative reconstruction of another person's experience' that carries no necessary evaluation of that experience and is therefore morally neutral; it may assist compassion, but it may also coexist with condemnation or manipulation.[127] The condemned-cell sequence and Sikes's flight exploit exactly this separation. Dickens gives the reader access to terror, distorted time, memory that will not be dismissed, and a mind under siege from itself without revising, at any point, the judgment of what these men have done. The ethical achievement lies not in converting them into innocent sufferers but in refusing the inference that culpability makes experience unreal. Narrative access can humanise without absolving; compassion, where it occurs, must still pass through judgments of seriousness, responsibility, and concern.

The dog complicates the scene further. Sikes tries to kill the animal because it can identify him, but the dog survives long enough to lead his pursuers to where he is hiding, dying only in the failed escape that follows. What lies between man and animal here is built from habit, dependence, cruelty, and a kind of recognition. Sikes's world is not

[126] Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, 451.
[127] Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, chap. 6, sec. III, "Empathy and Compassion," 326–32.

without attachment; it is only that his attachments have all been shaped through domination. The novel allows this complexity room to exist without letting it shade into exoneration.

The criminal children get less sustained attention than the adults do. The Dodger stands out for style: his speech, his comic confidence, a kind of theatrical self-possession that makes him memorable on sight. Charley Bates is defined mostly by laughter, at least until he later recoils from Nancy's murder and joins in the pursuit of Sikes. Their performances give the gang its energy, its social sharpness, but the narrative rarely goes back to reconstruct the childhoods that brought either of them there. It is Nancy's own line that she stole for Fagin when she was younger than Oliver that supplies the history the boys themselves are never granted.

This withholding is politically consequential. The gang demonstrates that criminality is learned through intimate relations: games teach pickpocketing, praise rewards success, food and clothing create debt, and the group supplies identity. Yet Oliver's immunity to this pedagogy allows the novel to preserve a sharp distinction between the child who can be rescued and the children already formed by the environment. The Dodger's trial later turns him into comic performance; his wit survives, but his destination is transportation rather than rehabilitation.[128]

Charley's reaction to Nancy's death opens up, briefly, another possibility. His horror at what Sikes has done breaks the gang's loyalty apart, and the honest life he later leads suggests that moral change need not be confined to someone as exceptionally pure as Oliver. But the ending reports this transformation quickly, almost in passing. The novel never actually narrates the social process by which a criminalised child turns into a productive adult; it simply announces the outcome. Here, too, the distribution of narrative time stays uneven.

The contrast among these figures shows that *Oliver Twist* does not run on any single, stable politics of empathy. Nancy is granted moral complexity and a sacrificial pathos; Fagin is granted psychological intensity, but only at the threshold of execution; Sikes is granted embodied terror, but only after an act the novel treats as unforgivable; the boys are granted voice, comedy, a narrow margin of possibility. Guilt, it turns out, buys access to the reader's attention faster than it buys sympathy. What the novel does, carefully, is keep understanding separate from absolution.

[128] Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, 387–89.

This separation is one of its real achievements. Dickens does not need every consciousness he represents to be admirable. He shows, instead, that a person can be responsible, damaged, attached, afraid, and still capable of acting rightly, all at once. Where the limit falls is on the question of futurity. The most compromised figures become fully legible right when they are about to die, be transported, or simply drop out of the social order altogether. Oliver alone gets rescued into a domestic future that continues; Nancy, Fagin, and Sikes are given their deepest interiority exactly when no real return to social life remains open to them.

So selective empathy names something larger than which character a reader happens to prefer. It names how the novel distributes its own resources: who gets a body, a history, an inner conflict, a future, a community able to sustain real change in them. Nancy does more than anyone to widen the moral field beyond mere innocence, but her death closes the opening she made. Fagin and Sikes become humanly perceptible without ever becoming socially recoverable. The criminal children reveal how much of character is a matter of environment and formation, yet they remain secondary to the one child who manages to resist that formation. The novel, in the end, is generous with feeling and stingy with futures.

2.7 Melodrama, Coincidence, Recognition, and Private Rescue

The mystery surrounding Oliver's birth is what finally ties the novel's scattered spaces together. A portrait, a locket and a ring, what Brownlow remembers, what Monks keeps hidden, what Bumble happens to know, what Nancy has watched, Rose's own family history piece by piece these turn what looks like coincidence into a plot built around recognition. Critics have often objected that the structure strains belief, and it does; but its purpose is not exhausted by the question of probability. What it expresses is a demand that hidden moral relations should, in the end, come to light.

Steven Marcus argues that coincidence in *Oliver Twist* belongs to the kind of reality the novel constructs: its population is composed of people already implicated in Oliver's fate, so encounters that would appear accidental in an open social world acquire a moral necessity.[129] Brownlow happens to be the victim of the first theft Oliver witnesses, but he is also the friend of Oliver's father. Rose happens to receive Oliver after

[129] Steven Marcus, *Dickens: From Pickwick to Dombey* (New York: Basic Books, 1965), 78–79.

the burglary, but she is also his aunt. The plot contracts London into a network of hidden kinship.

This narrowing-back corrects the parish's original act of stripping him bare. Oliver has been treated all along as a child with no relations to speak of; the mystery reveals that relations existed the whole time. Recognition gives him back a name, a family, property, a history. The emotional payoff is considerable, because here information and justice arrive together at the same moment. What the reader has believed on moral grounds all along that Oliver does not belong to the identities forced onto him turns out, genealogically, to be simply true.

Peter Brooks's account of melodrama clarifies the pleasure of this convergence. Melodramatic recognition externalises a moral truth that ordinary social surfaces have concealed.[130] Tokens, resemblances, confessions, and overheard conversations give invisible relations a material form. In *Oliver Twist*, the revelation of origins makes the world answerable to a moral order in which innocence should finally be named and protected.

The mechanisms of the plot are, all the same, unevenly distributed. Oliver stays largely passive in the discovery of his own history. It is Brownlow who interrogates Monks; Nancy who supplies the intelligence; Mrs Bumble who bargains away stolen knowledge; Rose and the Maylies who preserve the testimony that matters; the narrator who pulls the whole sequence together. What restores Oliver's identity is a coalition of people able to read documents, property, resemblance, confession everything he himself cannot read. The child at the centre of the mystery ends up with the least power of anyone over how it gets solved.

Nancy's role matters most of all here. She overhears the conversation between Fagin and Monks, carries what she has learned across the line dividing her world from the respectable one, arranges secret meetings, refuses any payment for it. Without what she does, the recognition plot simply cannot go forward. And yet she has no share in the domestic restoration her own knowledge makes possible. The woman whose actions bring the truth into the open is killed before that truth can secure any future for her. Her death is given meaning. Her exclusion is given nothing.

Monks, by contrast, gives the plot a concentrated, deliberate intention. His attempt to corrupt Oliver and destroy the evidence of his birth turns what had been an accident of

[130] Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 4–5, 20.

institutions into a family conspiracy. This device gives the narrative a human antagonist, someone whose guilt can be confessed to and punished. But it also risks moving responsibility somewhere more convenient. The parish's treatment of Oliver was already unjust well before Monks ever entered the picture; the workhouse does not need a villain's secret scheme in order to starve children. By tying Oliver's continuing danger to Monks specifically, the plot personalises a vulnerability that institutions produced in the first place.

The recognitions, then, work on two levels at once. On one level, they reveal that Oliver has been wrongly classified. On another and the early chapters have already shown this the classifying system itself is violent, quite apart from Oliver's individual case. The first problem can be solved with evidence about where Oliver came from. The second would require changing how children are treated when their histories never turn up a portrait, a will, a benevolent friend. The ending resolves the first problem decisively and leaves the second sitting there, an unresolved moral memory.

Brownlow's rescue of Oliver has to be seen not as trivial or like a simple gesture of ideology. He provides the actual material conditions Oliver needs to live: food, medical care, an education, legal help, affection, adoption. The novel is right to show private benevolence as something enacted, not just felt. Brownlow believes Oliver before the proof is even complete, keeps pursuing the inquiry after betrayal starts to look likely, and puts his money and his knowledge to work on the child's behalf. Compassion, here, has consequences that follow through.

The Maylies' care works in much the same way. They take Oliver in after the burglary even though the evidence in front of them could just as easily support suspicion. Rose's response to Nancy later repeats this same pattern: attention comes before moral certainty is complete, not after. These scenes push back against the institutional habit of treating vulnerability itself as a kind of guilt. In the benevolent household, judgment is held off long enough for a different account of things to emerge.

