Reading Dickens Today: How Contemporary Audiences Interpret Child Welfare in *Oliver Twist*

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Charles Dickens' Oliver Twist offers a powerful critique of institutional child abuse through its depiction of Victorian workhouses, yet how contemporary readers interpret this representation remains underexplored. This study investigates how six Indonesian readers with diverse backgrounds decode Dickens' social critique, applying Stuart Hall's reception theory to analyze their interpretive positions. Through semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, we found that participants occupied three distinct positions: two demonstrated dominant-hegemonic readings, fully accepting Dickens' humanitarian critique; two adopted negotiated positions, translating Victorian concerns into contemporary child welfare frameworks; and two exhibited oppositional readings, questioning the text's representational authority while advancing alternative interpretations. These findings reveal that interpretive positions correlate with readers' prior knowledge, professional socialization, and cultural contexts rather than emerging randomly. The study demonstrates that classic literature functions not as a vessel for fixed meanings but as contested terrain where historical representations provoke varied contemporary responses. Our analysis contributes to reception studies by empirically demonstrating how readers' social positions shape their engagement with ethically charged literary content, with implications for understanding how canonical texts continue to inform debates about institutional responsibility and child protection.

INTRODUCTION

Literature serves as a creative medium where language, imagination, and interpretation interact to convey human experiences across periods and cultures (Halim, 2024; Hernadi, 2002). As a form of artistic expression, literature allows writers to construct characters, settings, and social realities that reflect the values and tensions of their time (Dharma, 2018). Readers then engage with the narrative through their own personal perspectives and cultural backgrounds, so that each text can have multiple layers of meaning (Xiaofei, 2023). In this process of interaction, novels emerge as one of the most influential forms of literature because they are able to explore complex social issues such as poverty, institutional authority, and the treatment of vulnerable groups (Sulistiyana, 2014). Because novels often depict conditions according to their historical context, they provide valuable insights into how past societies functioned while inviting modern readers to reexamine these depictions through contemporary understanding, particularly in examining themes related to welfare systems, childhood experiences, and the impact of social institutions (Lobo, 2013).

Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* is a historical and famous literary works from a social criticism perspective (Al Ghammaz et al., 2022; Richardson, 2012). It presents a clear picture of child poverty and institutional neglect in 19th-century England through the experiences of Oliver; an orphan raised in the harsh environment of a workhouse. The novel highlights the daily realities experienced by children in these institutions, including inadequate food, poor care, strict discipline, and a lack of affection from the adults who were supposed to be responsible for their welfare. Through Oliver's suffering, Dickens exposes the failure of a system that claimed to provide protection but instead produced deeper injustice and misery. This portrayal serves as a direct critique of Victorian-era social policies and remains relevant to contemporary readers. The story encourages modern readers to reflect on how the treatment of vulnerable children in care institutions today may still bear

similarities to the conditions depicted in the novel. This study builds on this connection by examining how contemporary readers interpret Dickens' representation of child welfare and how their responses relate to or differ from modern views on institutional care.

Oliver's experience in the workhouse clearly illustrates the harsh reality faced by children in institutional care during the Victorian era. From the outset, he endured constant hunger, strict discipline, and an environment completely devoid of compassion. His suffering became even more apparent in the famous moment when he was pushed by his equally starving friends to ask for more gruel; this act was not one of defiance, but of desperation. However, instead of showing empathy, the workhouse authorities responded with anger and labeled him as a disobedient and ungrateful child. Their decision to remove Oliver from the institution and sell him to a gravedigger reflects how the system prioritized order and efficiency over the welfare of children. Throughout his time there, Oliver and the other orphans continued to face neglect, emotional abuse, and a lack of basic care, all of which revealed the cruelty rooted in the workhouse structure. This depiction is central to Dickens' criticism, highlighting how a system that should protect vulnerable children instead became a source of their suffering. This representation is important for this study because it provides contemporary readers with an opportunity to reflect on the meaning of child welfare and consider whether similar issues still arise in modern institutional care.

This study stems from an interest in how the workhouse is depicted as a place full of deprivation and injustice in *Oliver Twist*, and how today's readers understand this depiction. The study begins by exploring readers' initial perceptions of the conditions in the workhouse in the novel, including how they interpret the treatment of Oliver and the other children as a sign of the institution's failure to provide basic needs and adequate protection. To map these differences in interpretation, this study uses Stuart Hall's reception theory as a lens of analysis. After understanding these perceptions, the study then compares the representation of Victorian workhouses with modern forms of institutional care that still exhibit similar patterns. Through this comparison, the study aims to assess the extent to which the negligence, power imbalances, and lack of child welfare depicted by Dickens are still evident in today's care institutions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework: Reception Theory and Reader Response

When readers encounter a literary text, they do not simply absorb a fixed message. Instead, they actively construct meaning through a complex interplay of textual cues, personal experiences, and cultural knowledge. This fundamental insight underlies reception theory, which challenges the notion that texts possess singular, stable meanings waiting to be discovered. Rather, as Hall (1980) argues, meaning emerges through the dynamic process of encoding by producers and decoding by audiences. While authors embed particular ideological positions and social critiques within their texts, readers interpret these messages through their own frameworks, accepting, modifying, or resisting the intended meanings based on their social locations and lived experiences.

