

A Critical Approach to the Social Structures in *Brave New World* and *Oliver Twist*

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Abstract

This paper aims to focus on Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1837) in terms of social structure that shapes the characters' lives, social identity and welfare of whole society under the light of Marxism. Although both novels were written in different centuries, they address the main problem that an individual's personality, morality and life style are shaped by the society in which that individual lives. In these novels, alternative life styles are presented to the characters that have to endure and survive. While one of them, Oliver in *Oliver Twist*, manages to experience a happy ending despite his poverty, the other, John the Savage of *Brave New World*, does not have that chance or strength. Both characters live a life that they do not deserve and both of them see the harsh realities that are presented to them by the society. The social environments that both the characters live in can be assumed as the determining factor for their next steps in life. Therefore, these two novels from different centuries will be analysed in the course of how and by whom social structure is created.

Keywords

Aldous Huxley, Charles Dickens, *Brave New World*, *Oliver Twist*, Marxism, social structure, class struggle

Cesur Yeni Dünya ve Oliver Twist Romanlarındaki Sosyal Yapılara Eleştirel Bir Yaklaşım.

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Özet

Bu makalenin amacı Aldous Huxley'nin *Cesur Yeni Dünya* (1932) ve Charles Dickens'in *Oliver Twist* (1837) adlı eserlerini, Marksizm ışığı altında karakterlerin hayatlarını, sosyal kimliklerini ve tüm toplumun refahını şekillendiren toplumsal düzen açısından incelemektir. Bu iki roman her ne kadar farklı yüzyıllarda yazılmış olsa da, her ikisi de bir bireyin kimliği, ahlakı ve yaşam biçiminin yaşadıkları toplum tarafından şekillenmesi gibi ana bir problemi vurgulamaktadırlar. Bu romanlardaki karakterlere, katlanabilmeleri ve hayatta kalabilmeleri için alternative yaşam biçimleri sunulmuştur. Onlardan ilki olan *Oliver Twist*'teki Oliver, yaşadığı sefaletle rağmen mutlu bir sona ulaşmayı başarırken, diğer karakter olan *Cesur Yeni Dünya*'daki Vahşi John, yaşama şansı ya da gücü bulamamıştır. Her iki karakter de haketmedikleri bir hayatı yaşamakta ve her ikisi de toplumun onlara sunduğu acı gerçeklerle yüzleşmektedir. Her iki karakterin de içinde yaşadığı toplumsal çevreler onların hayattaki bir sonraki adımlarının karar mercileridir. Bu sebeple, farklı yüzyıllara ait bu iki romanda toplumsal düzenin nasıl ve kim tarafından yaratıldığı analiz edilecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Aldous Huxley, Charles Dickens, *Cesur Yeni Dünya*, *Oliver Twist*, Marksizm, toplumsal düzen, sınıf çatışması.

As Karl Marx states, “[t]he history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.” (1970, p. 17) What these two characters, Oliver of *Oliver Twist* and John the Savage of *Brave New World* experience in the fictional stories is unfortunately one of the examples of class struggles. In fact, it is the destination of all human beings who are led to live these struggles in order to produce what they need (Carver, 1991, p. 128) whether it is in the London of the 19th century or London of 26th century. Because of the social structure, both Oliver and John are alienated from the society and forced to live under the ideology that is created by people, who have

economic or political power. In Charles Dickens's novel, it is the upper class that creates this ideology while it is the World State in Aldous Huxley's. Thus, it seems that the owners of the power may change through centuries; however, the power is always there to impose upon people that they are always under control.

For the problem of class structure, Marxist approach attempts to present an alternative world. In this approach, it is stated that all societies consist of two layers: base and super structure. Base is the economy of that society and economy is determined by the means of productions (Eagleton, 1976, p. 3). On the other hand, super structure is the culture itself. However, those two layers are not apart from each other. They are linked to each other because what a member of society sees in the base is reflected on super structure, as well; so this link reflects the system of society. (Eagleton, 1976, p. 34) The problem that Marxism still mostly deals with is the class distinction since they believe that this distinction builds up a distance among people. (Sayers, 1998, p. 26) The ones, who are on the top in this distinction, do not want to share their welfare with the bottom as it is easy to control them when they are kept in need. In the light of all this information given so far, these two novels will be analysed with reference to the examples given in the novels to illustrate the unchanging social structures in different centuries.