But the domestic solution is, by its nature, a selective one. The final chapter gathers Brownlow, Oliver, Rose, Harry Maylie, Mrs Maylie, Losberne, and Grimwig into what the novel calls a "little society" approaching something close to perfect happiness.[131] That word, little, is worth noticing. This society stays small because its harmony depends

[131] Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, 477.

on intimacy and affection freely given. It offers a model of a relation. It builds nothing that anyone outside it could actually step into.

The ending hands out its poetic justice quickly. Monks squanders what he has and dies in prison; the rest of the gang disappears, through death or punishment; Charley goes straight; the Bumbles end up in the workhouse themselves; Oliver is adopted. This speed turns what are, underneath, complicated social histories into tidy moral outcomes. Whoever can be absorbed is absorbed; whoever remains tied to criminality is removed or made over; the officials get their comic reversal.

The Bumbles' fate makes the limitation especially clear. Watching them reduced to pauper status is satisfying, because now they must live inside the very institution they once ran. But a workhouse fit only to punish cruel officials is not, by that fact, made fit for the innocent people who live there too. The mechanism of comeuppance leaves the institution itself standing, still doing its work as an instrument of moral balance. Punishing the Bumbles feels like justice being done. The workhouse is left untouched.

The closing pages state the novel's preferred ethics outright. Happiness, it tells us, depends on "strong affection," on "humanity of heart," on gratitude, on mercy shown to others.[132] These are the answer to the heartlessness the novel exposed at its opening. What Oliver becomes under Brownlow's care shows what a humane environment is capable of cultivating in a person. The novel closes not simply on wealth, but on relations able to remember hardship without reproducing it.

Still, the move from workhouse to little society is, in the end, a move from a public problem to a private refuge. What secures Oliver's rights is a recovered identity and an adoption, not any universal claim attached simply to being a child. The social order gets corrected by putting one exceptional child back where he properly belongs, in his own family. The thousands he stands in for the boys at the farm, the children still out in the streets, the "hundreds of others" Nancy speaks of, stay exactly where they were, outside the circle.

Nussbaum’s later account of compassion in public life clarifies why this domestic resolution remains incomplete without making Brownlow’s care ethically trivial. She insists that a society must address compassion on ‘two levels: the level of individual psychology and the level of institutional design,’ because the insights of appropriate compassion can be embodied in laws and institutions rather than left dependent on

[132] Ibid., 480.

exceptionally benevolent persons.[133] Brownlow, Rose, and the Maylies achieve the first level with unusual seriousness: they convert attention into shelter, medical care, testimony, education, and protection. What the plot does not do is translate that recognition into the second level. The workhouse remains institutionally available for the next child; legal protection remains contingent upon humane observers; the moral insight generated by Oliver's case is not stabilised as a general entitlement. Private rescue is therefore not the opposite of political critique. It is the point at which the novel's compassion becomes practically effective for an individual while remaining structurally under-institutionalised.

Melodrama, coincidence, recognition: together they carry out both disclosure and containment. They disclose a hidden responsibility, connect injuries that had seemed separate from one another, insist that moral truth has to surface eventually and be seen. But they also contain what that truth implies, by translating a social conflict into kinship, inheritance, confession, punishment, benevolent rescue. This does not cancel out the critique of the workhouse the novel has mounted. It simply decides the shape that critique is allowed to take on its way to closure.

2.8 The Uneven Geography of Compassion

Oliver Twist opens with an institution assigning a name to a life, and it closes with a small community giving that same life a history, an education, a home. Between these two points, the novel keeps doing one particular thing: it turns abstractions into bodies. "Pauper" becomes the child who is hungry; "apprentice" becomes a body measured for dangerous work; "thief" becomes a frightened boy dragged through a hostile court; "fallen woman" becomes Nancy's divided mind; "murderer" becomes Sikes fleeing through his own hallucinations; "the Jew" becomes a condemned man searching a crowd for someone, anyone, to feel for him. This conversion is the novel's principal way of showing us what it wants us to see.

Narratorial irony does much of the work here, because it is what exposes the moral inversion built into official language. The workhouse calls starvation economy; Bumble calls any inwardness in the poor inappropriate; the court treats illness as insolence. The narrator does not simply add pity on top of these descriptions. He changes what the facts

[133] Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, chap. 8, sec. I, "Compassion and Institutions," 402.

themselves mean, by setting institutional claims directly beside their bodily consequences. Feeling, in this novel, becomes a form of judgment.

The novel's geography carries out the same operation, on a different scale. Roads, rookeries, houses, courtrooms, hidden districts along the river all of it governs who can be recognised and who can simply vanish. Oliver's cries fail in the street because the crowd has already settled on a more familiar story; Sikes's guilt becomes public only once the whole city organises itself around the spectacle of chasing him down. Visibility, here, is never a matter of optics alone. It depends on classification, on who has the authority to narrate, on the moral scripts through which any given body gets read.

Oliver's unusual purity gives this whole system its clearest victim. His physical vulnerability and his plain, simple way of speaking expose the violence aimed at him with real force. But that clarity comes at a cost. Compassion gathers around the one child left untouched by the environments meant to deform him, while the criminalised children around him are given less history, less future. Nancy widens this field by joining guilt to injury and to moral action but her place in the novel's ethical order can only be secured through death. Fagin and Sikes are granted psychological access only at the edge of execution, or of falling apart entirely. Empathy, it turns out, expands more readily in this novel than rescue does.

The ending answers suffering with recognition, punishment, private care. These are real, not empty, forms of action. Brownlow's belief in Oliver changes his life; Rose's attention lets Nancy's knowledge cross a boundary it could not cross alone; recovering the evidence defeats Monks's attempt to erase who Oliver is. The novel never treats feeling as sufficient when it stays only feeling. Compassion becomes meaningful once it turns into food, shelter, testimony, protection, adoption.

But none of these remedies get generalised. The workhouse goes on standing. The court goes on standing. Poverty remains. The criminal children scatter to their various fates. Oliver is lifted out of his category rather than the category itself being stripped of its power. The plot settles the question of who Oliver really is, and in doing so corrects one particular misrecognition. It never quite settles what society owes to a child whose origins can never be recovered at all.

This is the sense in which disclosure and containment sit side by side in this novel. Dickens makes it hard to look at administrative and social violence as something neutral. He gives readers a popular language of feeling through which hunger, coercion, and abandonment can be judged. And at the same time, melodramatic recognition locates

causes in villains and remedies in good individuals, good families, hearts that change. The political force of the novel lies less in any programme than in a redirection of attention; its limits lie in how unevenly that attention turns into actual protection.

The chapter can close, then, without reducing the novel to either radical exposure or conservative comfort. *Oliver Twist* builds moral legibility by selecting, contrasting, embodying. These same procedures that reveal suffering also decide which suffering gets to enter the plot's final community. Recognition saves Oliver. It leaves the workhouse right where it was.

Hard Times will put this same structure under different pressure, facts, labour, utility, the industrial "Hands." The suffering it depicts is more explicitly collective from the start. The question worth asking is whether Dickens can widen moral attention past the exemplary victim, or whether it is still exceptional individuals who end up absorbing the pressure that might otherwise demand broader change.

Chapter III – Feelings, Abstractions, and the Failure of Fellow-Feeling in *Hard Times*

> *"Some persons hold [...] that there is a wisdom of the Head, and that there is a wisdom of the Heart."*[134]

Gradgrind arrives at that distinction only after Louisa has collapsed in front of him, and it names the conflict governing *Hard Times* without reducing the novel to a contest between reason and emotion. The "wisdom of the Head" turns destructive once it claims sole authority over what can be known, counted, judged. Calculation is not itself the error. The damage begins with the refusal of every kind of human information that will not hold still to be measured against something else: attachment, memory, weariness, shame, hope, imagination, the uneven weight a loss carries from one life to the next. Dickens's counter-language of the heart therefore advances a claim about knowledge as well. Feeling matters because it brings forward what an abstract description leaves out, and narrative form matters because it settles whose experience reaches us, in what detail, and under which moral description.

3.1 Why Hard Times?

The method set out in Chapter 1 needs a second test, and *Hard Times* supplies one by altering nearly every term of the problem examined in *Oliver Twist*. The earlier novel gathers its attention around a single child, whose hunger, fear and exceptional innocence expose the cruelty of the New Poor Law. Coketown offers no comparable centre. Its social world runs through a schoolroom, a factory town, a bank, a broken marriage, a circus, a union meeting, an abandoned mine shaft, and the suffering recorded there belongs to no single visibly defenceless body and answers to no single institution. What holds the world together is a set of relations, in which education, political economy, labour discipline, domestic authority and habits of perception keep one another in place. Moving from Oliver to Coketown asks whether selective moral attention remains a useful account once Dickens exchanges the parish child for the industrial body.