Hall's encoding/decoding model provides a particularly useful lens for examining how contemporary readers engage with *Oliver Twist*. According to this framework, Dickens encoded his critique of Victorian institutions into the narrative through specific representations of workhouse conditions, adult cruelty, and child suffering. However, the meanings that modern readers decode from these representations are not predetermined. Hall identifies three interpretive positions that audiences may occupy. In the dominant-hegemonic position, readers accept the encoded message as intended, aligning themselves with the author's ideological stance without significant resistance. The negotiated position involves partial acceptance, readers acknowledge the core message but adapt it through their own values and contexts, creating hybrid interpretations that blend authorial intent with personal perspective. Finally, the oppositional position occurs when readers understand the intended message but consciously reject it, substituting alternative frameworks that fundamentally challenge the text's ideological assumptions.

This three-part framework has proven valuable across various reception studies. Ali (2024) demonstrates how contemporary readers reinterpret canonical texts through intersectional perspectives, revealing how issues of power, vulnerability, and institutional control can be critically reexamined within current ethical frameworks. Similarly, Kelly et al. (2023) emphasize that cultural alignment between readers and texts significantly shapes comprehension and interpretation, a finding particularly relevant when examining how diverse audiences respond to Victorian social critique. Lekha & Kumar (2024) further argues that interpretation

is always mediated through cultural lenses and the intersection of personal and social experiences, producing multilayered readings that reflect readers' position within their own historical moments.

What makes reception theory especially pertinent for studying *Oliver Twist* is its recognition that classic literature functions not as a static artifact but as an active site where past and present concerns intersect. When modern readers encounter Dickens' depiction of institutional child abuse, they inevitably filter it through contemporary understandings of children's rights, social welfare systems, and institutional accountability. This creates what Singh and Pratima (2022) describe as a "dialogic relationship" between historical text and present-day reader, where neither the author's original context nor the reader's contemporary position fully determines meaning. Instead, interpretation emerges from the tension between these temporal perspectives.

Despite the extensive scholarship on Dickens and the growing body of reception studies, few researchers have systematically examined how contemporary readers with varied backgrounds interpret the specific issue of child welfare in *Oliver Twist*. Most existing studies focus on textual analysis or historical context rather than empirical investigation of reader responses. This study addresses that gap by exploring how real readers, not hypothetical ones, make sense of Dickens' critique when approached from their own social locations and experiences with institutional care.

Child Welfare in Historical and Contemporary Institutions

Understanding how readers interpret *Oliver Twist* requires examining both the historical reality of Victorian workhouses and the persistence of institutional failures in modern child welfare systems. The workhouse system, established under the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, represented a deliberate policy choice to make poverty relief so unpleasant that only the truly desperate would seek it (Higginbotham, 2017). Children in these institutions faced systematic deprivation: inadequate nutrition, harsh physical punishment, emotional neglect, and treatment that prioritized administrative efficiency over human dignity. Dickens' portrayal, while fictionalized, drew directly from documented conditions that stripped children of agency and reduced them to objects of bureaucratic management.

Yet the relevance of Dickens' critique extends far beyond its Victorian context. Contemporary research reveals troubling continuities between historical workhouses and modern institutional care systems. Bywaters et al. (2020) demonstrates that inadequate welfare systems continue to create environments that harm rather than protect vulnerable children, particularly when institutions operate under resource constraints and prioritized organizational needs over individual wellbeing. The mechanisms differ, modern institutions rarely subject children to literal starvation, but the underlying dynamics persist rigid disciplinary practices, limited emotional support, and supervisory structures that fail to respond to children's developmental needs.

Finch et al. (2021) synthesize evidence showing that institutional child maltreatment remains a significant concern across various care settings. Their systematic review identifies patterns strikingly reminiscent of Victorian workhouses: staff prioritizing control over care, punishment for minor infractions, inadequate attention to emotional needs, and organizational cultures that normalize harsh treatment. These patterns suggest that the problem Dickens identified was not merely a historical aberration but reflects deeper tensions inherent in institutional care, tensions between individual needs and organizational efficiency, between compassionate response and bureaucratic procedure, between children's rights and adult authority.

The concept of "structural violence" helps explain these continuities. de la Cova et al. (2023) argue that institutions can produce harm not through individual malice but through systemic features that normalize inadequate care. When policies prioritize cost savings, when oversight mechanisms focus on compliance rather than outcomes, when staff lack training or support to provide trauma-informed care, the result is predictable suffering, even when individual workers mean well. This framework suggests that understanding institutional failure requires looking beyond individual cruelty (as represented by characters like Mr. Bumble) to examine how organizational structures, funding constraints, and policy frameworks create conditions for neglect.