In *Oliver Twist*, Charles Dickens recounts the narrative of an unhappy child who is victimized by the society and also mirrors society's imperfections so vividly and skilfully that the reader is drawn into the fiction from the very beginning. Like his other novels such as *David Copperfield* (1850) and *Great Expectations* (1861), Dickens puts the story of his fiction in the middle of the conflict between good and evil. He effectively draws the picture of this everlasting conflict, which appears mostly when people are influenced by the society that they live in. By reflecting the social facts and institutions of the age, Dickens tries to explain the problems of education, health, poverty and crime since he believes that modern industrial society could be fair and affluent. He also believes that a developed government would support social process and thus all kinds of profit-oriented attempts would be kept under control. He states this fact in his *American Notes* as such:

In our own country, where it has not, until within these later days, been a very popular fashion with governments to display any extraordinary regard for the

great mass of the people or to recognise their existence as improvable creatures, private charities, unexampled in the history of the earth, have arisen, to do an incalculable amount of good among the destitute and afflicted. But the government of the country, having neither act nor part in them, is not in the receipt of any portion of the gratitude they inspire; and, offering very little shelter or relief beyond that which is to be found in the workhouse and the jail, has come, not unnaturally, to be looked upon by the poor rather as a stern master, quick to correct and punish, than a kind protector, merciful and vigilant in their hour of need. (2001, p. 19)

Furthermore, Dickens compares evil characters, who are the representatives of defective sides of human nature with good characters with features that should be found in human beings. Dickens creates *Oliver Twist* by putting it in the middle of the conflict between good and evil that he observed in the society and showing how that universal struggle affects the individual. In the novel, the social institutions that aim to pursue social peace are the centers of corruption. It is inevitable to ignore the harsh facts of the age in the workhouse, in which Oliver was born. The doctor, Mrs. Mann who is "the good lady of the house" (p. 9), Mr. Bumble (the beadle), the members of the board are reflected as the evil characters and dark figures that Oliver and the other poor orphaned children have to endure in order to survive:

The fact is, that there was considerable difficulty in inducing Oliver to take upon himself the office of respiration,—a troublesome practice, but one which custom has rendered necessary to our easy existence; and for some time he lay gasping on a little flock mattress, rather unequally poised between this world and the next: the balance being decidedly in favour of the latter. Now, if, during this brief period, Oliver had been surrounded by careful grandmothers, anxious aunts, experienced nurses, and doctors of profound wisdom, he would most inevitably and indubitably have been killed in no time. There being nobody by, however, but a pauper old woman, who was rendered rather misty by an unwonted allowance of beer; and a parish surgeon

who did such matters by contract; Oliver and Nature fought out the point between them. The result was, that, after a few struggles, Oliver breathed, sneezed, and proceeded to advertise to the inmates of the workhouse the fact of a new burden having been imposed upon the parish... (p. 2-3)

Oliver, whose birth and death are left to chance, breathes with difficulty due to the medical insufficiency and also he is deprived of nursing. The narrator states that the nursing differs according to the different social classes in which babies are born; the doctor who delivers Oliver is just a municipal doctor and the woman who nurses him is just the old and drunken lady of the house, hence Oliver has serious health issues. Besides, the doctor and the lady of the house underline the unhealthy circumstances in social welfare institutions.

Even though the setting of *Brave New World* takes place in a futuristic world, approximately six hundred years later in the future (After Ford) where "community, identity and stability" (p. 1) is the only motto of the life, the world of Huxley seems to suffer from the same problems of Dickens' world. World State citizens of *Brave New World* have destructed their own human values by multiplying with hatchery rather than giving birth. At the opening sentences, the narrator describes this new world and how human beings are hatched, are divided into caste-systems and are categorized in relation to their castes as it is illustrated in the words of Director of Hatcheries and Conditioning when answering a student's question in the tour of the centre:

"Hasn't it occurred to you that an Epsilon embryo must have an Epsilon environment as well as an Epsilon heredity?"..."The lower of the caste," said Mr. Foster, "the shorter the oxygen." (p. 14)

and,

"And that," put in the Director sententiously, "that is the secret of happiness and virtue-liking what you've got to do. All conditioning aims at that: making people like their unescapable social destiny." (p. 16)

In this new world, scientific and technologic developments are only used for the sake of community's stability. One of them is Bokanovsky's Process - a phrase created by Huxley himself and a

method for producing many identical eggs from a single egg: "One egg, one embryo, one adult-normality. But a bokanovskified egg will bud, will proliferate, will divide." (p. 4) It is the basis of producing identical human beings and it is important for the world as the Director explains: "'Bokanovsky's Process is one of the major instruments of social stability!'" (p. 6) As it is understood, Bokanovsky's Process creates identical human beings, and this signifies the fact that there is no individuality in this world even if the narrator justifies it in the following words:

the bottle had passed, and it was the turn of the labellers. Heredity, date of fertilization, membership of Bokanovsky Group-details were transferred from test-tube to bottle. No longer anonymous, but named, identified, the procession marched slowly on... (p. 9)