The novel's relative compression sharpens the test. Its three books, "Sowing," "Reaping," and "Garnering" announce at once that ideas will be judged by what they do

[134] Charles Dickens, *Hard Times*, ed. Kate Flint (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 217.

to lives. Gradgrind's pedagogy is planted long before it comes up in Louisa's emotional exhaustion, in Tom's predatory self-interest, in Bitzer's bloodless rationality, in the ordinary speech of the town. The structure does more than set a mistaken theory beside a string of unfortunate examples. It follows that theory as it circulates through institutions and persons, until a way of knowing has hardened into a way of living. Himmelfarb is right to insist that schooling, industry, marriage and divorce, separate as they may look, are no distraction from the "industrial problem": Dickens treats them as linked expressions of a culture that has reduced relations to calculation and persons to functions.[135]

Four questions organised the reading of *Oliver Twist*, and this chapter asks the same ones. How is access to experience granted or withheld? How does suffering take on a body? How does narratorial orientation distribute sympathy and blame? And what kind of resolution does the plot finally make imaginable? The comparison is deliberately limited. No exhaustive history of *Hard Times* criticism is attempted here, nor is it claimed that two novels can add up to a comprehensive theory of Dickens. The critical debates selected are those bearing most directly on the argument already established, and they are used to test a narrower proposition: that *Hard Times* opposes the abstraction of "Facts" through a rival practice of particularising attention, while still containing social conflict within morally exemplary persons, domestic conversion and private care.[136]

The result neither reproduces *Oliver Twist* nor constitutes an advancement beyond it. *Hard Times* spreads moral visibility more widely and makes abstraction explicit in its own vocabulary, but its sharper contribution to the comparison lies in showing what happens when capacities of imaginative and affective attention are systematically weakened. Louisa cannot read her own desire; Tom learns to use persons instrumentally; Bitzer converts self-interest into moral consistency. Sissy is the counter-case because Gradgrind's schooling never fully displaces the habits of attachment and imaginative response formed in the circus. The chapter therefore asks; whom the novel makes available to sympathy and how a social order may produce subjects less able to recognise another person's claim. That field remains selective: Sissy earns trust more than exploration; Stephen is individuated through suffering and shielded from political

[135] Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty: England in the Early Industrial Age* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 474–75.
[136] Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice,* 13–35; Gallagher, *Industrial Reformation of English Fiction,* 147–69.

complexity; most workers enter as “Hands”; and collective agency reaches the reader chiefly through Slackbridge’s caricature.[137]

3.2 Facts, Abstraction, and the Denial of Feeling

Hard Times opens with an act of verbal enclosure. “Facts alone are wanted in life” describes no curriculum so much as it commands a clearance: “Plant nothing else and root out everything else.” The agricultural verbs look ahead to the novel’s three-part design, and they also let slip the violence sitting beneath Gradgrind’s supposed neutrality. A mind must be emptied before anything useful can go into it; childhood counts as unproductive ground; education proceeds by eliminating whatever cannot justify itself through service. The comedy is broad, Gradgrind’s certainty being so overdone, but the spatial arrangement underneath it children ranked before an inspecting authority gives that comedy a disciplinary edge. Cannon, apparatus, manufacture: the narrator’s images translate a theory of knowledge directly into pressure on bodies.[138]

The allusion has a specific shape worth tracing. In the Arabian Nights tale, Morgiana is a slave girl who saves her household by discovering forty thieves hidden inside oil jars in the courtyard; she goes from jar to jar and pours boiling oil into each one, killing the men concealed inside before they can carry out the ambush.[139] Dickens borrows from this scene the specific mechanics of the killing: something poured in from above, methodically, jar by jar, with lethal intent disguised as ordinary domestic labour. M'Choakumchild's "boiling store" of facts is not simply hot in some vague metaphorical sense, because it replicates the exact procedure by which Morgiana exterminates a threat. The children are cast, structurally, as the thieves: something dangerous, to be hidden and then destroyed. What is hidden inside each child, on this analogy, is Fancy, and Fancy is treated by the schoolroom as an intruder rather than a native faculty.

The three verbs Dickens actually uses are worth separating out, because they are not synonyms and the novel does not treat them as interchangeable outcomes. Killing Fancy outright would at least be a clean result, in the system's own terms: nothing left to interfere with the facts. But Dickens raises a second possibility, that the process will only maim it, or a third, that it will distort it and it is this second and third possibility that the

[137] Himmelfarb, *Idea of Poverty*, 474–86; Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 13–45.
[138] Dickens, *Hard Times*, 10, 15.
[139] See “The Story of Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves,” in *The Arabian Nights II: Sindbad and Other Popular Stories*, trans. Husain Haddawy (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1995), 53.

plot goes on to dramatize in Louisa, Tom, and Bitzer, none of whom loses imagination cleanly. Louisa's imagination survives the schoolroom but comes out unable to name itself; she can feel that something in her marriage and her family is wrong without having the vocabulary, because that vocabulary was the first casualty of her education, to say what it is. Tom's imagination survives too but redirected entirely toward calculating his own advantage a stunted, self-serving cunning rather than the outright absence of any inner life. Bitzer represents the third case, the character in whom the training seems to have worked as designed, and even he turns out, by the novel's own logic, to be a product of distortion rather than of simple emptiness: his creed of pure self-interest is exactly what Gradgrind taught him, recited back with an obedience the schoolmaster cannot then object to.

So, the schoolroom scene is not decorative violence, a flourish that makes an abstract critique of utilitarian education more vivid. It supplies the actual mechanism the rest of the plot works out. Each of these three characters represents one of the three verbs Dickens names in that early chapter, and the novel spends its remaining length tracing what a maimed or distorted Fancy looks like once it has to go on living inside an adult body, inside a marriage, inside a factory town built on the same principle that ran the schoolroom.[140]

The meeting between Sissy and Bitzer gives the pressure something visible to work against. Gradgrind's first move cuts "Sissy" back to "Cecilia," and his second converts her father's occupation into an authorised category. Her name, her memory, her bond to the circus all register as error, since none of it can be admitted in the form she actually lives it. Asked to define a horse, Sissy goes silent; Bitzer answers with an anatomical inventory. Ignorance on one side and knowledge on the other is not what the scene shows. Sissy knows horses through care, work, danger, performance, attachment, while Bitzer can describe the animal only by breaking it into properties. The famous sunbeam completes the contrast without a word of interior explanation: colour gathers in the girl and seems to drain out of the boy, until he looks almost capable of bleeding white. Embodiment has already delivered a judgment. The two children stand in the same light, and the narration makes that light expose two opposed ways of being educated, and of living.[141]

[140] Dickens, *Hard Times*, 15; Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 13–27.
[141] Dickens, *Hard Times*, 11–12.

Nussbaum's account of the scene keeps "Fancy" from softening into a vague synonym for kindness. Gradgrindian reason operates through commensurability, aggregation, maximisation, and the assumption that preferences may be taken as given. These procedures have legitimate uses; they become morally distorting once they decide in advance what counts as knowledge of a person. The definition of the horse is accurate and inadequate to the relation Sissy has been asked to translate. What the lesson suppresses is qualitative difference, the meaning a creature or an action acquires within a particular history. Dickens asks no one to abandon facts. He refuses to let one necessary mode of description pass for the whole of reality.[142]

Definitions form only part of the classroom's assault on representation. Flowers must not appear on carpets, since one would not walk on real flowers; horses must not decorate walls, since they could not enter a room. Depiction collapses into literal use, and art is deprived of its power to make one thing present through another. Imagination becomes a category mistake. The novel meanwhile is saturated with precisely those figures the school forbids: Gradgrind square, Bitzer bloodless, Coketown's smoke serpentine, the steam engine an elephant in "melancholy madness," Mrs Sparsit's suspicion a staircase descending towards an abyss. The refutation lies in the writing itself rather than in any assertion that metaphor is pleasant. A language purged of fancy could not describe the dehumanisation its own principles produce.[143]

Sissy's failure in political arithmetic repeats the point at a social scale. Presented with a nation containing fifty million of money, she declines to call it prosperous until she knows who possesses the money and whether any of it belongs to her. The answer is judged wrong for interrupting aggregation with distribution. She does not dispute the total; she asks what the total means within separate lives. Here, in miniature, is the novel's rival account of knowledge. Statistical description can identify resources, accidents or rates, while moral judgment begins when the unit concealed by the average is restored. Sissy's reasoning is emotional in one sense only, that it recognises value and vulnerability. It is also exact: a national sum cannot establish individual well-being without information that Gradgrind's question excludes.[144]

[142] Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 13–27.
[143] Dickens, *Hard Times*, 14–15.
[144] Dickens, *Hard Times*, 60–61; Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice,* 19–23.