Crucially, public narratives about institutions shape both their practices and their accountability. Baekgaard et al. (2023) demonstrate that when welfare recipients are framed as burdens or undeserving, policies become more punitive and public oversight weakens. This phenomenon, what they term "deservingness messaging", operated powerfully in Victorian England, where poor children were often blamed for their poverty and viewed as requiring discipline rather than compassion. Similar narratives persist today when institutional failures are attributed to "difficult" children rather than inadequate systems, or when calls for reform are dismissed as unrealistic given budgetary constraints.

Shim (2023) argues that effective child protection requires not merely institutional reform but fundamental reconsideration of how societies understand their obligations to vulnerable children. This means

examining the narratives we talk about institutional care, stories that can either naturalize harsh treatment or demand accountability. *Oliver Twist* functions as one such narrative and studying how contemporary readers interpret it offers insights into how classic literature shapes or challenges public understanding of institutional responsibility.

Research Gap and Study Contribution

While Dickens scholars have extensively analyzed *Oliver Twist* as social critique, and reception theorists have examined how readers interpret texts, these lines of inquiry rarely intersect in empirical studies that examine actual reader responses to specific social issues represented in canonical literature. We know much about what Dickens intended to criticize, less about how diverse contemporary readers receive and reconstruct those critiques for their own contexts. This study bridges that gap by investigating how readers with varied backgrounds, different levels of familiarity with child welfare issues, different professional experiences, different cultural contexts, decode Dickens' representation of institutional child abuse.

By applying Hall's framework to empirical reader responses, this research contributes to three scholarly conversations. First, it extends reception theory by demonstrating how interpretive positions emerge not as abstract categories but through readers' concrete engagement with ethically charged content. Second, it offers new perspectives on *Oliver Twist* by examining the novel not as historical artifact but as living text that continues to provoke debate about institutional care. Third, it contributes to child welfare scholarship by exploring how literary representation shapes public understanding of institutional responsibility across temporal boundaries. In doing so, the study illuminates how classic literature remains relevant not only despite the interpretive work readers perform to connect past representations with present concerns.

METHODS

Research Design and Philosophical Positioning

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive design to explore how contemporary readers interpret representations of child welfare in Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*. We chose this approach because our central concern is not to test hypotheses about reader responses but to understand the nuanced ways that individuals construct meaning when engaging with ethically charged literary content. Qualitative inquiry allows us to examine interpretation as a complex social practice shaped by personal biography, cultural context, and lived experience, dimensions that would be flattened by quantitative measurement (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

Our epistemological stance aligns with constructivist principles, recognizing that meaning making is neither wholly subjective nor entirely determined by textual properties. Instead, as Hall's (1980) reception theory suggests, interpretation emerges through negotiation between encoded messages and decoders' social positions. This philosophical orientation informed our methodological choices: rather than seeking representative samples or generalizable patterns, we aimed for in-depth exploration of how specific individuals with varied backgrounds engage interpretively with Dickens' social critique.

We acknowledge our position as researchers who believe that *Oliver Twist* offers valuable insights into institutional child welfare while recognizing that contemporary readers may legitimately arrive at different interpretations. Throughout data collection and analysis, we remained attentive to responses that challenge or complicate our own readings, treating disagreement not as error but as evidence of the text's interpretive richness.

Participant Selection and Profiles

We recruited six participants through purposive sampling, deliberately seeking diversity in educational background, professional experience, and prior engagement with child welfare issues. Our goal was not statistical representation but theoretical variation, assembling a group whose different social locations would likely produce varied interpretive positions. Given the exploratory nature of this study and the intensive analytical attention required for each participant's responses, we prioritized depth over breadth. While we acknowledge that six participants constitute a small sample, reception studies frequently work with similar numbers when conducting detailed interpretive analysis (Singh & Pratima, 2022).

Participants were recruited through academic networks and social media platforms, with selection based on the following criteria: (1) proficiency in English sufficient to read the novel, (2) willingness to read the complete text before participating, (3) diverse backgrounds regarding familiarity with child welfare issues, and

(4) varied educational and professional experiences. All participants provided informed consent and were assured of confidentiality through the use of pseudonyms.

Table 1. Participant Profiles

Pseudonym	Background	Prior Knowledge of Child Welfare
Nadira	Lecturer in English Literature, Makassar State University	Substantial, familiar with historical cases of child labor and exploitation
Vira	Active reader and social media commentator; regular engagement with news and non-fiction	Moderate, awareness from media and reading, not professional knowledge
Nina	Elementary Education student, Makassar State University, from Bulukumba	General, basic understanding of children's shelters and protection systems
Intan	Student at Alauddin State Islamic University, from Luwu	Limited, minimal prior exposure to workhouse history or institutional care debates
Iwan	Management student in Makassar, from Bone	Limited, unfamiliar with historical or contemporary child welfare institutions
Lukman	Student at Mahad Aly As'adiyah Islamic boarding school, from Papua	Moderate, exposure through educational television programs about child protection

This diversity proved valuable: Nadira's literary and historical knowledge contrasted with Intan and Iwan's more limited familiarity, while Vira's media-informed awareness differed from Lukman's educationally mediated exposure. These varied starting points allowed us to examine how interpretive positions relate to readers' prior knowledge and experiences.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection occurred in two phases. First, all participants received copies of *Oliver Twist* and were asked to read the complete novel within a three-week period. We emphasized that they should read at their own pace, noting any passages that provoked strong reactions. To verify engagement with the text, we asked participants to identify three scenes they found particularly memorable before proceeding to formal interviews.