That Bokanovsky's Process seems to support what Marxist critics state the fact that individuals do not have names leading to a lack of identity. As Andre Gorz states in *Critique of Economic Reason*, "[i]t is by having *paid*⁴ work (more particularly, work for a wage) that we belong to the public sphere, acquire a social existence and a social identity..." (1989, p. 13) It is just determined by the society as the reader can observe in *Oliver Twist* as well. Oliver's identity is shaped by the circumstances around him because there are two decisions ahead of this extraordinary individual: either he would continue to live under harsh circumstances provided by the social welfare institutions or he would step forward to the world of theft and crime, which is created by the society itself. Yet, Oliver is scarcely aware of what is going on around him. It begins in the workhouse for him to realize that he is poor and orphan. When he is aware of this fact, the only thing that he feels is loneliness:

Wretched as were the little companions in misery he was leaving behind, they were the only friends he had ever known; and a sense of his loneliness in the great wide world, sank into the child's heart for the first time. (p. 14)
 "So lonely, sir! So very lonely!" cried the child.
 "Everybody hates me. Oh! sir, don't, don't pray be cross to me!" The child beat his hand upon his heart; and

⁴ Author's own emphasis

looked in his companion's face, with tears of real agony.
(p. 42-3)

He was alone in a strange place; and we all know how chilled and desolate the best of us will sometimes feel in such a situation. (p. 47)

Oliver is far away from the warmth of a house and intimacy of a friendship. On the other hand, his lack of any relationship that can console him in such a situation causes him to discover his loneliness, which is an unbearable feeling. In fact, Oliver is not the only one who experiences loneliness as it is same for John the Savage in *Brave New World*. However, the feeling of loneliness destroys John's life in the new world because it makes his anger to increase and makes him to experience a tragic end while Oliver chooses to escape in order to forget his misery for a short period of time. As it is seen, loneliness is just one of the themes that are common in both novels. The other one is the ongoing war between good and evil.

The story of *Oliver Twist* reaches to a universal dimension due to the conflict of good and evil. Namely, Oliver is the representative of the theme that goodness can pursue under any circumstances and win at last. There is no difference in relation to the social structure in *Brave New World* and *Oliver Twist* because citizens are divided into caste-systems and also they do not complain about this situation because they are conditioned to accept. What John the Savage cannot endure most is the caste-system, in which people attain their identity with reference to their conditioning and the other issue is that the members of the lower parts of this system seem to be workers as soma-user slavers. Grown up on the traditional ways of the Reservation and an old volume of the poetry of Shakespeare, John finds London strange, confusing, and finally offensive. His quotation of Miranda's lines becomes ironic as John becomes more and more disgusted by the recreational sex, soma, and identical human beings of London. This disgust is felt through the end of the novel. On the other hand, dark and gloomy atmosphere in the beginning of *Oliver Twist* disappears when the narrator explains that Oliver is a good boy by his nature. These good characteristics that he has relieve the reader in the matter of the fact that Oliver is not going to change even when he enters to Fagin's world of crime:

Oliver Twist's ninth birthday found him a pale thin child, somewhat diminutive in stature, and decidedly small in

circumference. But nature or inheritance had implanted a good sturdy spirit in Oliver's breast. It had had plenty of room to expand, thanks to the spare diet of the establishment; and perhaps to this circumstance may be attributed his having any ninth birth-day at all. (p. 8-9)

As seen in the quotation above, Oliver manages to endure that oppressive workhouse system and the behaviours of people, who run it owing to purity and goodness that could only be found in a child's heart. All the good characteristics have effects on his experiences and feelings. To exemplify, when Oliver meets Mr. Bronlow and Maylies, representatives of the middle class, the first thing that they notice is Oliver's pure and good nature, which is also traced in his appearance. Since the identity given by society to the individual is specified with reference to an individual's nobility, name and financial power, the characteristics of Oliver's identity when he was born is stated as follows:

Wrapped in the blanket which had hitherto formed his only covering, he might have been the child of a nobleman or a beggar; it would have been hard for the haughtiest stranger to have assigned him his proper station in society. But now that he was enveloped in the old calico robes which had grown yellow in the same service, he was badged and ticketed, and fell into his place at once—a parish child—the orphan of a workhouse—the humble, half-starved drudge—to be cuffed and buffeted through the world—despised by all, and pitied by none. (p. 5)

As seen in the quotation above, the old calico robes that cover Oliver's body put him in the lower parts of the society. Oliver's being labelled as a theft is another example of people's perception of social identity:

"I don't belong to them. I don't know them. Help! help!" cried Oliver, struggling in the man's powerful grasp. "Help!" repeated the man. "Yes; I'll help you, you young rascal!"

What books are these? You've been a stealing 'em, have you? Give 'em here." With these words, the man tore the volumes from his grasp, and struck him on the head.