Louisa carries the fullest cost of this education. She reaches the reader in nothing like Oliver's condition of immediately readable victimhood, since material comfort, intelligence and reserve make her suffering hard to classify, and the narrator grants no continuous access to her thought. Her interior life surfaces through things that recur: the fire she watches, the questions she does not ask, the intensity in her eyes, the language of something starved or smothered before it can take form. "Never wonder" prohibits a good deal more than childish curiosity. It produces a subject who cannot interpret her own desire except through terms supplied by other people. Her silence before the marriage to Bounderby cannot count as consent in any morally sufficient sense; it is what an education leaves behind when it has withheld the vocabulary in which preference might be known.[145]

At Stone Lodge the opening classroom is reversed. The man who once filled children with facts must now confront an experience his system has rendered unintelligible. Louisa's accusation carries its force by joining personal injury to pedagogical cause: he trained her reason and left the inner life without cultivation. Even here the novel declines a simple exchange of bad ideas for good feelings. Recognising the absence of a childhood does not give one back, and Gradgrind's remorse leaves the effects of his authority standing. The "wisdom of the Heart" arrives as a belated possibility rather than an untouched natural resource waiting to resume command. A moral change begins with recognition; the time a system has consumed stays consumed.[146]

That belatedness marks a difference from *Oliver Twist*. Oliver's essential innocence survives the institutions that misname him, whereas Louisa has been formed by the very principles the novel condemns. Her moral legibility depends less on blamelessness than on damage. Rather than witnessing pain already available on the body, the reader is asked to infer a life from what has been repressed. Access becomes partial and retrospective. By the time Gradgrind sees his daughter clearly, the plot has shown that abstraction does something worse than overlook suffering after the fact: it helps to produce subjects who struggle to know what they suffer.

[145] Dickens, *Hard Times,* 16–20, 53–58, 96–101; Andrews, *Dickens and the Grown-up Child*, 9–26, 172–82.
[146] Dickens, *Hard Times*, 213–18.

3.3 Coketown and the Collective Body

Coketown enlarges the classroom until a whole environment appears organised by the same grammar. The town's first description is often read as documentary evidence of industrial pollution, though its force comes from the conversion of matter into figure. Brick loses its natural colour under smoke and ash; chimneys release serpents that never uncoil; the river runs purple; factories rattle and tremble; the piston rises and falls like an elephant in "melancholy madness." Dirt is the least of it. Here is a body whose movement has become compulsive, whose colour has been altered, whose energy repeats without developing. Industrial regularity appears as a form of affect, with monotony, fatigue and madness built into the landscape.[147]

Himmelfarb notes how little descriptive space the factory itself occupies. What dominates is the extension of its principles across school, chapel, prison, hospital, town hall and domestic life, and this matters to the argument being made here. Labouring flesh inside the mill does not exhaust the industrial body, which is also a social organisation of time, attention and value. Every institution turns "severely workful"; differences of function disappear beneath sameness of design; and the language of utility acquires the apparent inevitability of architecture. Coketown's physical environment materialises an epistemology that elsewhere appears as curriculum or political economy.[148]

The repeated declaration "Fact, fact, fact" makes the relation explicit. Material and immaterial aspects of the town mirror one another until whatever cannot be stated in figures or exchanged in a market is denied existence. The passage announcing such totality is itself exuberantly figurative. Its rhythm accumulates, its comparisons turn grotesque, and its biblical cadence pushes utilitarian certainty towards parody. Narratorial orientation here works through excess. No neutral town is shown to the reader and then judged for him; the description makes the town's claim to neutrality impossible to sustain. Satire restores moral visibility by exposing the metaphors an allegedly factual order cannot recognise in itself.[149]

Sameness and fragmentation coexist in the scene, and Williams's account of Dickensian urban experience helps explain why. Coketown repeats houses, movements, sounds, days and years, while the narration encounters it through abrupt visual

[147] Ibid., 27–30.
[148] Himmelfarb, *Idea of Poverty*, 474–79.
[149] Dickens, *Hard Times*, 27–30.

impressions red and black, smoke, canal, windows, piston, streets, crowds. The city imposes uniformity on its inhabitants and appears as a sequence of intensified details. Dickens reconstructs industrial production with no technical precision at all. What he renders is the pressure of an environment whose regularity exceeds any single observer's capacity to grasp it whole. The "structure of feeling" is no mood added to social description; the form through which the town becomes perceptible produces it.[150]

Time supplies one of the principal materials of this collective embodiment. The inhabitants move at the same hours, hear the same sounds, do the same work, and meet each year as the counterpart of the last and the next. Such repetition establishes more than monotony. It weakens the distinction between a living body and a machine valued for predictable recurrence. The circus again supplies a revealing contrast: its performers depend on repetition and exact timing too, but their rhythm answers to individual skill, danger, pleasure and mutual trust. Disciplined work is not being set against unregulated spontaneity. Dickens distinguishes repetition that preserves human variation from repetition that erases it. Coketown becomes affectively legible once its calendar is understood as pressure on expectation, the future arriving as a continuation of yesterday rather than as possibility. Plots of crisis interrupt that temporal enclosure, and the town resumes its cycle after each individual revelation.[151]

The category of the "Hands" condenses the problem. It gives the industrial population a body by reducing that body to an instrument. Hands can work, be counted, hired, dismissed, discussed as an aggregate; they require no memories and no conflicting attachments. The narrator interrupts the reduction by insisting that no calculation can measure the capacity for love or hatred, virtue or vice, in one apparently regulated worker. "Unfathomable mystery in the meanest of them" promises no complete psychological access. The phrase establishes the ethical importance of what remains unknown, making opacity a reason for restraint instead of a licence for classification. The novel's counter-arithmetic begins by acknowledging that persons cannot be exhausted by the uses institutions find for them.[152]

Hard Times cannot individualise the whole population it defends. Most workers remain a crowd, and the challenge to aggregation depends on a small set of exemplary

[150] Williams, *English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence*, 29–37.
[151] Dickens, *Hard Times*, 27–28, 45–46.
[152] Ibid., 71.

lives. Gallagher's analysis of the family-society metaphor shows how the novel connects the Gradgrind children to the workers by analogy: both are subjected to authority that treats them as functions, and Louisa's relation to her father parallels Stephen's relation to Bounderby. Metaphor produces sympathy by making unlike forms of oppression mutually intelligible, and it preserves distance at the same time. The middle-class daughter and the labouring man can be compared without ever belonging to the same plot of action, so that the collective body of Coketown becomes legible through figures selected to stand for it.[153]

Body, labour and community stand in a different relation at the circus. Its performers work through timing, skill, repetition and risk, and their activity answers to something other than profit or coercive measurement. Sleary's lisp, the performers' awkward domestic arrangements and their professional discipline keep the circus from turning into a polished utopia. What distinguishes it is a practice of mutual construction, since members are asked to make the best of one another rather than reduce each person to a worst case or a measurable defect. The bodies are fallible and bruised, and their vulnerability produces care where an administrative eye would find suspicion.[154]

For Nussbaum, the circus also clarifies the moral importance of pleasure. Humour, rhythm, grotesquerie, surprise and narrative movement do not decorate an argument that might have been stated more efficiently elsewhere; they exercise the very attention Gradgrind's system cannot value. Pleasure keeps company with persons whom an abstract account would file as marginal or disorderly. Himmelfarb's caution is equally important. The circus supplements industrial society without offering a practical replacement for it, preserving another rhythm of life at the edge of Coketown while the mills go unreorganised. Its moral superiority is real, and its institutional reach is slight. Even the clearest alternative the novel can imagine carries the tension between disclosure and containment.[155]

3.4 The Distribution of Sympathy

Lacking a single Oliver-like centre, *Hard Times* develops its politics of feeling through the unequal distribution of attention among Sissy, Louisa, Stephen, Rachael,

[153] Gallagher, *Industrial Reformation of English Fiction*, 149–53.
[154] Dickens, *Hard Times*, 45–46.
[155] Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 27–35; Himmelfarb, *Idea of Poverty*, 476–79.