The second phase involved semi-structured interviews conducted individually with each participant, lasting 45-75 minutes. Interviews were conducted in settings chosen by participants for their comfort, four in campus locations, two remotely via video call. All interviews were audio-recorded with permission and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

The interview protocol was organized around five thematic areas:

1. Initial impressions: How participants understood the workhouse setting and Oliver's circumstances

2. Perceptions of institutional treatment: Their interpretations of how adults in the workhouse behaved toward children

3. Authorial intent: What they believed Dickens was trying to communicate through his portrayal

4. Emotional engagement: Specific scenes that affected them and why

5. Contemporary relevance: Connections they drew (or resisted drawing) between Victorian workhouses and modern institutional care

Questions were deliberately open-ended to avoid leading participants toward predetermined interpretations. For example, rather than asking "Do you think the workhouse system was cruel?", we asked "How would you describe the conditions Oliver experienced?" This phrasing allowed participants to frame their responses in their own terms while still addressing our research concerns.

Throughout interviews, we practiced active listening and asked follow-up questions when responses suggested interesting interpretive positions. For instance, when one participant initially described workhouse

conditions as "strict," we asked what "strict" meant to them and whether strictness adequately captured what they had read. This probing often revealed more nuanced perspectives than initial responses suggested.

Analytical Framework and Process

We analyzed interview data using a theoretically informed thematic analysis approach that combined Braun and Clarke's (2006) systematic procedures with Hall's (1980) three interpretive positions. This dual framework allowed us to identify patterns across responses while remaining attentive to how participants positioned themselves relative to Dickens' encoded critique.

Analysis proceeded through six iterative stages:

1. Familiarization: Both researchers read all transcripts multiple times, noting initial impressions and apparent patterns. We approached this stage with Hall's three positions in mind but remained open to unexpected interpretive moves.

2. Generating initial codes: We systematically coded each transcript, identifying segments where participants (a) described workhouse conditions, (b) evaluated adult behavior toward children, (c) interpreted Dickens' intentions, (d) connected (or refused to connect) the text to contemporary issues, and (e) positioned themselves in relation to the narrative. This stage produced 47 initial codes.

3. Searching for themes: We grouped related codes into broader thematic patterns. For example, codes related to "hunger," "inadequate food," and "punishment for asking for more" were consolidated into a theme we labeled "deprivation as control mechanism."

4. Reviewing themes: We checked each theme against the original transcripts to ensure they accurately represented participants' responses. Several preliminary themes were revised or merged during this stage. Importantly, we discussed cases where participants' responses seemed to shift between interpretive positions, recognizing that readers may occupy multiple positions simultaneously or move between them.

5. Defining and naming themes: We refined theme definitions and determined how they related to Hall's framework. This involved identifying which responses indicated dominant-hegemonic readings (full acceptance of Dickens' critique), negotiated readings (adaptation through personal frameworks), or oppositional readings (resistance or reframing). We remained alert to the possibility that our categorization reflected our interpretive work as researchers, not just participants' inherent positions.

6. Producing the analysis: We selected representative quotations and developed interpretive narratives connecting participants' responses to broader theoretical concerns. Throughout this stage, we worked to balance vivid illustration through extended quotes with analytical discussion that moved beyond description.

FINDINGS

Overview of Interpretive Patterns

Our analysis of participant responses revealed distinct interpretive positions that align with Stuart Hall's three-part framework: dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional readings. Rather than presenting these as rigid categories, we understand them as analytical lenses that illuminate how readers position themselves relative to Dickens' encoded critique of institutional child welfare. Importantly, individual participants sometimes exhibited characteristics of multiple positions across different aspects of their responses, reflecting the complexity of real-world interpretation. Nevertheless, each participant's overall approach clustered most consistently around one primary reading position.

Before examining these positions in detail, we present the major thematic patterns that emerged across all participants, regardless of their interpretive stance. These shared themes provide context for understanding how different readers worked with similar textual material to arrive at divergent conclusions.

Cross-Cutting Themes in Participant Responses

Theme 1: Recognition of Systemic Deprivation

All six participants identified the workhouse as a site of profound material and emotional deprivation. Their descriptions consistently emphasized hunger, inadequate shelter, and the absence of nurturing care. However, they differed significantly in how they interpreted this deprivation, whether as historical artifact, moral condemnation, or contemporary warning.

Nadira characterized the environment as "dehumanizing," while Vira elaborated that children were "treated like tools for cheap labor, living in a cold and oppressive environment filled with hunger and fear." Nina emphasized that "the children live in severe poverty, with very little food and long working hours," framing the issue primarily in economic terms. Even participants with limited prior knowledge of workhouse history, like Intan, recognized that "the children experience harsh conditions, including hunger, inadequate clothing, and almost no emotional care."