"That's right!" cried a looker-on, from a garret-window.

"That's the only way of bringing him to his senses!"

(p.174)

Effect of social classification and social label is felt in every corner of the society. Classification of people due to their financial power and nobility shows the corruption in the society. In the same way, John is labelled as a savage like the other people living in the Reservation. When an individual is called as a savage, it means that that individual is not accustomed to the civilized life style. However, it is the citizens and rulers of the World State that corrupt both human nature and nature of the life. In the caste-system of the new world, people cannot rise to the upper classes due to the fact that every class is conditioned to live just what the class determines for them. On the other hand, people who represent upper class and help Oliver after noticing his childish purity and goodness, stemming from his nature or nobility, welcome him into their own class after Oliver's real identity has been revealed. Hence, Oliver now has a fortune inherited from his father and social identity, which gives him social prestige. It is also a way to show that how hypocrite a human being can be as it is stated that if an individual can level to an upper class, s/he also can be lowered down by the society.

For the fact that social power manifests itself in shaping the individuals, who live in a society, it is the social pressures that firstly determine an individual's being good or evil. The world that Oliver meets after the workhouse is the world of thefts, pickpockets and prostitutes. It is the world, which has characters such as Fagin, Bill Sikes, Charley Bates, Nancy, and which forces Jack Dawkins to be Artful Dodger. Oliver's journey to these suburbs after the escape and finding himself in a life of a different part of the society present to what extent Industrial Revolution affected British society. In a sense, society shapes them and puts them in harsh conditions. They have no chance to choose a better one: to continue surviving in corrupted social welfare institutions or get ready to commit a crime or steal in order to live. Artful Dodger's outcry shows this fact: "I am [prig],' repeated the Dodger. 'So's Charley. So's Fagin. So's Sikes. So's Nancy. So's Bet. So we all are, down to the dog. And he's the downiest one of

the lot!" (Dickens , p. 210) All of a sudden, Oliver finds himself in the underworld:

Little Oliver's blood ran cold, as he listened to the Jew's [Fagin's] words, and imperfectly comprehended the dark threats conveyed in them. That it was possible even for justice itself to confound the innocent with the guilty when they were in accidental companionship, he knew already... (p. 206)

As it is stated before, it is the society itself that creates those criminals as a result of the circumstances and it is society again which punishes those criminals at the end. Oliver's fear stems from the idea of the fact he will be judged as a criminal some day because of the difficulty of the differentiation between criminal and innocent. In the dark underworld Fagin with his own gang poisons around with his belief that he can change a child's soul forever. In other words, this danger is evil's threat to goodness. Yet, Fagin notices something in Oliver's nature: "I saw it was not easy to train him to the business,' replied the Jew; 'he was not like other boys in the same circumstances.'" (p. 312) Oliver's soul is not going to be corrupted by evil and continue to struggle with it due to his childish purity and goodness. In contrast to this, John is not so lucky on the subject of this struggle. Society or social structure that he meets in London makes him a real savage and turns him mad. In a lighthouse outside London, John undergoes purification for what he has experienced so far. Fasting, whipping himself, and vomiting, John tries to exorcise the guilt he feels for Linda's death and his horror of sexual contact with Lenina. Reporters, film crews and then crowds violate his privacy in the following passage in the novel:

Twelve days later The Savage of Surrey had been released and could be seen, heard and felt in every first-class feely-palace in Western Europe. The effect of Darwin Bonaparte's film was immediate and enormous. On the afternoon which followed the evening of its release John's rustic solitude was suddenly broken by the arrival overhead of a great swarm of helicopters. (p. 283)

When Lenina herself approaches him, lovesick and heartbroken, John attacks her with a whip. A riot breaks out and turns into a sexual

party. John awakens the next day, dazed from soma, and realizes what has happened. Filled with despair and self-loathing, he kills himself. His death puts an end to the possibility of living independently outside the social structure.

When social atmosphere of the two novels are compared, it seems quite difficult to choose which one is better than the other because it is seen that social hegemony sucks individuals in and makes them slaves. It is the power that decides what an individual needs and does not need. In Huxley's novel it is the World State that conditions people's life and makes use of them for the stability. Likewise, in Dickens' novel, it is the upper class that decides how the poor should live and be thankful for the social institutions. With the help of these institutions, upper class keep poor under control as soma and conditioning do in the other novel. When an oppressed individual stands against those rules, they are either forced to be criminals or exiled from the society. To sum up, it should be said that in whatever century an individual lives, s/he, child or adult, is inevitably tied to different kinds of social structures and is destined to live his/her life that is not controlled by him/her. The owners of the power are the determining factors in people's choices and they are seen to justify themselves by saying that all these structures are created to bring order to the society.

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