Gradgrind, Bounderby and the collective "Hands." These characters occupy no simple scale running from sympathetic to unsympathetic. They receive different forms of narrative access: some through bodily detail, some through recurring images, some through speech, others through caricature. The resulting hierarchy settles whom the reader is invited to care for, and it also settles which kinds of suffering can be recognised as morally significant.

Sissy is the novel's most consistent source of compassionate judgment, and among the least psychologically developed of its characters. Her knowledge appears in action. She cares for Louisa, remembers her father without bitterness, refuses to translate prosperity into totals, and grasps that a failed performer may abandon a child out of shame and love rather than indifference. Such responses establish her as an alternative to Gradgrind's method. The narration seldom lingers over conflict within her, and her goodness has the clarity of a principle embodied in conduct. Limited access protects her from the suspicion directed at other characters while turning her into an ethical measure against which more damaged subjects are read.

Her father's disappearance makes the restraint especially visible. Sissy is given neither evidence nor closure, only objects, remembered habits, and the dog that eventually comes back without him. She interprets abandonment through the most generous account available to her: he left because failure had made him believe she would be safer without him. The judgment may well be true, and the narration never certifies it through retrospective access to his mind. Sissy's compassion accordingly differs from omniscient knowledge. She acts under uncertainty and chooses an interpretation that preserves another person's vulnerability without denying the injury done to her. Few passages show more clearly how the novel models sympathy as disciplined construction rather than emotional contagion. The scene also guards against the critic's own temptation to convert narratorial invitation into a guaranteed readerly response: the text makes Sissy's generous reading available and morally authoritative, and it cannot compel every reader to share it.[156]

The contrast with Louisa is instructive. Sissy's moral life is legible because her responses are reliably other-directed, while Louisa's becomes legible through difficulty, silence and contradiction. The narrative approaches her repeatedly without claiming transparent possession of her mind. She watches fire, listens with unusual intensity, and

[156] Dickens, *Hard Times*, 38–46, 281–82; Keen, "Theory of Narrative Empathy," 222–23.

experiences desire as an obscure force for which she has no authorised name. Her reserve creates interpretive labour, since readers must connect dispersed signs across years of narrative time, reconstructing the damage Gradgrind can see only at the moment of crisis. This comes closer to the model of access established in Chapter 1, where interiority is a pattern produced through selection, delay and inference rather than a container opened by omniscience.[157]

Louisa's suffering complicates the social direction of sympathy as well. Nothing has been taken from her materially, and her marriage gives her social power the workers lack. The principles that treat labourers as units have nonetheless made her a means within familial and economic arrangements. The novel uses the analogy to make abstraction visible across class lines, at the risk of rendering industrial suffering emotionally intelligible only once it has been translated into the experience of an oppressed daughter. Gallagher's argument is especially valuable here: the parallel between Louisa and Stephen connects family and society while keeping them apart, allowing metaphor to perform an intimacy the plot rarely sustains in action.

Stephen Blackpool is the most direct test of whether a worker can be particularised without turning into another form of abstraction. His first description resists heroic spectacle. At forty he looks older, worn by labour, his body one in which endurance has accumulated as fatigue. The prose enumerates no injuries and no wages. It gives duration a face. Stephen's dialect marks him as socially located, and his repeated word "muddle" is no evidence of intellectual limitation. It names a network of law, marriage, industrial authority and class hostility that more educated speakers conceal beneath their systems. His speech lacks a programme and possesses diagnostic force, since it begins from relations lived rather than categories imposed.[158]

The unhappy marriage plot makes that force morally complex. Stephen's wife is represented through degradation so severe that the narration appears to close sympathy around him and Rachael. The law's refusal of divorce becomes legible through his entrapment, while the wife herself receives almost no history and no interiority. She functions as the embodied obstacle against which his patience and Rachael's care can appear. Selective moral attention operates within the intimate plot as much as the industrial one: the novel exposes the cruelty of an institution by concentrating perception

[157] Dickens, *Hard Times*, 53–58.
[158] Dickens, *Hard Times,* 66–70; Himmelfarb, *Idea of Poverty*, 481–83.

on the person it has made exemplary, and another damaged subject stays comparatively unreadable.[159]

Rachael's role resembles Sissy's in its moral steadiness. Her care prevents violence, restores order to the sickroom, and offers Stephen a recognition denied him by employer and union alike. She too is known chiefly through what she does for others. The economy of sympathy depends on women whose practical intelligence repairs crises generated by masculine systems of law, profit and pride, while their own desires remain disciplined by service. Their action is not thereby negligible. What this identifies is the gendered form through which the novel imagines moral knowledge: attention becomes credible when it is patient, domestic and self-effacing.

The meeting between Louisa and Stephen brings these parallel worlds briefly into contact. Louisa enters a worker's home and for the first time separates the industrial population into persons instead of treating it as a mass. The scene echoes Sissy's resistance to national averages, particularity correcting an inherited abstraction. Tom's use of Stephen compromises the encounter, as does the unequal knowledge among the participants. Louisa's attempt at benevolence cannot control the plot into which her brother has drawn the worker. Recognition is real, and it enters a relation already organised by class power and deception. Gallagher's point that literal connections in the novel often become destructive is borne out with unusual severity, since the meeting that enlarges Louisa's moral world helps place Stephen under suspicion.[160]

The union chapters extend the question from private sympathy to collective agency. Slackbridge's rhetoric converts workers into "men and brothers" while denying Stephen any right to dissent without becoming an enemy. Bounderby, from the opposite side, treats the same workers as appetites demanding luxury and disorder. Dickens places Stephen between these languages of aggregation. His refusal to join the union and his refusal to inform on fellow workers preserve individual conscience against both forms of coercion, and the moral clarity of the position is compelling. Its political consequence is isolation. The character who most fully articulates the workers' humanity is removed from the collective through which industrial power might actually be contested.[161]

[159] Dickens, *Hard Times*, 71–78, 83–90.
[160] Dickens, *Hard Times*, 156–62; Gallagher, *Industrial Reformation of English Fiction*, 150–60.
[161] Dickens, *Hard Times*, 137–50.

Stephen's speech to Bounderby reaches beyond personal patience. He rejects the fantasy that punishment will cure the "muddle" and identifies the deeper injury: workers are regulated as figures or machines despite possessing "souls to weary, and souls to hope." The language transforms the Hand from instrument into vulnerable subject, and it accuses those "put over" the workers of responsibility. Dickens gives Stephen a structural diagnosis and withholds any credible structure of action. His moral authority depends partly on the refusal of Slackbridge, and that refusal lets the novel condemn collective rhetoric without imagining a democratic alternative to it.[162]

Unsympathetic figures are not all denied intelligibility in the same way. Gradgrind is exposed to revision because paternal attachment unsettles his doctrine. Harthouse is granted enough access for the reader to understand boredom, opportunism and the pleasure of influence without mistaking comprehension for absolution, negative empathy in the strong sense used in Chapter 1 is not at work here, since the novel never invites attraction to his predatory perspective as such. It allows proximity while maintaining judgment. Bounderby and Slackbridge are organised more nearly as public performances, their voices repeating themselves until bluster becomes character. Narratorial orientation is strongest where psychological access is weakest, and satire fixes the limits within which these men can be interpreted.

The distribution of sympathy in *Hard Times* is broader than in *Oliver Twist* and no less selective. It includes a damaged daughter, a morally exemplary worker, a compassionate circus child, and a father capable of remorse. It leaves large groups available chiefly through collective image, and it narrows political virtue around patience, care and individual refusal. The novel defeats the fiction that all persons can be known as numbers; narrative fullness it does not distribute equally among the persons it rescues from that fiction.

3.5 Narration, Satire, and Melodramatic Form

The narrator of *Hard Times* takes no position outside the conflict between Facts and Fancy. The prose becomes the most sustained demonstration of a rival method, with metaphor, apostrophe, repetition, caricature, biblical allusion and abrupt changes of scale turning abstract principles into perceptible consequences. Booth's account of stable irony

[162] Dickens, *Hard Times*, 149; Himmelfarb, *Idea of Poverty*, 479–86; Eagleton, *English Novel*, 158–60.

is useful here, since much of the novel's moral orientation arises from the gap between what institutions say and what their language gives away. Gradgrind's neutrality looks coercive; Bounderby's self-reliance rests on an invented childhood; Mrs Sparsit's dignity becomes predatory spectatorship. The reader is asked to occupy the position from which such discrepancies can be judged, and the judgment is produced by form instead of being appended as commentary.[163]

"Sowing," "Reaping," and "Garnering" establish a causal pattern with the simplicity of moral fable. What is planted in the schoolroom returns in altered shape, and education becomes destiny. The plot complicates that apparent certainty. Sissy passes through the system without becoming its product, Bitzer embodies its principles with terrifying consistency, Tom converts calculation into appetite, and Louisa's crisis opens a possibility that cannot restore what has been lost. The agricultural scheme organises expectation while individual outcomes refuse a uniform harvest. Tension between announced moral order and uneven consequence keeps the novel from becoming the very system it attacks.