What distinguished these responses was not whether participants recognized deprivation but how they explained its significance. Some treated it as evidence of Victorian moral failure; others saw it as a universal pattern in underfunded institutions; still others questioned whether Dickens' representation could be taken at face value.

Theme 2: Adult Authority as Cruel and Arbitrary

Participants uniformly described the adults managing the workhouse as cruel, indifferent, or incompetent. Figures like Mr. Bumble and the matron were seen as wielding authority without compassion, prioritizing institutional order over children's welfare. Nadira stated simply that adults "treated children very unfairly and harshly," while Vira noted that authority figures "use their authority harshly, showing no compassion" and "focus on control and discipline rather than the children's basic needs."

Nina extended this observation to systemic analysis, arguing that adults "act in a cruel and uncaring manner, prioritizing discipline and saving resources over the children's welfare." This interpretation positions adult cruelty not merely as personal failing but as structural feature, adults behave badly because the system incentivizes efficiency over care.

Lukman offered a particularly telling response that revealed his interpretive framework: "They should treat the children fairly and kindly, as they would their own family, because a lack of fairness and care can create conflicts among the children." This statement reflects a negotiated reading that accepts Dickens' critique while filtering it through a contemporary ethical framework centered on fairness and family-like care.

Theme 3: Oliver's Request for More Food as Symbolic Moment

The scene where Oliver asks for more gruel emerged as interpretively central for nearly all participants. This moment functioned as a condensed symbol of the larger power dynamics and moral failures depicted throughout the novel. Participants repeatedly returned to this scene when asked which moments affected them most strongly.

Vira described it as "the most touching moment" because "his simple, innocent request is treated like a crime, showing how powerless and devalued the children are." Nina similarly noted that Oliver's "basic need is met with anger rather than compassion, revealing the cruelty and injustice of the workhouse system." For these readers, the scene crystallized Dickens' critique: the system punishes vulnerability and transforms legitimate need into transgression.

Interestingly, the participants who adopted more oppositional readings still found this scene powerful but interpreted its significance differently. Rather than accepting it as straightforward moral commentary, they saw it as illustrating how desperation can drive people to act against institutional rules, a more sociologically complex reading that emphasizes survival strategies rather than simple victimization.

Theme 4: Divergent Views on Contemporary Relevance

While all participants engaged seriously with the historical content, they diverged sharply when considering how Dickens' critique relates to modern institutional care. This divergence proved crucial for categorizing interpretive positions.

Some participants, like Nadira and Vira, drew direct parallels between Victorian workhouses and contemporary child welfare failures. Nadira insisted that "country should protect children" and that "being poor doesn't mean we can be mistreated," framing the issue as a timeless moral obligation. Vira argued that "society's humanity is shown by how it treats its most vulnerable," suggesting that Dickens' critique remains fully applicable today.

Others, particularly Iwan and Lukman, resisted such direct application. While acknowledging the historical injustices Dickens depicted, they questioned whether modern institutions face identical problems or whether changed social contexts require different analytical frameworks. This resistance marked their readings as oppositional, not because they rejected Dickens' critique of Victorian society, but because they challenged the assumption that his representation translates straightforwardly into contemporary terms.

Interpretive Positions: Dominant-Hegemonic Readings

Two participants, Nadira and Vira, demonstrated dominant-hegemonic readings characterized by full acceptance of Dickens' encoded critique without significant qualification or reframing. These readers aligned themselves completely with what they perceived as the author's moral perspective, treating the text as transparent window onto Victorian social injustice and timeless ethical truths about institutional responsibility.

Nadira's Response

Nadira, drawing on her background in literature and her knowledge of historical child labor exploitation, embraced Dickens' critique wholeheartedly. Her responses consistently used strong moral language "dehumanizing," "cruel," "child abuse" that mirrored the emotional register of Dickens' narrative voice. When asked about the workhouse system, she stated emphatically: "It was child abuse. None of the children should be treated like that."

This unequivocal condemnation reflects what Hall (1980) describes as operating "inside the dominant code", Nadira decoded the message exactly as encoded, without resistance or significant adaptation. Her interpretation extended beyond describing what happens in the text to affirming the moral judgments embedded within it. She saw no gap between Dickens' representation and reality, treating the novel as reliable testimony rather than constructed narrative.

Significantly, Nadira universalized Dickens' critique, arguing that "being poor is not a failure, being poor doesn't mean we can be mistreated." This statement moves from historical observation to ethical principle, suggesting that the lesson transcends Victorian context. Her emotional investment was evident: "We never choose from whom we born... :(" The emoticon in her written response (retained from the original questionnaire data) reveals genuine distress—precisely the emotional response Dickens intended to provoke.

Vira's Response

Vira similarly adopted a dominant-hegemonic position, though her articulation was more analytically detailed than Nadira's. She explicitly identified Dickens' rhetorical strategy: "Dickens wanted readers to see how wrong the system was. The cruelty toward children was meant to shock and expose the hypocrisy of Victorian society."