Caricature performs a comparable double movement. Gradgrind's square forehead and numbered children, Bounderby's inflated self-advertisement, Mrs Sparsit's Coriolanian brow make moral habits visible at a stroke. Such figures can seem psychologically thin, and their exaggeration gives social language a body. Bounderby is more than a hypocrite who happens to lie about his childhood. He is the performance through which privilege converts itself into evidence of merit, the repeated story of abandonment allowing inherited or structural advantage to pass as personal achievement. When Mrs Pegler appears and the fiction collapses, what matters is less the private embarrassment than the ruin of a public explanatory myth.

Mrs Sparsit's imagined staircase offers the clearest example of satirical melodrama. Observing Louisa and Harthouse, she turns incomplete evidence into a moral descent whose stages she alone can see. The staircase gives desire a spatial plot, Louisa moving towards an abyss while Sparsit occupies the superior position of spectator and judge. The fantasy exposes its observer far more than its object. Her appetite for catastrophe converts another woman's crisis into theatrical gratification, and when rain, darkness and physical exhaustion undo her surveillance, the melodramatic image survives

[163] Booth, *Rhetoric of Fiction*, 73–76; Iser, *Act of Reading*, 34–38.

with its moral direction reversed. Readers are invited to recognise the pleasures of spectatorship, and Sparsit's claim to interpretive authority is refused.[164]

Such self-conscious treatment of spectacle matters to the thesis, because Dickensian pathos never rests on the display of pain alone. Stephen in the Old Hell Shaft is built out of darkness, depth, bodily injury, public gathering, and the star above him. The industrial landscape has literally opened beneath the worker whom Coketown first misread and then expelled. His body becomes visible at the moment it can no longer return to labour. Melodrama concentrates dispersed social relations into a scene that can be witnessed, and unsafe industry, official neglect, communal rescue, personal loyalty and the failure of reputation all converge around the wounded man.[165]

Brooks's account of melodrama as a mode that externalises hidden moral forces helps explain the scene's effectiveness. Stephen's goodness and Coketown's injustice cease to be matters of competing report once the shaft has translated them into vertical space, darkness, injury and starlight. The clarity is purchased through extremity. The worker becomes fully legible at the point of death, and his moral authority is protected by his removal from future conflict. As in *Oliver Twist*, melodramatic embodiment discloses an injury that ordinary social language has concealed, and it tends to secure judgment around a victim whose purity can no longer be tested by action.[166]

The star motif ties Stephen's death to Louisa's lost capacity for wonder. As a child she was taught to dissect the heavens into fact; at the shaft, a star becomes the sign by which an injured man keeps his orientation and his hope. Astronomy is not refuted. Significance is restored to perception. A fact can be accurate and still fail to tell a person what an object means within a life, and the novel's imagery does this work again and again, attaching qualitative weight to what Gradgrind's language treats as neutral data.

Satire and sentiment do not compete. They collaborate in the production of moral legibility, satire breaking the authority of respectable explanations while sentiment gives the exposed injury duration, body and claim. Polarisation is the risk in both modes. Bounderby and Slackbridge are rendered so completely through rhetorical excess that little interpretive uncertainty survives, and Stephen's suffering accumulates a corresponding purity. Dickens makes judgment possible by sharpening contrast, and the

[164] Dickens, *Hard Times*, 195–212; Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination,* 4–5, 13–20.
[165] Dickens, *Hard Times*, 257–65.
[166] Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 4–5, 13–20; John, *Dickens's Villains,* 1–20.

same contrast shrinks the political field to blustering masters, manipulative leaders and isolated goodness.

3.6 Social Conflict and Containment

The political force of *Hard Times* shows most clearly in its refusal of the languages by which suffering is normalised. Gradgrind calls exclusion reason; Bounderby calls power self-help; the town's reformers answer alienation with compulsory religion, temperance tables and moral surveillance; Slackbridge calls coercive unanimity brotherhood. Against these abstractions the novel restores consequence. Children grow emotionally stunted, workers grow exhausted, marriage becomes imprisonment, an abandoned shaft becomes a death sentence. Disclosure occurs wherever an apparently neutral principle is made answerable to the life it organises.

Stephen's confrontation with Bounderby matters because it identifies the failure as relational rather than simply economic. The workers' "muddle" will not be resolved by removing leaders, transporting agitators, or repeating the claim that masters and men share identical interests. So long as persons are governed as sums and machines, mistrust will reproduce itself. Himmelfarb's reading usefully recovers the breadth of the diagnosis: Dickens's industrial problem concerns the capacity to understand, sympathise, work, enjoy and live with others, wages being only part of it. Her emphasis clarifies as well why the remedy stays morally expansive and institutionally uncertain. A transformed relation is easier to imagine than the means by which power would be redistributed.[167]

Organised labour is where that uncertainty becomes containment. Slackbridge's theatrical vanity and verbal aggression discredit the union meeting before its claims can be examined with the seriousness granted to Stephen. The workers who turn against him appear susceptible to collective pressure, though their later loyalty complicates any simple condemnation. Dickens distinguishes solidarity from conformity, and the formal balance is unequal: Bounderby's power remains materially effective despite the satire directed at him, whereas Slackbridge's politics is nearly exhausted by his repellent voice. Moral community among workers is easier for the novel to imagine than worker organisation. Formally, then, the point is more precise than a simple rejection of trade unionism: collective grievance is not denied, but collective agency is given less sympathetic and psychological room than the isolated dissenter. Political organisation

[167] Himmelfarb, *Idea of Poverty*, 481–83; Dickens, *Hard Times*, 149–50.

reaches the reader through a narrower channel than suffering does, which is one reason the novel's language of fellow-feeling becomes politically restrictive at the moment it confronts organised power.[168]

Stephen's isolation solves the difficulty at the level of character. Refusing employer and union alike, he can stand as a moral witness uncontaminated by interest. He acquires the innocence Oliver possessed by age and vulnerability, though his blamelessness is achieved through renunciation: he will neither betray fellow workers nor take part in their collective decision. The position makes his suffering available to a broad readership that might distrust labour militancy. It also narrows the range of politically legible working-class agency, so that patience, truthfulness and sacrifice become visible while strategy, conflict and collective power stay morally suspect.

His death intensifies both effects. The Old Hell Shaft converts industrial negligence into bodily catastrophe and gives Stephen a final public audience, which he uses to ask that legislators prevent others from dying needlessly. The plea moves beyond private grievance towards institutional responsibility, and it counts among the novel's clearest gestures towards reform. It arrives from a dying man whose claim cannot develop into organised demand. His body authorises the criticism at the moment it removes him from the social field, and a preventable wrong is exposed with its politics contained within testimony, mourning and remembrance.[169]

Gradgrind's conversion offers a different kind of resolution. Louisa's suffering teaches him that human beings cannot be governed by calculation alone, and his encounter with Bitzer shows him the completed working of his school. Asked whether he has a heart, the former pupil answers through circulation and reason. The exchange is comic, and the comedy is merciless, since what confronts Gradgrind is his teaching's success rather than its distortion. The system has produced an agent capable of applying its principles without the residual affections that now make Gradgrind retreat from them.[170] The irony is exact: Bitzer can identify the heart as a fact of circulation and cannot recognise the ethical claim encoded in Gradgrind's metaphor. He has not misunderstood

[168] Dickens, *Hard Times,* 137–50; Himmelfarb, *Idea of Poverty*, 484–85; Gallagher, *Industrial Reformation of English Fiction*, 147–60.
[169] Dickens, *Hard Times*, 263–65.
[170] Ibid., 213–18, 277–78.

the school; he is its most literal success, and the scene makes failed fellow-feeling the consequence of an education that mistakes factual description for adequate judgment.[171]

The scene refines the novel's distinction between sentiment and moral judgment. Gradgrind's new appeal to the heart is insufficient because he invokes feeling only when calculation threatens his own son. Bitzer's refusal exposes the partiality of paternal compassion: the father who once demanded universal submission to self-interest now asks for an exception grounded in personal attachment. The novel plainly values his awakened love, and it will not let that love appear politically innocent. Bitzer is defeated by the circus rather than persuaded by Gradgrind, the older man having developed no public language capable of translating affection into justice. His conversion changes the kind of father he can be and leaves the conflict between private loyalty and social obligation without a coherent answer.[172]

The circus rescues Tom where Gradgrind's moral appeal fails. Sleary defeats Bitzer through cooperation, improvisation, disguise and remembered kindness, with no superior argument required. The episode vindicates relationships excluded from Gradgrind's calculus, and it creates a serious ethical complication. A newly compassionate family uses solidarity to shield the guilty son whose actions helped destroy Stephen. Gallagher's analysis of the novel's paternalist structure is decisive here, since the repaired family becomes protective by separating itself from public justice. Domestic feeling corrects utilitarian hardness, and its first major act is clannish. The plot's moral alternative cannot be identified without remainder with social justice.[173]

Bounderby's exposure likewise supplies judgment without transformation. Mrs Pegler's testimony destroys the myth of the self-made victim and leaves his economic power intact, the relations of the mill unrevised. The final chapter multiplies his type through the grotesque provisions of his will, suggesting that the culture sustaining him will outlive the man. Satire deprives him of moral credibility while acknowledging the persistence of the order he represents a more severe conclusion than a simple conversion plot would allow, since false explanation can be unmasked without the institution built upon it disappearing.

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[171] Ibid., 277–78.
[172] Dickens, *Hard Times*, 277–80; Gallagher, *Industrial Reformation of English Fiction*, 154–60.
[173] Gallagher, *Industrial Reformation of English Fiction*, 154–60.

Sissy's future brings the chapter's central tension into its quietest form. She becomes a mother and extends care to people whose lives are shaped by machinery and reality, work that is valuable for beautifying lives the town has rendered monotonous. It is also deliberately modest. Coketown is not reorganised as a community, the mills continue, and Louisa does not recover the future denied her. The narrator's closing reference to "our two fields of action" places responsibility upon the reader while keeping private and public action distinct. Gallagher argues that the novel ends with those fields more divided than joined: domestic care survives, and the family never becomes an adequate model of social transformation.[174]

Containment should not be mistaken for cancellation. Several forms of abstraction have been made harder to accept. The novel has exposed the moral poverty of a pedagogy that cannot describe desire, a political economy that knows workers as Hands, a paternalism that confuses power with merit, a collective rhetoric that erases dissent. What institutions should replace them it cannot determine, and the absence of a programme does not return the reader to the opening position either. The represented world has been reorganised evaluatively. Averages, doctrines and claims of necessity now carry the bodies and histories they had excluded.

At this level *Hard Times* remains politically consequential. Sympathy is never converted into a reliable programme of labour reform. What changes are the terms under which industrial relations can be judged. Eagleton's scepticism is justified wherever the novel's compassionate heart stands in for collective agency, and the substitution does not exhaust its formal achievement.[175] Dickens gives abstraction a voice, a town, a school, a marriage and a set of consequences, and he shows the insufficiency of private conversion by letting Coketown and Bounderby's type persist. Disclosure and containment stay inseparable, the solutions being narrower than the injuries the novel has taught its readers to see.[176]

[174] Dickens, *Hard Times*, 288; Gallagher, *Industrial Reformation of English Fiction*, 159–60.
[175] Eagleton, *English Novel,* 111.
[176] Dickens, *Hard Times*, 283–88; Eagleton, *English Novel,* 158–60.

Chapter IV – Comparative Moral Geographies: Fellow-Feeling and the Limits of Reform

Moving from *Oliver Twist* to *Hard Times* confirms the central hypothesis of this thesis while it modifies the terms in which that hypothesis holds. Dickens contests, across both novels, an institutional language that turns persons into manageable categories. Oliver is a pauper, a bastard, an apprentice, a suspected criminal, well before the narrative insists on the hungry and frightened child those attributes have been used to hide. Stephen is a Hand, a troublemaker, an accused thief, before the novel gives the category back its fatigue, its attachment, its conscience, its hope. Moral legibility begins, in each case, with a reversal of abstraction the classification made, finally, to answer to a body**.**

4.1 London and Coketown

London and Coketown make social unreadability spatial in two quite different ways. London fragments. Oliver moves through a city where the workhouse, the street, the rookery, the courtroom, the bourgeois interior, and the country refuge all sit close enough to intersect, yet stay divided by unequal knowledge of one another. A child can be perfectly visible in public and still get read through the wrong story entirely. Coketown does the opposite: it homogenises. Its repeated streets, its identical buildings, its routines and industrial rhythms flatten difference until workers become Hands and one year is indistinguishable from the next. London makes people hard to know because its social worlds never quite connect; Coketown makes them hard to know because a single logic of sameness claims, in advance, to have already explained everyone. What the contrast clarifies is what the two novels share underneath it: moral recognition begins at the point where spatial and institutional description stops exhausting the person who actually lives inside.[177]

These geographies also decide how narrative attention gets to intervene, and the two novels take almost opposite routes to do it. In *Oliver Twist* the narrator keeps crossing boundaries the child himself is denied, carrying the reader from a respectable drawing room to a hidden court and back again within the space of a single chapter a mobility Oliver never has, since he is always being led, dragged, or lost rather than choosing where he goes. The prose, in other words, possesses a freedom of movement the plot withholds

[177] Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, 61–69; Dickens, *Hard Times*, 27–30; Himmelfarb, *Idea of Poverty*, 474–75.

from its own protagonist, and that gap is part of what lets a reader see connections no character in the novel is ever positioned to see for themselves.

In *Hard Times* the problem runs the other way round. There is no hidden district here to be smuggled into; everything in Coketown is, in principle, already visible, laid out along identical streets under a sky that never seems to change from one day to the next. So the narration has to work from inside that visibility rather than by crossing into somewhere unseen. It breaks up monotony not by taking the reader somewhere new but by refusing to describe what is already there in the flat, factual terms the town uses for itself. The red brick turns savage; the machinery becomes an elephant sunk in melancholy madness; the streets take on a rhythm closer to compulsion than to architecture. Difference, which London hides behind walls and unequal knowledge, Coketown hides in plain sight, behind an appearance of total sameness and prising that sameness back open takes a kind of interpretive excess, metaphor piled on metaphor, far more figurative language than a purely functional description would ever need.

One city, then, is opened up by movement across a divide. The other is opened up by a refusal to accept its own claim to be featureless. In both cases, though, description stops working as backdrop and starts working as an argument in its own right not a neutral setting the plot happens to occupy, but one of the means by which Dickens turns other people's failure to see each other into a problem the form of the novel has to answer.

4.2 Two Ways of Building a Victim

The difference, put another way, is a shift from constructing compassion to representing what happens when the capacities that sustain compassion break down. Oliver's narrative first has to overcome institutional misdescription; *Hard Times* starts one step earlier, showing how a whole social order can damage the habits of imagination and attention through which another life gets perceived at all. So, the later novel extends the earlier one's argument without becoming, in any simple sense, more politically radical. Its moral field grows wider, but the collective actors moving through that field are, if anything, harder to inhabit sympathetically than Oliver ever was.

Bodies organise sympathy differently across the two books. Oliver's childhood and his near-total blamelessness create an immediate claim on the reader, and his physical weakness reads almost automatically as evidence of moral innocence. Stephen's authority works nothing like this, it depends on adult endurance, on refusal, on sacrifice sustained over time. He has to remain patient under marriage law, employer power, union hostility,

false accusation, bodily injury, before the novel grants him its fullest public scene, down in the shaft. The worker becomes an exemplary victim through a narrowing of his own agency, not through anything given to him at birth. And the two characters leave the plot differently too: Oliver is rescued out of the institution, Stephen is removed by death. One plot restores a hidden social identity. The other restores, at best, a damaged reputation.

Attention spreads more widely in the later novel, certainly. Louisa's injured consciousness, Sissy's practical compassion, Gradgrind's late remorse, Rachael's care, even Harthouse's boredom all of this complicates a moral field that *Oliver Twist* had built around one sharp, single centre. But wider distribution does not mean equal access. Sissy and Rachael stay clearer as ethical functions than as subjects divided against themselves; most of the workers remain a collective body rather than individuals; the union reaches the reader chiefly through the caricature Dickens makes of Slackbridge. Selective moral attention persists into this second novel, it no longer works chiefly by setting one pure child against a degraded world, but it still works, now through different degrees of opacity, embodiment, and narratorial trust handed out unevenly among the people who need them most.