This meta-awareness of authorial intent did not create critical distance; instead, Vira aligned herself completely with that intent, accepting both Dickens' representation and his moral framework. She emphasized how the workhouse "dehumanized" children and "reinforced class inequality," using language that suggests she has internalized Dickens' social critique as her own perspective.

What marks Vira's reading as dominant-hegemonic rather than negotiated is her lack of qualification or adaptation. She did not reframe Dickens' critique through contemporary concepts or personal experience; she simply amplified it. Her concluding observation that "society's humanity is shown by how it treats its most vulnerable" echoes Victorian reform rhetoric, suggesting complete adoption of the text's ideological position.

Both Nadira and Vira demonstrate what reception theory identifies as a relatively rare phenomenon: readers whose social positions and values align so closely with a text's encoded ideology that they experience no need to negotiate or resist its meanings. Their responses suggest that despite the 150-year gap between composition and reading, Dickens' humanitarian critique resonates powerfully with certain contemporary readers.

Interpretive Positions: Negotiated Readings

Nina and Intan occupied negotiated positions, accepting the core of Dickens' critique while adapting it through their own ethical frameworks and contemporary concerns. These readers acknowledged the validity of Dickens' historical observations but translated them into modern vocabularies of children's rights, social justice, and institutional accountability.

Nina's Response

Nina, an elementary education student, brought professional interests in child development to her reading. While she agreed that workhouse conditions were "cruel" and "neglectful," she consistently reframed Dickens' moral language through contemporary educational and developmental discourse. For instance, she noted that the "environment is cold, neglectful, and emotionally draining, showing that they are seen more as burdens than human beings."

This response accepts Dickens' representation while extending it beyond his original framework. The phrase "emotionally draining" imports psychological concepts unavailable to Dickens, suggesting Nina read the text through modern understandings of childhood trauma and emotional needs. Similarly, her conclusion that "even the poorest deserve dignity, compassion, and opportunities" translates Dickens' Victorian reform agenda into contemporary human rights language.

Nina's negotiated reading became most apparent when she connected the novel to present-day concerns: "The lesson is that even the poorest deserve dignity, compassion, and opportunities, and society is judged by how it treats its vulnerable members." This statement accepts Dickens' core message (society should protect vulnerable children) but recodes it in terms of dignity, rights, and opportunities, concepts that reflect contemporary social policy discourse rather than Victorian moral language.

Intan's Response

Intan, who had limited prior knowledge of workhouse history, also demonstrated a negotiated reading. She accepted Dickens' depiction of institutional cruelty but consistently filtered it through a lens of fairness and protection that reflects contemporary Indonesian educational values. Her statement that "poverty should never be met with cruelty; every child deserves kindness, protection, and opportunities" reveals this adaptation.

What distinguishes negotiated from dominant-hegemonic readings is this process of translation. Intan did not simply adopt Dickens' Victorian reform rhetoric; she reconstructed his critique using her own ethical vocabulary. Her emphasis on "deserving" kindness and protection imports concepts from contemporary children's rights discourse, showing how she made the text meaningful by connecting it to her existing beliefs.

Both Nina and Intan illustrate how negotiated readings preserve a text's core ideological message while updating its terms. They demonstrate what Hall (1980) describes as containing "a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements", acceptance of Dickens' humanitarian values combined with resistance to his Victorian framing.

Interpretive Positions: Oppositional Readings

Iwan and Lukman adopted oppositional positions that, while acknowledging Dickens' critique of Victorian society, challenged or reframed key aspects of his representation. These readings are "oppositional" not because they defend workhouses or reject humanitarian values, but because they resist the assumption that Dickens' text provides straightforward lessons for contemporary contexts.

Iwan's Response

Iwan, a management student, brought a more skeptical analytical framework to his reading. While he recognized that "the workhouse conditions are extremely harsh and inhumane," he consistently emphasized the extreme nature of deprivation in ways that suggested questioning whether this representation could be taken as typical rather than exceptional.

His observation that children had "almost no emotional support" and "little chance to feel loved or grow" pushed Dickens' critique beyond what the text explicitly states, suggesting Iwan read it as exemplifying total institutional failure rather than as reliable historical account. This interpretive move reflects what Hall (1980) calls "oppositional decoding", understanding the encoded message but subjecting it to critical scrutiny.

Most tellingly, Iwan emphasized that "poverty should never take away someone's humanity" in terms that suggest universal principle rather than historical observation. By abstracting from Dickens' specific representation, he avoided treating *Oliver Twist* as straightforward guide to contemporary institutional reform. His reading acknowledged historical injustice while maintaining critical distance from claims about present-day relevance.

Lukman's Response

Lukman offered the most explicitly oppositional reading, consistently reframing Dickens' critique through contemporary Indonesian perspectives on institutional responsibility and children's rights. His background in Islamic education influenced his interpretation, as evidenced by his emphasis on fairness, empathy, and social justice as "human rights" rather than Victorian virtues.