4.3 What Irony Cannot Guarantee

Across both novels irony is the principal device through which official language is made to betray itself. The workhouse calls starvation economy and punishment benevolence; Gradgrindian discourse calls reduction knowledge and Bitzer’s self-interest reason. In each case the reader is positioned to perceive a mismatch between a vocabulary’s claim to neutrality and the human consequence it cannot describe. Satire does not itself create compassion, but it clears the space in which a competing judgment can become possible. The difference is that *Oliver Twist* usually directs this judgment towards the injured victim, whereas *Hard Times* also turns irony towards the production of the unresponsive observer.[178]

Across the two novels, Dickensian sentimentalism guarantees no moral improvement in its readers, and it is no ideological sedative whose effects could be predicted in advance, as though feeling something for Oliver or for Stephen simply produced, on schedule, a better citizen at the other end. It is, instead, a formal struggle over perception a struggle the text can stage but not settle. Irony discredits official

[178] Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, 5–16; Dickens, *Hard Times*, 277–78.

vocabularies. Embodiment gives abstraction a human cost it cannot talk its way out of. Restricted access hands interpretive responsibility over to the reader, who has to do something with a silence the narrator refuses to fill. Melodrama clarifies moral stakes, sometimes brutally, by removing the option of staying neutral. Resolution marks the point where social critique quietly folds itself back into private virtue, into a marriage, an adoption, a single reformed household standing in for everything the novel has just spent three volumes exposing.

None of these operations forces a single judgment out of the reader, and none of them secures its own translation into anything beyond the page. A reader can watch Bumble's language collapse under its own cruelty and still close the book unmoved; a reader can weep over Stephen at the bottom of the shaft and never think once about the conditions of the mine that put him there. What the novel controls is only the material out of which judgment might be built, not the judgment itself, and certainly not what a reader chooses to do with it afterward. This is, in the end, the most honest description available of what a novel can actually accomplish politically: it can make certain kinds of blindness harder to sustain, and certain kinds of cruelty harder to describe as anything other than cruelty. Whether that becomes reform, or simply becomes a feeling that passes, is a question the form of the novel cannot answer on its own, and Dickens, to his credit, never quite pretends that it can.

4.4 Recognition and the Limits of Sentiment

The comparison sharpens the meaning of resolution as well. *Oliver Twist* closes through recognition, inheritance, domestic placement, and the punishment or removal of criminal figures, its institutions left largely intact once Oliver has escaped them. *Hard Times* substitutes conversion, testimony, exposure and care. Gradgrind changes, Bounderby is unmasked, Stephen is cleared, Sissy preserves a humane practice. Coketown continues. Both plots settle the moral standing of selected persons more decisively than the structures that produced their suffering. Recognition is not reform, though it may alter the descriptions without which reform cannot be conceived.

Nussbaum is right, then, to locate a rival practice of attention in the form of *Hard Times*. The novel separates lives from aggregates, restores qualitative difference, and invites readers to regard even ordinary or squalid existence as a possible dwelling of the self. The close readings offered here add a necessary qualification. That practice is never neutral or universal. Dickens chooses which lives to particularise, which forms of agency

to honour, which conflicts to resolve through the heart. Empathy, sympathy and compassion reach us through narrative structures that can disclose a social injury while narrowing the acceptable shape of response.[179]

The implied reader constructed by them is no passive consumer of pathos and no already converted reformer. He must compare vocabularies, complete partial perspectives, recognise the limits of caricature, and decide what follows from the contrast between individual recognition and institutional persistence. The activity is politically modest and not negligible. As Claybaugh's account of the novel of purpose suggests, reformist fiction belongs to a wider culture of argument whose effects cannot be reduced to a direct line between reading and legislation. Dickens supplies scenes, figures and judgments that may enter public debate; he does not control the institutions through which they acquire practical force. That uncertainty belongs to the historical life of the novel rather than to any failure of close reading.[180]

A limited but defensible claim can therefore open the final conclusion of this thesis. Dickens's fiction intervenes most powerfully before policy, at the level where persons and injuries become recognisable as objects of public concern. *Oliver Twist* and *Hard Times* enlarge that field by opposing the pauper to hunger, the Hand to a soul capable of weariness and hope, and the statistic to the unequal life concealed within it. Their political limitation lies in a recurrent dependence on readable innocence, exemplary suffering, domestic care and individual conversion. Their achievement lies in making the inadequacy of abstraction felt without pretending that feeling alone can complete the work of justice.[181]

[179] Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 35, 43–45.
[180] Keen, "Theory of Narrative Empathy," 208–10, 222–23; Amanda Claybaugh, *The Novel of Purpose: Literature and Social Reform in the Anglo-American World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007), 1–15.
[181] Gallagher, *Industrial Reformation of English Fiction*, 147–69; Himmelfarb, *Idea of Poverty*, 474–86.

Conclusions

This thesis has argued that Dickens's politics of sentiment is best understood as two complementary movements rather than one repeated gesture. *Oliver Twist* builds the conditions under which a socially misread life can become available to compassion. *Hard Times* dramatizes what happens, in human terms, when an educational and social order sets out to suppress imagination, fellow-feeling, and attention to whatever resists being counted. In both novels, narrative form contests abstraction by forcing categories to answer to particular lives. The claim is not, then, that Dickens simply makes readers feel something. It is that he organises the terms under which suffering becomes intelligible, judgeable, and capable of making a demand on someone.

In *Oliver Twist* this work starts with the readable innocent. Hunger, bodily weakness, direct narratorial irony, and the repeated misclassification of the parish child make the violence of the New Poor Law exceptionally hard to miss. That same clarity, though, produces the novel's principal limit, since Oliver's total blamelessness lets the plot rescue him simply by proving that the category imposed on him never really belonged to him in the first place. Nancy, Fagin, Sikes, and the criminal children present the harder cases, where suffering, guilt, environment, and agency cannot be pulled apart so cleanly. The novel widens sympathy well beyond Oliver, but it never hands out moral attention evenly.

Hard Times changes the terms of the problem entirely. Its central experiment concerns what happens once the imaginative capacities needed for self-knowledge, and for recognising other people, are worn down systematically. Louisa's broken relation to her own desire, Tom's habit of treating people as instruments, Bitzer's perfectly consistent self-interest: these are three different outcomes of one and the same pedagogy, while Sissy, Rachael, and Stephen go on preserving forms of attention that Gradgrindian knowledge has no way of measuring. Coketown carries that same pedagogy out into an entire social environment, where persons become Hands, time collapses into repetition, and organised labour itself reaches the reader only through a voice the novel has deliberately compromised. So, the later novel diagnoses the failure of fellow-feeling on a wider scale than *Oliver Twist* ever attempts even while the remedies it still prefers stay stubbornly personal.

The comparison has also shown why irony, satire, embodiment, and melodrama cannot be treated as decoration wrapped around some moral message that existed before them. They are what make the message thinkable at all. London and Coketown produce two different geographies of misrecognition; the workhouse's language of economy and Bitzer's language of self-interest both expose the gap between being factually correct and being morally adequate; bodies, voices, scenes of recognition restore exactly the kind of information that administrative or utilitarian categories are built to exclude. What this thesis has called selective moral attention names that formal allocation of visibility, of duration, of interiority, of trust. The selectivity matters, because the same narrative that gives one injury a body can leave another person standing as a type, a face in a crowd, a caricature.

The political conclusion follows from this double capacity. Dickens's sentimentalism is neither politically sufficient on its own nor simply inert. It works best at the level of perception and judgment, where it can discredit an inadequate description, shift the moral status of a person, make certain injuries hard to go on defending. It grows far less secure once recognition has to turn into something collective, something institutional. Oliver is rescued, and the workhouse stays standing. Gradgrind changes, and Coketown stays standing. Stephen's moral authority comes at the price of his isolation from organised labour; Sissy's care mends individual lives without touching the structures that damaged them in the first place. Dickens makes, in other words, a genuinely powerful case for the necessity of fellow-feeling without ever quite proving that fellow-feeling can supply its own politics. Recognition is not reform. But reform without recognition would only start over from the very abstractions these two novels have spent their length teaching readers to distrust.

Read side by side, *Oliver Twist* and *Hard Times* locate fiction's distinctive political work in the gap between seeing and acting. They do not establish that empathy produces altruism, and they do not suggest sentiment should simply replace institutions. What they show is why institutions turn morally dangerous the moment they stop perceiving the lives they govern. Dickens's most lasting achievement lies in making that loss of perception visible in the first place even as his own plots keep revealing how hard it is to carry a restored way of seeing past one exemplary person, toward a social order actually able to sustain it.

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