When asked about adult treatment of children, Lukman responded not by describing what happens in the text but by asserting what should happen: "They should treat the children fairly and kindly, as they would their own family." This prescriptive stance suggests resistance to Dickens' representational authority, Lukman did not simply accept the text's depiction but measured it against his own standards.

His conclusion that the story teaches that "poverty is not a choice, empathy is essential, humanity can appear in unexpected places, poverty can push people into difficult actions, and social justice is a human right" reveals sophisticated oppositional reading. Rather than extracting lessons Dickens explicitly offers, Lukman reconstructed the narrative's significance using contemporary frameworks, human rights discourse, situational ethics, and structural analysis of poverty. This demonstrates how oppositional readings can honor a text while fundamentally reinterpreting its ideological implications.

Summary of Interpretive Distribution

Our analysis reveals that contemporary readers with varied backgrounds approach *Oliver Twist* through distinctly different interpretive lenses. The distribution across Hall's three positions, two dominant-hegemonic, two negotiated, two oppositional, suggests that the text remains ideologically contested terrain rather than conveying fixed meanings.

Importantly, these interpretive positions correlated somewhat with participants' prior knowledge and professional backgrounds. Readers with literary training or substantial prior engagement with child welfare issues (Nadira, Vira) more readily adopted Dickens' encoded perspective, while those with less familiarity (Iwan, Lukman) more frequently questioned or reframed it. This pattern suggests that interpretive positions reflect not just personal values but also socialization into particular reading practices and knowledge frameworks.

The negotiated readers (Nina, Intan) occupied an interesting middle position, suggesting how contemporary readers can acknowledge historical critique while translating it into terms meaningful for their own contexts. This finding has implications for understanding how classic literature continues to shape public discourse about social issues, not through direct transmission of authorial messages but through ongoing processes of adaptation and reconstruction.

DISCUSSION

Our findings reveal that contemporary readers engage with *Oliver Twist* through distinctly different interpretive lenses, producing varied understandings of Dickens' critique of institutional child welfare. Rather than receiving a fixed message, participants constructed meanings shaped by their social positions, prior knowledge, and ethical frameworks. The distribution across Hall's (1980) of three interpretive positions, two dominant-hegemonic, two negotiated, two oppositional, demonstrates that classic literature functions as contested terrain where historical representations meet contemporary concerns.

Understanding Dominant-Hegemonic Readings

Nadira and Vira's complete acceptance of Dickens' critique reflects what Halls (1980) describes as decoding within the dominant code. Both participants possessed knowledge that validated Dickens' representation, Nadira through literary training, Vira through media engagement with institutional failures, yet this knowledge produced alignment rather than critical distance. Their responses suggest that certain forms of education can reduce interpretive resistance when that education affirms the text's ideological framework.

However, this alignment carries limitations. By accepting Dickens' Victorian representation without question, these readers potentially overlook important differences between historical workhouses and modern care systems. While their humanitarian commitment is admirable, conflating past and present institutions may obscure how contemporary systems operate and what reforms they actually require. The emotional clarity of dominant readings, their strength, may also be their weakness, producing passionate conviction while foreclosing nuanced analysis.

Negotiated Readings as Translation Work

Nina and Intan demonstrated the most common contemporary engagement with classic social critique: accepting its moral core while recoding it in modern vocabularies. Their consistent translation of Dickens' concerns into frameworks drawn from children's rights, dignity, and developmental psychology shows sophisticated interpretive work. They recognized that Victorian language may not translate directly to contemporary contexts, yet found Dickens' underlying concern with institutional responsibility deeply relevant.

This translation process preserves what seems relevant while filtering out historical difference, a productive trade-off that enables connection across temporal boundaries. Nina's emphasis on "emotional needs" and Intan's focus on "deserving" protection reflect contemporary understandings unavailable to

Dickens, showing how readers make historical texts meaningful by bridging past representations with present frameworks. This approach may be particularly valuable in educational contexts, maintaining temporal awareness while building connections between historical critique and contemporary understanding.

Oppositional Readings as Critical Resistance

Iwan and Lukman's resistance to Dickens' representational authority demonstrates how contemporary readers can honor historical critique while questioning its contemporary application. Rather than defending workhouses, they challenged the assumption that Dickens' text provides transparent historical evidence or straightforward lessons for modern contexts. Iwan's skepticism about whether the depiction represented typical or extreme conditions reveals critical awareness that literary representations serve rhetorical purposes. Lukman reconstructed the text's significance using Indonesian Islamic educational frameworks and human rights discourse, treating *Oliver Twist* as raw material for contemporary ethical reflection rather than authoritative commentary.

These readings introduce valuable skepticism about canonical authority, reminding us that Dickens wrote from a particular social position that shaped what he noticed and represented. However, oppositional readings also risk undervaluing what historical critique offers. By maintaining distance, these readers may miss uncomfortable continuities between Victorian and contemporary institutional practices. The line between healthy skepticism and defensive dismissal remains difficult to discern.

Social Position and Interpretive Competence

Our findings suggest that interpretive positions are not randomly distributed but correlate with readers' social locations and knowledge bases. Participants with literary training or child welfare engagement (Nadira, Vira) demonstrated dominant-hegemonic readings, while those with less specialized knowledge (Iwan, Lukman) more frequently adopted oppositional stances. This pattern aligns with Hall's (1980) argument that decoding reflects social positioning, different communities develop shared interpretive practices that shape what seems obvious or questionable when encountering texts.

Importantly, more knowledge does not necessarily produce "better" readings. While Nadira and Vira articulated Dickens' technique sophisticatedly, their dominant positions foreclosed critical questions that less knowledgeable readers raised. Iwan and Lukman's oppositional readings, though less aligned with literary scholarly norms, introduced perspectives challenging comfortable assumptions about textual authority. This suggests that interpretive diversity has value, different reading positions illuminate different aspects of complex texts.

What *Oliver Twist* Reveals About Contemporary Institutional Care

The central question is whether *Oliver Twist* offers valuable insights into contemporary child welfare or merely provides historical artifact. Our participants' divergent responses illuminate both possibilities. The workhouse system Dickens critiqued no longer exists, but underlying dynamics he identified, prioritizing organizational efficiency over human welfare, treating vulnerable populations as burdens, punishing need, remain recognizable in various contemporary contexts.

Recent scholarship supports this observation. Finch et al. (2021) identify patterns in modern care institutions echoing Victorian workhouses: staff focusing on control rather than care, inadequate resources leading to neglect, bureaucratic structures obscuring individual suffering. de la Cova et al. (2023) demonstrate how "structural violence" operates through institutional mechanisms normalizing harmful treatment. These findings suggest Dickens' critique remains relevant not because modern institutions are identical to workhouses but because certain organizational pathologies recur across different historical forms.

However, important differences exist. Modern systems operate under legal frameworks recognizing children's rights, employ trained professionals, face public scrutiny, and exist within democratic contexts enabling reform. Victorian workhouses had none of these features. Understanding contemporary reform requires recognizing both resemblance and difference. The productive question is not "Are modern institutions like workhouses?" but rather "What can Dickens' representation help us notice about institutional dynamics we might otherwise overlook?"

Implications and Future Directions

This study contributes to reception theory by demonstrating empirically how Hall's encoding/decoding model operates when readers encounter ethically charged literary content. Our findings show that Hall's three positions emerge not as discrete categories but as overlapping tendencies readers may move between within

single experiences. The framework's value lies in illuminating the range of relationships individuals can establish with texts' encoded ideologies rather than definitively categorizing reader types.

For literary pedagogy, our findings suggest that teaching classic literature requires more than explaining historical context or authorial intent. It requires helping students recognize how their frameworks shape what they notice in texts while exposing them to alternative interpretive possibilities. The diversity of readings our participants produced suggests classroom discussions could productively explore not just what Dickens meant but why different readers find different aspects relevant, convincing, or questionable.

Future research might investigate how interpretive positions relate to readers' political orientations or experiences with actual care systems, whether different pedagogical approaches shape reading positions students adopt, and how readers in different national contexts interpret the same literary representations of social issues. Such research would deepen understanding of how classic literature continues participating in contemporary social conversations, not as static wisdom but as dynamic site where past representations meet present concerns.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined how contemporary readers interpret Dickens' representation of child welfare in *Oliver Twist*, revealing that meaning making is an active, socially situated process rather than passive reception of encoded messages. Applying Stuart Hall's reception theory to six participants' responses, we identified three distinct interpretive positions: dominant-hegemonic readers who fully endorsed Dickens' critique, negotiated readers who translated Victorian concerns into contemporary frameworks, and oppositional readers who challenged the text's representational authority while advancing alternative interpretations. These findings demonstrate that classic literature does not transmit fixed meanings across time but functions as contested terrain where historical representations meet present-day concerns. Interpretive positions emerged not randomly but through intersections of prior knowledge, professional socialization, and cultural contexts that shape how readers understand institutional responsibility. Participants with literary training readily adopted Dickens' encoded perspective, while those with different knowledge bases brought frameworks generating resistant readings. Importantly, no single position proved inherently superior, each illuminated different aspects of the text's complexity and contemporary relevance.

Our analysis suggests that *Oliver Twist* remains valuable not as direct blueprint for modern reform but as analytical tool prompting questions about power dynamics, accountability, and gaps between institutional purposes and practices. While Victorian workhouses no longer exist, underlying patterns Dickens identified, prioritizing efficiency over welfare, treating vulnerable populations as burdens, normalizing deprivation, and recurring across different historical forms. Understanding these continuities requires recognizing both resemblance and difference between past and present. For literary pedagogy and reception studies, this research demonstrates the importance of examining how readers' social positions shape interpretation. Teaching classic social critique requires more than explaining authorial intent; it demands acknowledging that diverse backgrounds produce legitimate yet divergent readings. Future research should explore how interpretive positions relate to readers lived experiences with institutional care and whether different pedagogical approaches shape the meanings students construct from canonical texts addressing social justice.

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